Nothing unites Nepalis more than a dispute with India. So, when New Delhi issued its new official map this month putting the east bank of the Kali River squarely within its own territory, all hell broke loose in Kathmandu.

The brouhaha could not have come at a better time for Prime Minister KP Oli. In failing health, with falling public support and facing serious challenges from within his own party, the dispute with India united Nepali politicians across party lines. It also allowed Oli, who has always used nationalism as a political plank, to send the message that he is standing up to India.

Even the opposition Nepali Congress, which had been hesitant to speak against India during the 2015 Blockade, this time mobilised its students to protest outside the Indian Embassy. Student unions in some Tarai towns also staged unprecedented anti-India protests.

But it is from his own NCP that Oli faces the greatest challenge, and he has been scrambling to put a trusted caretaker team in place ahead of a planned trip to the United States. Baluwatar insiders say Oli may be away for two months if he needs a new kidney.

Last week in a surprise move, Oli got his team of a dozen advisers to resign en masse. Although it looks like some of them (including his foreign policy and political advisers) will be reinstated after pressure from senior party leaders, the move suggests that the Prime Minister is working on a major overhaul in case he needs to be away longer.

On Wednesday, Oli met his main critic within the NCP, former Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal, for the first time since August, when they had an angry exchange in Baluwatar. Relations between the two have not been good since Oli out-maneuvered Nepal at the UML party convention four years ago. Nepal was also miffed at Oli’s surprise appointment of new provincial governors.

Sources said the two had a “heart-to-heart talk with self-reflection”, with Oli promising to consult his party colleagues more closely.

It is very likely the PM will be looking to induct Nepal loyalists to his reshuffled cabinet, and may have asked Nepal for recommendations. Oli also wants to finalise selection of the 120-member politburo before he goes away, and for this may need Nepal’s help to outflank Pushpa Kamal Dahal.

Dahal, for his part, has been biding his time knowing that sooner or later he will be prime minister. His reaction to the border dispute with India has been remarkably muted with calls for a “diplomatic settlement” and the suggestion that Nepal should not internationalise the issue. Prime Minister Oli appears to be preparing for a protracted absence from Kathmandu during which time he does not want Dahal to be calling the shots, or taking over.
The dispute over the tri-junction of India, China and Nepal, on the remotest north-western tip of the country is the latest strain on bilateral relations.

The Sugauli Treaty of 1816 between the East India Company and the defeated Gorkha Kingdom clearly stated that the main channel of the Mahakali River would form a shrunken Nepal's western border with British India. But the Survey of India maps of 1856 and 1858 slyly turned the area back into Garwali.

Such land grabs were no surprise. It was either unusable or did not care that the boundary had been moved. After the Chinese annexation of Tibet in the 1950s, China allowed India to put up 17 military checkpoints along its northern border. China and India fought a fierce Himalayan war in 1962, during which the Indian military took up a base on the strategic Lipu Lekh Valley. That base is still there.

In 1949, Prime Minister Kiriti Nidhi Bhatta got Delhi to remove all its checkpoints on the Nepal-China border, except one in Kalapani. Lipu Lekh was a good quid pro quo for the removal of the other bases?

So King Mahendra sanctified the region in return for Indian support for his takeover. Historians are divided.

Whatever the case, the elected rulers of Nepal after 1990 used anti-nationalism as a political tool to keep India from pressuring Nepal to legitimate its claim over the territory.

KP Oli, who now heads the newly elected NCP government, was one of the most vocal in Parliament demanding that India return the area. Current Tourism Minister Yogesh Bhattacharya even led a student group to Kalapani to raise the Nepali flag in the vast territory occupied by India. Yet many field reports from the area have just gathered dust in Singh Darbar. No action was ever taken, except when it was politically expedient to raise an anti-Indian drum beat. Nepal's own official map in 1975 showed Lipu Lekh as the boundary between Nepal and India, and not the Mahakali River. Ultra-nationalists claim that Nepal is surrounded by a big bully, but why would a neighbour respect your boundary if you do not really care where it is?

Now Delhi has not really bothered about winning the hearts and minds of Nepalis, either. It believes in carrying a big stick and showing who's boss. And all this is convenient for Nepal's India-bashing pseudo-nationalists, who have a handy excuse to take to the streets every time the border dispute flares up.

For Prime Minister Dli the brouhaha could not have been better timed. It has allowed him to distract public attention away from his administration's mediocre performance, and once more display himself in the flag. But what good is it to work ourselves into a frenzy of territorialism over this tiny strip of land when our rulers do not seem to care what happens to the rest of the country which they enjoy full sovereignty?

That is not one place where Nepal can play India off against China. In fact, Beijing seems to be on the same page as New Delhi on the issue. As far back as 1815, France, India and China agreed to allow Indian pilgrims to use the Lipu Lekh Pass on their way to Lake Mansarovar. Lipu Lekh was discussed during visits by Indian External Affairs Minister Jawant Singh to Beijing in 1999, by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to Delhi in 2005 and by Chinese President Xi Jinping in India in 2014. A joint communiqué between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi in 2015 in Beijing listed Lipu Lekh as one of the Sino-Indian border passes through which the two countries agreed to conduct talks.

One of the few instances in Nepali history when anti-Chinese protests broke out on the streets of Kathmandu was after that India-China joint communiqué on Lipu Lekh was issued, four years ago. Yet, Nepal's government, then did not dare broach the subject, which it is now not even raised last month during Xi's state visit to Kathmandu.

Nepal cannot go to war with India over this. (For one thing, our men are exhausted in their army.) How about trying to secure our own official map, and then taking up the matter at the highest level in every future bilateral? And then we may as well talk about disputes along the Tarai caused by rivers changing course, and border pillars completely moving under cover of darkness.

The time is right for dialogue. There is a governance in Kathmandu with a solid two-thirds majority, we have rare all-party unity over the matter, and Nepal's international stature is higher than it has been in a while.
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Cars before roads in Nepal

At next week's Power Summit, let us finally put the horse before the cart

Nepal’s development dilemma has always been that we get things backwards. Cars were carrying passengers on pothole-ridden roads while the cities even had sidewalks. The people of Pokhara saw aircrafts before they saw automobiles. We set up a university before we built a network of schools. We make plans to distribute wealth before we have found ways to create it.

That is perhaps why Nepal’s rulers and politicians are great with populist slogans, but not so great at delivering them. And the media reports uncritically on these grandiose plans. King Birendra’s Panchayati era was great for Nepal to reach ‘Asian Standards’ by 2020. We boasted of the country’s 83,000 MW hydro power plant, Nepal’s hydro candle and kerosene lamps.

There was nothing wrong with the slogans — what was missing was the homework, the technical expertise, managerial skills and a realisation of the economic impact. Today, Nepal has many of these ingredients for success in place. The recent financial closure of the Upper Tributary Hydropower project hopefully sends a message that it takes nine domestic and international agencies to work together to build a 200 MW hydro power plant. Unless we show real growth in the domestic and regional markets, no one will invest, and if no one invests we cannot create new energy in markets. Both have to be managed, like two sides of the same coin.

The energy sector is highly compartmentalised — there are too many agencies that take too long to analyse projects and provide necessary approvals. Nepal’s energy system, from ideas to market, is in the hands of too many people. We need to complete each part of the process, but much more efficiently.

We require a level playing field to scale up the production of affordable and clean hydropower, and the Nepali state needs to step up to use our tax money to absorb many of the costs that have been unfairly piled upon every unit of power generated.

Access roads to potential sites, transmission of the generated power, and distribution to demand centres are the obvious costs. There are all the unjustified costs of building schools and health posts, mitigating environmental impacts as well as ‘donations’ to all the goldearing wearing political cloak in the locality.

In the same way, subsidies given to LPG and other fossil fuels must be removed and a pollution tax imposed to support hospitals to admit more people with respiratory problems. These are all different facets of the energy market. We can start by replacing cooking and driving fuels, which pollute and contribute to climate change. Nepal has a huge fossil fuel import bill that provides money to oil-producing economies. The current balance has been maintained by sending young people to work in those countries, with these migrants then returning money home. Hydropower can help break this vicious cycle. We need our young men and women back home.

It will not be easy, because it seems that hydro development in a Nepal’s life is when a visa to the US or Australia gets approved. The government is aware of this, but it does not have to create jobs at home. The Backs are glad with the cut they make from all the transactions, and the airlines are happy. Even 125 million sitting Kuthmandu, let us all take this long-term and broader view.

Anil Chitrakar is President of Vikash Vihar. In a letter to nepal times, he said that he was3.

Harvard alumni condemn Roop Jyoti arrest

Thirty-eight graduates of Harvard University have condemned the arrest of Nepalese student Roop Jyoti for participating in a protest against the Indian government’s Citizenship Amendment Act. The graduates, who hold degrees in law, business, and economics, wrote an open letter to the Nepali government expressing their solidarity with Jyoti and calling for his release.

The letter, signed by alumni from the Class of 1998, states: “We are writing to express our deep concerns about the recent arrest of Roop Jyoti, a graduating student from the Class of 2019, who was arrested on November 7, 2019, in Kathmandu, for participating in a peaceful protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act.”

The letter continues: “Roop Jyoti is a committed activist and has been involved in various social and political causes. He has been an important voice in championing the rights of marginalized communities in Nepal. We are deeply concerned about the circumstances that led to his arrest and the potential impact on his future.”

The Harvard alumni further stated: “We urge the Nepalese government to release Roop Jyoti immediately and allow him to continue his studies and activism. We stand in solidarity with Roop Jyoti and all those who continue to fight for justice and equality.”

The letter concluded with a call to action: “We call on the Nepalese government to respect the rights of all citizens to express their views peacefully and to hold accountable those who have violated these rights. We also call on the international community to monitor the situation and support efforts to ensure the rule of law and human rights are upheld.”

Turkish traffic

Turkish Airlines flight from Kathmandu to Istanbul, bearing the name of the airline's CEO, Ayhan Baran, has been held up for inspection by airport security after the man was identified as a passenger on a list of people with no travel documents.

The incident occurred on Saturday, when the flight was screened by security personnel at the Istanbul airport. The man, who is believed to be a Turkish national, was carried off the plane and later released without any charges being filed.

Indian flights between India and Nepal

Indian flights to and from Nepal are expected to resume on 15 December 2019, according to the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal.

There are media reports that the government is negotiating an agreement with the Nepalese authorities to allow the resumption of flights. The resumption of flights is expected to boost tourism and economic activities in the region.

Ncell Voice Pack

Ncell has launched a new Voice Pack for prepaid customers. The pack offers 30 minutes of talktime for Rs. 20 and is applicable for all Ncell numbers. The offer becomes effective from 12 November 2019 and will remain in place till 31 January 2020.

Shangri-La's

Shangri-La's is an annual cake mixing ceremony held in November 2019 at the Sikkim state capital, Gangtok. The ceremony is a tradition in the region, where bakers gather to mix their ingredients together and exchange recipes.
Beyond the nation state in South Asia

Academics go against the grain to promote a trans-national mode of thinking

Binit Gurung

Against the Nation: Thinking like South Asians contains 22 essays authored by three sociologists — Susanka Perera, Dev Nath Pathak and Ravi Kumar — who argue that adherence to the nation-state concept is preventing the South Asian region from building upon its shared myths, culture and more.

The book promotes a non-statist discourse of South Asia, which is especially relevant at a time when Pakistan-India and India-Nepal relations are strained by Kashmir and Khalq, and SAARC is being sidelined. The authors focus on existing regional links in myth, folklore, religion, art, literature, food and popular culture, which can be the building blocks for re-imagining South Asia. The essays are proofed by an intellectually provocative and boldly reflexive chapter co-written by the authors, who are affiliated to South Asian University in New Delhi.

Re-imagining South Asia is imperative in the face of potential bickering among nation states in the region, which the authors argue, has made the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) hostage to nationalist politics.

The authors attribute this state of affairs to the parochial framework of the nation under which SAARC continues to function despite its regional rhetoric. They assert their opposition to the idea of nation, taking a crucial step towards realizing a South Asian mode of thinking.

Written in a markedly passionate tone, the book makes no pretense of academic objectivity. Rather, the authors call their approach "ideological", informed by their own politics of knowledge. Anyone familiar with the sociology of knowledge knows that what we call "knowledge" is always rooted in particular social and temporal contexts and shaped by the politics of social actors. It is an intellectual failing to view knowledge as universalistic and disinterested, particularly when the knowledge claims to represent human society. Such failings blind us to alternative ways of seeing and, thereby, enacting them to the dominant discourse.

The authors suggest that the official imagination of South Asia, as a coming together of eight nation states for regional co-operation, is ideological. This ideology is that of the nation state, which imagines the existence of hostile "others" across its boundaries, something that impedes the mainstreaming of organic regionalism. The book deconstructs this ideology by showing several instances of amicable artistic and cultural crossovers in the region currently, as well as in the past.

Yet, it would just be all talk and no substance if the proposed re-imagining of South Asia was not substantiated in some ways. The authors, based at a university established by SAARC, are apparently in a position to take concrete steps towards promoting a truly regional consciousness that defies the insular imagination of "nation". Yet they confront the messiness of everyday life inside the university.

The book mentions an incident when a senior academic took exception to the inverted map of South Asia, first conceptualised and published by Himal Southasia magazine, which was used by one of the university’s departments in a presentation. The upside-down map was envisioned to promote a re-imagining of the region centre on people rather than the nation state. At the university however, it was deemed unnecessarily subversive, and it was suggested that the department get rid of it.

The authors deplore such nationalist modes of thinking among colleagues and students, which make critical discussions on South Asia, inside and outside classrooms, difficult. They advocate an alternative regional framework in teaching and research, recognizing their interventions in the sociology curricula at the MA and PhD levels in the university.

Academics have little or no incentive to write for the popular media and prefer to converse with peers by publishing in discipline-specific academic journals. In their "publish or perish" world, popular writings are either ignored or frowned upon in the university system.

Nepal's first, and forgotten, tunnel

102 years later, the country has finally understood the advantage of high-speed tunnels to cut travel time

Gopal Gartaula

I
n all the current media hubbub about proposed highway tunnels in Kathmandu, Sanga, and the Tanak Jal Truckway, it may be worth remembering that Nepal's first ever highway tunnel was built as far back as 1917 in Hetauda.

The 560m tunnel through the Chure ridge between Hetauda and Ambikagram was constructed by army engineer Col Dilli Jung Thapa with local resources, and is still in good condition.

"The tunnel was built on orders of Prime Minister Chandu Shamsher Rana, and was supposed to reduce the time taken by horse-drawn carriages and ferries to travel from the Indian border to Bhimphedi," says Col Thapa's grand daughter Chandu Rana, who wants to turn the tunnel into a heritage site.

Col Thapa himself was the great-grandson of Jung Bahadur Rana, and got his engineering degree at the Thomson College of Engineering in Rowstock in British India. He died at the age of 51 in 1946.

Although it is not clear how much the tunnel cost, historians say the military completed the job ahead of schedule and returned the urgent budget to the treasury. Rana, who is researching her grandfather's life, says the government at that time was looking at several options, including a serpentine road over the Chure, a longer option around the mountain and the tunnel. Col Thapa is understood to have argued that although the tunnel would be costly, it would save money in the long run because of lower maintenance cost.

The Chure is made up of soft sediment of sand and silt, without bedrock, thus making it easier to drill. Parts of the tunnel that are still accessible and measure 2.7m wide and 3m high, just enough to allow vehicles to pass.

Pedestrians used the tunnel to cross over to the other side until recently, but the army blocked it during the conflict. Parts of the tunnel collapsed in the 2015 earthquake, but the entrance is still intact. Engineers say that after repairs it could still be used for one-way motor traffic.

Built at a time when highway tunnels were a rarity in Asia, it cut travel time between Bhimphedi and the Indian railroad in Raxaul. Beyond Bhimphedi, it was possible to reach Kathmandu, three days away, by walking or on horseback.

In his book, Nepal, Swiss geologist Toni Hagen writes about seeing the tunnel during his walk to Kathmandu in 1950, expressing surprise at such a sophisticated tunnel in the largely underdeveloped country.

Hetauda Municipality and the government of Province 3 have declared the tunnel a site of historic importance, and plan to preserve it as a museum. Col Dilli Jung Thapa had also established a temple at Chyruyami, which is now an important religious site in Hetauda.

Besides the tunnel, Col Thapa was also involved in the construction of the first cargo wayepay between Kathmandu and Hetauda, the Chandra Irrigation Canal in Saptari, the Dhanaux tower in Kathmandu, reconstructed after the 1944 earthquake, the sanatorium in Tokha, and the Janakpur-Jayapura Railway.

Says Col Thapa's grandson Janak Jung Thapa: "If only Nepal's planners had seen the potential and built more tunnels like this one, the country would have seen much more rapid development."

Chandra Rana is quick to note that the Nepali media is describing the 2.5km Neighboring-Naikal tunnel to be built with Japanese assistance as Nepal's first highway tunnel.

She says: "There is an attempt to airbrush history. My grandfather's contribution should be duly acknowledged."
Lucky British magician Drummond Money-Coutts knew only one word of Nepali, “Namaste”, which he learned from children at a shelter in Kathmandu. But he does not need language to communicate with these children — his tricks make them squeal and scream with delight.

The magician, who goes by his initials “DMC”, uses the power of magic as therapy and entertainment for Nepali children who have been rescued from traffickers and still suffer psychological trauma.

It looks like he has nothing in his hand. Yet when he opens it around a child’s ear, out comes a little red ball. The children are incredulous when the ball vanishes as suddenly as it appeared, and then magically reappears in the palm of another child at the other end of the room. How did he do that?

“Visual magic has the capacity to transcend language barriers. It inspires a sense of wonder and mystery in children, and creates a bridge to the mysteries of the world,” said DMC during a recent visit to a shelter run by Chitra Ghimire charity in Godavari. “I am especially interested in performing for children because I want magic to do for them what it did for me as a child.”

DMC had a lonely childhood, struggling to be accepted by friends after his parents got divorced. His mother moved away, and he was a shy boy at boarding school. Magic became his happy place, and he practised for hours and hours, so rigorous a discipline for him as music or martial arts was for other children.

Since then, magic has been a springboard for DMC, who was heir apparent to a baronetcy and left behind lucrative prospects at investment company Goldman Sachs to become a professional magician. He has performed around the world and for celebrities including the Queen of England, and has been featured in several TV series.

For the Netflix show Death by Magic, DMC performs dangerous stunts that have killed previous magicians. Sometimes he sets himself on fire, at other times he is submerged under water as he tries to re-create rigorously rehearsed acts. Occasionally, despite practice, accidents do happen.

“It seemed like a powerful notion, celebrating the lives of incredible people who attempted brave, courageous tricks that went wrong. It is a way of paying tribute to them, and of showing how dangerous stage magic can be,” says the dedicated magician.

Some magicians, like Harry Houdini, tried to explain magic beyond sleight of hand, the latter making his name synonymous with dangerous stagecraft. DMC created Beyond Magic with DMC, in which he travelled the world learning about the roots of magic and explaining them through TV.

“I wanted television to be more than just entertainment and performance of magic tricks. I wanted to take viewers on a journey with narration, and tell a story with history and knowledge,” he says.

What interests DMC is how every culture has its own view and definition of magic. In South Asia it may be more spiritual, while in Africa or Haiti it is seen as dark arts or voodoo.

“I create the illusion of magic, but the real magic lies in the natural world,” he says. “Childbirth for instance. It may seem like a commonplace thing. But if you really think about it, creating life from almost nothing is the most magical thing imaginable.”

Before coming to Nepal, DMC visited the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya and orphanages in Mumbai and Indonesia. “There is such purity with children when they see magic. Sometimes adults become cynical and it changes the way they perceive it. But children always respond innocently,” he says.

He has tattooed the words Maurice Pyar Vickers on his bald head over his left ear. “Courage to believe in love”. He explains, “It is the mantra I live by, no matter how my other thoughts might change.”

DMC is already planning a new TV show that he will launch after his Nepal trip, but details are under wrap. He will only say that “This last show was about magic and danger; this one will be about magic and kindness.”

Sewa Bhattarai
A personal
encyclopaedia of the Himalaya

If there is one book you must set aside, either for new year holiday reading or as a Christmas gift to a fellow traveller, it would be *Fable of the Himalaya* by the British climber-turned-trekker Henry Edmundson (pictured above), which has just been published by Vaja Books.

Edmundson was a boy when news came to his home in England that Hillary and Tenzing had climbed Mt Everest. His father, an outdoorsy type, immediately took the family out on a celebratory hike over the hills. Soon, Edmundson was devouring books on mountaineering and exploration.

"It became a sort of obsession," Edmundson said in Kathmandu this month after a trek over Lumba Sumba Pass. His wife, and lifelong trekking partner Connie, piped in: "Not just sort of, either.

"By age 18, Edmundson was climbing in Kashmir and in Baltistan in Pakistan, and in the past nearly 50 years he has trekked almost the entire Himalayan arc, from Afghanistan to Bhutan.

The Kangchenjunga Base Camp-Lumba Sumba was one of the last missing bits before he did it this year. (See following story.)

The view from Lumba Sumba pass towards Kangchenjunga is the cover image of *Fables of the Himalaya*. The title may sound a bit prosaic for a personal encyclopaedia of the Himalaya spanning everything from the politics, geopolitics, protechnics, geography, geology, cartography, history, adventure, culture and religion of those mountains. Fast in scope, and leaving out no details however slight, it is close to Edmundson’s life’s work.

Graduating in mathematical logic, he worked for an oil prospecting company to lifting out a technical journal, and kept a meticulous diary of all his treks, fully intending to write a book about the experiences on day one. "I wanted the book to be holistic because I believe in a non-specialist approach to make the subject interesting to non-experts," Edmundson explains. "I try to make complicated things simple and not make simple things complicated.

The book is divided into thematic chapters that are interwoven with his own personal travels across the Himalaya. Religion, Geology, Politics and Society — the last chapter dealing exclusively with Nepal’s political transition from war to peace, and up to the 2015 earthquake and Indian Blockade and their aftermath.

When he first arrived in Kathmandu in 1971 as a young lad, Edmundson had three letters of introduction from John Tyson, who was part of an unsuccessful attempt to get into the British Embassy, another to trekking pioneer Col Jimmy Roberts and one to Swiss pilot Hardy Fuerer. That gave him all the access he needed to set off to the deep hinterland, with the help of legendary porter and activist Mike Cheyne.

For his first trek, the author’s team chose one of the most difficult ones they could find: to Kanjiroba and Dhoraplan. In that respect, Edmundson was doing the Great Himalayan Trail even before the concept was invented, confusing himself not just to the Nepal Himalaya but to the entire 3,000km mountain arc. Along the way, he encountered more than just adventures in the wild; he found himself in the middle of a skirmish in Kashmir; in an earthquake in Nepal, witnessed the changes to trekking brought by new mountains roads and the climate crisis.

One useful thing about this book is that you do not need to read it cover to cover. Cared up on a cozy sofa by the fire, you can open up any sections and start reading. There is a lucid account of Tenzing Hagen and his early geological exploration of Nepal, which leads directly into seismicity and the orogeny of the 1934 and 2015 earthquakes. Backgrounds to upheavals of the political kind in mountains are also all here, starting from the British Afghan campaign of 1847, the Chinese annexation of Tibet and the Sino-India War of 1962, right up to Nepal’s Maoist conflict.

Edmundson has put a huge amount of work into this book, in terms of research, gathering illustrations and maps, and the sheer exertion of undertaking trips across some of the most arduous terrains on Earth.

Maybe you do not need a more exciting title when the content is so stimulating. And, finally, we have a Western writer who does not pluralise the word ‘Himalaya’. "Kunda Datt"
The east Nepal routes

Picking missing sections of the Himalayas will henceforth be done with less sense of urgency.

The year before, we had been in the same region and completed Num La, but missed the Lumba Sumba due to a medical emergency. The time-lapse view allowed us to witness how trekking is evolving in the remotest region of east Nepal.

Trekking to the north and south base camps of Kangchenjunga is becoming increasingly popular, and perhaps taking a rightful share off routes such as the Annapurna circuit, which are so compromised now by road building. Last year, there was substantial traffic up to Ghunsa and beyond, heading for north base camp. This year there were several big parties negotiating Sele La, an obligatory passage from north base camp to south, or vice-versa.

For this popular route, lodges are abundant or being expanded. Less travelled was Lumba Sumba pass, which needs camping and full kitchen staff. But for how much longer?

The Kangchenjunga Conservation Project Agency has set up a hot, toilet and tent area on the approach to the Nango La, and some of the paths are transformed into well-made stone highways 1m wide. A stone path from the new road to the Chinese border from Tipisa La now heads to Lumba Sumba and continues to Pass Camp (4408m) and beyond. It made for rapid progress, even if it flattened the walking experience.

After crossing Lumba Sumba, however, the trail is tough. Between Thumd, an isolated village with more affinity to Tibet than Nepal, and Chepewa, boot tracks are rare in the vertiginous jungle paths. Our style of trekking, with complete kitchen team, might soon become obsolete. Just a couple of new lodges and some trail clearing would make the whole area far more accessible. In Ghunsa, locals told us: “You camping trekkers with kitchen staff don’t add anything to the local economy.”

The rewards of camping, however, are extraordinary; visiting the isolated village of Olgheshumapa and its fabulous Nyingma-pa monastery housing multiple copies of the Kangyur and Tangyur stacked to the rafters, the golden millet fields of Chepewa, and the mighty and wild Aunst River, which cuts straight through the Himalayas between Kangchenjunga and Makalu massifs.
**GETAWAY**

**Babur Mahal Vilas**

Take the luxury to the7 Ranpur, Babur Mahal Vilas, now an architectural marvel and quaint boutique hotel. Largely built in the style of a neoclassical teas bazaar, the hotel has wide views, modern design, and Taj influences.

*(Advertised)*

**Booth Suites Hotel**

Staged in the City of Lakes, Pokhara, this boutique hotel is modern, stylish and offers a wide variety of luxury amenities. The rooms are spacious, stocked with goods, and the perfect place to unwind after a long day of exploring Lakeside.

*(Advertised)*

**Lake View**

For a weekend of rest and relaxation, escape to Lake View Resort’s cozy wooden huts, one of Lakeside’s newest establishments. Lakeside. *Pokhara (066) 546376/4638548*

**Tiger Mountain Lodge**

The rustic hand-carved log cabin in the midst of greenery and the backdrop of breathtaking mountains offers a restful stay. With kid-friendly menu options and guides that can take you to secret spots in Pokhara, Tiger Mountain will make your stay unforgettable.

Kondhre Dada, Pokhara (066) 476580

**Begnas Lake Resort & Villas**

Located in one of the most agriculturally flourishing areas of Pokhara, guests have the opportunity to explore and try locally grown coffee, grains, and vegetables. Begnas lake, Pokhara (066) 590810

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**MUSIC**

**Merhaba Turkish Restaurant**

With over 60 items on their menu, Merhaba offers the best and most Turkish food in town. Turkish kebab, a dish based mainly with tender meat, yogurt, erasers and flat bread, and their Turkish Pide is a must! Be sure to remember to make a reservation if you plan to visit. For more information, you can contact them through their social media platforms.

*(Advertised)*

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**AIR QUALITY INDEX**

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**KATHMANDU - 8 - 14 November**

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Too many mules on the Everest trail

Alton C Byers
in Khumbu

The Sherpas reportedly have a saying—"there's only one Everest"—meaning that because Everest is the highest mountain in the world it will always be the preferred destination of trekkers, climbers and extremely wealthy middle-aged men. Visitor numbers support this claim—over 60,000 foreign tourists (not counting support staff) will come to Sagarmatha National Park this year.

Along with the economic benefits there are also downsides, such as overcrowded trails, bottle-necks at checkpoints and bridge crossings, and the feeling of being in a perpetual traffic jam. Every day during the peak season, 500 tourists arrive in Namche Bazaar from the south and 500 more from trails east and north.

The vast majority of these tourists are cordial and having a wonderful time. What is not good about the trekking experience in the Khumbu—and on dozens of other popular trekking trails in Nepal these days—is the presence of mules—carrying supplies from Kharkhola (3,360m) south of Lukla to Namche Bazaar (3,440m).

Mules were introduced to the Khumbu about 15 years ago, in response to the growing number of tourists and the demand for food and other supplies. Today, about 500 mules are based in Kharkhola, to carry supplies up from the road head.

They have largely replaced the use of dzupko (yak-cattle cross breed) for the Lukla to Namche supply run, although dzupko and yak continue to be used from Namche onward to the higher altitudes. On a recent walk from Phakding to Lukla there were well over 100 mules in trains averaging about 15 animals each.

The locals hate them because mules destroy the trails with their sharp hooves, and leave behind so much poop that one seemingly spends more time playing hopscotch than trekking. Worse, they seem to think they have a right of way on the trails. Dzupko and yak always seem to go out of their way to avoid making any kind of contact with humans. But not mules.

There has been talk of building a roadway from Lukla to Namche capable of delivering the food and other supplies needed for the large and growing tourist trade. Especially if placed beyond the sight of the main trekking trail, a roadway would provide a more environmentally friendly way of delivering goods. It would also be a means for transporting processed solid waste, such as shredded plastic water bottles, composted and baled aluminium beer cans and other materials from Namche to Lukla, where it could then be transferred to Kathmandu for recycling.

The proposal to build the roadway is being held up by the central government in Kathmandu for reasons that are not entirely clear, but the plan certainly has the support of the majority of the people here.

Meanwhile, construction of a motorable road to Chepungkhesa, just below Lukla, continues, largely in response to the large number of flight cancellations in Lukla due to weather. Typically, hundreds of tourists get stuck in Lukla for up to two weeks, and a road would be an alternative access route. Expect the numbers of tourists visiting the Khumbu annually to keep growing as a result.

But at least the traditional trail from Lukla to Namche and beyond will remain in its present condition, for future generations of mountain lovers to enjoy. This is good news at a time when Nepal continues to relentlessly destroy its system of one-world class trekking trails through the construction of poorly-planned and often unnecessary roads, such as the Annapurna circuit, Dolpo, Manaslu and much of the Kangchenjunga trek.

Unplanned road construction has overall negative environmental, economic and social impact. But that is another story. Let us find an alternative to mules first.

Alston C. Byers, PhD, a Senior Research Associate and PhD student, Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research, University of Colorado at Boulder.
Love thy self

Sanghamitra Subba

K[

ichna Bumtho felt massive pain and grief when her mother passed away, wishing especially that she had taken better care of her during her cancer treatment. “I had to learn to be kinder to myself in order to let go,” she says.

Bumtho’s piece ‘Breathe In, Breathe Out,’ in the first issue of a new comic anthology deals with the loss of her mother and the journey she took to stop blaming herself for things beyond her control.

Bumtho is just one of eight artists in the first issue of the Vivang Comics series titled Self Love. To her, self love is essential in a time of healing. She portrays this in her pieces through simple illustrations, using a limited palette — muted yellows, beiges and browns — and scattered text revealing inner thoughts.

Self Love, released by FinePrint in October, uses comics-style illustrations to talk about a variety of topics, from masturbation to dealing with the loss of a loved one. The cover is pink, powerful and imbued with text. A woman with a cart shopping in the Self Love aisle of a store in front of shelves stuffed with ‘Pillow Dust’! ‘Anti Anxiety Antidepressant Liquid’ and ‘You Can Do It Buttery Biscuits’ is representative of what’s inside.

The anthology depicts how we navigate modern patriarchy, overcoming anxiety, dealing with loss, finding yourself and, at its core, learning how to love yourself. One of the most striking pieces in the comic belongs to Shrizhna Shrestha, whose entry, ‘The Permission Game,’ rings true for many Nepali females seeking independence but limited by structures of conventional society. Shrestha’s illustrated persona, decorated in bold black lines and bright colours, navigates the trials and tribulations of living in Patan, where the judgemental eyes of family and neighbours critique her every move, even at age 36. To her, self love is getting to do what you want to do and experiencing things on your own terms.

Other contributors include Bhumana Tulachan, who accepts that it is okay to feel sad and to heal; Ujali Shrestha, who navigates life with her anxiety baggage and Rashmi Lamichhane, talking about ‘getting it today.’

Each woman expresses her deepest emotions and inner thoughts in distinct artistic and visual styles. For each of them self love has a different meaning, but its importance is paramount to all.

SITE SEEING: Bangladeshi President Mohammad Abdul Hamid, who was in Nepal on a four-day state visit, lors an earthquake damaged heritage site in Bhaktapur on Tuesday.

OCCUPY TUNDIKHEL: Former PM Baburam Bhattarai, media personality Kubi Lamichhane and singer-freestylist Amatya, promising encasement of Tundikhel on Saturday.

GLOBAL GAME: Former national cricketer Paras Khadka, who recently signed with T20 international team from Abu Dhabi, with former cricketer Nepal's ultrasound on Saturday.

RACE TO THE TOP: A Slovenian athlete during a cycling race in Marung on Wednesday.

HAPPY HOLIDAYS: Turkish Airlines Country Manager Abdullah Tuner Kenezi, Filip Kenezi and Russian Ambassador to Nepal Alevtina A. Novikov were among those at a cake mixing ceremony at Gokarna Forest Resort on Monday.
US-bound Nepalis trafficked to Malawi

6 Nepalis rescued, 5 others still being held hostage as human traffickers extort migrants

Jasukej Sapkota in Kasungu,
15 November

Four Nepalis who had been held hostage in the Southeast African nation of Malawi have been rescued by the Nepal Police Human Trafficking Bureau. They had hoped to go to the US, yet were rescued and returned to Kathmandu on Monday.

All four had got in touch with an Indian agent a year ago, who had promised to take them to the US through Bolivia, which has visa on arrival at La Paz for Nepalis. Subjected to mental and physical torture in Malawi, they were freed in coordination with local police, and their families bought their flight tickets home.

Those rescued informed police that there are five other Nepalis in Malawi, who have been unable to contact police. Two other Nepalis who were stranded in the country and did not have money for air tickets have also been rescued. Malawi police arrested Indian national Najir Ahmad, who had sheltered the human traffickers.

Among those rescued, one is aged 46, and the others are below 26. The human trafficking ring had taken them to Malawi in a convoluted route through Vietnam, Ellipina, Madagascar, Jordan, Dubai and Azerbaijan. After 20 days in a hotel in Vietnam, they stayed in Addis Ababa for four months. The victims spent a few weeks to a few months at every other location after that, and in Malawi were made hostage after the traffickers demanded more money. Then they were taken to India for INR 600,000 and for INR 700,000, to fly them to Bolivia.

The Indian agent threatened and beat them up. Then local men came in, asked us for money, and beat us up,” one of the victims told police.

The traffickers had taken their passports and other identification, and threatened to extract their kidneys and sell them if they did not pay more. Though they did not reveal the amount they had spent, police estimate that it could be more than Rs 4.5 million each. Those rescued were devastated to learn they had not reached Bolivia after spending so much money.

After continuous harassment and beatings by traffickers, the Nepalis contacted their families, who informed police, triggering a rescue operation. Trafficking Bureau DSP Nanburi Regmi became acquainted with a Malawi police officer who was in the country on a UN peacekeeping mission, and used this informal channel to coordinate with police. Three Nepali women who had been taken to dance bars in Malawi were also rescued a few months ago.

According to the bureau, there may be more than 100 Nepalis stranded in countries around the world, after being trafficked. Six Nepalis stranded in Indonesia for nearly six months were returned home this week.

They told police that they paid Rs2.83 million each to traffickers. The police are in the process of rescuing eight others from Ethiopia, who have been there for seven months. Some of them still hope to make it to the US, while others are looking for ways to return to Nepal.

Traffickers’ routes

The route to the US through India, Russia or Spain, Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemalas or Mexico used to be popular with traffickers. They would try to lengthen the journey so that they could extract more money from victims.

Now, other routes through the Latin American countries of Suriname, Guyana or Colombia are more frequently used. Bolivia is popular because it offers visa on arrival for Nepalis. From there, traffickers try to sneak people into Mexico. In fact, Interpol and US security have now placed Bolivia’s immigration department on their watchlist.

VACANCY

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Artificial Intelligence is here, better get used to it

Sonia Awale

For those who think that Nepal is too underdeveloped to make full use of artificial intelligence (AI), think again. That is exactly what they used to say about computers and mobile phones in the 1990s.

It may come as a surprise to many that Nepal has been gaining ground in AI, developing not only machine learning software but also producing world-class engineers. One company at the forefront is Fusemachines Nepal, which has started using industry experts to train AI students with cutting-edge technology to deliver intelligent solutions.

“I wanted to see if I can contribute in bringing the best AI education to Nepal and make Nepal known around the world as one of the best sources of AI talent,” says the Nepali founder of Fusemachines, Sameer Maskey, a professor at Columbia University. This is the age of surveillance capitalism, where algorithms determine election outcomes, Siri knows what you want before you do, wearables correctly deduce the state of the heart and Facebook recognizes friends. AI simply imitates human

During a visit to Nepal six years ago, Columbia University professor Sameer Maskey handpicked three students from engineering schools across Kathmandu who were able to solve a mathematical equation. The three went on to become the core of Fusemachines, a global company that aims to democratise artificial intelligence (AI) through education and software solutions.

Headquartered in New York, Fusemachines has since opened branches in Canada, UK and the Dominican Republic to develop intelligent software solutions that have transformed brands and businesses around the world. One of its biggest operations is in Nepal.

Fusemachines employs 100 top Nepali software engineers who work on projects that use AI applications in fields ranging from telecommunications and banking to hospitals and governance.

Unlike other back office companies that work on outsourced software development, Fusemachines is a school in itself, training engineers while coming up with product solutions.

“We employ senior engineers and industry experts with PhDs along with upcoming engineers, who work together to solve client-specific problems through AI,” explains Sunmaya Shrestha, who heads Fusemachines’ Nepal operation.

“Such collaborative approach allows young talent to continuously learn and grow.”

Following Maskey’s vision, Fusemachines tries to make AI accessible to everyone through education, which is why it initially offered training fellowships and then, to meet the demand for engineers, launched AI University—a year-long, in-house training program.

With its own proprietary platform and content, we have partnered with engineering colleges in Kathmandu to offer AI,” says Shrestha. “The program is a blend of online and on-site, the course material is not too academic, in industry-focused and instructors are seasoned engineers up to date with new algorithms.”

Tech company started by Columbia University professor wants to make Nepal an AI hub
Kathmandu Valley

Thinking by recognizing patterns in data, so that repetitive everyday work can be done by machines that learn as they go along.

Nepal missed the boom in natural resource processing, manufacturing and information technology. But experts say that training a critical mass of engineers in AI can allow the country’s economy to leapfrog and become globally competitive.

Fusemachines Director of Academic Affairs Rüdiger Upatnik, who was in Nepal recently, rejects the notion that Nepal is not ready for artificial intelligence applications. “It is happening already, it is inevitable. If there can be 8.5 million Facebook users in Nepal, then it has the special conditions for AI.”

Proof of this is the increasing number of software companies in Nepal using local engineering talent to work on software solutions for customers in North America or Europe. However, most of the engineers and recent graduates need training in AI to keep up with customer requirements. America alone will need 200,000 data scientists in the next five years, and most of these will come from the UK, Finland, Canada, Singapore, China and India.

Which is why Fusemachines Nepal is also emphasizing education. Says the head of its Nepali operations, Sumana Shrestha: “You cannot learn AI in a one-day bootcamp, it needs intelligent mathematics, but there is a major gap in the teaching gap for engineers proficient in machine learning or other AI components everywhere.”

Coming to terms with AI

Artificial Intelligence: Ability of computer systems or machines to think and learn like human or the ability to perform tasks requiring human intelligence.

Machine Learning: A subset of artificial intelligence that provides a system with the ability to automatically learn and improve from experience without being explicitly programmed, relying on patterns generated from data.

Deep Thinking: Machine learning that is applied on a large scale of data, also known as deep neural learning.

Natural Language Processing (NLP): Interaction between computers and human languages, deals with programming computers to process and analyse natural human language.

Computer Vision: Enables computers to see, identify and process images in the same way that human vision does.

Image Processing: Analysis and manipulation of digital images in order to improve its quality.

Big Data: Extremely large data sets that when computed create new patterns, trends and associations.

Nepal established itself as a sought-after destination in the past two years for outsourcing services such as software and app development, website design and big data management to overseas clients, mostly due to the country’s inexpensive English-speaking workforce.

This move from IT to AI will not just create jobs in Nepal, but also allow the country to increase efficiency and productivity in the workplace. General practitioners in rural hospitals will be able to make diagnoses faster so they can spend more time with patients, high-risk individuals can be identified with cancer screening, and targeted advertising and customised fitness routines will lure potential tourists during Visit Nepal 2020.

Recently, a group of engineering students developed a model to help poultry entrepreneurs understand flock behavior and the state of their animals’ health, helping them to raise the farm’s business profit.

With precision livestock farming we can generate patterns to help farmers recognize symptoms before an outbreak of a disease by implementing AI components such as image processing and deep learning,” explained engineering student Saajl Awale at Phulchok Engineering Campus. “This allows for timely interventions to prevent mass deaths and reduce losses.”

Computer vision (which enables computers to see and process images as humans would) can also help identify rotten fruit novelty, and prevent misuse of pesticides by identifying areas on the farm that require chemicals, and the amount needed. AI can also estimate future harvests, allowing farmers time to find markets for produce.

Engineers at Fusemachines Nepal are working on Nepal’s first optical character recognition (OCR) system to form filled out with Nepali handwriting can be digitised and translated into English. This will have huge scope in Nepal’s banking, hospital and government sectors, where pan and paper continues to be the norm.

Sokal Bhatta, CEO of ride-sharing startup ‘Twelve’-sees Nepal is ripe for AI applications. “Our efforts now should be on preparing for a world in which machines perform skills-oriented tasks and for humans to take on the roles that require creativity and empathy. But before that, the government should design policies that allow AI to grow, and not restrict it.”

Romana Shrestha of Fusemachines Nepal says that as long as salaries for clerical staff are low, there is less potential for AI to flourish. But she adds: “The curse of cheap labour means companies will prefer to employ people to do repetitive work. But sooner or later, AI will be here. Nepal needs to develop despite government. And the private sector needs to prepare itself for disruption.”

Intelligent Applications: Left to right – Artificial intelligence through OCR can make banking smoother, reduce travel time for Visit Nepal Year 2020, identify patients at high risk from cancer, and make poultry farming more productive through precision livestock farming.

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artificially intelligent

Fuse Machines Nepal

Fusemachines Nepal head Sumana Shrestha (centre) with engineer Rojes Shikhar (left) and staff Kunj Shrestha at the Kathmandu office on Wednesday.

The company also has its own AI schools, open to professionals who want to grow their business or anyone interested. Fusemachines also offers a foundation course, open to high school graduates. A year-long, micro-degree program consisting of four major courses — including machine learning, deep thinking, natural language processing and computer vision — will be the next step.

“In school we were always presented with clean data sets to work on but that is rarely the case on the job. But this year-long training program gets people ready to take on real-life problems and provide AI solutions,” says Rojesh Shikhar, an engineer at Fusemachines Nepal and a post-grad at Phulchok Engineering Campus.

Apart from training, Fusemachines has given engineers who would otherwise have migrated to work in the US and Europe an opportunity to find meaningful work in Nepal.

Says Shrestha: “If you create opportunities here, people might actually stay, and once we have mass education in artificial intelligence, companies here will start adapting and see the value of AI products, creating more opportunities at home.”

Saja Awale
Bad Ass Nation

Threats to Nepal’s national insecurity cannot be underestimated in these perilous times. There are countries with spurious claims to Buddha’s birthplace or who want to purloin a desolate windswept mountain range in northwestern Nepal. And not a day goes by that a Nepali somewhere in the world doesn’t have to punch someone in the nose to prove that not all flags have to be rectangular.

The nation needs to be on high alert against expansionist forces which want to take over and overtake us. Nepal has been kicked around too often by our Bigger Brothers, and we will not take it lying down anymore — we will kowtow.

But seriously, if we are serious about being taken seriously we cannot pussyfoot around anymore — we must take the bull by the horns of a dilemma. How have other countries that have become pariahs done it? How can Nepal also become notorious and thumb its nose at land-grabbing neighbours?

The idea is to project ourselves as a Bad Ass nation and punch above our weight. Show that we, too, can be belligerent, expansionist and have territorial ambitions again. And we must also make it impossible for anyone to launch an invasion of our territory by keeping our highway arteries in such a state of disrepair that even enemy tanks would get bogged down.

Not that the Ass has been asked, but I have prepared some pointers for the Nepal Grovelment on our response to the occupation of Lipu Lekh-Lampiyadhura.

1. Nepal Army’s Cybernetic Warfare Unit to infiltrate Wikipedia to reclaim Darjeeling, Garhwal and Kumaon and Make Nepal Greater Again.
2. As a card-carrying member of the League of Failed States, Nepal to internationalise the Kalapani dispute by getting President Maduro to issue a strongly-worded statement.
3. Order a whole bunch of centrifuges to enrich plutonium to build up our nuclear deterrent with an arsenal of atom bums.
4. Warheads are pretty useless without a missile-delivery system, so the Nepal Army is to redeploy its deadly leather cannons last used to defeat British India in 1814. Slogan: “Kalapani to Kalapani!”
5. Resume hostilities where we left off during the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 and occupy Lucknow.
6. The Nepal Communist Party to declare Nepal a “dynamic between two boulders” and establish fraternal relations with Maoist comrades in China and India.
7. Boycott Hindi movies in cinemas — watch pirated ones on Netflix.
10. The Ministry of War Footing to rubber stamp every Indian map with the following: “The external boundaries of Nepal as depicted in this map are neither authentic nor correct.”