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## Pokhara: Nepal's new aviation gateway

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

PAGE 8-9



## 15 points for and against Nijgad Airport

PAGE 11

# Which way Nepali politics in 2020?



DIWAKAR CHETTRI

**R**everberations of 2019 are going to have far-reaching impact on Nepali politics in the coming year as a tug-o-war, broadly between ex-UML 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 Tshering 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 Marg, 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 sources.

The prime minister himself is in poor health, needs weekly dialysis and has decided to carry out his impending kidney transplant in Nepal itself. 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-UML dissidents like Madhav Kumar Nepal, Jhalnath Khanal, Bamdev Gautam and Bhim Rawal, 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 PMO, 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 1960 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."

**Saindra Rai**

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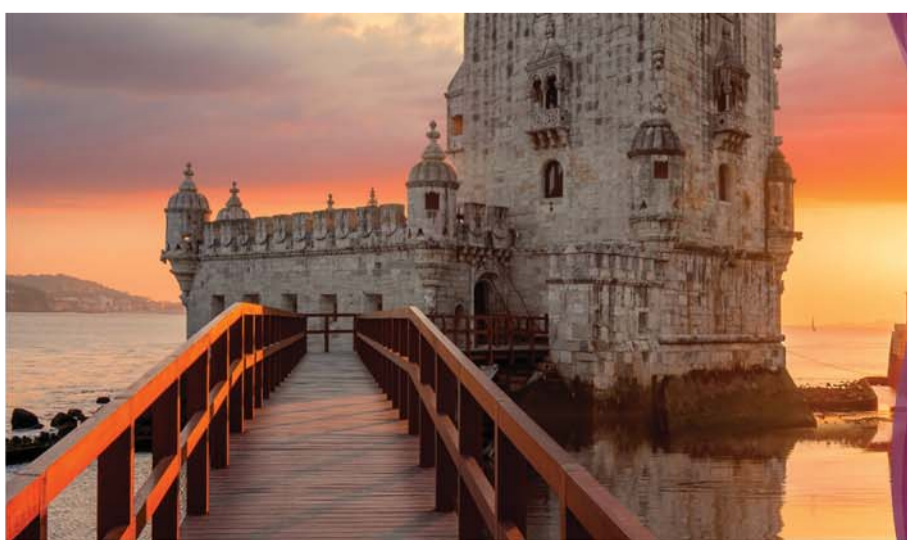
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GOING PLACES TOGETHER

# A MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE

Legend has it that the real reason Nepal stayed an independent nation state while all around us were colonised was that our powerful neighbours took one look at the terrain and people here, and concluded that the country was ungovernable.

In the three decades after 1990, Nepal's elected leaders have shown even fewer smarts than past feudal dynasties. The biggest let-down has been in the last two years, after the unified Nepal Communist Party swept the country's first three-tier federal elections. The strongest government in Nepal's democratic history is showing itself to be more feckless than those fragile do-nothing coalitions.

Perhaps the latest example of shooting ourselves in the feet has been the wrangling within the NCP over the US Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). If there was one vivid example of how not to look a gift horse in the mouth, this is it.

The awkwardly-named MCC was launched by President George W Bush in 2004 after the 9/11 attacks to reorient American aid towards the kind of infrastructure projects that USAID or the World Bank would not touch. At first, with an ongoing war Nepal was deemed ineligible for the MCC.

is normally done in Nepal: ad hoc, whimsical, wasteful. The MCC also made provisions to ensure transparency and minimise the kind of delays in large infrastructure projects that Nepal has become notorious for.

Any other government worth its salt, and one that knows what is good for its people, would have jumped at a deal like this. But not Nepal under the NCP. Members of the party's central committee have objected that the MCC is part of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy, put off by a clause that would require Indian go-ahead on the transmission line, and by provisions for independent outside auditing.

It is true that there is rarely a free lunch in official development assistance — even a grant is somehow tied to the strategic interest of the donor. But the MCC predates both China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Indo-Pacific Strategy. Yes, there is a new cold war between Beijing and Washington, the two compete globally for political, economic and military domination, and both superpowers have strategic concerns in Nepal.

But it would be in Nepal's own strategic interest to take maximum advantage and get both the BRI and the MCC to contribute to its infrastructure development. Instead, some sections of the NCP are doing their best to wreck both initiatives so Nepal is left with neither.

The reason the MCC needs to be cleared with Delhi is because Nepal's planners decided to upgrade the transmission line to 400kVA so it can also export electricity to India through Gorakhpur. And having Parliament ratify the compact would ensure political continuity and commitment.

Last week in this newspaper we projected an optimistic scenario of what Nepal may look like by 2030. Infrastructure-led development is necessary because jobs will be created during construction, and improved connectivity will have downstream benefits for the economy into the future.

However, there are good, bad and ugly infrastructure projects. The 'excavator roads' that maul our mountains are not just ugly, they are an environmental disaster. Pokhara's new international airport (*page 8-9*) is too costly for its capacity, but at least it is being built and may help diversify tourism while decongesting Kathmandu.

The proposed airport in Nijgad is an example of ill-advised megalomania (*page 11*). In fact, it is not an airport project but a timber concession. Yes, it is a game changer but only in the sense that it will wreck both our economy and environment.

Decisions on large, expensive projects must be taken by technocrats and planners who know what they are doing, not by ignorant, populist politicians with edifice complexes who want to commit colossal blunders like Nijgad, but sabotage a worthy initiative like the MCC.



BHANU BHATTARAI

But by 2012, with progress in health and education and economic, political and press freedom, as well as prospects for the rule of law, Nepal qualified for membership. A threshold program in Kathmandu went about shortlisting investment in infrastructure that could jumpstart development.

Nepali planners, working with their American counterparts, singled out transmission lines and highways as main economic bottlenecks. But they worried that Nepal did not have a governance track record, transparency or policy continuity to guarantee that the MCC's \$500 million could be effectively spent in five years.

Finally in 2017, the Nepal government committed \$130 million as counterpart funds, and the Hetauda-Damauli-Butwal 400kVA transmission line, as well as rehabilitation of 305km of highways from Itahari-Kakarvitta and Pokhara-Butwal, were selected for the MCC.

These were not chosen arbitrarily — serious homework was done to find catalytic projects that could transform economic growth through quick returns on investment. This was a departure from the way planning

**Infrastructure projects can be good, bad and ugly. We have all three.**

## 10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Go back 10 years to read Nepali Times #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.'



## ONLINE PACKAGES



POKHARA READY FOR TAKE OFF

Join us on a sneak peek of Pokhara's new airport as it nears completion to become Nepal's third aviation gateway. Listen to interviews with the project manager and Chinese contractor, look at the sweeping roof of the terminal building and take a cruise down the new concrete runway. Story: *page 8-9*.



NEPALI ELECTRIC BIKE

Watch a group of automobile engineers at Yatri Motorcycles work on designing and developing Nepal's own electric motorbike. Founder Asim Pandey, graduate of Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands and formerly with sports car developer Donkervoort, explains the process, challenges and potential of developing the bike. Story: *page 7*.

### ECOLOGY AND ECONOMY

We need to undergo a new development methodology that holds both the ecological lane as well as fills the technology gap ('Nepal in 2030,' Sanghamitra Subba, #989).

**Abhisek Karki**

■ To achieve anything you need a government that represents the people.

**David Durkan**

### ELECTRIC BIKE

Congratulations ('Designed and made in Nepal,' Sushma Baraili, page 7)! I hope the government will provide necessary support with tax relief, etc. to promote the made in Nepal product.

**Ramesh Shrestha**

■ The government should give home-grown projects like this a tax break. This undoubtedly is the first of its kind in Nepal and consequently needs all the support to bring the product into the market place.

**Ian Wall**

■ Many moons ago I was trying to find people to build electric bicycles. Electric motorcycles are a little more complicated, both in terms of design and production scale, but I'm glad that some people are thinking about design and building. Would be interested to go and see.

**Bhaskar Dhungana**

■ Many congratulations to the team! Pray for the safe delivery as many projects get aborted before their healthy delivery.

**TR Khatiwada**

■ I see these innovations (those powered by electricity) in coming days as utterly achievable with positive development of the country in power generation and distribution.

**Kshitiz Gurung**

■ I am so interested in switching to this bike. Looking forward to hearing more about it.

**Pukarkaji Tuladhar**

■ Keep up the good work. Every start-up needs help—let us know how we can contribute.

**Aura Yatri**

■ My son is inspired by your great job. And all the Nepalis are proud of you.

**Nirmala Poudel**

## WHAT'S TRENDING

### Indian Nepalis alarmed by Citizenship Amendment Bill

by Sanjay Pradhan

At least 26 people have been killed across India in violent protests since the Narendra Modi government passed the Citizenship Amendment Bill on 4 December. How does the bill affect the thousands of Nepali-origin people living in India? Visit our website to find out in this report from Darjeeling.

**Most reached and shared on Facebook**



### Nepal in the 2020s

by Sewa Bhattarai

Nepal is gearing up for its next census in 2021 with a pilot exercise in January. The most hitch census yet will give us an idea of the kind of country we will be living in from 2021 to 2030, and if it can graduate to middle-income country status. Go online for the details.

**Most popular on Twitter**

### Designed and made in Nepal

by Sushma Baraili

Nepal's first indigenously designed and crafted electric motorcycle, Yatri Bike, was launched in Kathmandu last week. Read our behind-the-scenes profile of the team behind the country's first e-bike and watch the video on the *Nepali Times* YouTube channel.

**Most commented**

### Nepal in 2030

by Sanghamitra Subba

What does the next decade have in store for Nepal's infrastructure? Will the planned Kerung-Kathmandu railway and Nijgad airport materialise? Will we add 10,000MW of hydropower to the grid? Will the Kathmandu-Tarai fast track be completed? Learn everything you need to know, only at nepalitimes.com.

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## QUOTE TWEETS

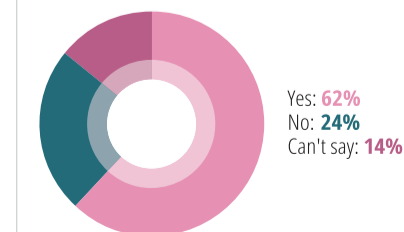
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**Kul Chandra Gautam @KulCGautam**  
Kudos @kundadixit & @NepaliTimes for great recap of past decade of progress & setbacks by your ace team of women columnists @ SoniaAwale @SanghamitraSubba @SewaBhattarai. Yes, the past decade saw much progress despite poor governance. But fixing governance *sine qua non* for the next one.

**Nepali Ma @erosgtm**  
Sad to see how the vision for this future Nepal undermines western Nepal altogether. Look closely at far western Nepal — is this really a vision for equitable development?

**Weekly Internet Poll #989**

Q. The 2020-2030 decade must finally be Nepal's. Do you agree?



Weekly Internet Poll #990  
To vote go to: [www.nepalitimes.com](http://www.nepalitimes.com)

Q. Will the Visit Nepal 2020 campaign succeed in attracting 2 million tourists?



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# Make sure you visit Nepal in 2020

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

Things 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 floor of the arrival concourse and various gold-plated, handcrafted figures at the base of the escalators.



**½ FULL**  
Anil Chitrakar

It shows that with just a small effort, 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 income percolate down to remote areas, and boosting heritage conservation in a big way.

With politics more stable, and power outages behind us, Kathmandu Valley’s world heritage sites are lit for nighttime visitors. Horticulture farms that produce organic food, art and crafts studios and workshops, chefs and hospitality staff, are all doing better. More and more hotels with better amenities are giving 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 one estimate.



HIMALAYAN HERMITAGE

As disposable income increases, more Nepali families are opting to travel and spend. These ‘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 Nepalis now prefer locals.

Campaigns that call on people to travel within Nepal first and then venture out into the world (‘Pahila Desh, Ani Bidesh’) are helping. The governor of the Nepal Rastra Bank recently lamented that Nepali ‘tourists’ took Rs90 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 Manakamana were always popular but now with increased mobility and spare change, Nepali pilgrims throng far-flung temples. A foreign visitor asks where two million tourists will stay when millions of Nepalis are travelling. Good 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.

Conversations 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. These markets have special needs and may not match traditional North America or European clientele. Food, shopping, pilgrimage, corporate retreats, meetings, medical checkups, banking and ease 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 suit 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 mediocre trip. Our challenge is to offer an experience that is distinctly different than China, India and Bhutan — but that does not 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 here. Let them come because they want to, because Nepal is special. It has to be a lifetime experience. 🇳🇵

**Anil Chitrakar** is President of Siddharthinc.



## 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 (above) 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 geared primarily for a younger clientele, with its breezy design and ‘the fastest wifi in town’.

“The main thing for us is location, location, location — this is a Thamel within Thamel,” says owner Prithvi 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 tries 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, Nagarjun 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 connoisseur himself, Pande has used the public spaces in the hotel to hang some of his eclectic collection.

The Chhaya Centre is named after Pande’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 QFX 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 Phosphene at The Nook and New Year’s Day brunch,” says Aloft General Manager Vikram Singh.

The Centre is indeed a one-stop locale, with everything from a casino to the soon-to-be-opened VFS visa application centre. Visitors will have plenty to do

**BIZ BRIEFS**

### Turkish with #VNY2020

Visit Nepal Year 2020 Secretariat signed a partnership agreement with Turkish Airlines to promote Nepal in the carrier’s network as part of the effort to bring 2 million tourists to Nepal next year. The MoU was signed by Turkish Airlines manager Abdullah Tencer Kecici and Suraj Vaidya (pictured).

### Nissan Kicks

Pioneer Moto Corp distributor of Nissan and Datsun cars in Nepal celebrates the sale of 450+ Kick vehicles. Offerings include cash discounts of up to Rs250,000, an exchange bonus of Rs100,000, iPhone 11 (128 GB), warranty for customers, etc.

### Qatar Live

Global pop icons Katy Perry, Maluma and Maroon 5 performed at the Doha Exhibition and Convention Centre for the Qatar Live series of concerts, 15-19 December. Qatar Live was organised to align with the FIFA Club World Cup Qatar 2019 (11-21 December).

### PROstyle Manhunt

PROstyle, a male grooming range from Dabur Nepal, signed an MoU with the Group of Event Entertainer for the title sponsorship of PROstyle Manhunt International 2020. Entries have opened for the PROstyle Manhunt International Nepal.



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As they enter Lavkant Chaudhary's *Masinya Dastoor* exhibition at the Siddhartha Art Gallery, visitors are strongly drawn to one particular work on display.

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

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

Chaudhary says the US-supported campaign to eradicate malaria from Chitwan and the rest of the Tarai, homeland to the Tharu people, destroyed not just mosquitoes but the Tharu themselves. The paintings, he says

are the “silenced histories of the Tharu community.”

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

Masinya Dastoor is expression through art of an aboriginal people who rulers in Kathmandu treated as expendable. The works are housed on two floors showcasing earthy, acrylic on canvas paintings (pictured 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 Tharus.

Chaudhary says he used to be as 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 stereotypical ideas about the Tharu. We were just water snail eaters, jungle dwellers, alcohol drinkers and an honest tribe. That was our identity,” he recalls.

Sangeeta Thapa 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 Mulki Ain of 1854, indigenous groups were categorised as *paani chalne masinya matawali* (touchable but enslavable alcohol drinkers), which made them expendable.

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

One of Chaudhary's art installations is small wooden boxes hung from the ceiling, each filled with grain and a single brass bullet. Next to it, the Diary series recreates pages carved into wood from the diary of Jokhan Ratgainya, a Tharu journalist and revolutionary who was killed in June 2001.

In one corner the Tamasuk series, pen and ink drawings on Nepali paper, leads into the Dastoor series, stippling drawings of day-to-day activities on archival paper prints of the *dastoor* (legal orders).

The second floor hosts large, striking oil paintings that detail quotidian scenes alongside violence from the conflict years, and the Tikapur massacre of 2015. Another installation is of ghaila pots hanging inside a darkroom, where light is projected on the walls. On one wall a video replays a barmasiya folk song and then shows a burning miniature village as eyewitnesses recount the violence.

Chaudhary 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 unearthing what 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 subcontinent 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. 🇳🇵

# Atrocities against Tharu expressed in art



**CULTURAL GENOCIDE:** Artist Lavkant Chaudhary shows his three canvases that depict how DDT sprayed to eradicate malaria also killed and dispossessed his people, the Tharu. His *Masinya Dastoor* exhibition at the Siddhartha Art Gallery is on till 9 January.



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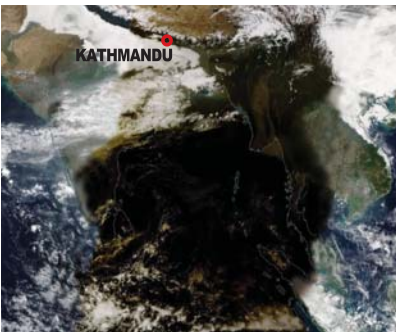
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Masinya Dastoor  
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Siddhartha Art Gallery  
Until 9 January 2020



A shift in prevailing winds caused by a high pressure area over northern India has pulled in cold, dry air from the west-northwest. Maximum temperature will plunge to 1 degree on Friday with with frost on the outskirts of Kathmandu. Misty mornings will give way to sunny, bright days with breezy afternoons. The Tarai and low riverine valleys will continue to be enveloped in thick fog, as seen in this NASA satellite image on Thursday at noon (left) at the exact time the annularity of the solar eclipse darkened the Bay of Bengal.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
15° 1°	15° 3°	16° 3°

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PHOTOS: MANISH POUDEL

# Designed and made in Nepal

## Project Zero starts from zero to manufacture electric motorcycles in Nepal

Sushma Barali

Asim 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 Netherland's Delft University of Technology and working at automobile company Donkervoort, 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 Yatri 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 boxier than gasoline bikes but has a futuristic silhouette. Mechanical engineer Ashesh Shrestha planned the bike's tests and system engineer Sulabh Shrestha designed the embedded software. Computer Science graduate Sarthak Sharma is an application developer, and electronic engineer Krishna Shrestha designed the overall architecture. Batsal Pandey heads business development.

Industrial designer Kanisha Suwal designed the motorcycle, based on a Café 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 Suwal.

To offset the weight of the lithium batteries, Yatri 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.

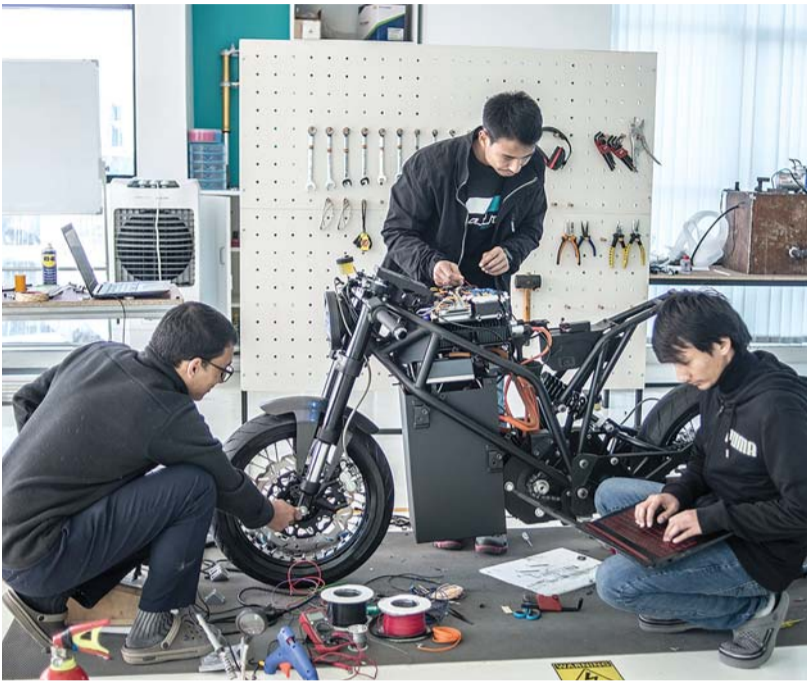
The battery array can be fully charged in about two hours, and will then run for 230 km, at a cost

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. Yatri 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, Yatri conducted a survey in Nepal's major cities about transportation problems. Most respondents ticked 'pollution', '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 10%, the components that Yatri imports for its bikes are categorised 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. 🇳🇵



Watch a group of automobile engineers at Yatri Motorcycles work on designing and developing Nepal's own electric motorbike. Founder Asim Pandey, graduate of Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands and formerly with sports car developer Donkervoort, explains the process, challenges and potential of developing the bike. [nepalitimes.com](http://nepalitimes.com)

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# Pokhara: Nepal's r

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 before a car. In fact, the first tyres they saw were on the undercarriage of the first DC-3 to land here on a flight from Kathmandu.

Ever since, Kathmandu's top tourist town has dreamt of 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 come true. Pokhara's new airport, and Nepal's third international aerial gateway (following Kathmandu and Bhairawa), is on track to

begin operations by December 2020.

Delayed by decades of turf battles, lack of political will, bureaucratic hurdles, local opposition and corruption in high places, construction of the \$216-million facility that will handle 800,000 passengers a year is currently getting finishing touches.

The sweeping steel roof is now taking shape amidst the dramatic backdrop of the snow-capped Annapurnas, in its green scaffold net the control tower soars above the surrounding terrain, and the concrete runway is now even visible on Google Earth.

"This 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 Binesh Munakarmi, 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 re-aligning the runway east-west, so that it could handle larger jets. After pressure from Pokhara's business community, the government finally acquired 155 hectares in Lekhnath Municipality and called for proposals. Two Korean companies bid, but negotiations with the government failed.

Finally in 2009, 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 Trisuli 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.

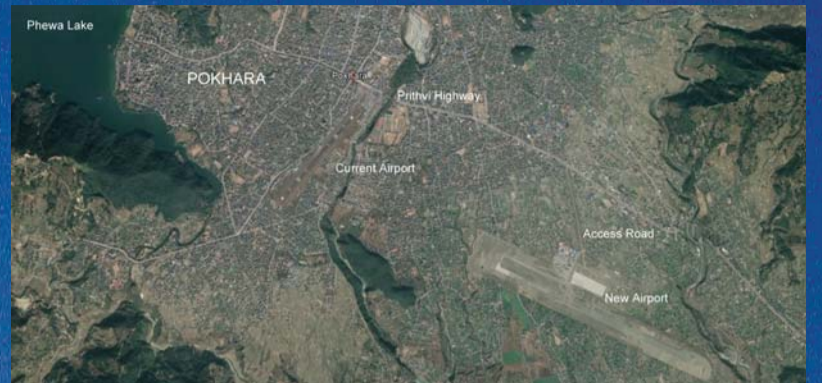
When it goes into operation, Pokhara's airport will have a 2,500m x 45m runway

with parallel taxiway that can accommodate medium-range jets like Airbus 320s and Boeing 737s to connect Pokhara directly to cities in China, India, Singapore, Malaysia or 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.



# new aviation gateway



Surrounding terrain, especially to the west, does not allow for larger jets like the Airbus330 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.

Munakarmi notes that there is room for expansion west of the apron 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 member of the Constituent Assembly from Kaski and, later, Tourism Minister Rabindra Adhikari, who was killed in a helicopter crash during a blizzard in Pathibhara in April. His wife won the byelection 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, make it possible for Nepali migrant workers to bypass Kathmandu, and also allow domestic flights directly to other cities besides Kathmandu, like Biratnagar, Nepalganj or Bhadrapur. It can also serve as an alternative for flights that have to divert from Kathmandu due to poor visibility. 🇳🇵

**FINAL PHASE:** (From l-r) Aerial view of the completed runway, taxiway and apron 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 Annapurnas in the background (main pic below).



Join us for a sneak peek of Pokhara's new airport as it nears completion to serve as Nepal's third aviation gateway. Listen to interviews with the project manager and the Chinese contractor, look at the sweeping roof of the terminal building, and take a cruise down the new concrete runway.

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

# GETAWAY



Perched on the highest northern ridge at an elevation of 2,000m, The Fort is the first boutique resort at Nagarkot. The ancient fort complex encompasses 14 acres of verdant forest and organic garden.

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31 December (6:30pm onwards/ Rs3,500++ per person), 1 January (12pm-3pm/ Rs2,500++ per person), Aloft Hotel, Thamel (01) 5252000

Park Village's New Year's Eve Carnival promises an evening of drinks, bbq, hor d'oeuvres, a lavish dinner, live music and energetic dance floors.

*31 December, 2pm onwards, Rs5,999++  
(Single Dinner) / Rs10,999++ (Overnight Stay),  
Budhanilkantha (01) 4375280*

Hotel Karuna features comfortable rooms with lovely views of the Pokhara Valley, Phewa Lake and the Annapurna Mountain Range from their large balconies. Sit in their courtyard garden and rooftop and take in the beautiful scenery.

*Lalupate Marg, Lakeside (61) 465644*

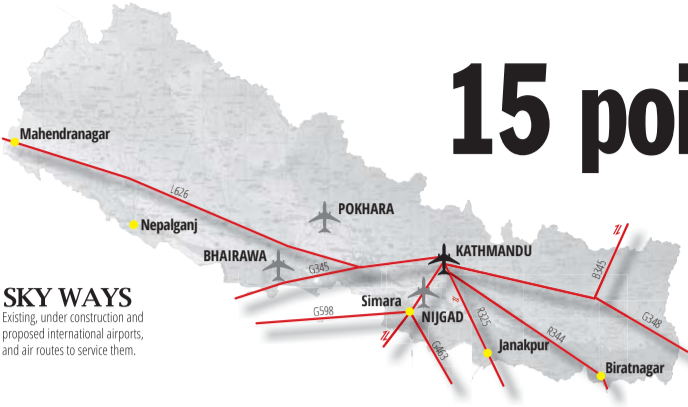
A bar chart titled '#Munich' showing the number of tweets per hour on Dec 26, 2019. The x-axis represents time in hourly intervals from 8 PM to 12 PM. The y-axis represents the number of tweets, with a scale from 0 to 25. The bars are red. The highest number of tweets is 25 at 11 PM, indicated by a blue callout box. The number of tweets fluctuates between 20 and 25 throughout the day.

Time	Number of Tweets
8 PM	22
9 PM	23
10 PM	25
11 PM	25
12 AM	24
1 AM	23
2 AM	22
3 AM	21
4 AM	21
5 AM	21
6 AM	22
7 AM	22
8 AM	23
9 AM	24
10 AM	24
11 AM	23
12 PM	22

We have been breathing unhealthy air all week long – no surprise there with winter peak and vehicular pollution compounding the situation. The concentration of particulate matter smaller than 2.5 microns in diameter exceeded 200 on Saturday and Sunday, taking the daily average AQI in Kathmandu's city centre firmly into the purple 'Very Unhealthy' zone. As the hourly average shows (above) the peaks were during morning and evening rush hour. For live AQI measurements go to [www.nepalitimes.com](http://www.nepalitimes.com).

**<https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>**





SKY WAYS  
Existing, under construction and proposed international airports, and air routes to service them.

# 15 points for and against Nijgad Airport

FOR	AGAINST
1 Kathmandu airport is congested and saturated. It is now surrounded by the city and is not safe. Nepal urgently needs an alternative international airport.	The existing Kathmandu airport is already handling 7.3 million passengers per year. It can accommodate 10 million if properly managed and with simple upgrades. A three-phase, \$240 million ADB-funded upgrade has been allowed to lapse to make Nijgad a <i>fait accompli</i> .
2 Kathmandu is one-way-in, one-way-out for large jets. Planes have to circle for hours to land in Kathmandu, because poor visibility forces domestic flights to also line up for instrument approach. Nijgad would solve that problem and ease congestion.	Extending existing taxiways to thresholds of RWY02 and 20 would streamline takeoffs and landings. Moving most short takeoff and landing (STOL) traffic to Ramechhap, or rehabilitating the old RWY34-16 for small planes, would reduce congestion and increase passenger capacity.
3 Kathmandu airport is at 1,338m elevation. This forces load penalty on large jets, which cannot carry full passenger and fuel load at takeoff.	The proposed 300m extension of RWY02 would have solved that problem. Low fuel burn on new generation aircraft like the Boeing 787 and Airbus 350 would make long-haul flights possible.
4 Steep terrain makes Kathmandu dangerous and unsuitable for the Instrument Landing System (ILS) approach. Nijgad is located in the plains 15-30km away from the Chure and Mahabharat ranges.	Radar installations at Kathmandu and Bhattedanda have improved safety. Most international airlines flying into Kathmandu use the new RNAV approach, which is superior to ILS.
5 Nijgad lies along the proposed Himalaya 2 air route over Nepal, which will shorten flying distance between west and east Asia, and reduce congestion along north Indian air corridors. Having an airport on that route would improve safety.	Himalaya 2 was first proposed in 2005, it is not yet operational. Even if it was, Nijgad would just be a waypoint on that air way. There are plenty of other airports within 15 minutes flying time in India for emergency landings.
6 Nijgad can be a prime 'hub' airport like Singapore, Dubai or Istanbul, which airlines can use for refuelling and stopovers. Nepal Airlines can pick up transit traffic, and thus prop up the country's tourism.	The 'hub' model is now obsolete. International aviation has moved to the 'point-to-point' model because advances in technology allow longer-range planes. Besides, Nepal Airlines is not Emirates.
7 International experts looked at Simara, Janakpur and other sites for a new international airport, and selected Nijgad because of its proximity to Kathmandu, terrain, distance to the Indian border and other factors.	Nijgad is 80km from Kathmandu city centre. Even with the new expressway, passengers will incur additional travel time. Passengers catching a 8PM flight from Nijgad will have to leave Kathmandu latest at 3PM because of traffic.
8 Nijgad's catchment area will include northern Bihar, and Indian nationals in that area will find it more convenient to take international flights from there.	Maybe. But why would Indians want to go through Nepali customs and immigration?
9 Nijgad is located 30-40km from the Indian border, allowing planes to make approaches over Nepali territory.	Top of Descent (ToD) for planes flying at 36,000ft is 150km away from a destination. Nijgad would still require flights to coordinate with Indian air traffic control.
10 The environment impact assessment (EIA) of Nijgad by the Department of Forests and Environment gave it a clean chit.	The EIA was a greenwash, and hurriedly copy-pasted from a hydropower project in Dolakha, according to a report in <i>Kantipur</i> .
11 As a national pride project, Nijgad will transform Nepal's economy in the coming decades, acting as a catalyst for employment and downstream services.	Nijgad is not an airport project but a logging concession. A corrupt state that cannot even upgrade the Nagarkot road in 5 years has no right to take on a \$6.5-billion project.
12 It is not true that 2.5 million trees will be cut for the airport. In the first phase, only 195,000 big trees and 575,000 small ones will be felled. For every tree cut, 25 more will be planted.	Nijgad is the last remaining native hardwood forest in the eastern Tarai. It is on the migratory route of wild elephants and is a critical corridor for other wildlife. This forest is unique and irreplaceable.
13 Nijgad is the most suitable site for an alternative airport because fewer people will be displaced, reducing the cost of compensation.	A valuable nature sanctuary will be destroyed, this has a cost. Simara airport 10km away can be expanded to accommodate 2 east-west runways without much logging.
14 You cannot have an omelet without breaking eggs. You cannot have development without lopping off a few trees.	It is not necessary to clear 80sqkm of forest and prevent 22,500 tons of carbon from being sequestered every year. There are alternatives.
15 Tree-hugging activists sabotaged Arun III for a few butterflies, and now they want to sabotage Nijgad for a few elephants which can always find another way.	The main argument against Nijgad is not environmental, although protecting wild elephants is important. It is an economic argument against a white elephant.

2020

A NEW YEAR'S EVE

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# Viber will help the Visit Nepal 2020 campaign



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

### Nepali Times: What makes Viber so popular in Nepal?

Anubhav Nayyar: If you look at all players, product wise, we are very similar. We have tried to cater

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 is important to have [communications] services that are really good.

I am very proud to say Viber 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 high usage over here. We are the only app which is truly localised from a global perspective. We are evaluating localised UI (user interface) itself because there are a lot of people who would not be English-literate, so then can we offer a service that is completely translatable? I do not mean a Google translate that is very literal, 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 20% 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 Khabar, that have been doing really well. We have also decided to partner with HamroPatro to provide a horoscope to every Viber user who chooses to subscribe to this service. We have also partnered with Nepal Medicit Hospital so users can request an ambulance or any assistance through Viber. We take that as a responsibility. In the beginning of this year we hit a billion users across the world — a big landmark and a proud moment for all of us. We should be breaking even, a big landmark for a messaging communication platform that is completely free.

### How do you ensure user data protection?

We are very passionate about user privacy. What sets us apart from our competition 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 only 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 it and switch it on. We take 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 players have seen. Privacy is a birth right. To put it bluntly: we do not sell our user data to make money and it is a compromise we make. We are asked by advertisers and we lose those dollars, but we gain consumer 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 helpline and a tourist bot. It's about meaningful reach.

Sakina Abidi

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

Sakina Abidi and Josie Wang

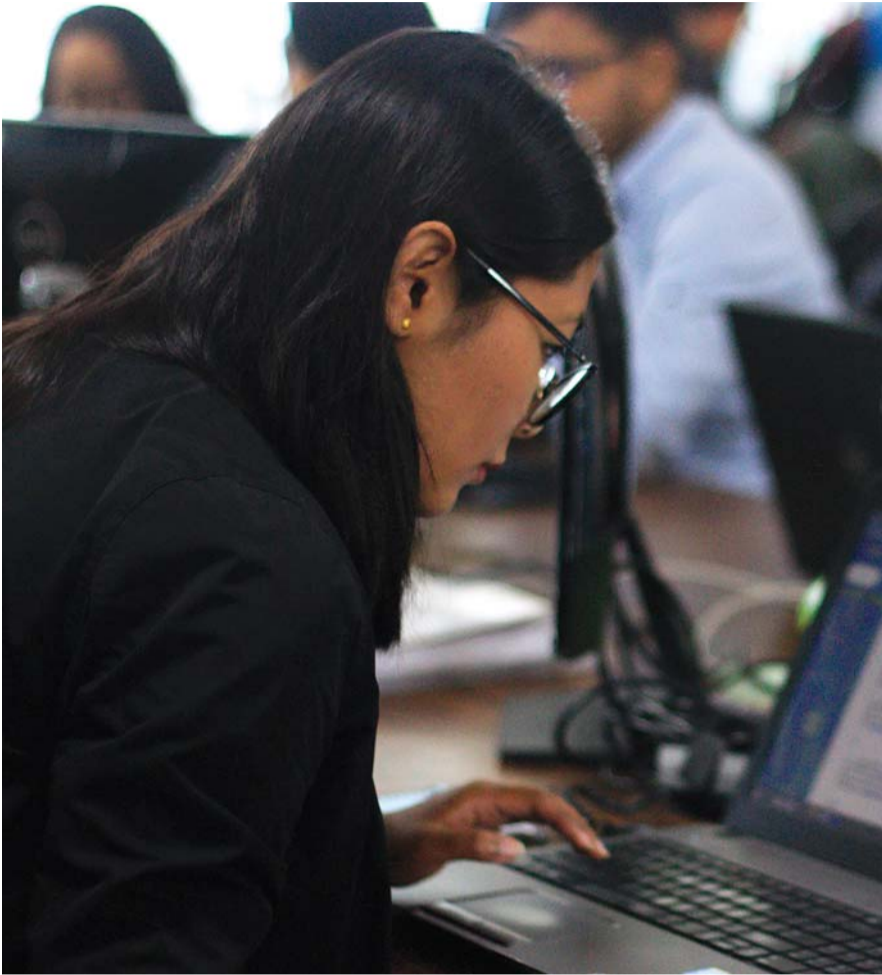
Much more than today, in the next decade smartphones will become the primary means of accessing the internet in Nepal, making social media an even greater influence in society. At the same time, financial technology, AI and e-commerce will transform the economy.

Already, 96% of households in Nepal have at least one mobile phone and more than half of those 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 is very difficult to go back, and this trend is growing exponentially,” says Madhu Acharya of Sharecast 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.

“More older people will be accessing the Net through smartphones, which will get cheaper,” adds Acharya. He gives the example of his 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 finances, Sumana Shrestha of Fusemachines says that the latest 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 digitises 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. Fusemachines and other AI-centred companies are already collaborating with local engineering colleges to build a critical mass of AI expertise in Nepal.

Kai-Fu 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

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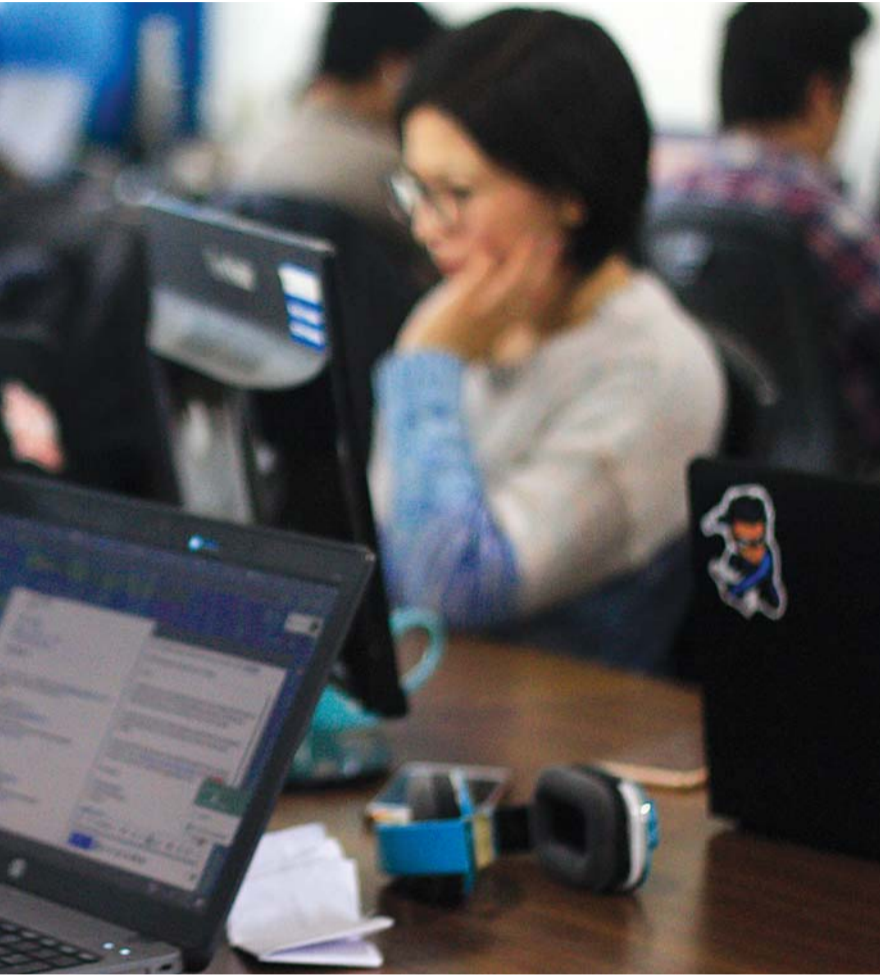
“लोभ, लालच र प्रलोभनमा नपरौ अब: लैङ्गिक हिंसा विरुद्ध लागौ सब ।”

“समन्वय, सहकार्य र साझेदारी सरकार: लैङ्गिक हिंसाको अन्त्य मानवअधिकार ।”

“सीप, सृजना र रोजगारी सहित अघि बढौ: लैङ्गिक हिंसा र दुर्व्यवहार हामी नसहौ ।”

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सञ्चार तथा सूचना प्रविधि मन्त्रालय  
सूचना तथा प्रसारण विभाग

# decade of AI



MONIKA DEUPALA

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



## SUMANA SHRESTHA

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

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



## MADHU ACHARYA

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

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

Nepal will also have to catch up with its immediate neighbours 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 IMEPay 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 ecosystem 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 Reuters report found that worldwide, across 38 markets, increasing concern about misinformation is undermining trust in media. Yet in Nepal, Sharecast 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 'fake news', but often without verifying links and checking sources.

This could hold implications for Nepali politics in the coming decade, especially in federal elections scheduled for 2022 and 2027.

"The ideas that float around on social media and digital platforms are extreme," Acharya tells us. "If 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."




## NEW YEAR'S EVE THE ULTIMATE COUNTDOWN 2020

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TIME: **7:30PM ONWARDS**  
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# Spooking Nepalis



BHANU BHATTARAI

## 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 integrate 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 Nepali Congress (NC), has requested Parliament to retract the bill, alleging that it restricts citizens' fundamental right to privacy.

NC 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. Section 10, subsection 6, states: 'In the course of information collection or counterintelligence, the bureau can monitor, intercept, or record the conversations 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 act 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

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# by snooping on them



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The bill is meant to restrict undue activity from foreigners. For example, then chief secretary of the government, Lilamani Poudel, made a 9-point code of conduct about officers meeting foreigners. That angered them. Baburam Bhattarai had promised to not transfer any secretaries, but transferred one within 18 days of becoming PM. We need to stop this kind of meddling. The current protests against the Bill are instigated by such foreigners.

**Deviram Sharma,**  
former chief of the  
National Investigation Bureau

necessary.

Critics say this has created a fear of the provisions 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 Kalyan Shrestha says the bill increases the chance of misuse of power. "There should be clear provisions about where 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.

Constitution 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 provision to undermine the system itself," he says, referring to how 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, Lokman Singh Karki, who in 2013 operated a state within a state and regularly tapped the phone calls of 293 critical politicians, security officers, civil society leaders, judges and journalists. When Parliament decided to impeach him in 2016, the phone tapping was prominent on its 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 snoop on ordinary



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The government is pushing through a law that is above the constitution. The law will grant extraordinary powers to the bureau any time, which are to be used only in emergencies. But there is not enough awareness in civil society about this. Yes, security forces should have powers but there should also be checks and balances. The law should provide for investigation of the bureau, as government investigation will not be enough.

**Radheshyam Adhikari,**  
Member of National Assembly,  
Nepali Congress

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 tabled 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 organisations, breaching 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 whom the state is allowed to spy on is so vague and broad that anyone in authority can use it to snoop on political or business rivals, the media or critics of the government.

Governments across the world have given intelligence agencies powers to spy on their own citizens, but these 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 those 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 panchayat in 1990, citing heightened activity of foreign spy agencies. But the panchayat system collapsed, and with it the 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 not 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 messages.

Security agencies in Nepal regularly use call/sms data in their investigations, which is actually illegal. Some have even made private information public. After Advocate Baburam Aryal and four others filed a case against the practice in February 2016, then

Chief Justice Kalyan 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 before doing so.

"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. A full-fledged law is the permanent solution," 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 Hemanta Malla, 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 others outlawing transfer or sale of information collected.

NC MP Radheshyam Adhikari concludes: "The way it is reads now, it lets the government pry into people's lives, intimidate them and threaten to disclose their private details if they don't obey." 🇳🇵

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# 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 m-ass 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 favourites.

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 mammon and mammaries. 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 authoritarians 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 Doublethink. “In fact, we have subcontracted the repairs to a Think Tank that is thinking about it.

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

**PM on Top of Mt Everest**  
By Our Social Climber

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 Revolting Restaurant on the Everest summit that serves inclusive ethnic items like *sukuti*, *churpi* and *chhang*. “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 Canine 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 Pageant this week. Contestants were judged in the Hottest Dog, Dog-Eat-Dog, Best Son-of-a-Bitch and Most Photogenic Tail categories.

Six-year-old Pukuli, who was crowned Miss Canine, won the pageant 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.”



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