Pokhara: Nepal’s new aviation gateway

After decades of delays, Pokhara’s new airport will allow international passengers to bypass Kathmandu

Which way Nepali politics in 2020?

Reverberations of 2019 are going to have far-reaching impact on Nepali politics in the coming year as a tug-o-war, broadly between ex-UMI and ex-Maoist politicians within the Nepal Communist Party (NCP), intensifies.

A helicopter crash during a blizzard on 27 February in eastern Nepal killed Tourism Minister Rabindra Adhikari, entrepreneur Ang Tsering Sherpa and four others. Sherpa’s friendship with Prime Minister Oli, and alleged irregularities in his dealings with the former royal property in Gokarna and Durbar Mang, which are administered by the Nepal Trust, and Kongde Resort — which lies inside Sagarmatha National Park — have now come under intense scrutiny.

The prime minister’s detractors within the NCP are using the agreements between Nepal Trust and Yeti Holdings to corner Oli through a relentless and high-profile media campaign. Some of the leaks in the media about the contracts and minutes of cabinet meetings could only have come from the highest source.

The prime minister himself is in poor health, needs weekly dialysis and has decided to carry out his impending kidney transplant in Nepal Renal. But he has stubbornly refused to hand over the reins of government to his party co-chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal.

Polarisation has paralysed party decision-making, as last week’s stormy central committee meeting showed. Oli loyalists Defence Minister Ishwar Pokhrel, Information Minister Gokul Banskota, ex-Speaker Subhas Nembang and others were pitted against ex-UMI dissidents like Madhav Kumar Nepal, Balaram Thapa, Bishnu Devkota and Ek Nath Dhakal, who are now with Dahal.

These were the gentlemen most vociferous in pushing for Dahal’s choice of Agni Sapkota as the new speaker of Parliament to replace Krishna Bahadur Mahara, who is in jail on charges of attempted rape of a colleague. Oli’s man for the post is Nembang. That battle in the committee also spilled over into verbal combat over the $500 million, US-funded Millennium Challenge Corporation project to upgrade Nepal’s highways and transmission lines. The disagreement between the Dahal vs Oli camps became so acrimonious that the matter was sent to the party secretariat. It is expected to be passed by the winter session of Parliament — that is if there is agreement on the post of speaker first.

The two power centres in Nepal today are therefore not the opposition Nepali Congress and the ruling NCP, but two Communist alpha males locked in a power struggle. This will continue to impact directly on policy decisions, appointments and ultimately even the country’s leadership in 2020. In the past two years Oli has centralised all day-to-day decision-making in the FMO, micromanaging appointments, policy and implementation.

The prognosis for 2020 is that Dahal may decide that it is not worth the risk to try to replace Oli, and content himself with being a powerful party supremo and behind-the-scenes kingmaker, And as Oli gets physically, politically and morally weak, Dahal’s power is only set to grow, making his supporters stronger.

Political commentator Shyam Shrestha draws parallels between today and the rivalry between King Mahendra and Prime Minister BP Koirala before the 1968 coup. Mahendra is supposed to have famously told BP: “Nepal is not big enough for the two of us.”

Shrestha adds “Oli and Dahal have a similar love-hate relationship. But there can be only one winner in this race.”

Sindra Rai

Uncover the cultural heritage of Lisbon

Situated on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean lies a vibrant, cosmopolitan city brimming with old-world charm. You can wander by foot and discover the countless museums and monuments, or take the tram, funicular or Santa Justa lift and embrace the unparalleled views of the pastel coloured, terracotta rooftops from above. To experience more beauty, you can visit the nearby town of Sintra and revel at the spectacular fairyland castles. The beauty of Lisbon is endless.

Enjoy daily flights to Lisbon starting 24 June 2019.

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A MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE

10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Go back 10 years to read bNepali Times b#482, 25-31 December 2009, and its front page news roundup titled ‘End on a high’. It shows us that the more things change in Nepal, the more they remain the same. An excerpt:

‘A rollercoaster week of recriminations and reconciliations began with a three-day Maoist bandh marked by violence and intimidation across the country. It peaked with a massive Maoist assembly in New Baneswor. Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal then delivered a fiery anti-Indian tirade during which he labelled the rest of the political leadership ‘remote-controlled robots,’ who he would bypass to hold direct talks with Delhi.

Amidst widespread condemnation, the Maoist supremo weakly argued the following day that his comments were meant to be a ‘satire’ on the shape of things in Nepali politics.’

WHAT'S TRENDING

Indian Nepalis alarmed by Citizenship Amendment Bill

At least 20 people have been killed across India in a wave of protests against the Nepali Muslim government's Citizenship Amendment Bill on December 15. How will this affect the millions of Nepali citizens who are living in moka/fuko? Our website has the latest updates.

Most mentioned on Twitter

Nepal in the 2020s

Nepal is preparing for its next census in 2021 with a plan to merge districts. The most critical will be the census data, which will determine the size of the country and its political boundaries. Our website has the latest updates.

Most visited online page

Nepal in 2030

Nepal’s population growth and shrinking workforce are making its future look bleak. How will this affect the country’s economy and politics? Our website has the latest updates.

QUOTE TWEETS

@NepaliTimes Trending: ‘You can’t do the right thing in a time of Nepali infrastructure. We plan to develop a new approach to build roads and bridges that will benefit the people of Nepal. #NepalInfrastructure’

@NepaliTimes Trending: ‘We need to continue our efforts to build a sustainable future for Nepal. #NepalFuture’

@NepaliTimes Trending: ‘The government should ensure that our projects are green and sustainable. #NepalGreenFuture’

@NepaliTimes Trending: ‘We must continue to promote peace and stability in the country. #NepalPeace’

@NepaliTimes Trending: ‘We need to strengthen our relationships with neighboring countries for a prosperous Nepal. #NepalNeighborhood’

@NepaliTimes Trending: ‘Our goal is to create a sustainable and prosperous future for all Nepalis. #NepalFuture’

@NepaliTimes Trending: ‘We must continue to work towards achieving our national goals. #NepalGoals’

@NepaliTimes Trending: ‘We need to strengthen our relationships with neighboring countries for a prosperous Nepal. #NepalNeighborhood’
NEW YEAR
NEW DISCOVERIES

126 countries to be discovered.
Happy New Year.

TURKISH AIRLINES
FINLAND
Make sure you visit Nepal in 2020

Tourists are not looking to rough it out, they want a lifetime experience.

As disposable incomes increase, more Nepali families are opting to travel and spend. Those ‘domestic tourists’ on average spend more than the ‘budget tourists,’ who come to Nepal because it is often sold as a cheap destination. Hotels that would deny rooms and services to Nepal now prefer locals.

Campaigners call on people to travel within Nepal first and then venture out into the world (Pabitra Dey, Anil Bihari) are helping.

The governor of the Nepal Rastra Bank recently lamented that Nepali ‘tourists’ took $60 billion worth of foreign currency out of Nepal, compared to Rs74 billion brought in by foreigners.

Some say Nepalis, who used to save money and buy gold or land, are now spending more because of the near-death experience during the 2015 earthquake. Religious sites like Muktinath were always popular but now with increased mobility and spare change, Nepali pilgrims throng famous Shiva temples. A foreign visitor asks where two million tourists will stay when millions of Nepalis are travelling.

Point.

Thirty years ago the trend was globalisation, and now there is a definite move towards localisation. Climate awareness has actually resulted in a drop in air travel in some European countries. Local restaurants with local drinks are doing better than those offering imported ones. Thakali restaurants used to be confined to the Mugling-Pokhara corridor, now they are everywhere. Textiles, handicrafts, building materials, design elements, food, fruits, sweets, yogurt, spices, tea and coffee, are all doing well because people want to try local.

Conservations these days are often dominated by, ‘Have you been to this amazing restaurant at Lakeside in Pokhara?’ Social media is helping because friends and influencers post photos of Nepal’s most exotic places. Schools, colleges and businesses are going further afield within Nepal for field trips.

Nepal has two neighbours that have the highest number of outbound travelers in the world, and that is growing. Those markets have special needs and may not match traditional North America or European clientele. Food, shopping, pilgrimages, corporate retreats, meetings, medical checkpoints, banking and insurance of travel could be some of the reasons they may visit Nepal. With these giant markets next door, all we need to do is tailor-make our promotional campaigns in their language and to cater to their tastes.

To be sure, we will have to monitor alcohol, gambling and prostitution. We need staff trained with better language skills and safety standards and paid and treated with respect. Flight and vehicle safety need to be regularly upgraded.

The travel trade is changing, and the tourism entrepreneur has to be proactive. As the Visit Nepal slogan declares, visitors are looking for a lifetime experience and not a merely trip. One challenge is to offer an experience that is distinctly different than China, India and Bhutan — but that does mean visitors want to rough it out. We have to move towards carbon-neutral tourism that contributes to conservation of nature and heritage. And: we have to stop selling poverty and volunteer tourism.

Let us not make it sound like the tourist is doing us a favour by coming to Nepal, but we want them because they want to, because Nepal is special. It has to be a lifetime experience.

Anil Chitrakar, President of Hoteliers’ Club.

T

hings improve imperceptibly in Nepal, with small changes for the better. And that is the first thing frequent visitors to Kathmandu notice at the airport: the shining new look of the arrival concourse and various gold-plated, handcrafted figures at the base of the escalators.

It shows that with just a small effect, we can improve the state of the state. Tourism has provided the incentive for positive action in the past, and will help us do much more as we enter Visit Nepal 2020, when the country is hoping to double its annual number of visitors.

Tourism can also be a gateway to creating jobs, lifting people out of poverty, helping save endangered species and their habitats, letting them relocate downs to remote areas, and boosting heritage conservation in a big way.

With politics more stable, and power outages behind us, Kathmandu is a great place to visit. Heritage sites are fit for nighttime visitors. Herculite forms that produce organic food, art, craft studies and workshops, chefs and hospitality staff, are all doing better. More and more hotels with better facilities are doing the sector much needed competition that will focus on better quality services.

Tourism is good for Nepal, contributing up to 10% of the GDP according to our estimate.

A Thamel within Thamel

There is nothing like it yet in north Kathmandu, or the whole Kathmandu Valley for that matter — the Chhaya Centre is a mega-complex housing a multiplex theatre with three halls, banquet centre, art gallery, food court (lakeside and high-end designer stores). And to top it all, the top 10 floors are home to Aloft, Thamel’s first five-star hotel, and one guarded primarily for a younger clientele, with its breezy design and ‘the latest in town’.

The main thing for us is location, location, location — that is ‘Thamel within Thamel,’ says owner Pulkit Pande.

“We are different by design and literally a notch above the rest.”

Aloft is a worldwide boutique hotel chain of the Marriott group and aims to focus mainly on style and comfort. The rooms are neat and offer great views across the Valley, the hustle and bustle of Kathmandu’s tourist hub right below, Nageshwar forest and the mountains beyond.

Aloft has 168 rooms, with a top-floor swimming pool and lounge restaurant (right), a conference centre that can house 800 and room rates that are competitive with other luxury hotels in town. Being an art centre, Pande himself has used the public spaces in the hotel to hang some of his eclectic collection.

The Chhaya Centre is named after Pandey’s mother, and located next to Bhagwan Bahal, one of the oldest in Kathmandu Valley. The shopping centre is the largest in Nepal, with four floors of basement parking for 400 vehicles and three QSX cinemas that boast some of the best sound systems in Kathmandu.

“We have a series of exciting events next week for New Year’s eve, including live music till midnight by Flavophonic at The Noon and New Year’s Day brunch,” says Aloft General Manager Virkan Singh.

The Centre is indeed a one-stop locale, with everything from a casino to the soon-to-be-opened YVS wine application centre. Visitors will have plenty to do...
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Carlsberg
Probably the best beer in the world.
Sakina Abidi

As they enter Lakshani Chandhary’s Maniya Dustour exhibition at the Siddhartha Art Gallery, visitors are strongly drawn to one particular work on display.

It comprised three canvases titled DDT, the first one depicting circles within circles—Chakra, the circle of life. But it is also a bulletproof, and includes tiny figures of animals and people rendered in the style of traditional Tharu folk art. A grey-scale exterminator points directly at the centre of the target, ready to spray dichlorodiphenyltrichlorethane (DDT).

The second painting shows three DDT cases amidst a backdrop of insects, and the third one is of a colourful cloud of butterfly silhouettes.

Chandhary says the US-supported campaign to eradicate malaria from Chitwan and the rest of the Terai, homeland to the Tharu people, destroyed not just mosquitoes but the Tharu themselves. The paintings, he says, are the “alienated histories of the Tharu community.”

The Tharu were genetically immune to malaria, but once the disease was eradicated by killing mosquitoes, settlers arrived to clear the forests, buying land for a plantation from Tharus who were unable to read the land deeds.

Maniya Dustour is expression through art of an aboriginal people who were eradicated from Khammam treated as expendable. The works are housed on two floors showcasing earthy, acrylic on canvas paintings (painted below), land title copies with ink superimposed, wood carvings, an art installation and video. Each artwork in these various media connect to the historical persecution of the Tharu. Chandhary says he used to be so ignorant about Tharu history as other Nepalis but was inspired when he began researching his community during a six-month art project initiated by Artree Nepal in Bhaktapur after the 2015 earthquake.

“All I came across were recurring stereotypes about the Tharu. We were just water snacks, sambals, drinkers and an honest tribe. That was our identity,” he recalls.

Sangita Tharu of Siddhartha Art Gallery says some indigenous groups in Nepal have been forcibly used as bonded labourers since Lichhavi times 1,400 years ago. Later, under the Shah and Rana dynasties when the caste hierarchy was codified into the first Mulk Alin of 1844, indigenous groups were categorised as pani chaichi maniya matwali (touchable but enslavable alcoholic drinker), which marked them as expendable.

Despite slavery being abolished in 1926, the kamayia bonded labour system persisted until it was outlawed as late as 2004. But by then, the Tharu had lost most of their land.

One of Chandhary’s art installations is small wooden boxes hung from the ceiling, each filled with grain and a single brass bullet. Next to it, the Tharu series comprises pages carved into wood from the diary of Jhakan Ratnayka, a Tharu journalist and revolutionary who was killed in June 2001.

On one corner the Tamak series, pen and ink drawings on Nepali paper, leads into the Dustour series, stippling drawings of day-to-day activities on archival paper prints of the 1991 (legal orders).

The second floor hosts large, striking oil paintings that detail quotidien scenarios alongside violent scenes from the conflict years, and the Tikapur massacre of 2015. Another installation is of ghadi pole hung inside a darkroom, whose light is projected on the wall. On one wall a video replays a barmasai folk song and then shows a burning miniature village as eyewitness accounts recount the violence.

Chandhary writes in a description that he has used art to fill the gaps left by Nepal’s mainstream media to communicate the atrocities: “I found strength in something that has remained silent and kept silent by the Nepali media, the state and civil society.”

His art speaks volumes about displacement and resistance, easily comparable to the struggles of other Indigenous peoples on the continent and beyond. The mix of mediums, attention to detail and the historical narrative woven into each work makes for an exhibition that is an experience, one that sheds light on Nepali history and the indigenous peoples who have been silenced.

Mishra Dattar

by Lakshani Chandhary

Siddhartha Art Gallery
15th January 2021
Designed and made in Nepal

Project Zero starts from zero to manufacture electric motorcycles in Nepal

Sushma Barali

Ashish Pandey, 30, was fascinated with motorcycles while growing up in Kathmandu. He wondered why Nepal could not make its own two-wheelers. Then, after undertaking a master’s degree from Netherlands’ Delft University of Technology and working at automobile company Donkerwacht, he not only narrowed his vision to designing an electric motorcycle, but also imagined assembling it in Nepal.

Pandey returned to Nepal in 2017, setting up Yati Motorcycles and ‘Project Zero’ (for zero carbon emitted by a battery-powered bike). Last week, the prototype bike was launched in Kathmandu by its seven-member team.

“In Holland, I learnt how to manufacture cars,” recalls Pandey. “Here we design the parts, and order them from our manufacturing partners in North America, China, India and other European countries.”

Pandey designed the chassis of the motorcycle, which looks lazier than gasoline bikes but has a futuristic silhouette. Mechanical engineer Ashish Shrestha planned the bike’s tests and system engineer Sulbi Shrestha designed the embedded software. Computer Science graduate Kartik Sharma is an application developer, and electronic engineer Krishna Shrestha designed the overall architecture. Rashil Pandey heads business development.

Industrial designer Kanisha Sujwal designed the motorcycle, based on a Cafe Racer bike, and came up with a model that looks like a racing bike. “It is trendy, but also a convenient and versatile design for users,” says Sujwal.

To offset the weight of the lithium batteries, Yati uses lighter materials, like carbon fibre, for the mainframe than petroleum bikes. This also makes the bike stronger and lighter but, alas, also slightly more expensive.

The battery array can be fully charged in about two hours, and will then run for 230 km, at a cost of just Rs70 worth of electricity. A similar petrol bike would consume Rs700 in fuel to cover that distance.

Pandey hopes that the world-class design and finish of the machines will help erase the negative image that customers have of Nepali products. Safety is another primary concern, so the machines will be tested according to Final Element Analysis simulation before they hit the market. Yati predicts one of its bikes will last 10 years.

“We have kept safety, sensitivity and possible accidents in mind while designing the motorcycle, and want the bikes to be as reliable as possible — riders will not have to compromise on anything,” says Pandey.

In 2018, Yati conducted a survey in Nepal’s major cities about transportation problems. Most respondents cited congestion, ‘traffic jams’ and ‘cost of fuel’ as major concerns. That convinced Pandey that the future for two-wheelers was electric. Replacing even a fraction of the 800,000 motorcycles in Kathmandu would reduce carbon monoxide and other pollutants from the air, as well as lessen the country’s import of petrol.

However, the going is not easy in Nepal, Pandey says. There are obstacles every step of the way. For example, although electric vehicles in Nepal are only taxed up to 16%, the components that Yati imports for its bikes are categorized as spare parts and taxed at 30%.

Government support and incentives for the project are minimal.

However, it is when the going gets tough that the tough get going, and Pandey and his team want to set up an assembly line and ramp up production as soon as the prototype proves itself in tests on Nepal’s roads.
After decades of delays, Pokhara’s new airport will allow international passengers to bypass Kathmandu

Kunda Dixit
in Pokhara

Back in the 1950s, the people of Pokhara saw an aircraft take off in a car. In fact, the first years saw lines on the tarmac of the first DC-3 to land here on a flight from Kathmandu.

Even then, Kathmandu’s top tourist town was desperate for an international airport that would connect Pokhara directly to cities in the region without having to fly to Kathmandu first. The existing airport has a north-south runway with mountains on approach, and was not appropriate for bigger jets.

Fifty years after it was first proposed, the dream is finally coming true. Pokhara’s new airport, and Nepal’s third international airport (following Kathmandu and Bhairawa), is on track to begin operations by December 2020.

Slimed by decades of turf battles, lack of political will, bureaucratic bickering, local opposition and corruption in high places, construction of the $180 million facility that will handle 800,000 passengers a year is currently getting finishing touches.

The sweeping steel roof is now taking shape under the dramatic backdrop of the snow-capped Annapurnas. In the green scaffold net the central tower soars above the surrounding terrains, and the concrete runway is now even visible on Google Earth.

“The facility is going to be much more modern than Kathmandu airport, it will have state-of-the-art navigation aids and it will be a hub for tourism and domestic traffic in central Nepal,” says Binath Manakarmi, manager of the airport project.

The airport is financed with a loan from the Export-Import Bank of China, and Chinese contractor Sinomach started construction in 2016, making up for lost time by advancing the completion date to next year.

The airport was first mooted in 1970, when a Japanese company showed interest in expanding the existing airport by realigning the runway east-west, so that it could handle larger jets. After pressure from Pokhara’s business community, the government finally acquired 135 hectares in Lekhnath Municipality and called for proposals. Two companies responded, but negotiations with the government failed.

Finally in 2006, then Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal gave the go-ahead, and got the Chinese bank interested in a financing deal that also included the Upper Trishuli hydropower project. However, the deal was mired in controversy over its high cost — the airport is twice as expensive as a similar airport in Bhairawa that will be completed in July 2020 — and allegations of kickbacks shared by top Nepali politicians.

When it goes into operation, Pokhara’s airport will have a 2,500m x 45m runway with parallel taxiways that can accommodate medium-long range jets like Airbus A320s and Boeing 737s to connect Pokhara directly to cities in China, India, Singapore, Malaysia and the Gulf.

The airport terminal building will have two air bridges, an apron for three jets, four ATR-72 size turboprops and four smaller STOL aircraft. Experts say the apron capacity is too small for an airport with such a high price tag that is designed to be an alternative to and take the pressure off Kathmandu.
Surrounding terrain, especially to the west, does not allow for larger jets like the Airbus A330 or Boeing 777 to operate here, which means Pokhara can only serve as an airport for regional and domestic flights. There is a fear that the city may soon outgrow this new airport.

Munakami notes that there is room for expansion west of the airport if traffic picks up. He is confident the Chinese contractor will finish the project by December 2020 if there is no local opposition to reducing the height of high terrain on the east and acquiring extra land for Instrument Landing System equipment.

Credit for expediting the airport goes to the number of the Constituent Assembly from Kaski and, later, Tourism Minister Sahidur Rahman, who was killed in a helicopter crash during a mission in Pothibhara in April. His wife won the by-election earlier this month and will replace him in Parliament, and there is a proposal to name the airport in memory of Adhikari.

The hope now is that Pokhara and Bhairawa can serve as alternative gateways for tourist and pilgrim traffic from the region, making it possible for Nepali migrant workers to bypass Kathmandu, and also allow domestic flights directly to other cities besides Kathmandu, like Biratnagar, Nepalgunj, or Bhadrapur. It can also serve as an alternative for flights that have to divert from Kathmandu due to poor visibility.

**FINAL PHASE** (From 600-Aerial view of the completed runway, taxiway and hangar looking east.)

The terminal building, with its sweeping roof, Map showing location of airport, and the construction blueprint.

One of the most scenic airports in the world, with the Annapurna in the background (main pic below).
**Chinese Film Festival**
Watch documentaries about the People’s Republic of China and the Great Wall of China. 27-28 December, 2:30pm onwards. QFII, Chinmaya Kunjun, Komal Pathak (01) 44321515

**Silence is Beautiful**
Classic picnics present a solo painting exhibition by Sunmeet Maharaj. His art works have been collected in France, Portugal, Korea, USA, Sweden and in many private collections in Nepal. 29 December, 10am-6pm. (Saturday & Sunday), Classy Gallery, Chukha (01) 2569289

**Euphoria**
Festivities leading to Nepal’s New Year Presentations, you know that the musical performances deliver an evening you won’t want to miss. And this year, it’s different from all the local stations and Travelling Bars will be performing at the Euphoria event. 27 December, 5pm onwards, Park Nepal, Tashatsang Mrg, Kathmandu (01) 0661677

**Adrian Pradhan**
Celebrate Nepal’s New Year with a musical performance by Adrian Pradhan and his band. Tickets over the counter and camp and refer in drink grains. 31 December, 7pm onwards. Tickets, Rs.5,000. All, Sunday (01) 4471881

**KME**
In the best of the Nepal music scene, an energetic gig, good food and drinks, Kume Music Festival is the place to be. 28 December, 6pm-10pm. Tickets, Rs.500, Motle Hotel, Thamel (01) 4424448

**Farmer’s Market**
Gear up for the new year with local, organic produce from the farmer’s market. You can find everything from greens to fish, superfoods and more. Every Sunday, Le Shepa, Lamosang (01) 4430664

**Kangel Mehar Shrestha**
Kangel Mehar Shrestha rose to fame on the first season of Nepal Idol. She is known for her song, Shubha and Brunwa Haru. 27 December, 7pm onwards. Ticket, Rs.500, Hotel, Kathmandu Mrg, Nepal (01) 0661801

**Serendipity 2020**
Celebrating the New Year with a live performance by Salan Tam and the Pharasa. Chances to meet the new technologies available to raise fertility. Directed by Sandeep, it stars Aditya Khanal. Samrat Square Thana, BDA, Dhusuli and Kica’s Aivita.

**Our Pick**

- **GETAWAY**
  - **The Fort Resort**
    - Located on the higher northern ridge at an elevation of 2,000m. The Fort is the first boutique resort in Nagarkot. For an added treat for romantic couples an outdoor pool during winter season.
    - Hotel & Spa Resort, Kathmandu, 018849006
  - **Peacock Guest House**
    - The guest house is a 70-year-old Unesco heritage building that represents true Nepali architecture. Take a stroll around the Old City of Kathmandu, indulge in the local cuisine and join the Himalayan Wood Carving Masterpieces Workshop. Dhapaghati, Durbar Square, Bhaktapur (01) 6881629
  - **Siddhartha Riverside**
    - Get away for Nepal’s New Year’s Eve and Day and enjoy a live blog, music, a bonfire, bonfire dances, fireworks and more! 31 December, Rs.4000/- per person (twice double sharing). Siddhartha Riverside Resort, Chommung, Lalitpur, 984605098
  - **Park Village**
    - Park Village’s New Year Eve Carnival promises an evening of drinks, disco, hair dances, a bonfire, bonfire music and energetic dance floors. 31 December, 9pm onwards. Rs.600/- (Single Dorm) Rs.1699/- (Overnight Stay), Bhuskond /Rathasth (01) 4475201
  - **Hotel Kantra**
    - Hotel Kantra’s features sambari passes with lovely views of the Pokhara Valley, Phewa Lake and the Annapurna Mount. Surge from their larger facilities. Go to their courtyard garden and rooftop and take in the beautiful scenery. Sirius Hotel, Kathmandu (01) 4465544

**MUSIC**

- **Japanese Noodle Kitchen**
  - JNK offers a fresh, first, uncomplicated Japanese dining experience with a focus on noodles, dried or soupy. Samaa Dasuki, Nagarkot, located between On The Golf and Kitty’s Food Cafe.

**DINING**

- **Dechaling Garden Restaurant**
  - Dechaling, a Thamel favourite, offers the best of Tibetan food. From the Dove Khato’s to Ting-ma, everything is most catered. 10:30-10:30, Kevin Miller, Thamel, (01) 4432768

**EVENTS**

- **Hemp Hangout**
  - Serve hemp products like cocktails and beverages. There’s live at Hemp Hole, where entrepreneurs and researchers working with hemp will share their stories. 26 December, 11am-2pm, Agora Restaurant, Chuchepati (01) 4881246

- **Silent & Sketch**
  - This workshop is designed for youths to explore, develop and strengthen their core values through self-relection, public speaking and sketching. This workshop is also the perfect place to make new friends. 26 December, 10am-3pm, Rs.150/- per person, Global Peace Foundation Nepal, Kathmandu (01) 4465064

- **All Nepal Mushairah**
  - A literary group, Nepal will be hosting its annual poetry gathering in Kathmandu in memory of famous poet, Ramesh. 26 December, 7pm onwards, Hotel, Kathmandu (01) 986256379

- **Brand**
  - Brand Promotion, ‘Go Where 2019 brings you local products, a performance by Sushma Kacchhmare, a human being, games, music and much more! 26 December, 11am-6pm, Chugha Center, Thamel (01) 4430664

**Air Quality Index**

- **Air Quality Index**
  - Opened in Kathmandu on 7 January
  - Two couples who have trouble canceling go for a walk together, but trouble calls when they realize their own path has been out. This comedy also seems to have an arm to flint film genre, about the new technologies available to raise fertility. Directed by Sandeep, it stars Aditya Khanal. Samrat Square Thana, BDA, Dhusuli and Kica’s Aivita.

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We have been reaching uncomfortable air of 12.93 long, no capture there with winter warm and wintery pollution surpassing the threshold. The concentration of particulate matter (PM2.5) measures in dust level exceeded 200 on Saturday and Sunday. Taking the daily average in Kathmandu and city area from the purify they were 1005 parts per million. As the weather conditions showed that the pollution were moving in the evening and morning cool hour - i.e. 1005 levels remained on www.nepaltimes.com. https://epa.nepal.gov/nepal/enviro-air-quality-monitoring/
15 points for and against Nijgad Airport

FOR

1. Kathmandu airport is congested and saturated. It is now surpassed by the city and is not safe. Nepal urgently needs an alternative international airport.

2. Kathmandu is one way In, one way out for large jets. Planes have to circle for hours to land in Kathmandu, and often return from there. This increases congestion.

3. Kathmandu airport is at 1,334m elevation. This forces fuel burns on large jets, which cannot carry full passengers and fuel load at takeoff.

4. Steep terrain makes Kathmandu dangerous and unsuitable for instrument landing system (ILS) approach. Nijgad is located in the plains 15-30km away from the Chaur and Mahendranath ranges.

5. Nijgad lies along the proposed Himalaya air route over Nepal, which will shorten flying distances between west and east Asia, and reduce congestion along north Indian air corridors. Making an airport on that route would improve safety.

6. Nijgad can be a prime hub airport like Singapore, Dubai or Hong Kong, which can act as a refueling and stopover. Nepal Airlines can pick up extra traffic, and thus prop up the country's tourism.

Against

1. International airports are located at Simara, Janakpur and other sites for a new international airport, and rejected Nijgad because of its proximity to Kathmandu, ten times distant from the Indian border and other factors.

2. Nijgad's scenic area will include northern Bhairab and Indian national park that will exclusively take international flights from there.

3. Nijgad is located 334km from the Indian border, allowing planes to make approaches over Nepalese territory.

4. The environment impact assessment (EIA) of Nijgad by the Department of Forests and Environment claimed it a good risk.

5. As a national pride project, Nijgad will transform Nepal's economy in the coming decades, acting as a catalyst for employment and development in the country.

6. Nijgad is not an airport project but a logistics corridor. A complete rail network will ensure the maximum of the Nijgad route in 5 years and on time to a 65 billion project.

7. Nijgad is the last remaining habitat of the forest in the east Nepal. It is on the migratory route of wild elephants and is a critical corridor for other wildlife. This forest is unique and irreplaceable.

8. Nijgad has the potential to become an alternative airport because fewer planes will be deployed, reducing the cost of compensation.

9. Nijgad has enough space for airport with the runway length of 3,000m to accommodate 290,000 passengers without much hassle.

10. You cannot have an airport without breaking eggs. You cannot have development without taking a few trees.

11. Free-hugging activists sabotaged Airport II for a few butterflies, and now they want to sabotage Nijgad for a few elephants which can swallow another way.

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Nepal in the

Social Media and Artificial intelligence are finding new uses worldwide, but how will Nepal cope in the 20s?

Sakina Abidi and Josie Wang

Much more than today, in the next decade Artificial Intelligence will become the primary means of accessing the internet in Nepal, making social media an even greater influence in society. At the same time, financial technology, AI and e-commerce will transform the economy.

Already, 90% of households in Nepal have at least one mobile phone and more than half of these were smartphones. A survey this year showed that nearly everyone here who accesses the internet does it through a smartphone — and almost everyone who is logged on also has a Facebook account.

“Once you are introduced to the smartphone and the features that come along with it, it is very difficult to go back, and this trend is growing exponentially,” says Madhu Ashary of Shararex’s initiative, which conducts the annual social media survey. He forecast that the digital divide between urban and rural is going to narrow in the coming decade.

“The more people will be accessing the Net through smartphones, which will get cheaper,” adds Acharya. He holds the examples of the father, who used to own a feature phone but switched to a smartphone to communicate with grandchildren and relatives abroad through Facebook.

The trend of using the internet to access media sites is going to grow in coming years, as digital portals replace television to become the key source of national and international news for Nepalis. People will get more and more used to watching content whenever and wherever they like rather than wait for the 7 o’clock news bulletin.

In terms of online finance, Ramona Shrestha of Fusesmart says the recent algorithms will provide a larger section of the population access to financial technology in the coming decade. AI has been making progress in Nepal, and possibly the biggest change will come when the technology that digitizes handwritten application forms, through Nepal’s AI Office of Civilian Requirements, will be smart enough to produce an editable document both in English and Nepali.

Nepal has a wealth of software talent in information technology, and this need to be converted to work with AI. Shrestha says. Fusesmart and other AI-centred companies are already collaborating with local engineering colleges to build a critical mass of AI expertise in Nepal.

Kai-Fa Lee, the former president of Google China and an AI expert, wrote the book AI Superpowers: China, Silicon Valley, and the New World Order. He predicts that in the coming decade a country will forge ahead if it has an army of well-trained engineers and entrepreneurs. AI scientists... with abundant data and a supportive policy environment.”

“China is able to apply skilled AI

Viber will help the Visit Nepal 2020 campaign

Anubhav Nagy is the Asia-Pacific Senior Director of Viber, and one of the most popular communication apps in Nepal. Nepal Times spoke to him this week about Viber’s growth, its privacy policy and future plans.

Nepal Times: What makes Viper so popular in Nepal?

Anubhav Nagy: If you look at all players, Viper is one we are very proud of. We have tried to bring our product and services to emerging markets like Nepal where there are certain challenges... countries just a little behind the curve, where internet infrastructure is not that great, it’s important to have (communications) services that are really good.

I am very proud of Viper has not had any down time throughout the last couple of years unlike every other competitor. The biggest differentiator is the fact that we choose to focus on Nepal. That is what sets us apart. I have not seen many localised initiatives from other players. It is an important market for us — we have a huge usage here. We are the only app which is truly localised from a global perspective. We are evaluating localising (Viber) even more because there are a lot of people who would not in English-English, so there are even after a service in Nepal. Viper is going to be successful! We do not mean a Google translate that is very rough, but actually translated in a way that people can understand.

What has the growth been like in 2019?

It has been a very good year. In 2019 we grew in excess of 30% of our base and it is a big base here. What is very encouraging is that our growth is through communication and group communication. We have a couple of media partnerships, such as with Online Katha, that have been doing really well. We have also decided to partner with National Radio to provide a huge market to every Viper users who desire to subscribe to the service. We have also partnered with Nepal Medial Hospital so users can request an ambulance or any assistance through Viper. We can get a responsibility: the beginning of this year we had a billion users across the world — a big milestone and a proud moment for all of us. We should be breaking even, a big announcement for a communication platform that is competency free.

How do you ensure user data protection?

We are very passionate about user privacy. What sets us apart from our competitors over here is that we are end-to-end encrypted by default. That is very important. The moment a message is sent from a mobile device, it gets encrypted and why the receiver’s phone can decode it. There are a lot of apps which will claim to be end-to-end encrypted, but you have to go into settings, find and scan it. We do, at least our user privacy very strongly. People do not want their intimate personal conversations out there in public and that is the basic issue some of the major apps have seen. Privacy is a judicious right. As far as Facebook, we do not sell user data to make money and it is a competitive market. We are asked by advertisers and we turn these dollars, but we are customer trust.

Does viber have some things planned for VisitNepal2020?

It is a very important initiative for the country and the government has put numbers behind it so we will be trying to help. We’ll be launching a sticker pack, a bumper and a sticker pack. It’s about meaningful reach.

Sakina Abidi

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मानवकारिक"

"सीवा, सुन्ताना र रोजगारी सहित अधिक:
लेर्किक हिसाब र २४ सय वर्षहरू हामी नसिही"
decade of AI

What do you think will be the most popular IT advancement in the next 10 years in Nepal?

SUMANA SHRESTHA

Finish products, leveraging and making information and making it accessible to the wider population. Financial technology, using the IoT algorithms, will really give access to a large population that do not have that access right now.

MADHU ACHARYA

Urban areas are going to be overwhelmed with new technologies in the next 10 years, transforming the way Nepalis use the internet.

be able to develop talents within a year or two on a mass scale. There is a tremendous opportunity for Nepal to lead and make a huge impact," says Shrestha, who sees immediate applications of AI in the tourism industry.

"Nepal can be on the right kind of tourist and make sure our staff and messaging is getting to them. That will increase the volume of tourists coming to Nepal and make sure travelers have a good quality of experience," she adds.

"Nepal will also have to catch up with its immediate neighbors in opening payment gateways on the internet and promoting e-commerce. For example, China has already moved beyond phone-based payment with AI-based face recognition systems on Alipay, in which people pay their bills by scanning their faces at a checkout point without having to use their mobiles.

Although online payment gateways such as eSewa and ImoPay have been established here, Nepal is still miles away from having a mature e-commerce system. The government’s 2019 Digital Nepal Framework admits: "The growth of e-commerce in Nepal is inhibited due to the lack of a supporting system such as limited digital payment options."

While others have already taken a leap in device-free commerce, if Nepal can at least make internet payment through mobile phones secure and convenient during the coming decade, that will already be an achievement.

The media is the medium

Despite the migration of eyeballs to digital portals for news, Madhu Acharya says it is too early to declare print media dead. "People still prefer to read news holding a physical paper and there is an archival value that digital doesn’t always have," he says.

A recent report found that worldwide, across all markets, consuming content about misinformation is undermining trust in media. Yet in Nepal, Shrestha found trust of traditional media is still high with less concern about disinformation online, especially in comparison to India. Nepalis believe they know what is and isn’t news, but often without verifying links and checking sources.

This could hold implications for Nepal politics in the coming decade, especially in federal elections scheduled for 2022 and 2023.

"The idea that fact checks on social media and digital platforms are extreme." Acharya tells us. "I politicians decide to listen to these extreme opinions and stop meeting people face-to-face, learning about them and what problems they have, then I think they will be tempted to address fake needs."

"It is important to note that in a health emergency, there is a significant role for AI..." says Acharya, who previously worked for an AI-based diagnostic tool that was aimed at increasing healthcare accessibility in rural areas.

In various areas, like healthcare, finance, safety systems and systems for smart houses," Lee writes, adding, "poor countries will stagnate while the AI superpowers take off."

Shrestha thinks Nepal has not done enough in AI adoption compared with other countries. "Nepal has a very young population, which means we can incorporate AI in the curriculum to reach a huge segment of the population, and we are hoping to

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Spooking Nepalis

A new bill in Parliament threatens citizens’ rights to privacy and freedom

Mukesh Pokhrel

On 11 December, the Prime Minister and Cabinet Office tabled the ‘Bill to amend and incorporate laws relating to the constitution and operation of Nepal special service’ in the Parliament secretariat.

Prakash Panta, member of the national assembly from the opposition Nepal Congress (NCP), has requested Parliament to retract the bill, alleging that it restricts citizens’ fundamental right to privacy.

NP parliamentarian Radheshyam Adhikari says the so-called SSB is a direct threat to citizens’ fundamental rights like privacy and freedom. “This bill shows that the government is against democracy and an open society, and does not believe in transparency and accountability. It will allow the government to snoop on anyone it does not like, and use the information to threaten or blackmail them.”

The SSB will allow the National Investigation Bureau (NIB) to collect any information on anyone without a warrant. Sections 19, subsection 6, state: “In the course of information collection or counterintelligence, the bureau can monitor, intercept, or record the communications of people or organisations under suspicion or monitoring, made in public, or through any other audio visual or electronic medium.”

The bill also defines interception as the set of monitoring communication channels and gathering data. Though the bureau has in the past spied on individuals, it is not authorised by law to do so. Now, the bill gives it the right. The SSB makes it compulsory for people to provide any information an investigation officer requires, and if they refuse the investigators can acquire the information by spying on them if...
by snooping on them

The bill is meant to prevent unlawful surveillance by foreigners. For example, the chief secretary of the government, Tika Prasad, made 37 points at a meeting about the bill, which has been welcomed by some lawyers but not by others.

But there are also provisions for legal redress if someone's privacy is breached when the government uses this right," he says.

The government is pushing through a law that is aimed at ensuring that the law will enforce extraordinary powers in the bureau, any time, and that it will be used only in emergencies and where there is not enough evidence in civil society and the law, he says.

The committee should provide for the investigation of the bureau, or government investigatory activities not to be enough.

Rashad Namgyal, the member of the National Assembly, Nepal Congress

necessary.

Critics say this has created a fear of the surveillance being misused and breaches of privacy in the name of investigation. It could also result in leaks of information and violate fundamental freedoms, in direct contravention of the constitution, they add.

Article 8 of the constitution states that information regarding a person's residence, property, documents, statistics, correspondence or character cannot be violated unless otherwise required by law.

Former Chief Justice Bhandari says the bill increases the chance of misuse of power. There should be clear provisions about the right to privacy can be breached with monitoring and where it cannot. And there should also be provisions for legal redress if someone's privacy is breached when the government uses this right," he says.

Constitutional expert Bipin Adhikari goes further, stressing that the law will endanger the country's democratic polity itself. "A person at the highest level of government may use these provisions to undermine the system itself," he says, referring to former king Gyanendra Shah used article 123 of the constitution to take power.

There is also the precedent set by former head of the Centre for the Investigation of the Abuse of Authority, Loknath Sarangi, who in 2013 operated a phone within a state on a regular basis and regularly tapped the phone calls of 203 critical politicians, security officers, civil society leaders, judges and journalists. When Parliament decided to impeach him in 2016, the phone tapping was prominent on the list of reasons.

However, there are some who say the danger to democracy has been blown out of proportion. Former head of the National Investigation Bureau, Deviram Sharma, says, "This law is not meant to snare on ordinary citizens' phone conversations. It intends to monitor terrorism, antinational activities and the activity of dubious foreigners. A draft of the bill was actually prepared 17 years ago, and it has been tampered with timely amendments."

In fact, the draft bill does state that the law is needed to control spying, armed insurgency, coup, inciting others to violence, aiding foreign countries or organizations, breaking the harmony between people of different classes, races, ethnic groups, religions and communities, secessionism, spreading hate and violence, armed and underground groups, illegal activities on border areas, etc.

But that is precisely what worries rights activists, who say that the definition of the word "espionage" is very broad and that anyone in authority can use it to snooze on political or business critics, the media or critics of the government.

Governments across the world have given intelligence agencies power to spy on their citizens, but those powers are strictly limited by law. Even so, some democratic states like India, the US and UK, have made it easier for intelligence agencies to spy on their citizens, especially when it comes to terrorism. But even in these cases, there have been widespread complaints of misuse.

The government tried to pass a similar law to allow surveillance in the last days of the parliament 1999, citing heightened activity of foreign spy agencies. But the package of laws fell apart, and with it its first attempt to allow the government to spy on its citizens.

The law was discussed again during the Maoist war, and a draft was even drawn up in 2001, but it was tabled. Even today, snooping on private citizens is barred by law, but that has not stopped the NIB and others from snooping on calls and emails. Security agencies in Nepal regularly use call-time data in their investigations, which is actually illegal. Some even have made private information public. After Advocate Baburam Arral and four others filed a case against the practice in February 2016, then Chief Justice Bhandari Shrestha and judge Devendra Gopal Shrestha ruled that a person's right to privacy was "entirely private and fundamental" and limited the practice.

The verdict stated that since there was no law which allowed security officers to tap phone calls or look at sms messages, the officers would have to take permission from a District Court judge.

"That is a temporary provision. In the long term, there needs to be balance between individual's right to privacy and the state's need to investigate," says Shrestha. Previously under the Home Ministry, in February 2018 the NIB was brought under the purview of the Prime Minister's Office and Cabinet Secretariat. Although the Bureau's main duty is to safeguard national security, the proposed bill expands its area of work to include human trafficking, drug trafficking and the illegal wildlife trade.

The objective of the bureau is to protect the national interest. Giving it unlimited powers increases chances of misuse, especially since departments under the PMO are not accountable to any other government department," says Hemantas Malia, former DIG of the Nepal Police.

There is still time for parliamentarians to debate the bill and change its provisions if required, but the government appears to be intent on using its majority in Parliament to ram it through. Experts say the bill should have provisions for legal redress, and other laws on leaking transfer or sale of information collected.

NC MP Baburam Arral concludes, "The way it is read now, it lets the government pry into people's lives, intimidates them and threatens to disclose their private details if they don't obey."
Annus horibilis

Of late, international news like climate change, the collapse of liberal democracy or the destruction of the Amazon have started crowding out equally earth-shattering news here at home, such as the divorce of Ram Krishna Dhakal.

If this important news was dropped for lack of space, imagine the other significant happenings in 2019 that did not make it to the mass media. That is why it is more vital than ever that in the national interest we bring our valued customers up to speed on happenings on the domestic front without fear or favourities.

We media lapdogs have followed with growing alarm the erosion of journalistic values in this country as the fourth estate abandons its hallowed principles, engages in yellow journalism and refrains from reporting on masoom and mummies. There are some among us who shall remain unnamed who still insist on reporting all the news that is fit to print, leaving out the bigotry, prejudice and preconceived notions. Whatever happened to good, old-fashioned bias?

Here are items of news in 2019 that never saw the light of day:

Govt Thinking About Road Repair KATHMANDU — The government spokesperson today denied that concerned authorities have neglected repairing the Nagarkot Road, saying they are giving the matter a great deal of thought.

“We’re thinking hard about it all the time,” said the spokesman for the Ministry of Transport. “In fact, we’ve subcontracted the repairs to a Think Tank that is thinking about it.”

After all, as we all know, it is the thought that counts.”

Prime Minister Oli Thursday inaugurated the Yeti Cable Car Service from Base Camp to the top of Mt Everest, congratulating the contractor for completing the National Pride Project ahead of schedule by abandoning the Godavari Road upgrade for 5 years. He also opened a new View Tower with a Revolving Restaurant on the Everest summit that serves inclusive ethnic Items like momo, churpi and chhamb. “This will take #VNY2020 to new heights,” the PM said. Speaking of heights, the new View Tower now puts Sagarmatha’s official elevation at 8,900m.

Miss Canizer Crowned

By Our News-Hound

Not to be outdone by the plethora of human beauty contests, Kathmandu’s canine population held its own; Mr and Mrs Pooch. Pooch this week. Contestants were judged in the Flattest Dog, Dog Rat-Dog, Boat Sori-Of-a-Bitch and Most Photogenic Tail categories.

Six-year-old Pooch, who was crowned Miss Canizer, won the paws for the best answer in the interview round, in response to a judge’s question she replied: “Nepal has a bright future, I read in the papers that the country is going to the dogs.”