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RAMESH GIRI / RSS

Party Line

Throughout the state visit to Nepal by Chinese President Xi Jinping last weekend, Marxism-Leninism-Maoism ideology was scarcely mentioned — even though both countries are governed by monolithic Communist parties.

The irony could have been lost on supporters of the Nepal Workers Peasants Party (*above*) that has traditionally governed Bhaktapur, who carried portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao during a rally to mark the party's convention just before Dasain.

While Nepal's politics still takes its inspiration from philosophers and leaders from the last century, the optics

of the Xi visit was all geopolitical symbolism. Proposals about connectivity, the Belt and Road Initiative, trade and infrastructure — just about everything was mooted except the ideological underpinnings of the proposals.

President Xi timed his state visit to Nepal after an informal summit with Indian PM Narendra Modi in southern India. His message was that India is too important a trading partner for China to jeopardise those ties over Nepal. Chinese leaders since Mao have advised Nepal's past kings, prime ministers and party leaders not to antagonise New Delhi.

The visit underscored China's national interest to see a stable and

independent Himalayan buffer state. For Prime Minister Oli, it was a photo-op to counter rising public disillusionment about his government's non-performance. Oli is sensitive about this, and pointedly told critics at a NCP tea party Wednesday to "open their eyes" to accomplishments.

With all the attention on tunnels, trains and toll roads, Xi's admonishment in his banquet speech that Nepalis do not complete projects, and advising his comrades to not be greedy, seemed to get lost in translation.

The most important message from President Xi's visit for Nepalis, as Bhaskar Koirala reports from Beijing (*page 4*), is whether China's promise of help will help us stand on our own two feet. Also in this edition, Bhutan Member of Parliament Passang Dorji says strategic shockwaves caused by Nepal wriggling out of India's sphere of influence would be felt in the region. 🇳🇵

NEPAL'S PEACE CORRIDOR
BY BHASKAR KOIRALA

POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF INDIA-NEPAL-CHINA TIES
BY PASSANG DORJI

PAGE 4



buzz

NEW HIGH WAY TO DOLPO

... is not good news for trekkers

PAGE 8-9

TRANS-HIMALYAN HANDSHAKE
EDITORIAL
PAGE 2



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TRANS-HIMALAYAN HANDSHAKE

Nepal's leaders are basking in the glory of the state visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping on 12-13 October. This hangover is going to last till at least after Tihar.

But sooner or later they (and we) will have to face the gritty reality that neither China nor India are going to make Nepal. We have to do it ourselves. The most important message of the Xi visit, as Sinologist Bhaskar Koirala argues in this issue (*page 4*), is that Nepal should follow China's example of self-reliance.

The Chinese leadership has always been strong on symbolism, keeping a long-term time horizon, building a strategy to attain those goals and implementing them. This time too, President Xi timed his state visit to Nepal after an informal summit with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in southern India. His message was that India is too

There has been much scorn in social media advising the government not to sell dreams of railways when it cannot even maintain roads inside Singha Darbar.

President Xi came across as a benevolent uncle, and used his state banquet speech to heap admiration on the Nepali people. We probably deserve that praise because Nepalis have been so patient with our feckless leaders for so long.

But Xi also went on to chide Nepal quite pointedly on not completing infrastructure projects. Chinese contractors have firsthand experience of this: the on-again-off-again Budi Gandaki and West Seti, being given the run around by corrupt officials, extortion and local opposition in airport, hydropower, irrigation and other schemes. Xi had another bit of advice for the NCP: Communists should not be greedy. To that, he could have added: they should also not have a lust for power (or other carnal desires).



BHANU BHATTARAI

important a trading partner for China to jeopardise those ties over Nepal.

The visit to Kathmandu may have been brief, but it underscored China's national interest to see a stable and independent Himalayan buffer state. Chinese leaders ever since Mao Zedong have advised Nepal's leaders to learn to live with India, and be smart about dealing with the rulers in New Delhi — advice that kings, prime ministers and party leaders in Nepal have not always heeded.

Prime Minister KP Oli pulled out all stops to make this visit happen, and to make it a memorable one for Xi. He micro-managed the arrangements, even getting Sur Sudha to rehearse the music the band would play at the state banquet. The frantic and temporary facelift of Kathmandu streets (only those that the Chinese entourage would drive along) carried its own symbolism: a shameless attempt by Nepali officialdom to hide governance failure, corruption and neglect that have made the capital so squalid.

For the Nepal Communist Party (NCP), the visit was a useful way to distract a disillusioned domestic public from its non-performance over the past two-and-a-half years. The ruling party is being ridiculed for squandering its two-thirds mandate, its inability to rein in wayward officials, for impunity and failure to provide basic services. Dangling future trains, tunnels and toll roads in front of people is not going to reduce their woes.

Nepal can only buttress its bargaining position with its giant neighbours if it builds greater self-esteem stemming from self-reliance.

linked and not land-locked". The emphasis on connectivity made sense, and although there was agreement on a detailed engineering study of the trans-Himalayan railway and two highway tunnels to Kerung, the financial modalities were not discussed, possibly because the Nepali side is by now aware of the 'debt trap'.

Nepal did not even raise the possibility of developing an alternative source of petroleum imports via China to reduce the country's reliance on India, and there has been no progress on the Trade and Transit Treaty. China's emphasis on developing the Gandaki, Karnali and Kosi corridors signifies support for stitching Nepal economically along a north-south axis, after past attempts to split it east-west politically.

Of the other exchange of letters, the most sensitive is the bilateral agreement on mutual legal assistance, which could be a euphemism for (and a precursor to) an extradition treaty. Although crime by Chinese nationals in Nepal has increased, the agreement is obviously targeted at the 15,000 Tibetan residents and refugees in this country. It is not lost on anyone that the protests in Hong Kong this year were sparked by a similar attempt at extradition.

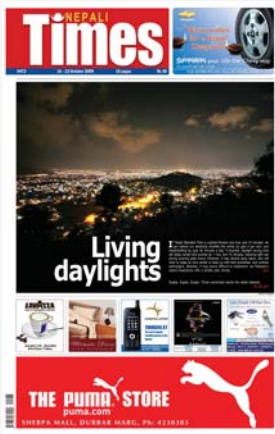
Nepal can only buttress its bargaining position with its giant neighbours if it builds greater self-esteem stemming from self-reliance. The strategy must be to take advantage of better connectivity for trade, jobs and economic growth.

10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Ten years ago, President Bidya Devi Bhandari was Defence Minister in the UML-led coalition government. Nepali Times issue #472 of 16-23 October 2009 carried this editorial about her:

Trust Bidya Bhandari to transform the most mundane issues of the Defence Ministry into the most pressing concerns of the nation. From the day she took charge, she has constantly ridiculed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). Bhandari's claim that the agreement, which put arms procurement and new recruitment on hold, is affecting the preparedness of the Nepal Army is not without merit. However, the priority now is to protect the peace and write a new Constitution. Strengthening the defence forces is necessary, but it is not the priority.

The CPA is a faulty document but for now that's all Minister Bhandari has. She'd do well to implement its provisions and move on.



ONLINE PACKAGES



DOLPO'S HIGH WAY

Join our reporter on a trip to trans-Himalayan Dolpo, the last district in Nepal to be connected to the highway network. Local lodge owners and trekkers are not happy about having to walk on trails where motorcycles are overtaking them in clouds of dust. Story: *page 8-9*.



LABOUR MIGRATION

A Nepali entrepreneur saw Qatar's reliance on imported vegetables, especially after the Saudi embargo, and set up a company to sell Nepali veggies in Qatar. Qataris are now buying *gundruk* and Pakistanis are purchasing *dalle khursani* chillies. Story: *page 14-15*.

XI'S NEPAL VISIT

Good article (What is Xi Jiping's Big Surprise?' by Saiendra Rai, nepalitimes.com), but scary content : 'China has been pushing Nepal to sign an extradition treaty [which] would affect the estimated 15,000 Tibetan exiles and refugees in Nepal.' What does it have to do with development?

Etienne Loyon

■ Tongue in cheek from the ever-effervescent *Nepali Times* ('Comrade Xi, Come Back!', The Ass, nepalitimes.com/page 16).

Gary Wornell

■ Come as often as possible President Xi Jinping, and please ask for a visit to every street in Kathmandu. Visit the large as well as the narrow ones, and go to the riverside.

Catherine Stievenart

■ And all the people say is "ke garnu" and continue their daily struggle amongst the dirt, dust, pollution and corruption...

Steve L Roberts

MAHARA RAPE CASE

What needs to be ascertained is why her accusation was on/off/on ('Mahara arrested', nepalitimes.com). Were there threats, was she paid money? Without a yes to these questions her case becomes more difficult to prove. This case, coming just a year after investigation into another rape case failed, needs to be thoroughly probed.

Alan Roadnight

■ After a few days Mahara will receive a clean chit and resume his previous position... after all the law is meant only for the poor in Nepal.

Ram Pd

■ This is a test for our Constitution and the Supreme Court—I hope they don't let us down.

Sanim Gurung

■ He is among the leaders responsible for killing thousands of Nepalis during the insurgency and who up to this point got away with a number of corruption allegations without due investigation.

Rufus Phobendra Shrestha

WHAT'S TRENDING



Exploring Nepal's culinary diversity

by Kedar Sharma and Kiran Sharma

From buttery mountain recipes to rich Rana-Mughlai cuisine and lichens to snails, Nepal has it all. Explore Nepal's culinary diversity in this special report timed for the Dasain issue. Watch videos at nepalitimes.com for recipes.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

Most visited online page



The superfoods of the Andes and the Himalaya

by Sonia Awale

The nutritious grains that mountain peoples of the Americas and high Asia cultivated were displaced by wheat and rice, but they are staging a comeback thanks to growing public consciousness about health. Read the full story online.

Most popular on Twitter

Mahara arrested

by Nepali Times

Read this analysis of the ongoing rape accusation that forced Krishna Bahadur Mahar to resign as Speaker of Parliament. Follow latest developments in the story online and join the discussion.

Most commented

QUOTE TWEETS

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Why are so many Nepali contract workers in Korea committing suicide? Point to ponder during Nepal's family festival of Dasain. Ki Mindo reports from Seoul:

K.P. @KP3426261
Painful situation for concerned families & Shameful for Governing bodies!!

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Nepal Parliament Speaker arrested for raping staffer. Krishna Bahadur #Mahara had resigned last week, and his arrest now strips him of his MP post as well. Read full analysis.

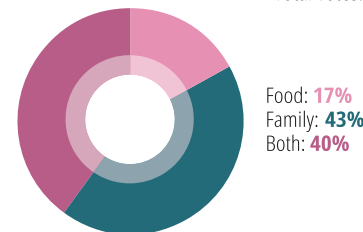
Narendra Khadka @NKhadka
Justice is being done and is this first of many abuses of position.



Weekly Internet Poll #980

Q. What is your favourite part of Dashain?

Total votes: 196



Weekly Internet Poll #981
To vote go to: www.nepalitimes.com

Q. Does the treatment of rape-accused MP Krishna Mahara mark a turning point for justice in Nepal?



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Nepal’s peace corridor

With President Xi’s visit to Kathmandu now a memory, Nepal’s must ponder whether China’s promise of help will help them stand on their own feet

Bhaskar Koirala
in **Beijing**

The visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Nepal is a watershed moment that concretely brings to the fore Nepal’s importance as a critical component of the rise of Asia within a dramatically shifting global order.

The long-term symbolism of the visit may very likely lie in the fact that a new pivot is emerging which slices through the heart of Asia, encompassing two of the most populous nations on earth and connecting Beijing, Kathmandu and New Delhi. This ‘peace corridor’ can potentially be a massive engine of global growth and serve as an anchor of regional peace and stability.

A predominating narrative that views Nepal as a ‘small’ and ‘poor’ country that is constantly buffeted by geopolitics or conflict could well be turned on its head by historians who look back on this visit 20 years hence. Nepal is not small, it has a population greater than Australia, and resources and human potential to see it into a more prosperous future.

The diplomatic breakthrough that arises with President Xi’s visit to Kathmandu opens a new vista for Nepal, which has enjoyed universally good relations with virtually all great powers through history. The evolution of Sino-Nepal relations to that of a strategic partnership as enunciated by the presidents of the two countries carries a significant implication that propels the relationship beyond the purely bilateral plane. Nepal must grasp this opportunity to leverage the goodwill she enjoys across the world, and promote greater cohesion and understanding.

Enhanced connectivity between China and Nepal as envisioned by the leadership of the two countries, which particularly features a cross-border railway across the roof of the world, would represent a once-in-a-generation development that shrinks geography and brings people together.

On the other hand, apart from the technical and engineering challenges that a China-Nepal railway poses, the onus will be on Nepal to decipher and decode to what extent this sort of infrastructure is going to relate with the open border regime that is in place between India and Nepal. In other words, nurturing the Indo-Nepal relationship must go hand-in-hand with preserving a positive Sino-Nepal relationship.

While Chinese assistance for the development of Nepal is important, the Nepali leadership would do well to take advantage of the rapport established during the visit of President Xi to genuinely understand the remarkable growth and transformation of China over the past 70 years since the establishment of the People’s Republic.

China’s rise is founded on self-reliance, which Nepal should learn from and strive to emulate. One of the points that should have been given greater

emphasis by the Nepali leadership during meetings with President Xi and his delegation is that Nepal is still a predominately agriculture-based economy, and how this might this be linked with the Belt and Road Initiative.

There are possibilities for Nepal to not just learn and borrow from China’s experience of agricultural modernisation, but also request blanket duty-free access for Nepalese agro-produce in the Chinese market. A potential consumer base of 300 million people in China would create conditions for an agricultural revolution in Nepal and open up huge job opportunities that can lay the foundation for self-sufficiency. Nepal needs to hone in on the nuts and bolts of this possibility and discuss with China the finer points of appropriate customs and quarantine infrastructure along the Sino-Nepal border.

One of the issues that loomed large for Nepal during this historic visit (and will continue to reverberate) is how the country is going to navigate between the two large overarching geopolitical constructs of the day — the BRI and the Indo-Pacific Strategy. How will Nepal balance BRI and IPS? It will be complicated, and for a country that is still undergoing a political transition, will be difficult to resolve.

Nepal’s ability to manage this balance will determine whether a ‘peace corridor’ that harks back to an earlier incarnation of King Birendra’s ‘zone of peace’ proposal can gain traction or not. This is an opportunity for the country to positively leverage its international goodwill. The main prerequisite for this appears to be Nepal’s ability to stand on her own two feet.



Bhaskar Koirala is the Director of the Nepal Institute of International and Strategic Studies.



BHANU BHATTARAI

Political geography of India–Nepal–China ties

Will the Nepal-China deal challenge India’s dominance in Nepal?

Passang Dorji
in **Thimphu**

The Nepal-China agreements on trade, economy, connectivity and security signed during Chinese President Xi Jinping’s state visit last week could mark the beginning of the end of Nepal being in India’s ‘sphere of influence’. If that happens, the strategic shock waves will be felt beyond Nepal’s borders.

The Himalayan mountains have historically been a barrier between Nepal and China, but railways, roads and tunnels are about to change that. In the battle between geography and technology, Nepal will fall into the Chinese embrace if technology wins. If geography remains a factor however, India can continue to wield political, strategic and geopolitical influence on Nepal. The idea of political geography will come into play around the trilateral relations between China, India and Nepal.

Xi’s trip to Kathmandu immediately after his informal summit with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was geo-strategically nuanced. It showed the confidence China exudes over South Asia vis-à-vis India, and the difference in national comprehensive power between the two strategic rivals says it all: China is far more powerful than India.

Nepal has to make a choice, and it seems to have made it. Upgrading Nepal-China bilateral relations from a ‘comprehensive partnership’ to a ‘strategic partnership’ was a masterstroke of Chinese diplomacy. If Nepal has drifted toward China or is increasingly doing so, India’s own Nepal policy is to blame.

The top priority of small countries is always security and survival. Their foreign policy behaviour is a response to the possible threat from a bigger neighbour. The fears do not necessarily have to be real, they could be perceived. In geopolitics, perception and speculation determine a state’s response to the geopolitical environment. When small states are cornered, they take risks that have implications for relations with other countries, especially bigger neighbours.

The 18 agreements and two letters of exchange China and Nepal inked in Kathmandu last weekend are ambitious and challenging. The timing was also interesting: right after Xi’s India trip and when China-India ties are strained over the Kashmir issue. China’s message to India is that the traditional concept of ‘spheres of influence’ is losing its relevance in geopolitics. And that Nepal cannot be construed a permanent ‘strategic backyard’ of India — it has to belong to whoever wins the power game.

The China and Nepal developments are a pointer to what is going to happen in South Asian geopolitics as China continues to rise and India pushes back its inroads into the region. These are not only signposts, there are lessons here. India will have to learn why it is detrimental to its own interest to push a smaller neighbour too much. Similarly, Nepal should ponder whether it is wise to move too far away from India without preparation.

An Indian scholar once said to this commentator about Nepal: “If India has learnt one thing, it is not to interfere.” A Nepali scholar said: “Post 2015, Nepal has

learnt the danger of depending on one neighbour too much”. It is important to strike a balance to ensure a working China-Nepal-India relationship. This will determine the geopolitical environment of the Himalayan sphere in years to come.

For India, the Nepal-China deal is evidence of the changing strategic and geopolitical architecture of its neighborhood. If China-India-Nepal relations are not managed properly, the ramifications will spill beyond their borders. The interests of political giants do not just diverge, they also converge in places, countries and ideas that matter to their national, regional and global ambitions.

We cannot discount the interest of other powers, the United States for instance, in the Himalayan dynamic. With Nepal being a candidate for the Indo-Pacific strategy, Washington’s reaction to the new developments will be worth following. Nepal, for its part, should not forget that when its political market is open to too many players, it could lose control.

When push comes to shove, Nepal will have to decide based on its own national interest. ‘Nations do not have permanent friends and foes, but only permanent interests’ is still relevant in inter-state relations, especially for smaller countries like Nepal.

Nepal’s domestic politics is

key to its response to Sino-Indian overtures, and it will have huge implications for the implementation of the deals struck with China. And the way Nepal puts its own house in order and manages its domestic political issues will determine India’s response to the China-Nepal deal. An indifferent or no reaction from New Delhi to China-Nepal bilateral developments do not mean it is not interested. It is in ‘wait and see’ mode, and any unmanageable domestic political fissure in Nepal can wreck the China-Nepal deal.

The growing Chinese footprint in Nepal is proof that Beijing is already the chief player in South Asian geopolitics. Its Belt and Road Initiative is gaining momentum in Nepal and the region despite India’s resistance and non-membership in it. But the future of the recent China-Nepal agreements will depend on Nepal’s foreign policy dexterity and to some extent, on the character of Sino-Indian relations henceforth.

China has become a reality in South Asia. Ignoring that fact would be a mistake.



Passang Dorji, PhD, is a member of Bhutan’s Parliament, and a scholar on Bhutan and Nepal relations with China and India. The views in this article are his own.

passang2007@gmail.com

BIZ BRIEFS

Outpacing India

Nepal and Bangladesh are estimated to grow faster than India in India, says the World Bank. In India, real GDP growth is projected to fall to 6% this fiscal year while in Bangladesh it will reach 8.1% due to the performance of the garment industry. Nepal's GDP is projected to average 6.5%, backed by strong services and construction activity due to rising tourist arrivals and higher public spending.

Turkish' new heights

Passenger and cargo traffic on Turkish Airlines reached an 82.9% load factor for September 2019, including 6.7 million total

passengers carried. Transit passengers increased by 6.2%, international passengers rose 5.5% and cargo/mail volume increased by 9.8% compared to last year.

Cleaner trails

Small Mammals Conservation and Research Foundation (SMCRF) is competing for funding to conduct clean-up campaigns

of plastic on the Chandragiri-Champadevi trail and waste management trainings in local communities. The project is one of the top 15 initiatives for a grant from the European Outdoor Conservation Association. Online voting will be held 7-21 October to choose the top 3 projects.

Qatar awarded

Qatar Airways has been named 'Best Airline' at the prestigious 2019 Business Traveller Awards, held on 7 October in front of 250 industry leaders in London. Qatar was judged 'Best Long-Haul Airline', 'Best Business Class' and 'Best Middle Eastern Airline'.

Thai Airways

Thai Airways received the Hall of Fame Award at the 30th annual TTG Travel

Awards 2019 ceremony and gala dinner in Bangkok recently. The airways also recently introduced new flights to Sendai, the centre of Japan's Tohoku Region.

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Marco Polo, the film that was never made

Trying to make a movie about a belt and road initiative before the term was even invented

If you want to be remembered, write it down. Marco Polo was not the only merchant who traded and travelled from the Venetian empire to the mysterious orient of Kublai Khan in 13th-century China, but he was the only one to record it for posterity.



SO FAR SO GOOD
Lisa Choegyal

Marco tagged along with his father and uncle on the epic journey, making such an impression on the Mongol rulers that they kept him in court as an exotic oddity. Only after 24 years was he able to make his way home to Venice in 1296, bringing treasures, gemstones and noodles, allegedly introducing pasta for which Italy is famed.

Imprisoned during a skirmish with the republic of Genoa, it was by a quirk of fate that Marco Polo's literate cellmate, Rustichello da Pisa, wrote down his stories to while away their jail time. Ridiculed as a web of unlikely and fanciful fibs by his contemporaries, Marco's bizarre, fantastic and romantic stories were dismissed as 'Il Milione', his nickname as the teller of a million tales.

But the Travels of Marco Polo became a best-seller, giving Europeans their first glimpse of the marvels of Asia and the splendours of the Mongol court.

The Silk Road travelled by Marco Polo did not bring him to Nepal. He would have passed way north, through the flourishing centre of Kashgar, across the forbidding Takla Makan desert to Dadu, the ancient Beijing.

Nepal was then a Malla stronghold guarded by the great

barriers of the high Himalaya to the north, and fevered Tarai wetlands to the south. Exquisite stone carvings of the golden Licchavi era would have littered the Valley, as they still do today — temple statues, inscribed steles, waterspouts fed by a complicated network of underground channels, and the massive black Budhanilkantha Vishnu, reclining on his bed of snakes, dragged by villagers across the width of the Valley from mysterious origins in the lost quarry to the south.

Long before I came to Nepal, in one of those chance encounters overheard in a conversation in a Dublin bar, I accosted the strangers, contacted the organiser, and soon found myself the only female member of a British film team driving overland from Venice to Central Asia, researching a film about Marco Polo.

Outside it was a bright spring morning, but the fug of cigarette smoke in the Kensington basement flat clouded the air without dimming our excitement. Maps were strewn across the floor, a white board was scrawled with routes and timeframes, and the plastic green telephone on the mahogany side table shrilled incessantly with its old-fashioned ring. Amongst the overflowing ashtrays and empty crisp packets, our leaders planned and postured.

It was 1973 and I sat enthralled in a carpeted corner at this planning session for a Marco Polo movie that was never made. The project was destined to run out of funding, but not before our exploratory team had completed our own epic journey. Infected by the project's glamour, publisher Alexander Macmillan paid for the recce, race driver Graham Hill

OVERLAND TO ASIA: Members of the Marco Polo Expedition in Tehran in 1973, including Lisa Choegyal's Land Rover companion Daniel Topolski, far right.

procured us Land Rovers, and writer Jan Morris helped us with details of medieval Venice — she who as James Morris, 'The Times' correspondent embedded with the 1953 British Everest expedition, telegraphed the glorious news of Tenzing and Hillary's success.

Shaking off the worst of the expedition egos, I lucked out by having Iran and Turkey as our patch, and oarsman Daniel Topolski as my Land Rover companion — almost as under-qualified as me but with an African saga under his belt, Daniel was a writer, photographer and rowing champion who coached the Oxford blues to multiple victories. With black curls, and irresistible Polish charm, his girlfriend Victoria became one of my best friends — and without whom I would never have got to Nepal.

Behind the wheel in the upright seats with camera and notebooks in hand, together Daniel and I ventured through the haunting ruins of Persepolis, cooling towers of Yazd, haze of Mount Ararat and hanging monasteries of Trabzon. We slept on floors, lived off kebabs and yoghurt, passed through the Valley of the Assassins and Elburz mountains, and followed the caravan trade routes as far as Mashhad on the Soviet Afghanistan border.

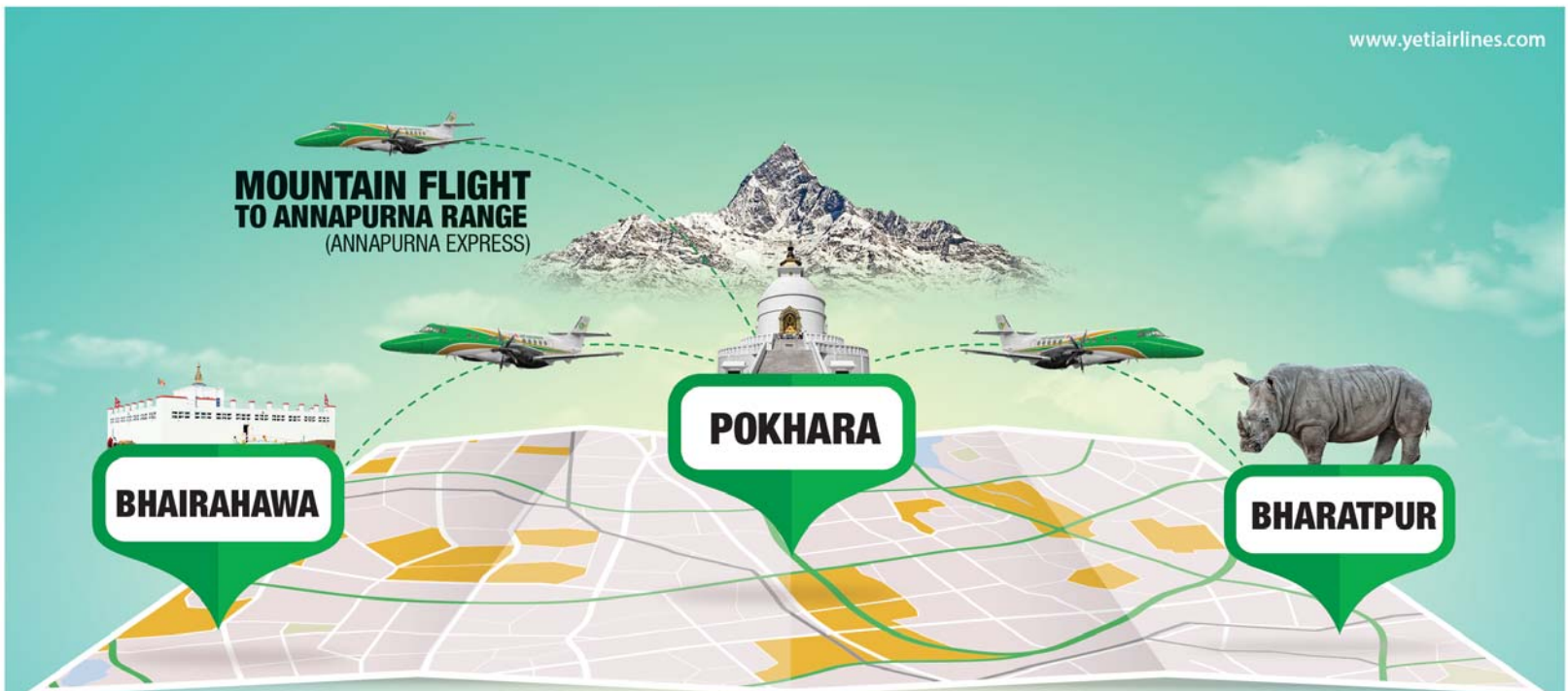


Sickness hit us crossing the rutted tracks of the Dasht-e-Lut salt desert, and euphoria when one richly glowing afternoon we were welcomed into a colourful Kurdish encampment — Daniel nearly killed me when he realised I had failed to properly load the film into the cameras, so no

photos. We discovered the sleepy, forgotten Mediterranean village of Yumurtalik, once a thriving port where Marco Polo disembarked to begin his trip to China in 1271, noting 'all spices, silk, gold and wool from inland were carried to this... city good for trade'.

And strangest of all, whilst seeking film permits in Tehran, we were invited to the inauguration of the Shah's sister Princess Shams' latest extravagance, a conch-shaped palace on a bend in the river designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, glittering with curved mosaics, fountains and crystal. Scrubbing up and finding something to wear from the back of our dust-encrusted vehicle, we mingled with the royal bejewelled crowd, gloated over the indulgent interiors and incomparable Persian carpets, tucked into caviar and champagne, admired the shimmering skill of the celebrity belly dancer, and bowed low when presented to the King-of-Kings himself.

Succumbing to such arbitrary extremes is the essence of travel, and Daniel and I had the best of times with that Marco Polo project. Due to the vagaries of political boundaries, journeys in the footsteps of Marco Polo have been impossible to re-enact since the days when he travelled under the safe passage of Kublai Khan's engraved tablets, through the enormous expanse of the Mongol empire. Inspired by Marco's travels and exploration, several films have been made before and since, but ours was not one of them. 🇳🇵




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(ANNAPURNA EXPRESS)

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This satellite image of the Subcontinent taken on Thursday at 10AM shows northern India polluted but completely cloudless. The jet stream has migrated south and chased monsoon clouds back to the sea, and there is no westerly disturbance in sight. However, a low pressure band currently moving across Iran will be making its presence felt early next week with some cloud cover and perhaps a snow flurry or two over the higher reaches in Nepal. There will be some afternoon buildup over the Himalaya on Sunday. The maximum temperature has been falling steadily and will be in the mid-20s into the weekend.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
24° 14°	24° 15°	24° 15°

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1955



2019

LAND OF LAND ROVERS:

Three Land Rovers, including the 1955 vintage 'Oxford' (foreground, right) being worshipped over Dasain at Patan Darbar Square before continuing their 19,000km journey from Singapore to London.

In Darjeeling's famous Mane Bhanjyang, the vintage Oxford Land Rover posed this month with the historic toy train just as it had in 1955 (left).



KUNDA DIXIT

The long road home

Sheilin Teo

The monsoon rains were tapering off in eastern Nepal as three gritty Land Rovers pulled into Nepal at Kakarbhitta just in time for the Dasain festival.

The Last Overland Expedition from Singapore to London was retracing the journey 64 years ago by The Oxford and Cambridge Far Eastern Expedition. Six fresh graduates in two Series 1 Land Rovers named 'Oxford' and 'Cambridge,' after their alma maters, traversed 29,000km through 19 different countries in six months from London to Singapore. It was the first time the trip had been done by road and inspired many others to follow.

The 64-year-old Oxford, passionately restored by motoring aficionado Adam Bennett, rumbled into Patan Darbar Square last week just in time for the Dasain puja, when Nepalis worship all machines: from carpentry tools to ploughs, motorcycles, cars and even planes.

Expedition leader Alex Bescoby and the

drivers sprinkled vermilion powder, draped the radiators in marigold garlands, lit incense and rang a bell to summon the gods to ensure that the rest of the expedition would be breakdown-free.

It was Bescoby who dreamt up the return trip from Singapore to London for the original Land Rover, with Tim Slessor from the First Overlanders, now 88. Among the eight members this time around is Tim's grandson, Nathan George, fresh out of university, following his grandfather's tyre tracks but in reverse. Nathan is as old as Tim was on the London-Singapore trip in 1955.

The Southeast Asian leg of the journey from Singapore through Malaysia, Thailand, Burma and into India, followed the same route as the original expedition. Many of the dirt tracks are now highways, and cities have sprung up where there were none.

The Last Overlanders were flagged off alongside 90 other Land Rovers in Singapore on 25 August, and plan to reach London on 14 December — a journey of 19,000km. Along the route, Oxford and her escorts draw curious onlookers.

In Darjeeling the convoy was greeted by local Land Rover enthusiast Samantha Dong and paraded across town, where 'Oxford' got a photo-op with the historic toy train, replicating a 1955 picture (see above).

Of the two Rovers in 1956, Oxford undertook the offshoot from the Grand Trunk Road in Patna to Kathmandu on the newly-opened Tribhuvan Highway.

This time, the route goes from India to Tibet via Nepal because of tension on the borders between India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. British nature broadcaster David Attenborough, who got the BBC to support the First Overland, says the route followed by Slessor's crew would be impossible to undertake today.

"I doubt that it would be possible now to do that because the world has divided itself against itself," Attenborough said. "And there are plenty of places now where you will not be allowed to cross the frontier."

After crossing into China at Rasuwa, the Land Rovers will speed past Lake Mansarovar. They plan to traverse Kashgar on the old Silk Road into what the crew call 'The Stans', past the Caspian Sea into the Caucasus, Turkey and on to the Channel.

Before leaving Kathmandu, Alex Bescoby mused: "The lines on the map are just that. What we are discovering is this beautiful spectrum of humanity, where each culture or religion doesn't stop at the boundaries — it spills over and merges and mixes and it's really just opened my eyes to how incredibly fluid they are." 🇳🇵



— 1955: The First Overland
— 2019: The Last Overland



Gurkha Welfare Trust

The Last Overlanders team caught up with the Gurkha Welfare Trust in Pokhara, one of the charities it is raising money for. They met 106-year-old Lal Bahadur Gurung (pictured, left) a World War 2 veteran of Libya, Egypt and the fierce battle of Monte Cassino in Italy, in which 245 Nepali soldiers were killed. <https://www.gwt.org.uk>

Follow the Last Overland journey here:
<https://www.lastoverland.com/>
Instagram: @thelastoverland

nepalitimes.com

More photos and video online



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New High Way to DOLPO

... is not good news for trekkers

Photos and text by
Sonam Choekyi Lama in Dolpo

Here in Dho Valley, in the arid mountains of northwestern Nepal, the only sounds used to be tinkling yak bells and the flapping of wind on prayer flags. Now, there is another one: the throb of internal combustion engines.

Chinese motorcycles roar down the dusty trails of once quiet Dho, and the growl of an excavator can be heard from across the valley. It will not be long before the Sumo pickups arrive from the district headquarter in Dunai, which itself was recently connected to Nepal's road network.

During his state visit to Nepal last week, Chinese President Xi Jinping said Nepal would go from being landlocked to 'land-linked', and promised to help build better road access across the Himalaya from Nepal to China. This is what 'better connectivity' looks like here at ground zero in Dolpo.

One of Nepal's priorities for trans-Himalayan connectivity is the Kali Gandaki Corridor from the Tarai, through Mustang to the Korala checkpoint at the Chinese border. The new road from Marim Pass on the Tibet border to Dunai has now reached Dho and Chharkha.

On parts of the road that are already motorable, motorbikes noisily overtake trekking groups spewing clouds of dust as they climb the trails. Neither the trekkers nor lodge owners are happy.

"They go so fast, they are noisy and irritating. It is dangerous for school children and older people — it will kill someone one day," grumbles Tenzin Gurung, a monk at the Sitcho gomba.

Across the road however, a younger trader is excited about the road since it will provide easier access to the market and bring down the cost of food.

Such ambivalence has accompanied Nepal's rapid road-building spree in other parts of the country like Tsum, Manang and Mustang. But perhaps nowhere has the change from no-road to road been as dramatic as here in Dolpo, which was the last district in Nepal not linked by road.

Over on the other side of Mo La pass, at 5,021m, an excavator is clearing a switchback down the rocky slope that follows the trekking trail, which itself followed the ancient trading route from Dolpo to Mustang.

"The weather is challenging, it is windy and cold on the pass, and we have to bring the diesel up by mule from Mustang," says excavator operator Padam Bahadur.

Those who own lodges and depend on trekking groups for income are opposed to the road. Even if it is built, they say it should not destroy the traditional trading routes and trekking trails.

Says Sonam Lama, an architect who fought a losing battle to prevent the road to his native Tsum Valley: "These hiking trails should not be replaced by roads. We should try to find an alternative motorable road."

The dozers are also ploughing across holy chorten and mani walls. The excavator driver, who is from Piuthan, says he had to "relocate" a mani wall because it was obstructing the road alignment determined by the surveyor.

Villagers in Chharkha ask why Dolpo should follow the example of Kagbeni, where the road to Lo Manthang bypassed the old cobblestone streets of the town to preserve its heritage. Indeed, Dolpo seems to be making the same mistake as other parts of Nepal.

With little oversight by local or national governments, it looks like change is too big and too quick for Dolpo to handle.

"There is no reason why the road had to follow the trekking trails, go through the villages and destroy our holy shrines," says Ramprasad Sherchan, owner of the Muktinath Hotel in Kagbeni. However, Sherchan now sees potential for more trekkers going to Dolpo via Mustang since the district will be more accessible. 🇳🇵

DOLPO'S HIGH WAY



Join our reporter on a trip to trans-Himalayan Dolpo, the last district in Nepal to be connected to the highway network. Local lodge owners and trekkers are not happy about having to walk on trails where motorcycles overtake them in clouds of dust.

nepalitimes.com



EVENTS



Jazz Masterclass

This jazz masterclass gives students and both aspiring and established musicians an opportunity to get tips from visiting artists, learn techniques and interact with international jazz musicians. 22 October, 11am-1:30pm, free entry (limited seating), Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory, Jhamsikhel (01) 5543554

Clean-up Campaign

Small Mammals Conservation and Research Foundation's Chandragiri-Champadevi Clean-up Campaign is one of the initiatives selected for potential funding by the European Outdoor Conservation Association. The funds will go towards conducting a biodiversity survey, a clean-up hike and for future preservation of wildlife in the area. Vote by 21 October online.

Diwali Market

Celebrate this Diwali with a pop-up market filled with handicrafts, local goods and great food to get you in a festive mood. 18 October, 11am-7pm, Heritage Garden, Sanepa, 9842838493



Krama

Tilicho Kala presents a collection of artworks to showcase the rise of contemporary female artists in the 21st century. 19-23 October, 4pm-10pm, Common Room, Soaltee Crowne Plaza, (01) 4273999

Imperfect Solidarities

Explore topics like shame, stigma and vulnerability as well as transformative justice and healing through discussions, archival data and stories. 19-20 October, 10am-5pm, Rs500 per person, photo.circle HQ, Jhamsikhel (01) 5543501



Pink Walkathon

Raise awareness about breast cancer and support ongoing research initiatives with a walk from Jawalakhel to Patan. 19 October, 7am-10am, National Hospital & Cancer Research Center, Jawalakhel (01) 5553376

Boudha Farmer's Market

If you're looking to get healthy and to change your diet, the farmer's market in Boudha is the best place to start. Every Saturday, 8am-12pm, Utpala Cafe, Boudha, 9801052333



Singing Bowl Workshop

Enter a meditative state with the soothing sounds of the singing bowl. Learn about its inner workings and power. 19 October, 11am-1pm, Rs1,200, Vinyasanepal, Thamel, 981323752

15 years in Nepal

French photographer Michel Mée documents his 15 years in Nepal, from the mountains in the northernmost reaches of the country to the fringes of urban life in the cities. Catch the exhibition before it ends. Till 25 October, 10am-3pm, Patan Museum, Patan Durbar Square (01) 5526271

MUSIC



Valley Jams

Friday evening, Kathmandu will be alive with exciting musical performances by global jazz bands in various locations. Don't miss the shows of Tropic Green (Moksh), Paul Tynan & Jake Hanlon and Adrian Crookston & Palouse Forro (Jazz Upstairs), RSxT (House of Music) and Faby Medina (Manny's Eatery and Tapas Bar)! 18 October, 7-9pm, Rs600, Locations vary, 9803516450

Jazzmandu Finale

End the jazz festival with a bang at the joint performance of international and local artists. The medley of classical and contemporary jazz and Nepali classical sounds blend together, delivering to the audience a visio-auditory extravaganza. 23 October, 5:30-10pm, Ticket: Rs1400, Hotel Yak & Yeti, Darbar Marg, 9803516450



Jazz at the Temple House

Listen to the beautiful blending of Nepali classical music and the upbeat eclectic sounds of Nepali Afro-funk band Cadenza Collective. 22nd October, 5:30pm onwards, Ticket: Rs1,600, Kantipur Temple House, Thamel, 9803516450

Sounds of Latin Jazz

Experience the many flavours of jazz with the sounds of Afro-Caribbean and Brazilian jazz. 20 October, 7-9pm, Rs1600, Ticket: Dhokaima Cafe, Patan, 9803516450

Jazz Bazaar

Get away from the city and enjoy a musical afternoon with performances from Nepali classical musicians and jazz artists from around the globe. 19 October, 2:30-10pm, Ticket: Rs1,400, Gokarna Forest Resort, 9803516450

DINING



Haadi Biryani

If you're craving for a quick and easy Biryani, Haadi is the place to go, or order from. Their slow-cooked biryanis are seasoned with a secret spice blend that is enhanced by the clay pots they're delivered in. 11am-9pm, Dilli Bazaar (01) 4438444

Oktoberfest

Celebrate Oktoberfest with a hearty meal and a chilled glass of Sherpa Craft beer while you enjoy the autumn warmth in the sunny courtyard. 8am-9pm, Dhokaima Cafe, Patan Dhoka (01) 5522113



Friday BBQ

Unwind and enjoy the night with mouth-watering barbeque, refreshing drinks and some time to yourself and friends. 6:30 onwards, The Dwarika's Hotel, Battisputali (01) 4217999

Starry Night BBQ

Sit under the clear autumn skies, sip cocktails and enjoy a variety of both vegetarian and non-vegetarian barbecued goodies. 7pm-10pm, Rs2,500+, Shangri-La Hotel, Lazimpat (01) 4412999



Beer, Kebab and MO:MO

Spend the weekend with unlimited beers, momos and kebabs while listening to live music. Every Friday and Saturday, 7pm-10pm, Rs1,250 onwards, Fairfield by Marriott, Thamel (01) 4217999

GETAWAY



Dwarika's Resort

Dwarika's Resort not only boasts luxury accommodations, an attentive staff and fantastic amenities, but also award-winning dishes from around the world. Next time you're in Dhulikhel, lunch at the hotel's restaurant or a night in their comfy rooms is a must. Dhulikhel (11) 490612

Atithi Resort & Spa

The Camellia Spa in Atithi Resort is one of the best in Pokhara. With a variety of services ranging from Ayurvedic Massages to steam and sauna, Camellia is a sanctuary for those looking to get some 'me' time. Lakeside, Pokhara, (061) 1466760



Bardia Gaida Camp

Reconnect with wildlife just a stone's throw away from the rhino zone in the central area of Chitwan National Park. Enjoy scenic views of lush forests and rare glimpses of even rarer wildlife. Chitwan, (01) 4215409/ 4215431



Hotel Yukhang

Experience how the Malla kings lived at this charming traditional hotel. With touches of both old and new, Hotel Yukhang embodies the blending of Bhaktapur's medieval history with the touch of contemporary amenities. Thamel (01) 4267358

Club Oasis Spa

Enjoy a weekend to yourself at Hyatt's luxury spa. Take a dip in the jacuzzi, get a full-body massage and facial, and step into a sauna before you indulge in the hotel's delectable weekend brunch. Hyatt Regency, Boudha (01) 5171234



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OUR PICK

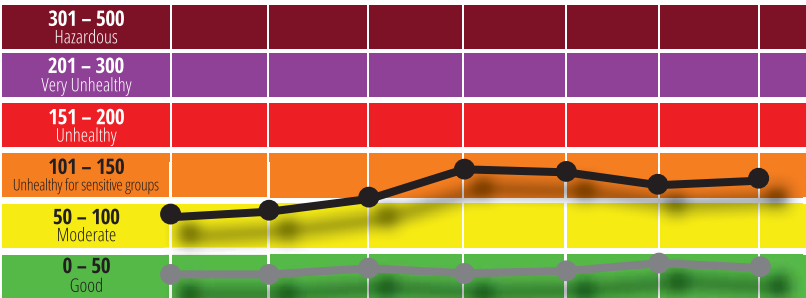


Opened in Kathmandu on 18 October

The brilliant Angelina Jolie returns as Maleficent from the classic Sleeping Beauty fairytale. The first movie was loved by both critics and viewers, with Maleficent going from villain to hero and shattering the cliché of the kiss of true love. The sequel has a lot to live up to but seems promising with the addition of Michelle Pfeiffer as Queen Ingrith, better visuals and Jolie's return to the silver screen after a long hiatus.

AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 11 - 17 October



As expected, with the rains and Dasain over, Kathmandu Valley's Air Quality Index worsened this week. Increase in vehicular traffic combined with the inversion effect trapping the pollution at ground level means the daily AQI average has crept back up to the dangerous Orange Band (above). However, hourly measurements at the US Embassy station at Phora Darbar showed much more unhealthy morning and evening pollution peaks at rush hour. Go online to www.nepalitimes.com for live pollution readings. https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/



MONIKA DEUPALA

The rise and fall of Comrade Mahara

Sewa Bhattarai and Sanghamitra Subba

Wearing a plain white polo shirt and a hint of a smile, former House Speaker Krishna Bahadur Mahara walked out of Norvic Hospital on Tuesday surrounded by security guards and some supporters. He was whisked away to the district government attorney’s office at Babar Mahal.

Mahara is accused of attempted rape of a female colleague in Parliament, Roshani Shahi, on 29 September. When the news hit headlines, the ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP) reacted with uncharacteristic decisiveness, advising Mahara to resign. For watchdogs who have been criticising the government for impunity, including in war crimes and last year’s highly publicised case of Nirmala Panta, this came as a surprise.

Was the government finally buckling under national and international pressure to clean up its track record on impunity? Was Mahara the last straw? Could the party be reacting to sagging public support?

Senior politicians have been falling like nine pins. This week it was the turn of MP Mohammad Aftab Alam from Rautahat, accused of burning a dozen people alive in a brick kiln after they were injured while making explosives to be used in the first Constituent Assembly elections in 2012.

With unprecedented swiftness, police on Tuesday arrested another MP, Pramod Sah from Sarlahi, after he was accused of vandalising an airline counter and roughing up airport staff in Janakpur. There is also an arrest warrant out for Parbat Gurung, MP from Dolakha accused of attempted murder.

Initially, Mahara’s response fit the pattern of powerful men who know they can get away with any crime. His press adviser said he had never gone to Shahi’s apartment, but after CCTV footage emerged of him arriving on the street outside, Mahara agreed to cooperate with the investigation. When his health reportedly worsened in custody, he was taken to an expensive private hospital.

Mahara’s first resignation letter was conditional: he said he was stepping down

only for the duration of the investigation, hoping to get right back to his speaker job. In fact, that is still a possibility since he has not resigned as member of parliament.

“An MP is suspended if accused of grave crimes, so Mahara is not receiving any government facilities or salary at the moment,” explains Rojnath Pande, spokesperson of the Parliament Secretariat. “However, he is not dismissed from his position. If he is cleared, he can go back to his duties as an MP.”

Meanwhile, the NCP after telling him to resign has kept mum. NCP Spokesperson Narayan Kaji Shrestha told *Nepali Times*: “His resignation automatically includes resigning from the party. We had advised him to resign as MP as well, but since he is suspended at the moment the point is moot. We cannot say anything now about his eventual return to politics.”

Shrestha claims Mahara’s resignation was meant to aid the investigation and not necessarily because of his guilt, and that he is innocent until proven guilty. However, top NCP leaders have been briefed by police that there is enough evidence against Mahara to make the rape claim credible. The party is therefore in damage-control mode.

Even a year ago, the NCP might have tried to hush up the case, especially because the evidence is murky. Shahi has changed her statement many times, calling police to say she was raped, withdrawing the complaint, then filing a first information report (FIR) for attempted rape, and again accusing the police of pressurising her. There are screenshots of Shahi’s SMS conversation with a mysterious ‘M Sir’, which hint at long-standing intimacy.

Journalists have dug up Facebook posts showing Shahi has known Mahara for decades, and implying that he has been abusing her, and that she may even have carried his child once. However, the account has now been deactivated.

Shahi has been subjected to the same kind of backlash that #metoo accusers have faced: a section of the public thinks she had a consensual relationship with Mahara and outed him when he ceased to serve her purpose. Shahi has in fact accused Mahara of not helping her get a permanent posting at the Parliament Secretariat.

The case has now become emblematic

of the trend of rape and sexual abuse in Nepal, and globally — most perpetrators are known to victims, and even have close relationships. Use of force is rare but manipulation, including threats, bribes, shame and humiliation, are common. If Shahi faced threats and shame during a supposedly consensual relationship, it is difficult to see where the consent ends and abuse begins.

Shahi herself has complicated her case by her on-off accusation, but more people in Nepal now seem aware that even if the relationship is consensual, violence or non-consensual intimacy makes it abusive. Many believe Shahi was intimidated into changing her statements. Yet for a government famous for impunity, the very fact that a powerful politician is being investigated is a step forward for gender justice.

But there are also many losers. Mental health was made an easy scapegoat after Shahi blamed depression and medication for her inconsistent statements. The reputation of women leaders, including MPs, has taken a hit since most of them have remained conspicuously silent. Only Nepali Congress MP Uma Regmi, whom Shahi called at midnight on 29 September, has spoken out.

Shahi’s marriage also suffered, since her husband Chitra Jung Shahi, who was out of town when the incident happened, reportedly went straight to Mahara on his return and then chided his wife for smearing the Speaker, forcing her to retract her accusation. Chitra Jung Shahi later posted a handwritten statement on Facebook saying he was separated from his wife.

While the case is tangled, it has certainly shaken Nepal’s powerful men, many of whom have, until now, behaved as if they are above the law. The pressure for justice in this case is increasing. On 3 October, 15 human rights organisations issued a joint statement, urging the government to treat Mahara as an ordinary citizen and investigate the case. The UN and embassies of five countries in Nepal issued another joint statement, urging Nepal to establish a ‘zero-tolerance message to combat gender-based violence’.

The NCP appears to be trying to turn the Mahara case into proof that it abides by the rule of law, and deflect attention away from larger cases of impunity for war crimes. 🇳🇵

SHAHI & MAHARA

1990: Roshani Shahi and Krishna Bahadur Mahara have reportedly known each other for decades and may have had an affair.

■ In 2017 Shahi posts a photo from 1990 on Facebook with the caption: ‘I stayed in Mahara Sir’s house for 5 years and the memories remain in my heart and womb’. (*Lokaanta*)

2011: Shahi’s mother dies. She becomes depressed and attempts suicide in later years. (*Binu Subedi in Kantipur*)

10 April 2017: On Shahi’s Facebook: ‘Yes, politicians have the freedom to do anything. They can lie, rape, engage in polygamy, carry weapons, impregnate ‘daughters’ and have daughters by them. (*Ameet Dhakal in Setopati*)

22 April 2017: On Shahi’s Facebook: ‘Be careful, especially women, sisters. For the last 9 months there is a worm in the Ministry of Finance that I don’t know and don’t understand...It aims to destroy women, kill them and not let them progress.’ ■ Mahara was Minister of Finance at the time. (*Setopati*)

26 April 2017: On Shahi’s Facebook: “After silencing your wife since 1990, becoming an MP, being involved in war and peace, now as you bring in a new person to work, how many people have you raped? Even if you don’t explain your property details, you can calculate this... right, Minister? (*Setopati*)

29 September 2019: Mahara goes to Shahi’s rented room in Tinkune at around 7PM and exits an hour later, a CCTV clip shows. Shahi claims she called senior NCP leaders but was ignored. She then calls police at 9PM and they arrive immediately. They collect evidence from her room, but do not conduct a medical exam. No statements are taken.

30 September: *HamraKura.com* publishes a video interview of Shahi with her face and identity hidden. Mahara’s press adviser Dilli Malla releases a statement denying that Mahara entered Shahi’s room and condemns portals for spreading fake news.

1 October: An emergency meeting of the NCP at Baluwatar asks Mahara to resign as speaker and MP. ■ *Nagarik* publishes a video interview with Shahi in which she retracts her previous statements. Her identity is revealed. Shahi says she is waiting for her husband before filing an FIR. ■ Mahara first tenders a conditional resignation and later resigns unconditionally as Speaker, does not mention MP post.

2 October: An assistant sub-inspector and female police officer are assigned to provide security for Shahi. ■ On Facebook, Shahi complains the officers are harassing her. ■ Shahi publishes a handwritten statement on Facebook denying the rape and claiming that depression led her to make the accusation. ■ Shahi’s husband arrives from Tanahu, and the couple go to the police station to deny Mahara’s misconduct.

3 October: Police verify CCTV footage. ■ Shahi’s husband posts a handwritten statement on Facebook announcing their separation after 28 years of marriage.

4 October: Shahi files an FIR citing attempted rape and drunken assault. ■ Police go to the court for an arrest warrant. ■ *Himal Khabarpatrika* reports Shahi again claims that the police pressured her to file an official complaint. ■ *Kantipur* reports Shahi’s Facebook page was being updated even in the middle of an interview, implying someone else was posting the messages.

6 October: Kathmandu District Court gives the police permission to arrest Mahara, and he is taken from his residence in Baluwatar to Singha Darbar and detained.

10 October: Mahara is admitted to Norvic Hospital due to high blood pressure and respiratory issues.

13 October: In a handwritten note, Shahi says that on 4 October the police conducted a 9-hour investigation, including an aggressive interrogation, and forced her to file an FIR. She claims she was prevented from holding a press conference.

15 October: A forensic report from police confirms bruises on Shahi’s body are from physical abuse and struggle. ■ Mahara is taken to court from Norvic Hospital. After a day-long hearing, the Kathmandu District Court remands Mahara in custody for three more days.



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New Gurkha book

There have been many books written about the Gurkhas — their first recruitment during the Anglo-Nepal Wars in 1815, their history in defence of the British Empire, about the Afghan campaign, on Flanders Field and Gallipoli in World War I, and about Malaysia, the Burma front and in Monte Cassino in World War II. More than 50,000 Nepali soldiers were killed in the two world wars defending the British Empire.

Now there is a new account of Nepali soldiers in the British Army, an inside story by one of the army's most experienced officers. *Gurkha Odyssey: Campaigning for the Crown*, by General Sir Peter Duffell (see photo, right), is a tribute to the Gurkhas' 200 years of brave and loyal service to the Crown — the British crown, not the Nepali one. Well, Nepal is not a monarchy anymore, and because after 1816 Nepali soldiers did not really have to spill their blood to defend their homeland till the Maoist conflict in 1996-2006.

Duffell combines the broader history of Gurkhas in the British Army with his own personal experience commanding Nepalis in the ranks. We know the history well: the expansionist Gurkha empire was on a collision course with the Honourable East India Company and full-scale war broke out in 1814. (Just how 'honourable' The Company was we can learn in William Dalrymple's latest book, *The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company*. But that is another review.)



BFBS GURKHA FACEBOOK PAGE

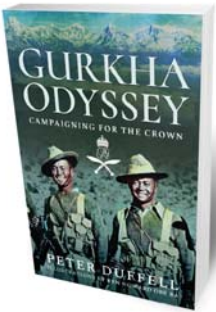
British officers and their Indian sepoys encounter Nepal's first line of defence: the malaria mosquito, and then have to contend with the 'martial spirit of an indomitable foe'. Impressed by their courage and discipline, the British start recruiting the soldiers they were fighting even before the end of the war: forcing Nepalis to fight Nepalis defending their forts in Garhwal and Kumaon.

The book is compellingly written, with illustrations by Ken Howard, and follows 'the light-hearted and gallant soldiers' in battles of Empire: from the North-West Frontier through two World Wars, to the Falklands. Ironically, after fighting alongside the British in Helmand Province in 1847, the Nepalis are back in Helmand as part of NATO forces where they have won more than 100 medals for gallantry but at

the cost of many lives.

General Duffell has seen the Gurkhas in action up close and personal, and vividly recounts some of his own experiences with the soldiers from Nepal — having commanded them at every level from Subaltern to General in the battlefield and in peacetime since 1960. Peter Duffell was awarded the Military Cross after leading the Gurkhas under his command in jungle guerrilla warfare in Borneo in 1960. He served as General Commanding British Forces in Hong Kong between 1989 and 1992, in charge of the Gurkha brigade there just before the handover.

Fluent in Nepali, he has been able to understand the soldiers under his command well, which gives the book added authenticity. 🇳🇵



Gurkha Odyssey: Campaigning for the Crown
Pen & Sword Books Ltd, 2019
304 pages
£25 hardback
ISBN: 9781526730572
www.pen-and-sword.co.uk



SHYAM RIMAL/RSS

TOUCH DOWN: Burmese officials welcome President Bidya Bandari at Naypyidaw International Airport in Burma on Wednesday. Nepal's Ambassador to Burma, Shreekrishna Udas, was also present.



MANJEEV SINGH PURI/TWITTER

LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR: Indian Ambassador to Nepal Manjeev Singh Puri presents a book on Nepal's Sikh Heritage to Chief Minister of Punjab Amarinder Singh in India on Tuesday. Nepal's Ambassador to India, Nilambar Acharya, looks on.



RANDY BERRY/TWITTER

CHANGA CHET: American Ambassador to Nepal Randy Berry (right) at a kite-flying competition with diplomat colleague Manuel P. Micaller, Jr. at the US Embassy grounds at Phora Darbar, Kathmandu during the Dasain holidays.



PARAS KHADKA/TWITTER

MORAL SUPPORT: Nepal's national cricket team, including Paras Khadka who recently stepped down as captain, visit Muskan Khatun who is recovering from an acid attack a month ago.



CUJ NEPAL

NEW WATCHDOGS: Centre for Investigative Journalism Nepal elected a new governing board on Thursday. Chandra Kishore Jha (centre in kurta) was elected the new chair and Nirmala Sharma (on his right) vice-chair.

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“I am not leaving cricket, I will still play for Nepal”

Paras Khadka has stepped down as the captain of Nepal's national cricket team, making the abrupt announcement via a Twitter post on 15 October, shocking many. It came a day after the International Cricket Council (ICC) restored Nepal's membership by provisionally lifting a ban on the Nepal Cricket Council (CAN).

Khadka debuted in the senior team in 2004 and was appointed captain in 2009, when he was just 22. From winning the Division 5 title in 2010 to gaining ODI status in 2018, Khadka has been a constant guide to the team throughout ICC suspension. Excerpts from his press conference:

What is the reason behind your sudden resignation?
It was not sudden. I was waiting for the ban to lift.

Who will be the new captain?
That is not my decision to make — it is up to CAN officials and the coach. My captainship was not the reason Nepali cricket got where it is today. The next captain should be chosen in the interest of Nepali cricket.

How do you critique your skipper'ship?
I am quite satisfied. I received support from the team and coaches.

Why did you decide to resign now?
I felt it was the right time to have new leadership. Now we have to work towards making Nepal a test nation.

What are your plans now?
As a captain I was also a selector and a mentor, so I would like to take a break from that. But I'm not leaving cricket. I still wish to play for Nepal.

So you are not resigning over a disagreement with the new CAN leadership?
No, I have not even spoken with them for 3-4 years. CAN has to prioritise cricket and players.



We should move forward with a new leader, new structure and new strategy. I will do what I can.

Was it easy to resign?
It was not difficult. Whoever the new captain is,

he will have my full support.

Will Paras miss cricket or will cricket miss Paras?
I won't be missing cricket. I will be involved one way or another. But I don't know if cricket will miss me. Sachin Tendulkar was the rage yesterday, today it is Virat Kohli. We got here with hard work but that is not sufficient anymore. The cricket board has funds, but if the players aren't safe or capable, it won't mean a thing.

Lastly, who should be the captain of the Nepali cricket team?
Dipendra was vice captain in the last tour, but Gyanendra Malla is more senior. The decision depends on CAN.

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Upasana Khadka

There is something inherently elitist about labels like ‘expat’ and ‘diaspora’. They refer to skilled Nepalis studying, working or living abroad and not to the hundreds of thousands of migrant workers when, in fact, both are just individuals moving out for better opportunities.

But Nepal’s migrant economy has also opened up new business prospects, as Kalyan Ghimire discovered. It was during a trip to Qatar to organise a musical event for Nepalis that he saw a market for ‘nostalgic products’ like *dalle khursani* and *gundruk* among the 400,000 Nepalis in Qatar.

“On one hand, I saw Qatar’s reliance on imports of vegetables, especially after the embargo, with a high share of Nepalis as the consumers of these imports,” Ghimire explained. “On the other hand, farmers in Nepal were destroying produce using dozers to protest low prices.”

Although he had little experience in the trade, Ghimire set out on a mission to play the role of a link by establishing Al Saman International. His business intuition told him Nepali migrant workers could be customers, marketers and advisers. Nepalis work in just about every sector in Qatar, and through them he was able to establish networks with higher-ups who make procurement decisions.

Ghimire’s son Saman is based in Qatar and now in charge of marketing Nepali produce. He says: “Nepali workers were reluctant in the beginning to believe that it was do-able. But once they saw the possibility, they are doing everything to help us.”



PHOTOS: UPASANA KHADKA

It required just the first few orders for the business to take off. Nepalis were the biggest consumers and helped spread the word. A wave of selfies by migrant workers next to ‘Nepali Vegetables’ signs proliferated on social media. The red hot *dalle khursani* chillies have been a particular hit, including among Pakistanis.

“Word of mouth and social media did wonders in expanding our consumer base,” says Saman Ghimire, who adds that Nepalis working in supermarkets go out of their way to help spread the word. “A Nepali *bhai* in one mart even changed the placement of our vegetables as he thought they were not visible enough.”

Ghimire’s Facebook account now resembles review websites like Yelp. Workers send unsolicited reviews and advice. One of them reads in Nepali: “I was at the Able mart the other day where special vegetables from India and Bangladesh were being sold. There was a huge crowd of buyers there, including Nepalis.

I recommend you to explore this possibility.” Recently, Qataris were spotted buying *gundruk* in Ghimire’s partner store in Doha, Fresh Food Mart. With many Nepalis working as cooks, their employers seem to have developed a taste for the fermented Nepali dish as well. The company has streamlined a

Dead end of the Korean

Why are so many Nepali workers in Korea committing suicide?

Ki Mindo
in Seoul

For many Nepalis, it is a dream to find work in Korea, where they expect to earn many times more than in Nepal. Yet, there is a dark side to the Korean Dream: from 2009 to 2018, there were 143 deaths of Nepali workers on South Korean soil, and of them 43 were suicides.

The 31% suicide rate is much higher than workers from other nationalities. Among Burmese workers, there was a total of 51 deaths, including 4 suicides, from 2011 to August 2019. Among Vietnamese migrant workers, there were zero suicides out of the 14 deaths from 2017 to August 2019.

Most of these deaths involved E-9 non-professional employment visa holders who had been employed at farms and factories that suffer a chronic labour shortage. While these tragic deaths repeat every year, the South Korean Government has no clue why so many migrant workers make such an extreme choice.

“Nepali migrant workers who come to South Korea under the employment permit system tend to be highly educated,” notes Seo Seonyoung, a sociology researcher at Yonsei University. “Their families have great expectations for them, but in Korea they find themselves at the lowest rung of the workforce ladder. The unbearable stress could eventually force them to commit suicide.”

There are growing calls for a systematic improvement to end the vicious cycle. The



ONLY MEMORIES: The body of Kedar Timilsina arrives at Kathmandu airport last month. He is suspected to have taken his own life, but his family does not believe it (*left*).

A mother holds the photograph of her son who suffered from depression while working in South Korea, and killed himself. There have been 43 suicides by Nepali workers in Korea between 2009-2018.



Bal Bahadur Gurung, 32

“He really loved the children. These kids remind me of my husband every time I see them,” said Maiya Gurung, 28, wiping away tears and looking at an image of her 7-year-old daughter and husband Bal Bahadur Gurung on her mobile (*pictured*).

Bal Bahadur Gurung jumped off the Wolleung Bridge in Seoul on 12 June, and died instantly after being hit by a passing vehicle. CCTV footage showed Bal Bahadur walking nervously back-and-forth over the bridge several times, hesitating. He had become an ‘unregistered’ migrant two days before, and feared deportation.

Bal Bahadur entered South Korea with a proper work visa in October 2017. In March, he left the company and registered himself at the Ministry of Labor to find another job. Migrant workers automatically lose their right to stay in the country if they fail to secure employment within three months. Bal Bahadur went back to Nepal to spend a short time with his family then returned to Korea, but had no luck finding a job within the three-month deadline.

His often asks her: “Did Daddy die?” “No,” Maiya replies, “your father has gone abroad to work.” She weeps as she tells us later, “I want to die, too. But when I think of these poor children, I can’t.”

desert



HOME VEGGIES: Kalyan Ghimire and his team sort eggplants on Wednesday morning at a collection centre in Satdobato for air shipment to Qatar (left). The fresh vegetables from Nepal, including the super hot *dalle* chilli are popular among Qatari, Nepali and other South Asian customers at this market in Doha.

supply chain to fly consignments of fresh Nepali veggies to Doha every Wednesday and Sunday. The seven markets place their orders a day or two before. Back in Nepal, farmers bring their produce to a collection point in Satdobato early morning on shipment day. The produce is graded, packaged and sent to the airport

quarantine office, then put into the cargo holds of flights to Qatar. A team at Doha airport receives the shipments and dispatches them to market. This Wednesday orders were placed for 1,900kg of fiddleheads, chillies, radish, French beans and bamboo shoots. There have been hiccups along the way. For example, there is a big

demand for coriander and mustard leaves, but they have a short shelf-life and attempts to export them have not worked out. One big challenge is the cost of air freight, which puts Nepali produce at a price disadvantage compared to items from India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The government could help by setting a lower rate for perishables in the cargo holds of Doha-bound aircraft. For now, the father-and-son team is trying to consolidate the business, make supplies reliable and fresh for current customers. Says Saman Ghimire: “If we can ensure the guaranteed supply of vegetables, demand is not a problem.” The Ghimires also have their eyes on FIFA 2022, when they expect demand to grow. They are also hoping to branch out into exporting bottled water and t-shirts for the World Cup games. Says Kalyan Ghimire: “There is potential for so much more economic activity beyond labour migration. Returnees can also play an important role in expanding their horizons in the Gulf and Malaysia.” 🇳🇵



Watch as Nepali veggies are prepared for shipment to Qatar, where migrant workers are getting a fresh taste of home and Qataris are being turned on to *gundruk*. nepalitimes.com

US ban on Malaysian glove exporter affects Nepalis

The suspension of exports from Malaysia-based WRP Asia Pacific, a glove manufacturer, by the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Detention Orders this month has been hailed as a milestone in the fight against forced labour and has potential implications for Nepali workers in Malaysia. WRP Asia Pacific was accused of using forced labour at its plants in Malaysia, and the order has reverberated throughout the rubber sector, which accounts for 65% of the global glove industry. The company made headlines recently after a strike by over 2,000 Nepali and Bangladeshi workers, who said they had not been paid for months. “We held a strike for two days, and resumed work only after our Embassy intervened and the employer was forced to pay due wages. We have been paid in a timely manner since then, but we don’t know how the ban will affect our future,” said Dipak Rai, a Nepali worker.



The media reports led Malaysia’s Ministry of Human Resource to file a court case against WRP Asia Pacific. The US move is as per its Trade Facilitation and Trade Enforcement Act, which makes imports produced by forced labour illegal. Other countries also have laws for due diligence in global supply chains, like the French Corporate Duty of Vigilance Bill or the UK’s Modern Slavery Act, holding parent companies liable for activities of subcontractors and suppliers. The CBP order has also halted imports from four other countries: China (garments), Brazil (bone charcoal), Democratic Republic of Congo (gold) and Zimbabwe (diamonds). It is difficult for the Nepal Government to unilaterally lobby or watch-dog destination countries outside its jurisdiction to ensure compliance of labour standards in ‘dangerous, dirty and difficult’ jobs Nepalis do. Given that migrant workers do not have freedom of association in many destination countries, collective bargaining is not always possible. The Nepal Government has tried to bypass the limitations by requiring Nepal-based recruitment agencies to be held accountable for non-compliance of contractual terms by a foreign employer. Licensed recruiters now have to contribute to escrow deposits so workers are compensated in case of exploitation. Malaysia is now proposing a new chapter on forced labour in its Employment Act, and pushing companies to conduct social audits, which they have so far been reluctant to do. A case like the WRP one can push for tangible outcomes for the welfare of often-overlooked workers, and could set a precedent for systemic reforms in labour migration. *Upasana Khadka*
Some names have been changed.

Dream

South Korean Government has been trying to improve ties as part of its ‘New Southern Policy’ to balance its need for migrant workers to address the shortfall of workers. There are now 2.42 million migrant workers in Korea, and the number has nearly doubled in the past 10 years. Local farms and factories cannot function without migrant workforces. Hong Sung Soo, law professor at Sookmyung Women’s University, says: “Discrimination and xenophobia towards migrants are not only inappropriate, but also not clever at all if we consider our industrial and demographic reality.” Labour rights groups and health activists have been examining why there is such a high suicide rate among Nepali migrant workers in farms and factories in South Korea.

“It is not just a single factor — there is a web of complex reasons that trap migrant workers towards the extreme choice,” explains Jeong Young-seob, Co-director of the group Migrants Act. A field survey in August of 141 migrant workers from Nepal by the *Seoul Shinmun* newspaper, Green Hospital and the Migrants Trade Union showed that there were four main factors: the gap between expectations and the reality of working in Korea, inability to leave, high expectations from loved ones back home, and ruined relationships in Nepal. 🇳🇵

Some names have been changed.

Ki Minda is a reporter for The Seoul Shinmun newspaper in South Korea. Published by special arrangement. key5088@seoul.or.kr

Dhan Raj Ghale, 40

‘I am enocent. I have no mistake. Company cheating me. I am no crazy [...] company take my signature [...] please investigation please’ This is the note left by Dhan Raj Ghale among other personal effects (left) before he hanged himself in 2011 while working at a futon factory in Daegu City. Dhan even had a plane ticket booked to go back to Nepal. Upon seeing a Korean reporter in August in Pokhara, Dhan’s wife Man Maya Ghale, 48, and Dhan’s younger brother Bhim Raj Ghale, 36, recalled the events of eight years ago. Bhim said his older brother was a hard-working man who loved his family more than anything else in the world. “After seeing the letters, I thought Dhan must have been bullied at work,” Bhim recalled. Dhan also left another short letter written in Nepali: ‘I’ve done nothing wrong. I once fought with another worker from Mongolia. I don’t know what that

Mongolian guy told Korean people...’ He also wrote twice to the manager of the company: ‘You don’t talk to me anymore. I don’t understand. Please tell me why.’ The company, however, denied there was bullying, and that Dhan was never asked to sign any document. Dhan may have found Korea’s alternate day and night shifts difficult, and had been working night shifts for two months before his death. “My husband told me he could not sleep when he was working night shifts,” Man Maya recalled. Dhan’s daughter and son were ten and five at the time of their father’s death. Now they are in college and school. “I will never forgive those people who mistreated my father,” Dhan’s son vows revenge, and the siblings have made joint promises to themselves they will never go overseas to work no matter what.



Kedar Timalsina, 28



A coffin was rolled out of the arrival area at Kathmandu airport recently. Inside was the body of Kedar Timalsina, who hanged himself on 20 July in Busan inside the warehouse of the seafood processing factory where he worked (pictured, left). “This paper doesn’t say anything about why Kedar killed himself,” family members at Kathmandu airport said, examining the death certificate. The family could not understand why Kedar would kill himself. It had been only 25 days since his wife Bandana gave birth to their first son. “I even heard Kedar threw a big party in Korea to celebrate the birth of the baby. Why would such a man kill himself? It doesn’t make any sense,” said Bandana’s brother. Kedar had an aging mother who just turned 60, and would need his care more than before. What further frustrates the grieving family is the silence and indifference from both their government and Korean authorities. South Korean police never investigated surveillance camera footage at the factory, or forensics on Kedar’s phone. According to police, Kedar’s co-worker had told them he had recently purchased land in Nepal but it turned out to be a fraud. Kedar’s family says that is not true because the land he bought two years ago had nearly doubled in price. None of Kedar’s personal belongings were returned to his family, and Korean police said the Nepali Embassy told them the family did not want them back. The family said the Embassy had never contacted them. “We are responsible for confirming the identity and death certificate in order to promptly return the body back to family in Nepal. The Embassy does not send back items unless they are important,” the Embassy of Nepal replied when asked about it.



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Comrade Xi, Come Back!

Prime Minister Oily is a genius. Not only has he outsmarted everyone to take a selfie with President Xi, he also managed to give Kathmandu a miraculous facelift in four days flat by forcing the Municipality, Roads Department and the Kathmandu Valley Urban Division to work together at gunpoint over Dasain.

The cynics will quibble that only the route from the airport to Soaltee and Lazimpat were repaved and painted, but hey, at least Tin Kune was converted into a temporary National Park with a berm, tropical palm trees and turf – a feat no elected prime minister or despot in this country has managed before.

The grabberment now needs to build on this accomplishment by inviting President Xi to visit Nepal every other month, and in the spirit of Nepal's policy of neutrality and pancha shila, to also organise a state visit for Prime Minister Modi every alternate month.

We can then have them visit all the roads whose potholes need to be filled, airports which have to be spruced up, and cities that need facelifts and chin tucks. That way, in the spirit of feederlism, infrastructure development will also be decentralised, and Nepal can take a great leap forward to stability and posterity.

For example, on his next visit President Xi could conduct bilateral negotiations with his Nepali counterpart at Godavari Resort. That way, the Sat Dobato-

Godavari road would finally be fixed. The month after that, Modi could also have a free and frank exchange of views with the Oligarchy in Nagarkot. This will force Messrs Red Rice Contractor to finally finish upgrading the road and erect Potemkin villages all along the route.

I have to admit though, that it would look a bit odd for Xi and Modi to keep popping up in Nepal over and over again. In that case we can easily organise official visits for other world leaders like President Trump, who can go play golf in Gokarna so that the Chabahil-Sankhu road will finally be completed after 10 years.

Inviting the King of Thailand to Lumbini would be a surefire way to expedite work on Bhairawa Airport, and holding the next BIMSTEC Summit in Pokhara might actually lead to the completion of Pokhara airport as well. The SAARC Summit can be held at the Melamchi Tunnel headworks so the project is re-kickstarted.

However, state visits are expensive. That is why I have come up with a cunning plan (if I may say so myself) to reduce the cost by asking visiting HOGs to wear Virtual Reality visors that show only clean, smooth, dust-free streets and shiny buildings everywhere they look. Kathmandu would look like

Xanadu. It would leave a far better impression on visiting VVIPs, and be a lot cheaper to boot.



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