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KASHMIR AND KATHMANDU

Earlier this month, India’s BJP government abruptly told all tourists and pilgrims to leave Kashmir, it shut off the phone system and blacked out the Internet. The entire Himalayan state is still under lockdown.

On 8 August both houses of the Indian Parliament amended the Constitution to abolish Articles 370 and 37-A, which had given Kashmir a special autonomous status. Since 1950, Kashmir was allowed to be governed locally, except in matters pertaining to communications, security and foreign policy. At a theoretical level, this was a deal not very different from how New Delhi directs Bhutan’s foreign policy and defence.

At India’s independence Kashmir was a ‘princely state’ governed by a Hindu dynasty even though the state’s population was predominantly Muslim. After partition in

and “decisive”. Except for Pakistan and China, there has been only muted reaction internationally, with the United Nations and the United States calling for “calm and stability”.

Here in Nepal, there has been surprisingly little interest. There has been no official comment yet from the government. Prime Minister Oli was away, and his often voluble party co-chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal, who goes out of his way to comment on places like Venezuela, has had nothing to say about Kashmir.

There are many reason why Nepalis should take Kashmir seriously. Firstly, there are many Nepalis working in Kashmir and Ladakh this time of year in the tourism industry. There are also tens of thousands of Nepali nationals serving in the Indian Army, who are eye-ball-to-eye-ball with Pakistan across the Line of Control and with the Chinese Army in Ladakh. As in previous hostilities between India and Pakistan, and between India and China, Nepalis have shed their blood for the Indian side.

It is in Nepal’s interest that a future war over Kashmir should be prevented at all cost. Unfortunately, instead of de-escalating tensions, New Delhi’s move on Kashmir has damaged already bad relations even further. The people of Kashmir, who have historically been ignored by both India and Pakistan, have now become like the Kurds or Palestinians – stateless and even angrier.

Kashmir is now a triangular flashpoint (astride another hot spot, Afghanistan) and it involves conflicting territorial claims by three nuclear-armed nations. A future conflict there could easily escalate, and drag in the other global power, the United States.

The other factor that should engage the minds of Nepal’s rulers is that a BJP government that could overturn India’s own Constitution on Kashmir for populism could attempt a reversal of Nepal’s secular constitution. BJP leaders have often voiced support for Nepal becoming a Hindu state again, and some have even pushed for a return of the Hindu monarchy.

Ironically, when Nepal’s monarchy was abolished in 2008 there was a centre-left coalition in India. Politicians in New Delhi and left-leaning bureaucrats then had no love lost for Nepal’s kings, but tables have turned in India and it is the BJP that now calls the shots. Kashmir’s message should be heard loud and clear in Kathmandu.

Nepal’s secular Constitution is the result of a 10-year war and a decade of instability during which the country nearly got sucked into a multi-ethnic internal conflict. If our neighbours want a stable Nepal, they should not tamper with this reality.

New Delhi’s mistake in Kashmir should also teach Kathmandu’s rulers a lesson: not to retreat from the assurances of provincial autonomy inherent in our federal Constitution. Guarantees of territorial integrity come not from brute force or taking away people’s rights, but from true devolution and self-governance.



1947, the last King of Kashmir, Hari Singh, decided to stay with India in return for assurances from Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (himself a Kashmiri Pandit) of a plebiscite and autonomy. By then, Kashmir had already been carved out by Pakistan which laid claim to its western half, and China, which took the Askai Chin region of Ladakh.

Last week, Hari Singh’s descendant Karan Singh gave qualified support for the BJP move to abrogate Article 370, welcoming Ladakh being turned into a union territory, while supporting statehood for Jammu and Kashmir so as to maintain communal harmony.

Kashmir has been a strategic flashpoint for seven decades now, with India and Pakistan having gone to war at least thrice over the territory, while India fought briefly with China over Askai Chin in 1962. Kashmir is a volatile and emotive issue for Indians and Pakistanis, and has held the entire South Asian region hostage.

India’s security clampdown and communication blackout has meant that the world is not getting the full picture of Kashmir. There is a trickle of videos showing Kashmiris out in the streets, and hospitals full of injured demonstrators. Meanwhile, in the Hindu-dominated regions of Jammu, as well as the mainland, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s move has been welcomed as “bold”

India’s message on Kashmir should be heard loud and clear in Kathmandu.

10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

An editorial in Nepali Times 10 years ago (#464), 4-11 August 2009, took the government’s decisions to close an eco-tourism resort in Chitwan and delays of Melmchi as examples of the country held hostage by extortion. Nothing has changed. Excerpt:

‘Trust our rulers to try to wreck what is working. In a country where there are so many other priorities (ensuring there is no famine by winter, planning now to avert next year’s cholera epidemic, keeping prices down, creating jobs) you’d expect any sane government to be in permanent crisis management mode. Not here. Here, we are too busy trying to fix things that ain’t broke.

In Chitwan and Melamchi the possibility of kickbacks sway decision-making in times of political transition. Fine, we’d be naïve to assume that corruption can be eradicated. The least our MPs investigating Chitwan, Melamchi and other issues this weekend in the Parliamentary Accounts Committee can do is to minimise the harm caused by mismanagement, poor planning and corruption.’



Times.com

ONLINE PACKAGES

WHAT'S TRENDING



BON VOYAGE

The dazzling beauty of Dolpo is confined mostly to the ink-blue waters of Phoksundo Lake. The remoter valleys of Nepal’s most remote region hide the ancient monasteries and culture of the Bon religion. Follow us to this mystical land and discover how this 18,000-year-old animist belief in the Tibetan rim land teaches conservation. Story: *page 8-9.*



HYBRID NATION

Watch interviews with social scientists and inter-ethnic couples talking about Nepal’s new melting pot. The country’s ethnic diversity is being stirred into an amalgam of multicultural identities that will have a profound impact on reservation policies and national integration. Story: *page 14-15.*

LPG VS ELECTRIC STOVES

Anil Chitrakar, your article is very practical for community and policy makers. (Look what’s cooking in Nepal, # 972) Please conduct a series of town hall meetings to bring awareness in the public.

Puru Shrestha

■ I remember the days of deforestation, and now seeing all those gas containers is so sad. We desperately need fuel efficient ways to cook and warm houses.

Sigmund Stengel

■ Anil should raise this concern more loudly. Lead and raise strong collective voices. We support this effort.

Mahabubur Rahman Khan

ENVIRONMENT AND MEDICINE

It’s true, people in rural areas who completely depend on mother nature for living are the ones most affected by environmental degradation (‘Environmental destruction is a medical emergency’, Bikash Gauchan and Nathaniel Uchtmann, #972).

GC Rabindra

HERITAGE

Kind of puts a damper on the “Hamro sampada hami bachauchau/We will save our heritage” slogan of the *Guthi* bill protests (‘Selective outrage about heritage loss’, Sewa Bhattarai, #972). Maybe we should amend it to “Hamro sampada [vyaktigat faaidaa chha bhane matra] hami bachauchau/We will save our heritage [if there are personal benefits]”.

Aashish Mishra

TUBERCULOSIS

The main problem is not federalism but lack of proper diagnostic tests and facilities here in Nepal (‘Nepal TB cases grossly underestimated’, Paul Nunn and Bhim Singh Thakuri, #972). The proportion of clinically diagnosed TB is very low.

Kabi

BETWEEN THE LINES

It is a good write-up (‘Guy Jatra’, Ass, #972). One must understand the message between the lines in this satire. Keep it up.

Masood Bhatti



Living below Nepal’s melting mountains

by *Alton C Byers*

With little outside help, a village in Nepal’s Khumbu region is adapting to the climate crisis by building embankments to protect themselves from increasingly frequent floods coming out of melting glaciers upstream. Read this exclusive field reportage by a Himalayan climate scientist on [nepalitimes.com](#).

Most reached and shared on Facebook

Environmental destruction is a medical emergency

by *Bikash Gauchan and Nathaniel Uchtmann*

Landslides and water shortages triggered by environmental destruction and haphazard road construction have a devastating impact on medical care among the ill and vulnerable in rural Nepal. This report by two doctors based at Bayalpata Hospital in Achham was widely shared on social media.

Most popular on Twitter

Look what’s cooking in Nepal


by *Anil Chitrakar*

Nepal produces its own hydroelectricity, while we import all our LPG. If we just made our morning meals in rice cookers using clean hydroelectric power, it would save us billions. This opinion piece was most read and commented on by readers this week.

Most visited online page


Most commented

QUOTE TWEETS

- 

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Nepal Electricity Authority must introduce time of day metering which will serve as an incentive to cook with electricity at certain times of the day. We also need to use the power we generate & not export it till we’re self sufficient, says Anil Chitrakar
- 

गम्भीरमान @SachinBhattarai
This is a very good logic pointed by Mr Anil Chitrakar. But, the issue is, will our government really have the will to implement this particular course of action? @NepaliTimes @Hello_Sarkar
- 

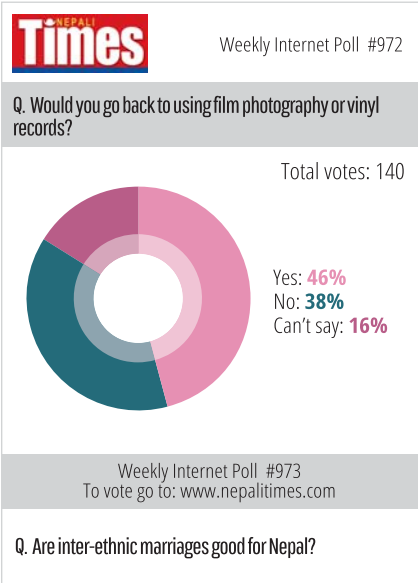
Pratik Lohani @rajmahal1354
great idea but not an original one. our transformers will go up in flames when every household uses induction stoves to cook. no dice until power distribution system is upgraded in major metropolitan areas.
- 

नेपाली रञ्जन @koiralaranjan
This is high time to electrify kitchens instead of wasting money for LPG gas

- 

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Landslides and water shortage triggered by environmental destruction have devastating impact on #health systems and on people who are already ill and vulnerable in rural #Nepal, write @Drgauchanbikash and Nathaniel Uchtmann.
- 

KYU Yeti @KyuYeti
How about the age old wisdom of hyper urbanisation, erratic deforestation, land/resource mismanagement, and in some instances, pure unadulterated negligence? Could this possibly be having significant impacts? Otherwise it’s so easy to blame anything and everything on climate.





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A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER 

Driving Nepal deeper into debt

Ramesh Kumar

In the past three years, federal and provincial governments spent a massive Rs216.5 million on vehicles. If we add the budget allocated to vehicles this fiscal year, it adds up to more than Rs250 million, not including the budgets for cars of local governments and projects.

All three spheres of government are ignoring their own declaration to minimise expenses, and are wasting money on frivolous items. And the irony of it all is that the SUVs are driving along roads that are in advanced stages of disrepair because the money has all gone for expensive cars.

Though the government has been slow to provide development and service delivery, vehicle-related expenses have grown six-fold since 2013. The federal government is the biggest spender: provincial governments accounted for just Rs20 million spent on cars in the past three years.

This fiscal year the federal government spent 2.45% of its development budget on vehicles. While it is perennially unable to fully disburse that budget, it spent four times more on vehicles than the amount allocated, even transferring money from other budget lines to do so.

“Using unspent development budget to buy vehicles is just an unnecessary expense,” says

Government SUVs drive along roads in advanced stages of disrepair because budgets have been misspent on expensive cars

former government secretary Purna Chandra Bhattarai. Other experts say that it is not just elected representatives, bureaucrats are also draining state resources.

According to the 56th report of the auditor-general, among the 800 vehicles in the 22 Singha Darbar-based ministries, only 622 are operational. Some are not being used even though they are in running condition — new vehicles are being bought before old ones are phased out. After an order from the PM’s office, 201 vehicles were handed over to various organisations this year, including many that were still in working order.

“Buying new vehicles involves kickbacks, so the tendency to buy new vehicles is increasing,” says former finance secretary Rameshwar Khanal.

Four new Scorpios were bought for deputy attorney-generals last July, not because they were necessary but because the existing five-year-old vehicles were considered too old. At the end of the last fiscal year, 16 Scorpios were purchased for the chiefs of



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फोन: ५००५६०९-०५, फ्याक्स: ९७७-९-५००५५९८, पोखरा: ९८५६०४५८६३

prabhu BANK BIZ BRIEFS

Turkish & River Plate

Turkish Airlines is a new sponsor of Argentine football team River Plate (Río de la Plata in Spanish). Turkish is the first airlines to sponsor River Plate, also known



as ‘The Millionaires’. The three-year agreement will see the Turkish Airlines’ logo emblazoned on River Plate’s jerseys until the end of the 2021-2022 season.

Nepal Lit Festival

The Bookworm Foundation has announced that the IME Nepal Literature Festival will be held in Janakpur on 3-4 November 2019 and in Pokhara on 13-16 December. The winner of the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature will be announced in Pokhara on 16 December. Celebrities including Indian MP and writer Shashi Tharoor, poet and screenwriter Javed Akhtar and actress Shabana Azmi have confirmed attendance.

Coca-Cola ‘Jigri Pack’

Coca-Cola has launched the 250-ml ‘Jigri Pack’, offering a new drinking experience for Nepali consumers. Made using the latest packaging innovations, consumers can find Coca-Cola, Sprite and Fanta in the new pack.

Shree Airlines to India

Shree Airlines conducted a test flight of its first international route from Kathmandu to Varanasi on 12 August with its CRJ200. The



airline is inducting a new Bombardier Dash 8 turboprop this week. Shree now has permission to fly to Varanasi, Ahmedabad, Bangalore and Kolkata.

Galaxy Note 10

The Galaxy Note suite with enhanced S Pen and pro-grade camera now comes in two sizes – 6.3-inch and 6.8-inch. Features include handwriting to text, premium video technology, quick and easy video editing



and AR doodle. Pre-booking for Galaxy Note 10 and Note 10+ can be made by depositing Rs5,000 from 12 to 23 August. The Note 10 is priced at Rs116,000 and the Note 10+ at Rs134,000.

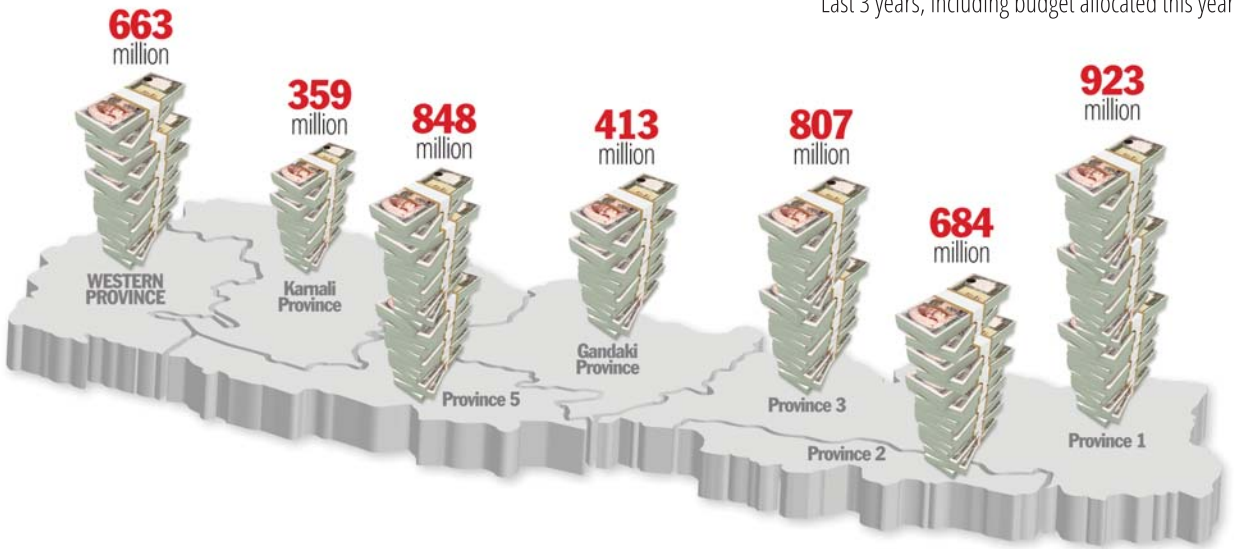
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BIKRAM RAI

Provinces move into high gear

Last 3 years, including budget allocated this year



SOURCE: PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENTS

the House of Representatives and National Assembly, displacing 10-year-old vehicles.

The National Inclusion Commission bought five vehicles costing at least Rs4 million for its chief and 4 members. But to date the commission has only one member — the others have not yet been appointed. The vehicles are covered and stored on the office premises. Many other new commissions have already bought vehicles for their yet-to-be appointed members.

According to the auditor-general's report, there are 1,323 officer-level officials in the Ministry of Agriculture, and 1,577 vehicles in operation. There are 174 vehicles for 90 officers in the Finance Ministry and 151 vehicles for 94 officials in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). Many senior officials are accused of having separate vehicles for home and office use.

According to a guideline issued by the Finance Ministry, new vehicles should be bought only for newly-established organisations.

Other offices should buy new vehicles only every 15 years. This guideline is considered legally binding, so ministries and other bodies are actually breaking the law. Only officials at joint secretary level and above are supposed to get vehicles, but today deputy secretaries and even junior officers are riding in government vehicles. Some officials have even acquired the habit of buying a new vehicle immediately after they are promoted or transferred.

Joint Secretary Binod Kunwar of the PMO says the office has made efforts to have an inventory of vehicles in working order, but hasn't succeeded because of lack of cooperation from government entities.

The Ministry of Finance does have guidelines on the capacity of vehicles that can be bought, but they are routinely ignored. Even money allocated to build public infrastructure is being spent on vehicles.

Repair and maintenance of vehicles is another area full of

irregularities, including money being allocated for the upkeep of vehicles that have been in storage for years. Kunwar says the vehicles have become a long-term burden on the state.

The Ministry of Finance continues to dole out huge sums of money to keep officers happy, and the government has taken no steps to regulate it, despite the fact that the Finance Ministry has issued guidelines to reduce operating costs. This includes a rule that government vehicles should not have private license plates, but this is also ignored.

The government also has a policy of going electric, but continues to buy fossil fuel vehicles. Former Finance Secretary Rameswhor Khanal, who himself drives an electric Kia Soul, explains: "There are fewer dealers of electric vehicles in the market, so there are less kickbacks in their purchase. Besides, you cannot make up fake bills of repair and maintenance of electric cars, which is why they are less popular."

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“लैङ्गिक हिंसा विरुद्ध १६ दिने अभियान:
हिंसाविहीन समाजको हाम्रो आह्वान ।”

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CELEBRATE RESPONSIBLY

A working mother’s guilt

I like to consider myself an exemplary parent, but probably all mothers think that.

“Mum, Mum, Sangjay’s been playing with a python.” Rinchen was hoping to get one up on his elder sibling, but he knew he had to come up with something pretty spectacular to get my attention. “That’s nice, darling.”



SO FAR SO GOOD
Lisa Choegyal

Tiger Tops’ rustic ‘office’ had a thatched roof, wood rafters and mesh windows, and I was distracted by a guest relations manual update and tomorrow’s rooming list. I trusted my teenage boys to read jungle lore, and to know the difference between harmless and dangerous snakes. On a shelf above me, dusty glass jars of formaldehyde contained some of the more lethal varieties preserved for science: sinister yellow banded kraits and a lurid green pit viper. A deer barked in the distance and the cooks clattered in the adjacent kitchen. He tried again: “And it wasn’t a very small one. Tim and Jack dared him to pick it up.” The four boys were just back from one of their elephant-back expeditions through the Chitwan grasslands, this time up the Surung Khola valley — an unruly quartet close in age and fast friends since infancy. Disturbed from its winter torpor, the python did not appear bothered by its rude manhandling and was soon safely restored back into its Chitwan freedom. I like to consider myself an exemplary parent, but probably all mothers think that. The truth is that my two sons were dragged into the wake of my own enthusiasms. Lucky their father seldom left home, as my selfish priorities may not have always featured family first. Our photo



GROWING UP: Lisa Choegyal with her sons Sangjay and Rinchen in Chitwan (left) and Sangjay playing with a python.

books support me in providing a peripatetic and sometimes idyllic childhood, but always to suit my travels, my schedule and my work in wildlife, conservation and adventure. Two little boys posing in checked shirts on a Khumbu *chorten*, peering out of a tent on a remote terraced hillside with early morning peaks behind, bundled in life jackets hanging on through the white water, and embracing an elephant deep in the jungle grasslands. There were many years of birthday cakes for Tim Jack Sangjay or Rinchen, moulded out of elephant dung, elaborately iced and delivered by a decorated *hati*, a perennial delight with everyone valiantly keeping up the well-worn joke to please the grown-ups. Brought up in Kathmandu, our boys attended the British School until their early teens, both speak Nepali like natives,

and both consider this Valley their home. As children they were forced to follow me on various missions — the picture albums show coconut-throwing competitions in Sabah, canoeing in the back waters of Sarawak, volcano trekking in Indonesia, horse-riding in Mongolia, cycling in Vietnam, rock climbing in Kenya and abseiling in Wyoming. After a particularly arduous trek recce wading rivers and lost in the Chandragiri hills, Rinchen declared: “Never again, Mum.” There were the usual close shaves as toddlers. Sangjay tumbling down a flight of stairs, almost being swept into a flooded stream, crashing from the top steps of a slide, and falling backwards off a sofa through our sitting room window; the ensuing wound’s 12 stitches still show as a white scarred patch when his thick dark hair is cut short. Rinchen must have been less

reckless as I recall few childhood mishaps, but instead a healthy curiosity and keen observation. Driving to school one morning a small voice from the back seat asked: “What are those dogs doing Mummy.” “Mating, darling,” I replied, with an attempt at insouciance. There was a long pause. “Looks like awfully hard work to me!” One result of their upbringing was an early affinity with animals. Sangjay’s first spoken word was “*hati*”. Stopping for a break at the riverside village of Malekhu, its fish delicacies hung skewered ready for the barbecue at the shop front. “Doesn’t it hurt the fish?” asked Sangjay, aged three. I was stuck for a glib answer. He showed the same concern for a pig on the solid iron spit roasting over a pit of burning coals in front of the Lodge — a favourite for special celebrations

that could take 24 hours to cook, laboriously turned by relays of men through the night. Rinchen’s self-possession served him well as a pageboy, aged two, at my brother’s wedding in Chelsea Old Church. Both boys made it down the aisle behind the beautiful bride in their purple silk Khampa chubas, white tights and ballet shoes (promising they’d look “just like Ninja Turtles”, when Sangjay aged four refused to put his on). But during the service Rinchen was last to remain standing alone in attendance behind the happy couple, all the other older bridesmaids and pageboys having fled back to their parents in the pews. I can hardly bear to recollect the time they went missing at my mother’s home on that same British visit. (‘They’ll be absolutely safe playing out in the garden,’ she had said, never dreaming they would venture beyond the hawthorn hedges.) After an agonising half hour, they were found wandering near the main Oxford London railway line a couple of fields away. I was never sure I believed their story about a passing train driver who stopped for a friendly chat, as all the locomotives I saw hurtled past at horrifying speed. Probably the depth of my attempts at responsible motherhood was when I misplaced them in Christchurch Airport. Stopping to change planes after a trip exploring New Zealand’s West Coast, I was absorbed chatting with mountaineering friends when we noticed they were gone. After a frantic search with thudding heart, we heard the humiliating announcement: “Would the mother of two small boys please collect them from lost property.” A kindly old Kiwi couple had found them on the sidewalk outside and handed them in. Rinchen had his own python encounter during a gap year job at a river running camp near Rishikesh, but it did not end so happily. Finding a python being burned by villagers mistakenly to protect their livestock, they reported this violation of an endangered species to the Indian wildlife authorities. Three of the team were arrested for their pains, and the poor snake died anyway. 🐍

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Worldwide women's activist

Bandana Rana has risen from local campaigner to a policy-making role on gender rights at the UN

Sewa Bhattarai

The first Nepali elected as a member of the committee of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), journalist and gender rights activist Bandana Rana is looking forward to further challenges after being elected a Vice Chair of the committee this year.

Rana started out as a tv journalist more than 30 years ago, reading and producing the news on Nepal Television. Working on reports and documentaries about rural women, she wanted to go deeper into the field.

Eventually she co-founded Saathi, one of the first organisations working on domestic violence in Nepal, and Sancharika, a forum for women journalists. In those roles, Rana was involved in drafting shadow reports for CEDAW — analyses on the status of women drafted by civil society and non-government organisations to complement the government reports that are submitted every four years. Friends then suggested that she contest the election for the CEDAW committee.

"I was inspired by the prospect of being a part of that mechanism, since I have worked in gender rights for more than 30 years now," says Rana.

She remembers the whirlwind three months of campaigning as she met every ambassador in Kathmandu, others in Delhi, travelled to Istanbul to meet foreign ministers, and to New York three times to convince countries to vote for her.

When the results came out, Rana had secured sixth place among 23 seats, and was the only South Asian member on the committee. In January she was also elected one of the Vice Chairs and is now part of CEDAW's policy-making body,

a rare position for a Nepali.

In that role, Rana reviews the reports submitted to CEDAW by governments and civil society's shadow reports, and conducts dialogues with countries. She tries to focus on violence against women. "I like to look at the mechanisms in place to address these issues in all spheres — economic, political, and social. What is the engagement of the media? How do countries engage men and boys in combating violence? Are there enough shelters? What are the ways victims can access justice, and how are justice officials sensitised?"

For Rana, her role is also an opportunity to take her local experience global. "I think I bring many unique points to the table," she says. "As a citizen of a small South Asian country, I take that perspective to a global scale. CEDAW has a majority of legal experts and their language tends to be highly legal. As a communicator, I simplify the communication style of CEDAW so that the dialogue is constructive and not intimidating to member countries."

One wonders if such activism has had an impact on the situation of women in Nepal. Rana thinks it has. "Today we are openly talking about domestic violence and sexual abuse, while these 'private issues' were taboo topics before. The change is apparent even in rural women. Nepal's conflict has taught them to institutionalise themselves and seek support in groups," she says.

That leads us to the #metoo movement. Rana is all for a new, modern way that takes the fight forward. "I myself was molested when I was younger, by a relative who attempted to smooch me when he came home. I did not dare to speak up about it to my parents, because those were the days when victims would be shamed for these assaults," she remembers.

"Things have changed now, and the women who spoke up have encouraged others, especially younger girls, to speak out. This changes romantic relationships because men are now banned from doing many things. But I say that only the men who misbehave have any reason to fear."

Rana is clear about future priorities. "In the past few years, Nepal has made great progress in laws but their implementation is weak, and that is where the next challenge lies," she says. "We must invest in finances and knowledge, and we must put in place a strong monitoring system to check if our system is working. Also, strong internalised political will to solve these problems is a must."

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NATURAL FAITH:

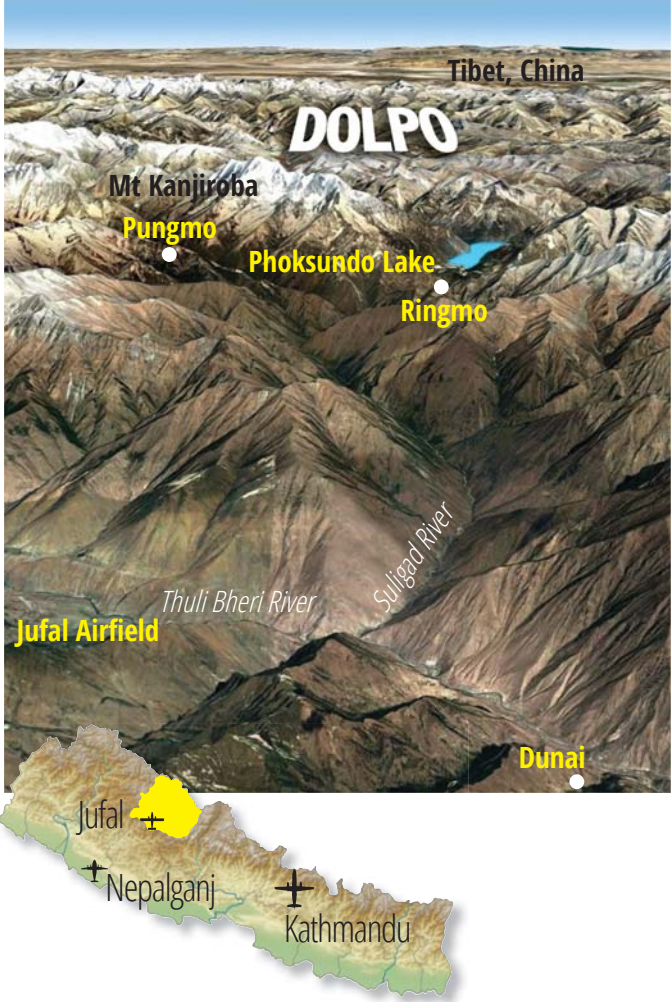
The Thasang Tholing Bon Monastery on the slope above Phoksundo Lake (*main picture*) is one of the two centres of the faith in Dolpo that pre-date the advent of Buddhism here.

Rainbow on Phoksundo Falls at Ringmo (*right*). Waterfalls are also holy for adherents of the Bon faith.

The other centre is the monastery in Pungmo (*top, and in map, right*) which spreads a deep reverence for mountains, trees, lakes and rivers.

(*Above*) A yak caravan camps out below Baga La. Dolpo's dependence on yarsa has lessened because of climate change and over-harvesting. Now most locals rely on tourism.

Tsiring Lhamo in Pungmo (*above*) says nature is her community's guardian, and it is important to respect Mt Kanjiroba, which towers over the valley.



Sonam Choekyi Lama
in Dolpo

The dazzling beauty of Dolpo is confined mostly to the ink-blue waters of Phoksundo Lake, which overshadows the district's other destinations.

The remoter valleys of Nepal's most remote region hide the ancient monasteries and culture of the Bon religion, an animist faith that is said to have existed in the Tibetan rim lands for 18,000 years – long before Buddhism got here.

Today, Bon Po has been overlaid by Buddhism and later Communism in Tibet, but it still thrives in parts of the plateau that today lie in Nepal, like Dolpo. The 500-year-old Thasang Tholing Bon Monastery, with the Pungmo Gumpa, are the jewels in the crown of Bon animism.

Thasang Tholing is a cluster of nine private monasteries and one community gumpa a 15-minute walk from Tso village. What is distinctive about the adherents of Bon Po here is their deep reverence for nature, so that conservation of the ecosystem is not some outside concept but deeply ingrained in the belief system.

Killing for meat was banned, so many villagers in this arid land used to chase wild animals to the edge of the cliff, where they fell to their deaths.

“Appalled by the cruelty, Lama Treton Tsewang Tshultrim founded this monastery many centuries ago so that the killing would

stop and the wildlife would be protected,” explained Kenpo Nyima Samduk Lama, the present head monk of Thasang Tso. *Thasang* means ‘protected cliff’, and *tso* is ‘lake’.

Through the centuries till today, the monastery acts as a religious warden of the holy Phoksundo Lake and its surroundings, protecting its wildlife and restoring the ecological balance of the mountains.

Elderly villagers near the lake remember when musk deer and other animals came down to the shores to drink water, and roamed the forests surrounding the monastery. With poaching the numbers declined, but as the monastery actively revives traditional conservation customs the animals have started to return.

The Bon worship the landscape, mountains, lakes, rocks, rivers and wildlife. In short, nature is sacred, as illustrated in this chant in their dialect: ‘*lhe lhu zhi dag*’, which means ‘we are guardians of nature’. Generations of Dolpo Pa, therefore, have grown up with an innate understanding of how nature is linked to their daily lives.

The Bon monastery is a habitat for musk deer, blue sheep and other small mammals, which are prey for the snow leopard and the Himalayan wolf. Given its relatively recent genesis, Phoksundo does not have fish and conservationists say care must be taken not to introduce any alien aquatic species.

“We are now seeing more and more snow leopards on the prowl in the forests around the monastery, and in the cliffs above. In winter, when there are fewer people, they even venture out to the shore to drink water,” said resident monk Geshe Nyima Samduk,

BON VOYAGE

Tibetan animist belief preserves message of conservation in Dolpo



showing visitors around the shrine.

Although Shey Phoksundo National Park was set up in 1984, it was the long-established Bon tradition that really helped conservation on the ground, says snow leopard researcher Tshiring Lhamu Lama. “Local conservation tradition was very important for preserving the nature and culture of Dolpo, and the two are linked. The national park is only 35 years old, but the gompas have been here for 500 years,” she added.

Besides Thasung Tholing in Ringmo, the other cradle of Bon civilisation in Dolpo is the less travelled Pungmo Valley. This wild and scenic landscape on the lap of Mt Kanjiroba is two hours off the main Dolpo Trail, and few visitors ever come here. The villagers worship Kanjiroba as the ‘ruler of kings’, just as they revere the cliffs, streams, waterfalls, trees and ravines that make up the topography.

The local Bon dialect has words for the

divine: *Yul Lha* (lord of the land), *Yul Sa Sol Sa* (ritual for nature gods), *Sman Mo* (female spirits). The faith is so strong that locals believe that transgressing nature will bring down wrath and misfortune: livestock will perish, crops will fail and the salt caravans will be stuck in blizzards. The nature gods could also retaliate with hailstorms, earthquakes and disease.

“We are not allowed to eat meat that is slaughtered here. We only eat animals that die of natural causes. We are not supposed to cut trees because they are gods too, and so are the rivers and lakes,” says Yungdrung Lama, whose family lineage carries the Bon tradition.

Larke Lama is the elected ward chair in Pungmo village and says the Bon way of life is integral to everything his community does. Locals believe they have to perform the Yul Sa Sol Sa ritual to ensure a good harvest. Lama says, “sometimes the weather is bad for crops, so we pray to the sky gods to restore the natural equilibrium.”

For thousands of years, the Dolpo Pa have survived on a bi-annual journey back and forth across the Himalaya. But the winds of change have affected the ancestral occupation of the yak caravans that used to take grain and cotton up from the lower valleys to barter for rock salt and carpets from Tibet.

The modern monetised economy, the spread of transportation in Tibet and Nepal, education and out-migration have all contributed to erode this traditional practice. And now added to this list of factors is climate change, which has made weather unpredictable in the trans-Himalayan valleys.

This year, unseasonal spring blizzards closed the high passes that the caravans use for trading. Tourism was hit, as trekkers were stranded.

Dawa Gurung and his family take his yaks and horses into the pasture of Dhanigad, crossing the Baga La pass at 5,000m. “We heard the China border is opening soon and we need to go to Chang (Tibet) but this year I do not think I will go — the trail is still treacherous and there is not much to trade,” Gurung said.

The grain-salt barter trade between Nepal and Tibet has now been replaced by just one precious commodity: yarsa, the caterpillar fungus that grows out of the ground in meadows above 4,500m and is prized in Chinese medicine.

Yarsa means ‘summer grass’ or ‘winter worm’ in the local dialect and has raised living standards here. But lately, due to over-picking and climate change, yarsa harvests have slumped. Dolpo traders used to sell yarsa across the border in Tibet and buy rice, sugar, blankets and even solar panels in China.

“This year it snowed continuously from February to April, and in Saldang half the yaks died. The melting snow also made the ground soggy, and all the yarsa rotted,” said Tashi Dhondup Lama of Tso village.

The weather, crops and health of livestock are so closely tied that the loss of yarsa and yaks has meant no trade with Tibet, which means no salt and no butter. As a result, for most villagers in Dolpo this year there are no ingredients to make the salty Tibetan butter tea. 🇳🇵

Bon Po and Tibetan Buddhism

Bon Po	Tibetan Buddhism
Bon Po mantra 'Om Matri Muye Sale Du'	The mantra goes 'Om Mani Padme Hum'
Devotees circumambulate shrines anti-clockwise	Devotees circumambulate shrine clockwise
Sacred religion symbol is the Swastika sign	Various symbols
18,000 years old	About 2,500 years old
Monks substitute blue for yellow in the central panels of vests	Monks wear maroon sleeves, skirt with yellow vest



The dazzling beauty of Dolpo is confined mostly to the ink-blue waters of Phoksundo Lake. The remoter valleys of Nepal's most remote region hide the ancient monasteries and culture of the Bon faith which preaches worship of nature.

EVENTS



Seema on the Rocks

Seema Golchha, a housewife turned stand-up comedian and ventriloquist, is in Nepal for her very first solo comedy show.
17 August, 6:30pm onwards, Rs1,000, Moksh, 9807034180

Pride Parade

Celebrate love at the annual Pride Parade. March with fellow LGBTIQ+ supporters, dance and end the day with a Rainbow Concert.
16 August, 12pm-6pm, Thamel to Tudikhel (01) 4000012

Nepal Retrospective

Film South Asia presents “Nepal Retrospective”, a series of 8 exceptional Nepali documentaries from the last 20 years. All films have English subtitles.
15 August-3 October (Every Thursday) 5:30pm onwards, Rs50, Yala Maya Kendra, Patan (01) 5522713



Wall Climbing

Astrek Climbing Wall has always viewed walls as opportunities rather than obstacles. To assert that walls are meant for climbing and in celebration of Global Climbing Day, Astrek is providing 100 free climbing passes. Pre-registration is required.
24 August, 12pm onwards, Astrek Climbing Wall Pvt Ltd (01) 4419265

Art Talk Program

MCUBE Gallery invites art lovers to “AIR_MCUBE 11TH SEASON”, a talk program with Austrian artist Lea Titz and Nepali artist Sandhya Silwal. They will discuss the progress of their work and future projects.
18 August, 4pm-5:30pm, MCUBE Gallery, Patan, 9851170110



Freedom

Samjhana Rajbhandari presents “Freedom”, her 8th solo painting exhibition. The event was inaugurated by the honourable former Chief Justice Sushila Karki on 9 August.
10-21 August, Sarwanam Art Gallery, Kalikasthan (01) 4011027

Painting Exhibition

Dalali-La Art Space presents “Volume IV: Structural Beauty” by Bidhata KC. This is a series of paintings inspired by KC's tour of Mustang a couple of years ago.
3-31 August, 10am onwards, Dalai-La Boutique Hotel, Thamel (01) 4701436



Black Source

Taragaon Museum presents “Black Source”, a series of charcoal artworks by Chung-Hsi Han. The exhibition will be inaugurated at 4:30pm on 18 August.
19-20 August, 10am-5pm, Taragaon Museum Contemporary Art Gallery, Hyatt Regency, Boudha (01) 6201035

Typography Workshop

Bring words and images to life with this Expressive Typography Workshop. You will learn about the basic elements of design, typography and digitization. Make sure to bring your laptop. Basic photoshop and illustrator skills are recommended.
17 August, 10am-2:30pm, Rs1500, Sattya Media Arts Collective (01) 5521812

ABOUT TOWN

MUSIC



Nadav Dagon

Enter Nadav Dagon's musical playground and immerse yourself in the Drumtek musician's hypnotising 360-degree show.
23 August, Rs1,000, Evoke Cafe & Bistro, Jhamsikhel, 9851111051

Pema the Pianist

Listen to the soothing melodies of Pema the Pianist while you sip a refreshing cocktail.
16 August, 7pm onwards, Electric Pagoda Bar/Cafe, Thamel (01) 4700123

Kanta dAB dAB

Listen as a sitar, percussion and bass combine for a unique contemporary performance.
16 August, 6pm-10pm, Social Cafe, Gairidhara (01) 4427370



Polyphonic Concert

Listen to the polyphonic songs of l'Ensemble de Caelis, a musical group formed in 1998 by Laurence Brisset. They specialise in the interpretation of the medieval a cappella repertoire.
21 August, 6pm onwards, Alliance Française de Katmandou, Jhamsikhel (01) 5009221

Blind Faith

Come see the Blind Faith Band play the greatest hits of Om Bikran Bista, who is regarded as the Nepali King of Pop. This tribute will take the audience down memory lane, with songs from the '90s.
16 August, 7pm onwards, Rs1,500, Privé Nepal, 9818123232

DINING



Italian Food

Dining Park's Italian Food Promo offers the best of authentic Italian food.
16-26 August, Dining Park, Mid-Baneswor (01) 4486002

Thai Tastes

Indulge in authentic Thai cuisine prepared by Chef Paniti, who has flown in from Thailand just for this food festival.
16-25 August, 12pm-10pm, Hotel Annapurna (01) 4221711



Mexican Fiesta

Eat your heart out at Chimes' Mexican Food and Beer Fiesta. Enjoy a taco with a side of chips and salsa.
17 August, 2 pm onwards, Chimes Restaurant, Sanepa (01) 5549673

Pasta Per Te

Pasta Per Te, which translates to Pasta For You, is the perfect event for pasta lovers. You can customize your own dish, pair it with a beverage of your choice and end the meal with tiramisu.
Till 20 August, 6pm onwards, Rs1,300 plus, The Sunrise Cafe, Hotel Yak & Yeti (01) 4248999



Scrumptious Sichuan

Enjoy the best of Sichuan cuisines with Sichuan chicken, Chinese glass noodle salad, honey dates wanton, crispy congee lamb and more.
16-25 August, 6:30pm-10pm, Rs2,200 plus tax per person, Hyatt Regency (01) 5171234

GETAWAY



Akama Hotel

A new property in Kathmandu, Akama Hotel boasts a fusion of local Newari and Himalayan Cultures as well as luxurious modern amenities. Relax by the infinity, pool, take a dip in the jacuzzi and step into the sauna room for a day away from the Kathmandu hustle.
Dhumbarah (01) 4377298

Balthali Village Resort

A simple and cosy retreat just beyond Kathmandu Valley, Balthali Village Resort is ideal for anyone seeking to get away but not too far away from the city.
Panauti, Kavre, 9851087772



Dom Himalaya

Dom Himalaya Hotel offers a space for visitors to indulge in traditional Nepali cuisine, relax with Tibetan singing bowls and bask in the vibrant chaos of Thamel.
Thamel (01) 4263554

Mount Princess

Surrounded by mountains and forestry, Mount Princess is a haven for city dwellers. Spend the morning sipping a warm cup of Nepali tea while you take in the breathtaking views.
Dhulikhel (01) 490616



Raniban Retreat

Located on a hillock of Raniban forest, this environmentally-friendly boutique hotel offers a spectacular view of the mountains.
Pokhara (01) 5185435



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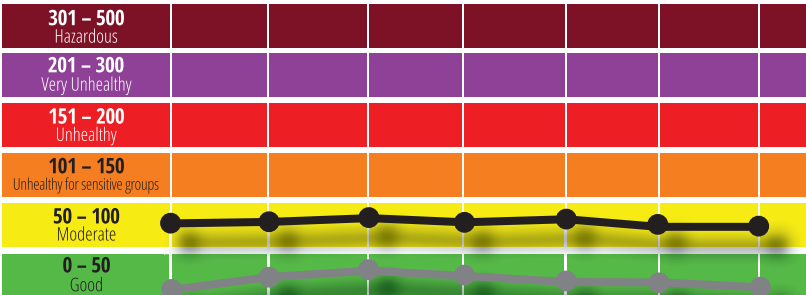


Opened in Kathmandu on 16 August

Once Upon a Time in Hollywood is a “modern fairytale tribute” to the Golden Age of film in which a TV star and his stunt double navigate the changing industry. Directed by the acclaimed Quentin Tarantino, the movie boasts an ensemble cast featuring Leonardo DiCaprio, Brad Pitt, Margot Robbie, Al Pacino, Dakota Fanning, Austin Butler and more.

AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 9-15 August



Regular evening and night showers this past week kept Kathmandu Valley's air quality relatively clean, washing particulate and gaseous pollutants from the air. The Phora Darbar monitoring station of the US Embassy recorded the daily average in the Yellow Moderate band every day. However, the averages mask daily rush hour peaks when air quality did decline to Unhealthy. This means that it is all right to walk or play sports outdoors, except during the morning and evening peak hours if you live near a road.
https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/



SAURAV THAPA SHRESTHA

The Nil Barahi festival, 17-20 August, re-enacts a centuries old tradition

Alok Siddhi Tuladhar

The Tantric goddess has the face of a hog, and she moves slowly through the narrow streets of Bodey with 19 other masked dancers representing various other deities in attendance. The parade goes on all night for three nights as the dance turns into a trance.

Starting near midnight this Saturday, Bodey's Nil Barahi festival will be held as it has for the last 500 years, a tradition that some believe goes back to the Lichhavi period, perpetuated by King Subarna Malla of Bhaktapur and later the Shah dynasty.

Turn north at Thimi on the road from Kathmandu to Bhaktapur to a quaint little Newar settlement called Bodey and the nearby dense forest of Tigini. At a raised clearing in the forest is the shrine of Nil Barahi. Legend has it that the goddess, disguised as an old man, abducted Bodey farmers and taught

them a tantric dance that the locals have performed continuously every year since then.

The highlight of this annual festival, known locally as the Nil Barahi Dyo Pyakhan, is a slow-moving but animated masked dance procession, acted out by an ensemble of about 100 residents of Bodey: gurus, dancers, musicians and a supporting cast. The 19 dancers, who represent Bhairav, Nil Barahi, Kumari, Singha, Dwarpal and Ganesh, have taken on the responsibility for life.

Once the dancers don their masks they draw on a divine power and sway through the streets of Bodey all night long, moving their limbs and bodies languidly to the tune of *dha* (drums), *ta* and *bhusya* (cymbals), *ponga* and *mwali* (flutes).

Once activated with tantric powers, the elaborately painted masks allow the humans behind them to endure physical hardship that they cannot

even imagine bearing in ordinary circumstances. Once the procession begins, the dancers cannot eat, drink, sit, sleep, talk or relieve themselves for 15 hours every night for three nights.

People believe it is divine intervention from the gods that allows the dancers to take up this superhuman challenge. Some of the dancers, now in their late seventies, have been performing this role every year for the last 60 years.

every year for the last 60 years. Prem Chand Aduwa Shrestha, representing the lead Nil Barahi, says all 19 'gods' adhere to strict moral discipline throughout the year. "That is why people know me more as Barahi, and less by my real name," Shrestha explains. "Local people treat us as gods even when the festival is not on. I am now 68 but have never fallen sick, and have never taken medicine."

Most families in Bodey, and their visiting friends and relatives, line the

streets, staying awake till early morning to conduct special ritual worship as the gods dance past their neighbourhood, offering food and money, which goes to the guthi to organise the annual festival.

“The offerings fund the complicated and elaborate rituals, but it is not enough. So the municipality has been helping out since 2017,” says Ward Chair Dev Krishna Move Shrestha.

Though celebrated with much passion, the origins of the Nil Barahi festival is shrouded in mystery. Some say it is a victory ritual commemorating an ancient battle, but others reckon the subdued nature of the music and dance moves signify a desire for societal wellbeing.


"I think it is a protective dance, since most of the deities are in some way related to good fortune," says researcher Sworup Adhikari.

Despite the vibrant atmosphere, there is growing concern among the elderly that the tradition might not survive because of the strict

rules governing the lives of the dancers.

Luman Dhon Shrestha, a 40-year-old *ponga* player, however, says Bodey's youth are excited to be a part of the ritual: "They find it an honour to be chosen to represent a deity, and there is competition if one of the dancers passes away."

In recent years, many young men and women come to Bodey for the festival and can be seen recording the dances on their phones. Youth-driven publicity over social media platforms has resulted in a marked increase in the number of visitors, increasing the money collected as well.

Prem Nidar Shrestha of Bodey sums it up: "Money is vital in keeping the festival going, but with a growing number of devotees attending in recent years we are confident it will survive into the future." 

Nil Barahi Festival

Bodey

Starts 11 pm on August 17 and every night till August 20













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Animal Planet meets Disney World

Much has been said about the darker, edgier remake of the beloved 1994 animated classic *The Lion King* since its release a month ago. Most notably, the digitised re-release uses new photorealism techniques to bring to life breathtaking computer-generated shots of wildlife and nature. It is so realistic we have to remind ourselves we are not watching Attenborough or Animal Planet. But in retelling the original cartoon movie, it is precisely this virtual realism that has been panned by reviewers for ‘lacking soul’, and being ‘heartless’, or ‘trading feelings for realism’.

Still, as someone who was so moved as a child by the original *Lion King*, the 2019 version worked well, as it retold the story of a young cub who must embrace his role as the rightful king of Pride Rock

and avenge the death of his father Mufasa at the hands of his villainous Uncle Scar.

The young Simba crying for help after the stampede is as powerful and as painful to watch, if not more. The audience of young Nepalis at a matinee show at Labim Mall was thoroughly transfixed by the boisterous 3D duo of Pumbaa and Timon. Hakuna Matata is there, so is a body positive message in the mix. And despite working with a different medium, the characterisation of young-adult Simba is still on point: joyously chasing after butterflies over a clearly perplexed antelope.

The only actor reprising his voice role, James Earl Jones as Mufasa sounds as kingly as he did the first time around. The voices of Donald Glover as Simba and Beyoncé as Nala are perfect fits. JD

McCrory as young Simba is full of life, naive and entitled. Chiwetel Ejiofor presents a different Scar, downright menacing and terrifying, a departure from Jeremy Iron’s charismatic villain. But the highlight have to be Simba’s sidekicks, Pumbaa and Timon, voiced by hilarious Seth Rogen and Billy Eichner.

Hans Zimmer and Elton John return for musical composition. *Circle of life*, as the opening of the film, is a shot-for-shot adaptation of the original. The high-spirited *Hakuna Matata* and soulful *Can you Feel the Love Tonight?* are full of nostalgia.

Director Jon Favreau made *The Jungle Book* in 2016, and used some of the new technology in this *Lion King*. During promotions Favreau said it was important that the film have the illusion of being a naturalistic documentary. The fact that the *Lion King* is based in Africa drives home the reality of desertification and biodiversity loss caused by human greed and the climate emergency.

One might ask why we need a photorealistic *Lion King* with Musafa explaining to Simba the circle of life when ecosystem collapse is already so real. Besides, we have Animal Planet and other nature documentaries. Here’s why: the *Lion King* anthropogenises wildlife, forcing children hooked on cartoons to learn early about nature’s balance and the need for conservation. The message is more powerful when the digital animals are more realistic.

Cartoons are keeping pace with animation technology, and this can only make them more relevant at a time when the Planet is facing its sixth extinction. If they can be entertaining and goad the next generation to be activists for the Earth’s protection, that can only be a good thing.  **Sonia Awale**



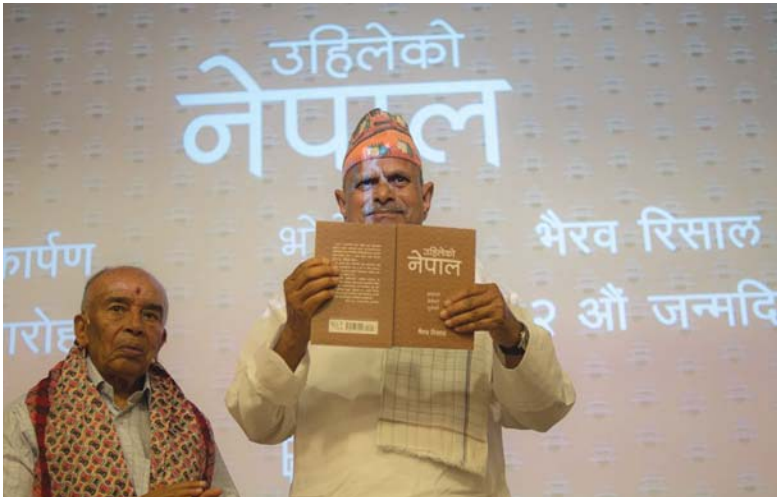
RATNA SHRESTHA/RSS

BACK ON HOME TURF: Prime Minister KP Oli returns to Kathmandu on Monday following health checkups at National University Hospital in Singapore.



RANDY BERRY/TWITTER

VISIT NEPAL: US Ambassador to Nepal Randy Berry meets with newly-appointed Minister of Tourism and Civil Aviation Yogesh Bhattarai (right) in Kathmandu to discuss Visit Nepal Year 2020.



KANAK MANI DIXIT

GREAT MINDS: Former President Ram Baran Yadav (right) displays a book by Bhairab Risal released on the journalist's 92nd birthday, in Patan on Wednesday.



INDIAN EMBASSY

ANNIVERSARY GIFT: Indian Ambassador Manjeev Singh Puri gifting ambulances on the occasion of 73rd Independence Day of India on Thursday at the Indian Embassy.



JAYJEEV HADA

ON THE BALL: The Nepal Junior Tennis Team is participating in the ITF Asian Team Championship Finals in Astana, Kazakhstan. So far, Nepal has prevailed over Thailand and Yemen, confirming its spot in the Top 8.

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“Unusual appointment ... extraordinary tasks”

Yogesh Bhattarai is Nepal's 37th Tourism Minister in 41 years. He has taken the place of Rabindra Adhikari, who was killed in a helicopter crash in April, and wants to continue projects his predecessor was keen on, like Nijgad Airport. Bhattarai spoke with *Nepali Times* this week about the prospects of Visit Nepal Year 2020, rescuing Nepal Airlines and speeding up construction at Pokhara and Bhairawa airports.



BIKRAM RAI

Nepali Times: You now head a ministry infamous for frequent changes and wheeling-dealing. How will you clean up its image?
Yogesh Bhattarai: As the 37th Tourism Minister my appointment is unusual, and I have a pile of extraordinary tasks to complete. I will only step down after we have accomplished them. The centres of power in this country are the government and the Nepal Communist Party, so there is no room for any wheeling-dealing.

How are the preparations for Visit Nepal 2020?
Since there was no minister for a long time, the preparations are not satisfactory. Infrastructure has not taken off. The challenge is to speed it up, and within two weeks we will release a detailed workplan laying out the responsibilities of the government, the ministry, the department, Nepal Tourism Board, organising committees and embassies for the Visit Nepal Year.

The last Mt Everest climbing season was controversial. What are your plans for future expeditions?
Much of it was intended to

give Nepal's mountains a bad reputation. There are some weaknesses on our side, but the weather window of just three days led to the crowding. Like every year there were casualties and we are concerned about reducing them. Some agencies are also cleaning up the garbage on Everest. We will issue new climbing rules and from the next season, only trained liaison officers will be employed.

Where has the investigation on fake helicopter rescues gone?
The investigation committee under the general secretary has made some recommendations. Based on that document, further investigations are underway and the culprits will be punished.

The number of tourists has increased, but their spending has not.
This year, average spending per tourist came down to \$44 from \$55. But transactions via informal channels have been reduced.

You said you would make Nepal Airlines “wow worthy”. What did you mean?

We have to make Nepal Airlines fly high again and turn it into a flag carrier we can be proud of. There are problems — we know what they are. The company should be in profit, and pay its debts. We cannot achieve that in two months, and there is no silver bullet. We need shock therapy.

Mismanagement and political interference are blamed.
I don't wish to blame anyone personally. I don't think anyone intended for NAC to collapse. But as I said, we are looking at a dramatic turnaround in management. Those who can

handle the change will stay, those who can't will have to go. If management can convince the government that the company is financially viable, then it will invest.

You seem to be all for building Nijgad Airport. What about the trees?
I am not here to cut trees, but we need to build the airport. Its investment modality will be decided after a discussion with Investment Board Nepal. We will talk with the Ministry of Forests, and local governments will work on resettlement. It is a national

pride project, so it also requires political commitment. We aim to lay the foundation stone by November.

Nepal's aviation is still under the EU blacklist, even if ICAO has delisted us from the list of countries with safety concerns.
As per ICAO, a country should score a minimum of 60 points to pass the safety test — we have 66 points and have been delisted. But as far as the EU is concerned, a team is visiting Nepal for a safety audit. We believe that Nepal will soon be taken off the blacklist.





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Nepal is turning into a

Increase in inter-ethnic marriages blurs cultural distinctions, complicating job quotas

Sanghamitra Subba

Ever since Nepal’s founding king Prithvi Narayan Shah described the nation state he forged as a garden of 4 castes and 36 ethnicities, besides considering themselves ‘Nepali’ most people have also kept a distinct sense of sub-national identity.

The Muluki Ain of 1854 defined this social hierarchy, and the 2011 census lists all 125 castes and ethnic groups, forming the basis on which the new Constitution defines Nepal’s reservation policies for the civil service, government and Parliament. But with an increase in inter-ethnic marriages producing an even more multicultural society, there may be a need to redefine ethnicity as the country becomes even more diverse.

“Growing up, my most cherished memories are visiting my grandparents from both sides of my family and being exposed to diverse beliefs, traditions and food,” recalls Rubeena Mahato, who has a Maithili father and Newar mother. “The two ethnic backgrounds merged seamlessly without one undermining the other.”

But despite embracing her dual heritage and being raised in a household with no concept of caste hierarchy or religious superiority, and taught to respect people regardless of their ethnicity, Mahato says society kept her in a box as she grew up. (*See box.*)

Mahato recalls that the first question she was asked at school was about her caste and ethnicity. As children who didn’t know better, her classmates made assumptions based on what they had seen their parents do. Mahato was seen only as a Madhesi, leading her to feel self-doubt over her Newar identity. While she embraced her duality, her peers and teachers did not.

The caste and ethnic categorisation in the Muluki Ain and a rigid perception of identity pose obstacles for Nepalis who want to adopt their hybrid identities. Seira Tamang is a political scientist whose research focuses on social exclusion. She says, “Regardless of how people might choose their ethnic and other identities, society at large will see and treat them according to the singular homogenised identity and strata of the Muluki Ain.”

Historian Pratyoush Onta of Martin Chautari says Nepalis have three types of responses to multiethnic identities: embracing their hybrid ethnic identity, reasserting one ethnic identity while rejecting the other, or identifying themselves only as Nepali. Keeping a single ethnic



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We should envisage a model of egalitarian, inclusive, multicultural society that is applicable not only at the most general level of the nation state and society but to all levels and all regions, so that we can negotiate and renegotiate our fluid, multiple identities.
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Rajendra Pradhan, Dean of Nepā School of Social Sciences and Humanities

identity as long as it abides by the ongoing patrilineal system aligns with the current perception of ethnic identity, but there is social and political confusion for many like Mahato who want to preserve their hybrid ethnic identity.

Mahendra Lawoti, professor of political science at Western Michigan University, who has written extensively on Nepal’s reservation policies, says, “Ethnic identity is not just shaped by the individual’s perception of themselves, but also society’s recognition of them. Ethnic identity is ultimately a social construct.”

Indeed, the ethnicity of a person

in Nepal is still largely determined by the father’s lineage. But this can lead to even more confusion over the freedom of women to change their ethnic identity and surname with marriage and the matter of reservation policies.

Besides a mandatory quota for women in government and civil service, there is also affirmative action for indigenous people, Dalits and other ethnicities. But as marriages create more multiethnic identities and a weaker attachment to a single ethnicity, the future of the reservation policy comes into question.

“The reservation policy should be reflective of society and should respond to changes in the social dynamic,” says Lawoti. “The state does not recognise multiethnic individuals, but it should respond to this new reality.”

However, whether offsprings of inter-ethnic marriages will seek to assert their hybrid identity, or take up one or other of their parental identity is also uncertain. Some may prefer to assume the identity of their Dalit or indigenous parent rather than their ‘higher caste’ parent in order to benefit from reservation.

Lawoti and Onta both agree that policies should be more flexible to accommodate multiethnic individuals. This applies to women who marry someone from a

Maithil–Newar

Growing up in a Maithil-Newar household, Rubeena Mahato embraced her colourful and multicultural heritage, celebrating both *Rakshya bandhan* and *Bhaitika* with Newari mandaps and eating Mithila dishes like *thekuwa*, *khajuriya* and *daal puri* during *Chath* and delicious *yomaris* during Newar *Lapte bhoje bhoj*. “My dual heritage merged seamlessly and they always have,” says Mahato.



From a young age, Mahato was taught to respect everyone regardless of their ethnic or caste background. But she did not always receive the same treatment from others, and witnessed others get harassed because of their heritage.

“Because of my upbringing, it was inconceivable for me to engage in ‘othering’ and exclusion, or to suffer it. I remember arguing with my friends over it and refusing to participate. Over the years, there have been multiple occasions where I have had to lecture perfectly educated young people for using caste slurs. Most are embarrassed, some are quite taken aback and some refuse to introspect. But I know that we cannot let such behaviour go unchallenged.”

Mahato never caved in to the pressures of Nepal’s patriarchal society to conform to her father’s Maithil identity. Living in Switzerland with her husband, Mahato remembers: “Our home is a riot of colours, tastes and flavours from our various heritages. What could be more Nepali than that?”

nation of hybrid identities



INTERETHNIC LOVE: Prime Minister KP Oli presents rhododendron blossoms to his wife Radhika Shakya on 21 February during Kalu Pande Diwas in Dahachok.

KRISHNA PAUDEL

“

The reservation policy should be reflective of society and should respond to changes in the social dynamic. The state does not recognise multiethnic individuals, but it should respond to this new reality.

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Mahendra Lawoti, Professor of Political Science at Western Michigan University

different caste or ethnicity. Women should be allowed to either keep their birth surname or change it to their husband's, but if they are allowed to change when it fits their immediate purpose, the system perpetuates unfairness.

“Women should be allowed to change their ethnic identity when they get married but not to simply abuse the system,” says Lawoti. In Nepal's patriarchal society, even with inter-ethnic marriages there is a tendency for wives to adopt the customs, traditions and culture of her husband's ethnicity, forgoing her own. Children are raised with the culture of their father's ethnicity. When doing so, the ethnic background of women

erodes and hybrid identities are less likely to be formed.

However, with greater geographical mobility, the spread of education, and people moving out of historical ethnic enclaves, there are more possibilities of mixed ethnicities. Politician Tripple P Gurung and journalist Ramyata Limbu raise their children with a fusion of ethnic customs and practices. Both Gurung and Limbu traditions are preserved flexibly within the home – a trend that many families with inter-ethnic marriages now practice.

Basantapur of Sunsari district in eastern Nepal is perhaps one of the most multicultural, multilingual and multiethnic villages in Nepal. Anthropologist Chudamani Basnet researched inter-marriage in the

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Inter-marriage was made possible by a common language, Nepali, which has facilitated interaction between people of different ethnic groups, but at the cost of their mother tongues.

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Chudamani Basnet
Anthropologist



SANGHAMITRA SUBBA

Tharu–Tamang

Suksari Chaudhary was in her early 20s and working in a garment factory in Kathmandu Valley when she met Chhewan Lama. Amidst the hum of sewing machines and heaps of fabric scraps, the two fell in love.

They went their separate ways, but five years later they both found jobs in a school in Lalitpur and got married soon after. Although she is Tharu and he is Tamang, the wedding ceremony reflected neither culture but was performed using Brahmin rituals.

“I think it was easier for us to have an inter-ethnic marriage because both our parents were no longer with us and our other relatives also had inter-ethnic marriages,” says Chaudhary. Lama's parents and Chaudhary's father had passed away years before they met.

The only time they faced any difficulty over their mixed marriage was when they returned to Lama's home in Kavre for the first time after getting married. She recalls, “At first, his extended families didn't really understand why he had married a Tharu.”

But when Chaudhary was asked to sit in a traditional Tamang puja by Lama's family, she felt welcomed and accepted. It was rare for a conservative family to allow a person from another ethnic background to worship with them.

A year after their marriage, Lama and Chaudhary had a daughter, who grew up in a multiethnic household. She is now 22, and Chaudhary regrets not teaching her daughter Tharu customs, just as she herself never had the chance to learn about her heritage. As the only Tharu family in a predominantly Brahmin/Chhetri area, as a girl she was only familiar with the customs and practices of the ‘higher caste’ community.

Today, the family has added other rituals to their celebrations. For example, during Dasain, they put white tika on each other in the evening as per Tamang custom. Lama says, “When we were raising our daughter, we neither raised her strictly as a Tharu nor a Tamang. She is a combination of both and a product of an interlaced family.”

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Regardless of how people might choose their ethnic and other identities, society at large will see and treat them according to the singular homogenised identity and strata of the Muluki Ain.

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Seira Tamang
Political Scientist

town and found that although Janjatis have been intermarrying people from higher caste groups, there were none of the expected cultural conflicts.

A Limbu woman married to a Giri man found that as they had migrated away from their families and were more economically independent, they faced very little inter-ethnic conflicts.

However, not all such marriages are accepted. ‘Higher caste’ people who have married Dalits, for instance, are routinely ostracised by their own community. Sometimes couples who have crossed caste or ethnic lines to elope have been publicly taunted, beaten, or driven out of their villages.

Basnet attributes much of the opposition to the loss of cultural heritage and language. “Inter-marriage was made possible by a common language, Nepali, which has facilitated interaction between people of different ethnic groups, but at the cost of their mother tongues,” he adds.

As offspring of inter-ethnic marriages create and practice their own fusion customs, some of the distinct cultural and linguistic attributes of the original ethnic groups tend to erode. The future of hybrid identities with the current social and political state of Nepal is therefore uncertain, even though Prime Minister KP Oli and his wife Radhika Shakya, and other senior politicians, themselves have married across ethnicities.

Inter-ethnic marriages in Nepal came in waves. During the Panchayat, many underground Communist leaders, like KP Oli, developed relationships with young women in the households where they rented rooms, or in the neighbourhoods of inner city Patan and Kathmandu. During the National Development Service, college graduates were mandatorily required to serve a year in rural areas, and got married to locals. The third wave was during the conflict, when Maoist guerrillas could get married with the party's consent. Today, education, mobility and

connectivity have unleashed a new wave of inter ethnic marriages.

Uncertainty is also perpetuated by the lack of data regarding inter-ethnic marriages. The Department of National ID and Civil Registration refused this paper's repeated requests to release data of inter-ethnic marriages or to comment on the trend, citing issues of privacy and discrimination.

Regardless, Nepal is celebrated as a multicultural, multilingual and multiethnic nation, characteristics that have been embedded in the Constitution. But while the country as a whole may have a rich ethnic diversity, it is also becoming a new melting pot. 🇳🇵



Watch interviews with social scientists and inter-ethnic couples talking about Nepal's new melting pot. The country's ethnic diversity is being stirred into an amalgam of multicultural identities that will have a profound impact on reservation policies and national integration.



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You Want It Darker?

I don't know about you, but I miss the good old days when Nepal was a feudal landlocked Himalayan kingdom in which nights were still dark. Then, we went from feudal to federal, even though no one can tell the difference. We replaced one king with a herd of them. With our own merchant marine we will soon no longer be landlocked, and we have emerged from the dark ages to become a nation of fly-by-nights.

Many of us are still old enough to remember that Nepal used to suffer load shedding for up to 18 hours a day. This was the single most outstanding achievement of the post-1990 dispensation. It forced Nepalis not to take power for granted, and as the noted 20th century philosopher Batman used to say — with little power comes great responsibility.

Today, with 24-hour electricity supply, we have turned a powerless state into one where the powers-that-be get their power from India. We must bear that in mind as we use the remaining space in this week's column to make an inventory of all the things that we as a nation have lost with the end of load shedding:

- Nepal cannot sell its darkness as a tourist attraction anymore. We have gone from being a nation of star-gazers to a country of navel-gazers.
- Nepal Tourism Board will have to scrap imaginative slogans like 'Nepal: You Want It Darker', or 'Be a Torch-bearer in

Kathmandu', and replace them with 'Make Nepal Dark Again'.

- Diesel generator importers have gone bust.
- The sale of Nightvision visors has plummeted since the war is over and people will no longer need these to take accurate aim in the general direction of Waterloo at night.
- The sun has set on solar panel vendors.
- Nepal has doubled its carbon footprint, and will soon become a middle income state.
- Instead of engaging in our national pastime of playing interactive games with each other in the dark in order to procreate, most of us now just fondle fones.
- As a result, the country will soon have below replacement level fertility. Who is going to take care of us in our next incarnation?
- The proposed 17-floor skyscraper on Purano Bus Park was all set to be a symbol of national pride and get listed in the Guinness Book as the Tallest Building in the World Without a Functioning Lift. But now that we have 24-hour electricity it will just be listed as the Ugliest Erection in South Asia.
- There is more electric power now, but it is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands.



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