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CLEAN AND GREEN

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STORY ON PAGE 12-13

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Kiran Nepal

GOING PLACES TOGETHER

RULE BY LAW

Nepal's ruling unified Marxist-Leninist-Maoists have in the past year incrementally constricted freedom of expression, thinking no one will notice if they do it bit by bit.

It has not gone unnoticed. There is an uproar in social media and journalists have been speaking out, but the government is using its numerical might in Parliament to pass bills that blatantly flout constitutional guarantees of basic individual freedoms.

2019 saw censorship in installments, and it started with a revision of the Penal Code that criminalised ridicule, satire, photoshopped images of politicians, and even banned reporters publishing personal information of public figures. The Media Council Bill, a brainchild of Information Minister Gokul Banskota, sought to criminalise free speech on vague grounds.

The latest attack is the Information Technology Bill which was passed by a Parliament committee this week, and is sure to be voted through when the winter session begins. It has hefty fines and jail terms for any content deemed 'offensive or demeaning' -- infringement of Clause 83 is a fine of Rs1 million and/or jail term of up to five years, and any content that violates Clause 94 (ridicule and hate speech) carries a fine of Rs1.5 million and/or 5 years in jail. Strangely, the punishment for social media infractions are in fact much heavier than physical assault, libel or defamation in the legacy media.

'It is wrong for this bill that is supposed to regulate Information Technology to be misused to address issues for which there are existing laws,' wrote *Kantipur* in a strong editorial on Wednesday. 'Since the definition of defamation is so broad, this law will have a dampening effect on free expression, and foster self-censorship.'

Indeed, what constitutes objectionable content is intentionally defined so broadly that anyone can be hauled in for any online post at any time. There is even a new directive against satire painted in the backs of trucks. Even before this Act is passed people are being put behind bars for Facebook posts or YouTube satire. Ruling party goons beat up someone for posting an unflattering video of the Tourism Minister.

The bill was put to debate in the parliamentary committee, and the opposition Nepali Congress did push several amendments, none of which were accepted by NCP lawmakers. Now, the arithmetic of the full House means that the IT Act is sure to become law. Fundamental rights of citizens, guaranteed by the 2015 Constitution, are going to be severely curtailed.

"The overment will decide what you can say and what you can't," says NC MP Gagan Thapa in an online video. "Just because it has a majority, the government can't violate the basic principles of the Constitution."

But Thapa is a voice in the wilderness, none of the other opposition politicians have

bothered to speak up in defence of freedom of expression even when the attack is so systematic. Under the new law, internet service providers will be liable for content of users, and global platforms like Facebook, Twitter and TikTok would be required to register in Nepal.

The Special Service Bill would also allow the state to snoop on anyone's data, tap phones and intercept emails. Politicians want their privacy



SUBHAS RAI

Why is Nepal's kakistocracy in such a tearing hurry to pass this bill when much more urgent legislation on federalism and other laws languish in Parliament?

protected from media, but do not respect the individual's right to privacy.

The ruling NCP seems to have decided that it can pressure the press by withholding advertising, making media moguls beholden to it for business, and tightening regulation.

The NCP-affiliated Press Organisation surprised many by being inaugurated this week at the prime minister's residence, where journalists took oaths to follow the party line on socialism. The least we can say: good thing they did not swear by communism.

The state sees the free-wheeling nature of the Internet and its impact on public opinion as more of a threat. Hence the attempt to restrict critical content on social media as its reach grows. More than 90% of Nepalis now have mobile phones, half of them are smart phones, and this proportion is growing. The Internet has become synonymous with Facebook as almost everyone with a smartphone has an account on that platform.

Why is Nepal's kakistocracy in such a tearing hurry to pass this bill when much more urgent legislation on federalism and other laws languish in Parliament? Journalists and citizens may not be arrested right away, but the clearly the intention is detention. This is not rule of law, but a draconian rule by law.

ON THE WEB

FOR AND AGAINST NIJGAD AIRPORT

Sampling of the online debate following articles in issue #990 on the proposed airport in Nijgad and the one in Pokhara that will be completed next year. For more feedback, go to www.nepalitimes.com

How ironic, when we destroy something created by man we term it as 'vandalism' but when we destroy something created by nature we call it 'progress' ('15 points for and against Nijgad', #990).

Ajay Limbu

■ The government is set to revise the ratio of compensatory tree plantation from 25:1 to 10:1 for 'National Pride Projects'. So, the government will be required to plant fewer trees now.

Bibek Shrestha

■ I hope the Nepal Government goes ahead with this project. Even our counterparts in South and the Southeast Asia have moved ahead and we are still debating on building an airport or not. Just build the damn thing.

Bali Hang Sambhangphe

■ Does Nepal even need Nijgad after completion of Lumbini and Pokhara international airports?

Chiran Basnet

■ Pokhara and Bhairahawa airports are built with regional standards for regional purposes. The Nijgad will be our first truly 'international airport'. TIA is not even a regional standard airport as per modern requirements.

Bibek Limbu

■ Nijgad airport to become an international hub is most likely the biggest propaganda ever created to justify the irreversible destruction of nature that will affect the entire region.

Sanjaya Singh KC

■ A somewhat madcap project that smacks of extreme hubris.

Marcus Cotton

■ Nijgad is a profoundly bad idea. Now that Pokhara and Bhairawa are nearly operational, Nepal needs to sort out the air traffic situation before taking any more steps.

Joe Niemczura

■ People think that trees never grow once gone, and they would be right if new saplings are not planted. International airport I would say is a must but with minimal damage of the environment.

Deepak Rijal

■ The balance of social, economic and environment is essential for sustainable development. Therefore, it should be built minimising the environmental loss.

Anjalee Thakali

■ The human destruction of nature has crossed the tipping point. So many species are going extinct

due to unwarranted development blinded by greed. The next generation will have a huge task undoing our folly. Could we not have smaller international airports at alternative sites?

Prabir Rana

■ Good news. Congratulations. Please avoid all the mistakes of Kathmandu airport at all cost ('Pokhara: Nepal's new aviation getaway', Kunda Dixit, #990).

Ramesh Shrestha

■ This is surely going to be the world's most beautiful international airport.

Sue Chamberlain

■ It's absolutely great that some planes/tourists can bypass the air traffic congestion of Kathmandu airport and go directly to Pokhara. Still, bigger planes can't land in Pokhara (and Bhairawa) and Kathmandu will continue to be the gateway for most tourists flying in to Nepal, and congestion will be worse. Nijgad airport needs to be built.

Avani Mani Dixit

■ A crazy daft idea driven by greed for earnings and with no thought for the pristine environment of the Pokhara and surrounding valleys. Relax by the Fewa or Begnas lakes? Not anymore with jet aircraft blasting overhead.

Marc McConnell

■ If Kathmandu Airport is operated 24 hours and the management is working effectively there is plenty of space for many more flights landing and departing.

Stephan Kocher

■ Nepal needs an international airport close to Kathmandu and Nijgad is the most suited. However, the environmental impact is also real. If the airport is built, a forest three times larger must be created elsewhere. This way we have airport with net gain of the forest. As we rely more and more on international air travel, which is rapidly growing, it's imperative that we are ready for the future. Kathmandu airport doesn't even meet today's domestic airport adequate standard when comparing with other countries. There has to be an international airport somewhere in Nepal, which can act like Hub.

Roger Adhikari

■ Yes environment is a big thing to consider here but Nepal doesn't need a big airport as Nijgad. Kathmandu, Pokhara and Bhairawa should be expanded. The hub model has been replaced by point-to-point aviation, so Nijgad is obsolete. The Air Asia X long haul low-cost carrier model is a perfect example of which way aviation is going in Asia.

Aashik Pokhrel

10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Ten years ago *Nepali Times* marked the end of a year and a decade of war, and tried to be hopeful about the future. As feared, the 2010-2019 was a lost decade. Excerpt from a publisher's note on the front page of issue #483 of 1-6 January 2010:

Back in 2000, we had no idea just how dramatic the decade ahead was going to be. The first (nearly) 500 issues of this newspaper coincided with a period of great transformation. Guerrillas went from the bullet to the ballot and emerged as the single largest party, and the most inclusive assembly in our country's history was elected. Nepal became a model for non-violent political change: a case study that proved revolutions don't necessarily have to be bloody. Imagine how much more progress we would have made if there had been a stable political climate and a more accountable government committed to basic needs. Let's hope that in the next decade we will live in less interesting times. That our coverage will be less obsessed with the political quarrel of the day, and celebrate the ability of individual Nepalis to overcome adversity. We hope that by 2020 we will have made up for lost time.



Nepali Times

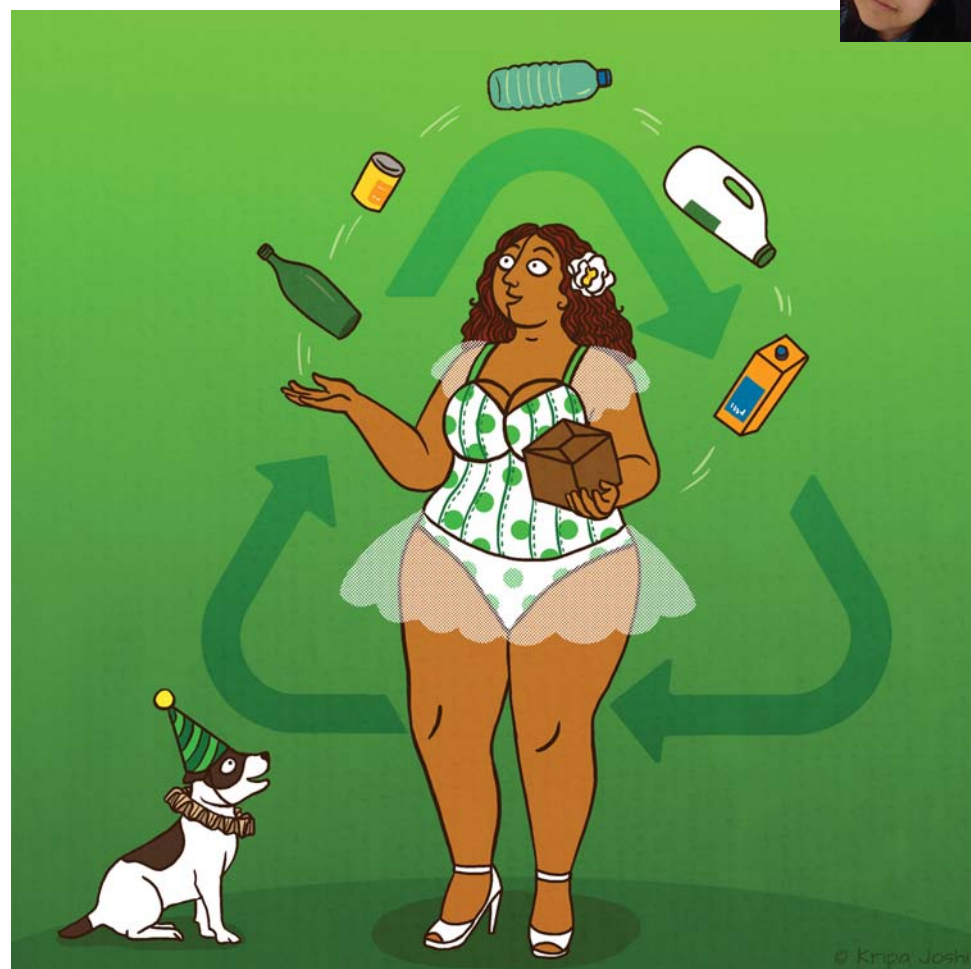
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KRIPA JOSHI



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Miss Moti is back in 2020 with her weekly sketches, this time with a focus on the environment and green living.

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TURKISH AIRLINES

FINLAND

Staying in Nepal to create jobs

Dil Bahadur Gurung is glad he turned down an offer to go abroad to start his own handicraft business

Dil Bahadur Gurung was 13 when he left his isolated home village of Orang in Dolakha district to get a better education in Kathmandu. He was used to hard work, and was prepared to face any hardship to pay his way through school. He worked as domestic servant for a family in exchange for food and shelter.



MADE IN NEPAL
Naresh Newar

The teenager had to wake up at 4AM and finish all household chores to able to join morning classes at 6AM and return to finish the rest of his work. At night, after all the cleaning and washing he would do his 'homework'. In three years, he graduated from high school and joined a college, while working at a cargo company to pay for college.

"It wasn't an easy life, but I was so determined to study. My self-confidence and motivation prepared me for this life, and later on in my business," says Dil, now 47.

He started working in a shop in Thamel and took technical training in hand-crafted products at the Department of Cottage and Small Industries. He had some savings by then, and with help from an uncle he invested it in his own company, 'Handcraft' in Kapan to produce lamp shades, notebooks, boxes, greeting cards from Nepali lokta paper.

But competition was stiff, he



NARESH NEWAR

had few customers and he did not have access to raw materials. He struggled to keep his business afloat. His parents insisted that he close down the shop, and migrate to the Gulf for a more stable salary, like many of his peers.

"Everyone was asking me to close down my company, but that just increased my determination to keep going. I believed that I could make the business of paper handicrafts a success," recalls Dil.

So, he headed back to his

village in Dolakha to collect wild lichen, pipal leaves, and lokta pulp to create handmade greeting cards. Back in Kathmandu, he went door to door, from one shop to the next, walking and cycling all over Kathmandu with his products. Even after being rudely rejected often, he did not lose heart and gradually managed to find loyal customers.

He slowly diversified his products and started making lamp shades, small boxes, pouches – all made from lokta. Before long, the

original designs started bringing in orders from wholesalers, hotels, restaurants, schools. He started a small outlet in Dhobighat which became popular. As business picked up, he hired 16 fulltime staff and also involved another 150 painters, flower and other suppliers.

Today, Dil Bahadur Gurung's company is valued at Rs10 million, and he has an annual turnover of Rs4 million. He is also encouraging his 20-year old son to finish his



studies and join the business so he does not have to move abroad.

"I am so glad that I didn't migrate abroad to work as a labourer, and I want to encourage other Nepalis to stay in the country because this place is full of opportunities for those who are willing to work hard starting small businesses," says Dil. "Working abroad is not a solution. We Nepalis have to tap our abilities to start our own ventures and create jobs for other Nepalis at home."

Instead of the Nepal government working on deals with foreign countries to send labourers, it can do just the opposite by bringing in more foreign investment to create jobs right here in the country, he says, adding: "We cannot afford to lose any of our younger generation by migrating abroad and working in dirty and dangerous jobs."

Journalist-turned-farmer Naresh Newar presents this multimedia column, Made in Nepal, in Nepali Times every fortnight, profiling stories of successful small entrepreneurs.



EMBASSY OF RUSSIA

Russia, Nepal to mark 75 years since end of WWII

To mark the 75th anniversary of the establishment of the United Nations and the victory of the allied countries in World War II in 2020, diplomats of the Russian Embassy in Kathmandu visited the oldest surviving Gurkha soldier Bal Bahadur Basnet at his home in Kathmandu last week.

Victory Day is widely celebrated in Russia every year on 9 May, and this year it will be a special anniversary. During World War II the people of Russia were in action on both the western and eastern fronts, and Nepali soldiers fought on the same side as Russia against the Axis forces.

Nepali veteran Bal Bahadur Basnet is now 98 years old, and was captured by the Japanese in Singapore, and was one of only four of 300 Nepali soldiers fighting in the British Army who survived a POW Camp in New Guinea. Basnet took part in battles in Burma, Malaya and Singapore before being captured, and lived through the horrors of being a prisoner-of-war.

During the meeting with Russian diplomats, Bal Bahadur Basnet shared memories about the war. "He was very pleased to get to know that in Russia

all veterans of all battlefronts of the Second World War are deeply honored and treated as brothers in arms," said Artem Blashchanitsa, Third Secretary of the Russian Embassy in Kathmandu, who was present at the meeting.

"In 2020, Russia intends to hold large-scale functions marking Victory Day in the Second World War, Nepal will join celebration of this momentous event," said the Russian diplomat.

The victory of allied countries in World War II (1939-1945) laid the foundation for establishment of the United Nations, which was created with an aim to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, and 2020 will also be celebrated as the 75th anniversary of the world body.

"It is worth reminding ourselves that during the Second World War peoples of Russia and Nepal fought for common cause and contributed to the victory. This page of history of the two countries should never be forgotten," said another Russian diplomat Iuliia Androsova, First Secretary of the Russian Embassy, who also attended the meeting with Basnet.

BRAVE MAN: Bal Bahadur Basnet (centre) who is now 98 shared his memories of fighting in World War II with Iuliia Androsova, First Secretary (left) and Artem Blashchanitsa, Third Secretary of the Russian Embassy in Kathmandu this week.

2020 marks the 75th anniversary of the end of the war in which Russia and Nepal were on the same side.

prabhu BANK BIZ BRIEFS

Turkish to Xi'an

Turkish Airlines has added the 3,000 year old ancient Chinese city of Xi'an on its growing network of destinations in 126 countries. Xi'an is the historic starting



point of the Silk Road is the airlines' fourth destination in Mainland China, and 318th in the world. The flights will be operated three times a week from Istanbul with Airbus A330 aircraft.

Qatar's 2019

In 2019 Qatar Airways won World's Best Airline – for a record fifth time – at the Skytrax Award in Paris and was named



World's Best Business Class by Trip Advisor. It is now also the official airline of FIFA 2022, and increased its network to over 160 destinations worldwide that it operates with a combined fleet size of passenger, cargo and Qatar Executive to 259 aircraft.

NIB green deposit

Nepal Investment Bank has introduced Green Double Fixed Deposit on the occasion of new year that will let users double their deposit amount in 7.5 years. Other benefits include 50% waiver on credit card fees and up to 100% loan facility against the Green Double FD after 1.5 years of deposit.

Ncell top-up winner

Jitendra Kumar Kamati of Siraha, who is undergoing treatment at Birat Nursing Home in Biratnagar due to a road accident, has received a million in cash prize as the lucky winner Ncell's campaign 'Recharge ma Chamatkar'.

NIC asia Ahealth benefit

A new tie-up between NIA Asia and Shri Tinau International Hospital in Butwal has been signed so debit and credit card



holders and officials of the bank are now eligible to receive 10-15% discount in various healthcare facilities in the hospital. NIC Asia serves 2 million customers and has 313 branches, 408 ATMs and 102 extension counters across the country.

Make-or-break decade for climate action

In the 2020s the world needs to dramatically reduce emissions to avoid social and political catastrophe

One week before the United Nations 25th Conference of Parties (COP25) began in Madrid last month, the World Meteorological Organisation warned that by 2100 the average global temperature is likely to rise 3 to 5° C above the preindustrial average. This is almost three times higher than the goals set by the 2015 Paris Accord.



Earlier, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) pointed out that in the coming decade global greenhouse gas emissions need to fall 7.6% annually to meet the goals of the accord. But this goal seems unachievable, and we are likely to see increasing impacts on natural systems in the coming 10 years to 2030, and beyond.

A January 2019 assessment by the Kathmandu-based International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) warned that if present emissions rates continue (which from the waffling in Madrid looks certain) two-thirds of Himalayan glaciers will be gone during this century.

‘Even if the average global temperature is kept below 1.5°C, as envisaged by the 2015 Paris Accord, glacier volumes will decline by one-third,’ the report said. ‘Snow-covered areas and snow volumes will decrease over the coming decades due to increased temperatures, and snowline elevations will rise.’

In 2019, Iceland’s Okjokull and Switzerland’s Pizol glaciers disappeared. Will Himalayan glaciers and snow volumes face a similar fate? Referring to the Gangotri Glacier, journalist George Black, in his book *On the Ganges, Encounters With Saints and*



Sinners Along India’s Mythic River, writes: ‘When glaciers decay, they become sad, derelict things. The ice cracks and crumbles and turns dirty pale blue before melting away altogether.’

The disruptions in the Himalayan snow ecosystem are real and will occur alongside similar disruptions in the midhills and plains. Changes in rainfall patterns are affecting conditions that sustain ecosystems, leading to the depletion of springs in the midhills with significant implications for the health and livelihoods of people living in them. Frequent and high-intensity rainfall, landslides and floods damage communities, decrease diversity of species and increase disease and pest dynamics.

The changes in rainfall and snowmelt will continue to reduce dry season river flows in the coming decade, leading to a reduction in the availability of fresh water, resulting in lower crop yields, lower electricity production and increased water stress. Longer

hot periods, which increase the demand for energy needed to run air-conditioners, for example, will be a hallmark of the 2020-2030 decade.

The implications of these decade-long changes have not really hit the political class and civic leaders in Nepal and other South Asian countries, who have always focused on short political time horizons. Most of them consider climate change to be something in the distant future, not something to worry about now — a problem that someone, somewhere (most likely in the developed west), will provide technical and financial solutions for.

Yes, solutions will be technical and require new funds, but how we deal with the impending changes is fundamentally governed by cultural, economic and political considerations. Greenhouse gas emissions are not decreasing fast enough and adaptation is unlikely to be automatic, linear or straightforward.

Sea level rise is a perfect example of this complexity. A 2019 report by the US-based Climate Central suggests that by 2050, 42 million Bangladeshis and 36 million people in coastal India are likely to be vulnerable to sea level rise. An earlier estimate was only 5 million each in the two countries. Displacement due to sea level rise will present major challenges for governance, urban development and alternative livelihoods for those seeking safer locations. This new wave of migration will not begin 30 years from today, but is already happening and will accelerate.

A recent Oxfam report says that climate-fuelled disasters were the number one driver of internal displacement over the last decade,

forcing more than 20 million people a year to leave their homes. Given the current political backlash in many countries against migrants and refugees, the movement of people across borders will be even more curtailed. Yet those displaced will keep moving, despite migration becoming much harder and increasingly unsafe. Though landlocked, Nepal may not remain immune to this upheaval, as the arrival of Burmese Rohingya refugees through Bangladesh and India has shown.

Throughout human history, entire civilisations have been affected by droughts and floods. Migration is also a strategy to escape poverty and insecurity stemming from political hazards, as well as an outcome of many pull factors, such as jobs and better livelihoods. Today, two to three million Nepalis live outside the country, mostly as wage workers.

Climate change is likely to further accentuate prevailing societal imbalances, inequalities and other fault lines. These will seriously stretch institutional capacity to manage any new waves of migration. The socially excluded, marginalised, uneducated and those with limited livelihood options will be pushed into greater desperation.

In the past year, 15 major reports have come out warning of the threats to humanity and ecosystems from the climate emergency. The tens of millions of people at the frontlines facing these new threats will be the aged, women, children, peasants, fisherfolk and those making a living off already-depleted natural resources. The political challenge is to act in the coming decade to avoid potential social and political catastrophe. The longer we wait, the bigger will be the price that humanity pays. Efforts have to start in 2020. 🇳🇵

Ajay Dixit is Executive Director of Kathmandu based ISET-Nepal. His monthly column Climate for Change in Nepali Times deals with the impact of global heating in Nepal and beyond.

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Seize the coming decade

As we hurtle into the 2020s, time to recall a millennium eve 20 years ago and face the clean slate of the future

The guests were dressed with care as befits the end of an era. The New Year's Eve atmosphere was buoyant but grave, with the usual eclectic Tiger Mountain mix. Old Asia-hands from Singapore and Thailand were gathered with Swiss family, British friends, Kathmandu



SO FAR SO GOOD
Lisa Choegyal

expats, Tibetan cousins and Nepali hosts, all reflecting on the massive significance of the passing millennium. The grandeur of the Himalayan scenery matched our mood.

It was 31 December 1999 and we were perched on a ridgetop above the Bijaypur Khola in Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge. Far beneath us, the lights of Pokhara Valley twinkled in the winter cold, and the soaring white peaks glowed pale in the moonlight. On the hillside opposite some farmers were razing their fields, and the fires spread out slowly until they formed the unmistakable shape of a giant burning cross.

Jim Edwards leaned against the stone column beside the Lodge's picture window. "Perhaps we should heed such a powerful symbol," he said quietly. Despite the cosy warmth and the blazing central fireplace, a shiver went down my spine.

There were a few things to worry about, not least the widespread concern that the digital world would come crashing down on the stroke of midnight, which had kept our diplomatic friends on high alert in their embassies. To no avail as it turned out, but the rumours had been rife and convincing.

In Nepal, the brutal insurgency was rumbling with increasing vigour throughout the country. It would be another six years before peace was achieved, a time of such trauma that it is buried deep into



a collective national amnesia. The horror of the royal massacre was 18 months ahead of us and, three months after that, the 9/11 terror tragedy of the twin towers which changed our world forever.

Pokhara Lodge had been shaken with an evening raid by alleged insurgents that carried off not only the terrace telescope and some staff cameras, but the bulging contents of the end-of-season tip box, which

seemed rather harsh given their declared ideology. The attack was the first of relatively few direct clashes with tourism during those deeply troubled times. No one was harmed, and even the resident guests were unalarmed, confusing the red bandanas, flags and brandished khukri knives as part of a cultural show.

On that millennial eve, Pokhara Lodge had been operating for just over a year. The trees and wild landscaping had yet to mature around the honey-coloured stone bungalows, hand-cut from a local quarry, clustered like a local village adjacent to our community forest neighbours. The swimming pool bamboos were still in their infancy, but the peaks were already mirrored in its shimmering blue surface on a breathless morning as eagles, vultures and kites wheeled overhead.

Sir Edmund Hillary had done the inauguration honours,

REFLECTIONS: Tiger Mountain's shimmering swimming pool mirroring Machapuchre, and the inauguration 20 years ago with Lady Hillary, Toni Hagen and other guests.

stooping stiffly to light the votive brass lamp on the broad slate veranda one clear October day, with expansive views of the Himalaya range stretching from Dhaulagiri to Manaslu. At various stages of construction, monks and priests had blessed the hilltop site, selected by Colonel Jimmy Roberts as the first campground on Prince Charles' original Royal Trek in 1980.

I had walked the first recce of that route for Mountain Travel with Pertemba Sherpa, a circuit now driveable down unappetising dusty rutted roads, because Colonel Jimmy's hips were already failing him and his walking days were over. I stayed behind to manage the media that early December day 40 years ago, as the Prince of Wales strode uphill towards the silhouetted skyline tree that now bears his name, accompanied by Prince Dharendra and a royal retinue. "The mountain views were 'gin clear' for all four days," Colonel Jimmy noted in satisfaction.

As we hurtle into another shiny new decade, pondering on what lies ahead, hopes run high for a better prognosis as we face the clean slate of the future. Our New Year resolutions this time can be more ambitious than the annual self-improvements destined to peter out by February.

Nepal's full potential for generating hydropower can happen, even as glaciers retreat and river levels drop, the patient queues at hitis and water taps testament to a depleting water table. The realities of rail travel are still a dream away, victim to the overwhelming odds against running rails through the world's highest, youngest and least stable mountain chain. But electric bikes and cars are beginning to ply the Valley, and all sorts of innovative no-plastic and waste solutions are being trialled and adopted.

The energy and opportunity of the much-awaited Visit Nepal Year 2020 is upon us, with a plethora of creative events, new product ideas, and even an appreciation of the old and bold who have shaped tourism in the past. Hopefully, new international airports around the country will improve our travel patterns, pushing tourists beyond the much-treaded Kathmandu-Pokhara-Chitwan triangle with new destinations that can deliver the delights of Nepali culture and adventure. Even as roads penetrate the heights and scar the hillsides, trekkers can disperse beyond the Everest-Annapurna-Langtang circuits, bringing benefits to the pristine and scarcely-visited sections east and west along the Great Himalaya Trail.

At this dawn of a new decade, let us tune our ears to the rhythms of history, use the commitment of VNY2020 and push beyond the cliché: Plus ça change, plus c'est la meme chose. Seize the decade. A future awaits. 🇳🇵

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A wide westerly front has covered Nepal and northern India, brining rain and snow in the higher reaches of the Himalaya. This is the second major system this season, and will bring down the maximum temperature in Kathmandu and across Nepal. Light to moderate snow will cover the high valleys and the trans-Himalaya. There will be passing showers into Friday and early Saturday in Kathmandu that could linger till Sunday in places. Things will clear briefly before another system arrives midweek next week.

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GOPAL GARTAULA

Ex-refugee takes refuge in music

Gopal Gartaula
in Charlotte, USA

Manoj Rai was a 17-year-old student in a school in Tashigang, Bhutan in 1990, when soldiers arrived at his dorm and took away all the Nepali books. They piled them high in the courtyard, and set them alight. A few days later, the boy decided to escape the army's dragnet and without even returning home he went down to the border, where the Indian security forces were packing other Bhutanese like him into trucks and dumping them in eastern Nepal. Thousands of refugees from Bhutan lived under plastic sheets by the side of the Kankai River in



Jhapa. Many fainted from trauma, culture shock and homesickness. On a single day, Manoj Rai remembers cremating 28 children who had died of epidemics. "We refugees know very well the meaning of life," Rai said with a faraway look in his eyes at his home in Charlotte, North Carolina. He is among the nearly 95,000 refugees from Bhutan who have been resettled in the United States. Others have gone to New Zealand, Norway, UK, Australia, the Netherlands and Canada. Rai opted for resettlement after seeing no possibility of returning to Bhutan, and tried to convince as many of his compatriots as possible to take up the offer. Some were resolutely refusing to move, but he tried to convince them that being a citizen of a foreign country, rather

CROONER: After spending two decades as a refugee in Nepal, Bhutan's Manoj Rai has made a name for himself as a singer about his homeland (*left*) with frequent concerts. Rai with compatriots at a refugee camp in eastern Nepal in the early 1990s (*below*).

than a refugee, could help them return to Bhutan one day. Many third-generation Bhutanese are now studying in the world's top universities. Rai has always been interested in music, often taking his small band house-to-house during Dasain and Tihar in Nepal, performing songs of longing for home in Bhutan. Villagers used to give them rice, gundruk and vegetables, which the refugees cooked in the camps by the dusty river banks. "We were always hungry, but we had to eat to live. And music was a way to feed ourselves," Manoj recalls. "And now, on the other side of the world from home, we are trying to preserve our culture." Soon, relief organisations like World Lutheran Foundation, Save the Children, the UN High Commission for Refugees and others came to the rescue of the refugees, settling them in seven camps in Jhapa and Morang, where 120,000 Bhutanese lived for more than 20 years, until resettlement. "We were floating like kites. We missed home, and slept in jute sacks on the sand," remembers Manoj, who could not even go back to Bhutan when his mother died there. "That is my biggest regret -- that I was not there for my mother. There are many Bhutanese like me." Manoj came to the US 8 years ago and recorded over 70 songs since then. He has also founded the charity Love and Sports, which supports Nepali art, culture and music with an annual gathering in which the best are honoured with awards. Many of Manoj's Nepali songs are about Bhutan. The translated lyrics of one of them: 'In the lap of the Himalaya is our dear Bhutan We blossom as we live together as one Don't cry, mother, we will make you smile We will decorate our motherland with flowers.'

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Tyler McMahon
in Manang

Reigning three-time winner, and current three-time 24-Hour Mountain Bike Race World Champion, Cory Wallace, defends his title, while Nepali Budhi Bahadur Tamang (Roan) takes 2nd and uses the training to win the South Asian Games Cross-Country Mountain Bike Gold two weeks later.

The Yak Attack organising team wanted to change the race this year and added two stages full of singletrack, a new trail on Stage 3, and the world's highest timed 'Enduro' section to make this edition an unforgettable one.

Stage 1 was a loop around Besisahar of Lamjung district, allowing racers to experience the trails and views before the race started climbing around the circuit. Three-time reigning champion Cory Wallace, determined to start his title defense properly, won the stage followed by Roan Tamang.

Stage 2 is one of the harder stages from Besisahar to Chame 2,900m with the first 40 km undulating. Wallace, looking to put a gap on the rest, rode the 66-km stage in under 4 hours, a new course record and nearly an hour ahead of second place Tamang.

Stage 3 took riders to Manang village (3,500 meters) adding a diversion to previous years that included a new singletrack climbing and descending via Ghyaruinto Manang. Wallace and Tamang continued their hold on the race finishing 1-2 again.


After the rest day, Stage 4 took riders on 100% singletrack from Manang to Phedi, a 16km stage that is one of the hardest riding. Wallace and Tamang continued to lead, but 3rd place was a battle between 4 riders all within less than 20 minutes.

Stage 5 crosses Thorong La at 5,416m, and is the most-feared stage of Yak Attack and can completely change the results. At 27km it is not the longest stage, but the first 3km is a near-vertical ascent that can take up to 4 hours for the average racer.

The downhill after the pass included a timed 'Enduro' section, the highest in the world. While Wallace won the overall stage, followed closely by Tamang, fellow Canadian and Kona Bikes teammate, Rhys Verner, tied Tamang on the timed Enduro stage. He also finished 3rd overall for the day, a comfortable 29 min ahead of 4th place, securing him 3rd overall in the race.

Stage 6 was the new 'Single Track' that took riders on a loop from Kagbeni and Lubra Valley bringing them back to the finish. Wallace continued his dominance, while Verner finished a close second. Tamang had a slower day finishing off the podium, but kept enough of a lead to remain in second place for the race.

The final stage took riders from Kagbeni to Tatopani for a soak in the hot springs before the group ride and bus transfer to Pokhara for the closing ceremony. Wallace easily closed his 4th straight Yak Attack victory, while Tamang finished in 2nd place and Verner in 3rd. Claire Demarquet won the female category, while Harka Lama won the 40+ age group for the second straight year.

Yak Attack will return in 2020 with a similar singletrack version and is currently offering a first-come, first-serve, early entry sale. 

Yak Attack Single Track Edition

The iconic mountain bike race returns to Nepal for the 13th time



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South Asian Games Segway

Following the Yak Attack, former National Champion, Roan, who had missed qualifications due to injury, was a last minute call up to the South Asian Games XCO Mountain Bike Race. Using his fitness from Yak Attack, he dominated the race from the starting gun, leading start to finish to win the Gold Medal as Nepalis swept the podium in all mountain bike events for the Games.



Pokhara IV

Coming up in January 2020 is the Pokhara IV, a 4-day stage race based out of Pokhara. Initiated by MTB-Worldwide, the creators of Yak Attack, it is an entry-level mountain bike stage race for riders to experience Nepal without the risk of altitude. The clover leaf format starting and finishing each day at Lakeside through iconic landmarks like the World Peace Pagoda and Begnas Lake with plenty of course shortcuts.

New for 2020 is the option to just participate for the two days of the weekend (25-26 January) to coincide with Chinese New Year. Pokhara IV takes place 25-28 January and entries are still open, with special discounts for local and expat riders.



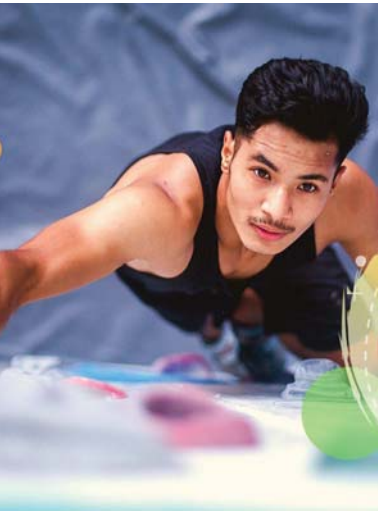
Join us for a sneak peek of Pokhara's new airport as it nears completion to serve as Nepal's third aviation gateway. Listen to interviews with the project manager and the Chinese contractor, look at the sweeping roof of the terminal building, and take a cruise down the new concrete runway.

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ALL PHOTOS: FLAWSONE PICTURES

EVENTS



Boulder Competition

If rock climbing is your thing, then this boulder competition is for you. Register ahead for a friendly competition where all level of climbers can participate, have fun, and win prizes.
4 Jan, 11AM-6PM, Kathmandu Sports Climbing Center, Paknajo, (01)4256505

Khula Manch ma Khula Bahas

An open discussion about the increasing encroachment of Tundikhel, an important and rare open space left inside the urban center of Kathmandu.
4 Jan, 1-2 PM, Tundikhel, Kathmandu

Web development workshop

IIT Nepal is hosting a free workshop about the programming language Python. Interested techies can register for hands-on learning and Q&A sessions with experienced instructors.
4 Jan, 11AM-4PM, Yeti Plaza, Bagbazar, (01)4167615, 9851161198, 9851224985



A Portrait Story

An exhibition traces the evolution of portrait paintings in Nepal, featuring works by experienced and novice artists.
9-23 Jan, Taragaon Museum, Bouddha, (01)6201035

Step towards Self-Love

Pahilo Kadam is providing one-on-one counselling by mental health professionals. In this mental health networking and testing event, experts will lead the cognitive test and formation of support groups.
4 Jan, 930AM-4PM, King's College, Bijuli Bazar, 9863473651, 9867772885



Art and photography workshop

Karyashala Creation is organizing art workshop for children aged 6-14 and photography workshop for adolescents aged 14-19.
6-19 Jan, 9-11 AM, Karyashala Creation, Kopundole, 9860728664

Ford Treasure Quest

Four-wheel owners can try and solve puzzles while driving to different parts of the city. Participants will get a clue at the Starting Point, and win attractive prizes if they solve it.
4 Jan, 1030AM Onwards, Kathmandu, 9861609836, (01)4297859



Food for Street Dogs

Dogs Nepal will provide food for 50 -70 homeless dogs and perform a survey about their status, health and possibility of adoption. Interested individuals can join them.
4 Jan, 10AM-12PM, Kapan, facebook: @dogsnepal11

Board Game Night

The group Kathmandu Board Games: The Settlers of Patan regularly hosts board games nights every Thursday, and you can try your hand at the games even if you are new to them.
9 Jan, 6 PM, Baked n' Fresh, Jhamsikhel, Patan, (01)5904689

MUSIC



Innov8

The brand Innov8 is comprised of emerging talents, and plays modern, experimental songs. The group of four will be performing in Kirtipur.
4 Jan, 3-6PM, Sasa restaurant, Kirtipur, 982-3115348



Karma Live

The popular folk rock band Karma will be performing at a Friday magic bash, reviving its famous hits to warm up the evening.
17 Jan, 730PM onwards, La Villa, Lazimpat, 9813861738

Full Moon Concert

Enjoy classical and devotional music at an open air concert with violin recital by Swadha Poudel and vocals by Shree KC at Kirateshwar Sangeetashram.
10 Jan, 4-8PM, Kirateshwar, Pashupati



Lindy Hop Dance Workshop

Groove to jazz music as you learn Lindy Hop, a dance popular in the swing era of 1930s and 40s. Free workshop and paid classes available.
4 Jan, 5-630PM, Yangrima City Hall, Bouddha, 9808880227

DINING



Piano Piano

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Inside Nomad hotel, Lazimpat, (01)4429391, (01)4429392



Le Sherpa

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Maharajunj, (01)4428604

Revive Leisure Park

Here you can find good food in relaxing surroundings. The green park and leisurely ambience will help you enjoy your meals even more.
Mahalaxmistan, Lalitpur, (01)5550678



Aalucha

The humble potato morphs into mind-boggling, sizzling varieties at Aalucha, blending local Newari and western flavours.
Bhaktapur Durbar Square, 986-0108771

GETAWAY



Gokarna Forest Resort

Right in the outskirts of Kathmandu lies a different world. Gokarna Forest resort boasts of lush forests and expansive golf grounds.
Gokarna, (01)4451212

Traditional comfort

The boutique hotel fuses traditional Nepali hospitality and architectural designs with modern facilities.
Kamalpokhari, (01)4410009



Three mountain lodge

On a small hilltop settlement of Bandipur, the lodge has preserved an old-time atmosphere, and is a living museum of Newa culture.
Bandipur, (01)4435686, (01)4435645

Tranquility Spa

If you need to unwind and relax, this is the place to go, with many kinds of ayurvedic massages and manicure/pedicure facilities.
Lazimpat, (01)4425386, (01)4420424



Sabila Boutique Hotel

The hotel tucked into an alley in Boudha gives an up close view of the famous stupa, while providing all the comforts and amenities you will need.
Boudha, (01)4912625

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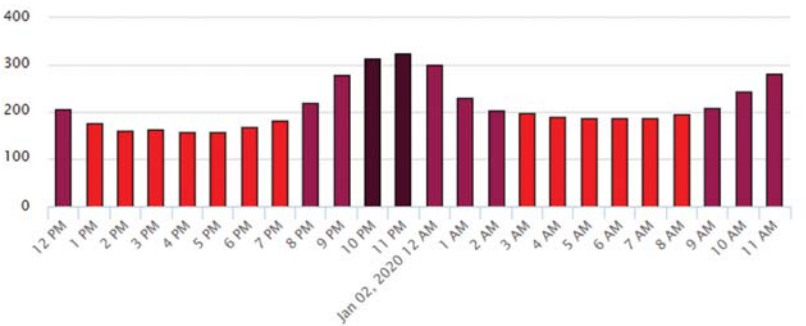
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OUR PICK

Opens in Kathmandu on 3 January

Smooth and suave Lance and awkward genius Walter are the complete opposite of each other. The two spies are hunting a criminal, but one of them turns the other into a pigeon. This animated movies featuring the voices of Will Smith, Tom Holland and Rashida Jones is a fun, family frolic. It is directed by debutants Nick Bruno and Troy Quane.

AIR QUALITY INDEX



The hourly Air Quality Index (AQI) measurements give a clearer picture of just how bad the pollution level in Kathmandu has been this past week. That is why we are including this graph (above) of the 24 hour period between midnight January 1 to midnight January 2 as measured at the US Embassy station at Phora Darbar. As you can see AQI exceeded 300 and went into the 'Hazardous' Purple Zone. This is probably because the evening vehicular emission was trapped by the winter inversion layer. AQI was marginally 'better' in the afternoons and early morning hours, but the concentration of PM2.5 particles was still in the 'Dangerous' Red Zone. Gasp.
<https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>

Nepal readies for influx of Chinese tourists

Travel trade hopes to raise visitors from China to half-a-million in 2020

Josie Wang
in Khumbu

When Nepal chose famous Chinese actress Xu Qing to be its Goodwill Ambassador for Visit Nepal Year 2020 in China, she did not need much convincing. She was already in love with Nepal.

“My heart was racing when I saw the breathtaking view of the Annapurna range,” she gushed in a Weibo post from Pokhara, “This is the life I yearn for.”

Xu posted photos of herself posing in front of Machapuchre, boating on Phewa Lake, wearing a marigold garland, and taking selfies with smiling children. Those posts went to 17 million of her followers on Weibo.

Xu Qing has won numerous awards in the past 30 years. Many of her roles are deeply rooted in the hearts of people, which makes her hugely popular on social media. Her account on Weibo, a Twitter-like social media platform in China, has more than 17 million followers.

“It was a wise decision to choose her as an influencer to promote tourism from China,” says Chinese art curator Justin Zhao who has lived in Nepal for seven years, and founded the Himalayan Light Art Award. “Next door China is the biggest potential market for tourism development in Nepal, and the number of Chinese tourists to Nepal is growing rapidly.”

Chinese Ambassador to Nepal Hou Yanqi has also been projecting China’s soft power in Nepal through her social media feeds to promote Visit Nepal 2020. In a Tweet on new year’s eve on Tuesday, she posted pictures of herself modelling in Patan Darbar Square and wrote: ‘True beauty always touches the deep heart. Beautiful Nepal with history, diversity and nature deserves a visit. Wish #VisitNepal2020 successful!’ And she tagged Nepal’s Tourism Minister Yogesh Bhattarai.

From January to October 2019, there were 134,281 Chinese tourists in Nepal, up nearly 10% for the same period last year. Chinese visitors account for nearly 14% of arrivals by nationality, second only to India. Numbers started going up in 2011 after Nepal announced free visas for Chinese nationals.

“Chinese Buddhists and those who enjoy adventure sports are the two most common types of Chinese tourists in Nepal,” notes Wang Ziping, who runs a restaurant in Pokhara. Indeed, many of the visitors have nothing but praise for Nepal’s natural beauty and its friendly people.

‘Although Nepal is poor, it is the happiest country in the world. You can actually see the real smiles on people’s faces and feel their inner comfort. I taste a bit of my dream life here,’ noted one visitor on an online post.

Adds another: ‘You can see the cultural diversity of South Asia in Nepal. People of different religious faiths live in peace here. They understand each other and develop together.’

There are also negative comments, and deal mostly with poor infrastructure and the high airfares. Says restaurateur Wang: “Air tickets to Nepal are too expensive. The price in the peak season is more than double to



XU QING SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNT



similar destinations. If the price of air tickets comes down to the same as that of flying to Thailand, more people would love to come.”

With a target of two million tourists in 2020, entrepreneurs have made efforts targeting potential

Chinese visitors, but many say that unless the infrastructure bottlenecks like airports and highways are fixed it will be difficult to meet the target even if the volume of Chinese tourists reaches 500,000 this year.

But here in Pokhara, restaurants, hotels and paragliding companies are gearing up for the influx of Chinese tourists. At Lakeside restaurant menus are in Chinese, as are shop signs. Shopkeepers do their part by calling out “*Ni hao*”.

HIGH LIFE: Chinese actress Xu Qing has become a brand ambassador for Visit Nepal 2020 in China, and posted pictures like this one from Annapurna Base Camp (*left*), on Chinese social media from her recent trip.

Chinese Ambassador to Nepal, Hou Yanqi has also posted photos of herself modelling in Patan Darbar Square this week (*below, left*)

Chinese social media has many comments from people impressed with their Nepal visit.

“We have Mandarin courses so our staff can communicate with Chinese tourists,” says Prakritee Gurung, manager at Shangri-La Village Resort. Across town at Fishtail Lodge, nearly half the 24,000 guests in 2019 were Chinese tourists.

Nepal is readying for a tri-nation Nepal-India-China Expo (NICE) 21-24 February to jointly promote tourism. Nepal is strategically placed to be the go-between.

Tourism entrepreneurs in Pokhara who have been lobbying to have Pokhara International Airport built are excited that it will finally open next year, and there will be direct flights between Chinese cities and Pokhara, bypassing Kathmandu.

Pokhara became famous in China after the popular television serial *Deng Feng Lai* (Up in the Wind) was filmed on location here and the actors took a paragliding flight. Since then, many young Chinese have flocked to Pokhara.

For Wang Ziping it was love at first sight with Pokhara. He came on a visit, and never left, deciding to open the Pokhara Restaurant on Lakeside. He says: “Pokhara International Airport is about to be finished and there will be more Chinese tourists flying directly here. I am sure business will pick up.” 🇨🇳

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MONIKA DEUPALA

KUNDA DIXIT

A tipper truck has just arrived from Gorkha at Gandaki Urja's biogas plant at Kotre near Pokhara, which with its dome digester looks like a nuclear reactor. The truck tilts its container to empty 5 tons of smelly poultry waste into a pit

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THE FUTURE IS HERE: Biotechnologist Nimesh Kumar Jha (*left*) explains the process of turning cow dung and farm waste into methane gas at Gandaki Urja's industrial scale biogas plant in Kotre of Kaski.

where rotting vegetables and cow dung from a farm in Syangja are all being mixed before being fed into the 4,000 cubic meter digester that is kept inflated. In the absence of oxygen, bacteria already in the cow dung go to work to break down the waste into methane, carbon dioxide and hydrogen sulphide. The impurities are removed by filters to produce 200 cylinders of bio-CNG a day which are sold to big hotels and restaurants in Pokhara.

Customers pay a deposit for the cylinders and pressure regulators, and usually use up about two cylinders a day. The cost per kg for the bio-Compressed Natural Gas (bio-CNG) is the same as the state subsidised Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG). However, customers prefer the biogas because it saves them up to 30% cost because it has higher calorific value than LPG, and there is no residue that goes waste.

“So far, the customers are satisfied, and we see demand growing in the future as word spreads,” says Ashim Kayastha, Director of Gandaki Urja.

Half the plant's revenue comes from bio-CNG and the other half from the effluent which is dried and sold as organic fertiliser. The plant can produce up to 11,000 tons of fertiliser a year and is sold to surrounding farms.

The future of bio-CNG depends on scaling up the technology since any municipality generating more than 40 tons of biodegradable waste per day could have its own biogas plant. Nepal imports 500,000 tons of chemical fertiliser a year, and if each of 100 municipalities produced 5,000 tons of organic fertiliser Nepal could slash its import bill. This could also significantly reduce the country's annual import of Rs33 billion worth of LPG from India which grew four-fold in the past 10 years, making up 2.5% of Nepal's total import bill. But to scale up, industrial biogas needs the same government incentives as hydro, solar and wind power.


At the moment hydropower investors enjoy a 100% corporate tax holiday for 10 years, and 50% for the next five years. There is only 1% tax on imports of equipment for solar, wind and hydropower, there is no such provision for the equipment for industrial scale biogas. Instead, there is a tax on interest, and also VAT on bio-CNG.

“The government should look at this not only as an energy project, but at its multifaceted benefits,” says Kushal Gurung of Gandaki Urja. “There is a waste-to-energy and fertiliser angle, too. If we want to make Nepal fully organic in the next ten years, projects like these need to be prioritised.”

Gandaki Urja got a boost from an unlikely source, Business Oxygen (BO₂) in Kathmandu which helps entrepreneurs running Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to scale up by injecting equity and providing technical assistance.

Says Siddhant Pandey of BO₂: “We are always on the lookout for climate investments, and we realised that bio-CNG would be an incredible adaptive resilience investment. It would displace imports of LPG and fertiliser. It was going to be clean, no carbon footprint, and it made business sense because it met our internal return on investment expectation.”

The challenges are ensuring reliable sources of raw material and building knowhow for the technology within Nepal.

Says Pandey: "The Pokhara plant is a drop in the ocean, it can be replicated in all 7 provinces. We know it is scalable, and it depends how proactive provincial governments will be." 



Join us on a trip to Kaski for a tour of Gandaki Urja's new industrial scale biogas plant that produces methane gas from farm and urban waste. The bio-CNG is sold to big hotels in Pokhara, and the by-product organic fertiliser to surrounding farms. This is the future of energy in Nepal.

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* T&C Applied.

History and context from Ram Sharan

Kanak Mani Dixit

The new book by Ram Sharan Mahat, former foreign and finance minister of the Nepali Congress, is an explainer and update on Nepal’s political transition and state restructuring exercise. It is an encyclopaedic dive into the political economy of present-day Nepal, useful for readers abroad and Nepali students seeking to understand history, trends and context.

Mahat lost his Parliament seat in 2017 after consecutively winning four parliamentary elections from Nuwakot since 1994. This forced respite allowed the economist-politician the time to pen his thoughts on critical national events of the past two decades, committed as he is to the middle way that shuns populism and profligate governance.

This work, together with Kul Chandra Gautam’s *Lost in Transition* (2014), provides antidote to the English language narrative of the conflict and post-conflict transitional era, which has been presented mainly by writers bowled over by radical leftism. *Trials, Tremors and Hope* also complements Mahat’s earlier work, *In Defence of Democracy* (2005), published even as King Gyanendra sought to convert Nepal into a royal autocracy.

Mahat guided Nepal into the era of liberal economics, and rather than be coy he spends considerable space here defending his plans and policies as a six-time finance minister. He introduces us to BP Koirala’s evolving thinking on economic governance, and reminds

6-time finance minister’s new book sets out the context and trends of Nepal’s prolonged political transition

readers of once-important entities such as Socialist International, the Club of Rome and its ‘Limits to Growth’.

Mahat was sceptical of elements that went into the 2015 Constitution, fought a rearguard action on the establishment of provinces, and advocated local government energy channelled via the 75 districts. And yet, unlike many Constituent Assembly members who became lukewarm towards the document they promulgated, the author seeks ways to implement the Constitution as the only way forward.

‘Managing the new federal structure is an un-tested and daunting challenge,’ he writes. ‘The multiple levels of governance in a relatively small country with a history of centralised administration creates problems of overlap, ambiguity and conflict of authority ... The main task at present is to building of institutional capacity at the sub-national and local levels ... (with) supporting legislation, regulations and necessary manpower they are lacking at present.’

With the Constitution declaring Nepal a ‘socialism-oriented’



(*samajbad unमुख*) economy, it is imperative to have authoritative interpretations of the phrase to avoid confusion, and to save society from the radical trap. The economist and administrator in Mahat provides his elucidation.

Noting that ‘there has been no major change in the fundamental orientation of the country’ despite the regime change, he writes: ‘The socialist objectives are to be met through democratic norms and values including competitive plural politics, as well as an elaborate list of fundamental rights, including those related to social protection, the security of property rights,

among others.’

Elsewhere, Mahat writes that the goal of socialism is guaranteed to be based on ‘competitive multiparty politics—including periodic elections, adult franchise, press freedom, civil liberty and an independent and impartial judiciary.’ He suggests capitalising on Nepal’s comparative advantage in clean energy, biodiversity, eco-tourism and cultural heritage, strategic location between China and India, and international goodwill.

At a time when many intellectuals prefer to handle the Maoists with kids gloves, especially now that they are tied umbilically to the erstwhile UML,

Mahat is clear on what the Maoist conflict ‘inflicted on the nation’: besides the death and maiming, it disrupted social and economic lives, destroyed physical assets and infrastructure, derailing development and slowing economic growth.

For a work with such a sweep, Mahat has preferred to side-step some aspects maybe because he is top leader of the Nepali Congress, which itself is hardly playing the role of a responsible and critical opposition to a powerful CPN government. One would have wanted Mahat to be less descriptive and non-opinionated, and not be

Debut novelist lets Afghans speak for themselves

Jamil Jan Kochai is the O. Henry Prize-winning author of the novel *99 Nights in Logar*, which was shortlisted for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature. Nepali Times spoke to him at the Nepal Literature Festival in Pokhara. Excerpts:

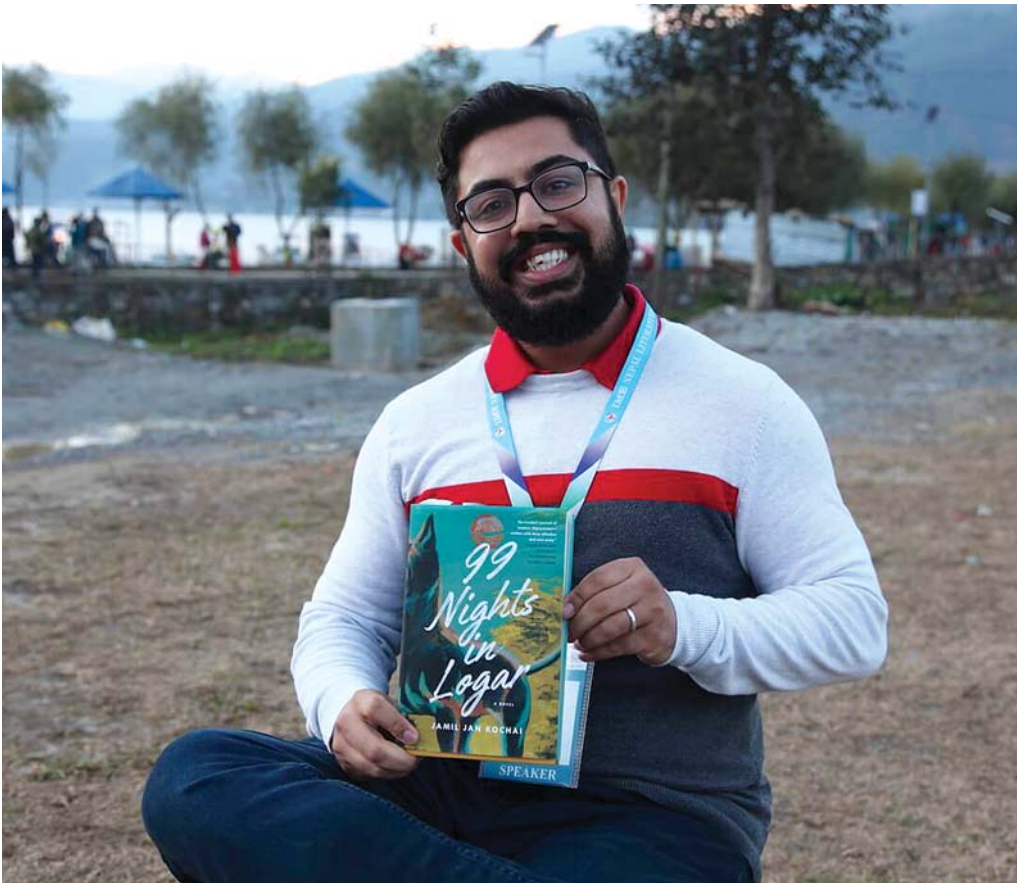
Nepali Times: An entire chapter in your English novel is in Pashto. What was your motivation?

Jamil Jan Kochai: Initially, it started out as a craft issue more than anything else. I had been trying to write that chapter for a long time. The entire novel leads up to that story within the story, and it is actually based on real life events: this tragedy that occurred in my own family. I knew it was going to be very difficult to write, but I did not anticipate that I would not be able to write it.

Whenever I heard this story, it was always in bits and pieces and it was always in Pashto, because it was only meant for us and it was our story. That chapter ended up being directly from my father. He told the story as he remembered it. It is the story of the murder of his younger brother during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

Initially there was some, not necessarily resistance, but certainly questions. My agent had questions about it, my editor had questions about it, other editors had questions about it, but when I discussed the intention of it and how I was having so much trouble telling that story, ultimately, my agent, my editor, my publisher – everyone was very supportive.

It did take on its own sort of political ideological message. What happens to stories when they are translated? Who is the book meant for? Finally I decided,



JOSIE WANG

‘I am going to allow it to remain in this state instead of translating it and risk ruining it.’

You also have all these non-English words in the novel.

There is this sad thing where, our entire second generation of immigrants in America that is coming up right now, we are losing touch with our language, but at the same time it still has a way of almost infecting our English and that is the way we talk. I always wanted to

write in a voice that was true to the voice that belongs to my household. I think there are also certain words that are untranslatable.

You have a lot of religious elements, almost underlying the novel – how intentional is it?

What I was trying to capture with the novel was how this boy from America in Afghanistan experienced the world. I was conscious of the ways Islam was represented in America and how Muslims are represented in America.

In particular, this whole idea of the good Muslim versus the bad Muslim, which is a rhetoric I find really troubling where certain populations of Muslims become bomb-able and destroy-able because of how they are portrayed in the media.


Your book is semi-autobiographical?

I would say a lot of elements are heavily autobiographical. When I was 12 years old, I went back to my parents’ home village in Logar and I had adventures with my cousins and so, certainly, it begins with my memories. Budabash was our guard dog in our compound in Afghanistan. He absolutely hated me, that was true, but he never did bite off the tip of my finger. He did get loose out onto the village and we had to go after him, but I did not actually take part in the chase. My cousins did and it was something I would often think about. So the first time it really started with this idea, “What if I hadn’t been afraid of going on this chase with my cousins, what would have happened?”

Are there any Afghan Americans you are excited about?

Aria Aber. Her poetry collection came out recently and she had a poem published in *The New Yorker* as well. Very talented, I want to give her a shout out.

Fragmented Futures. It was set up by an Afghan American art organisation in California and they put together this incredible magazine of just Afghan artists and it was photography, paintings, poetry and fiction as well. Incredible work. I was overwhelmed by how talented they were — it got me very emotional. I’m very excited about this next generation of writers who are coming out of these communities in the States.

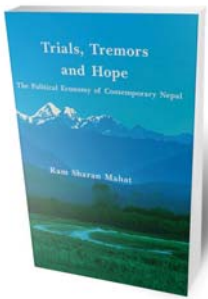
 **nepalitimes.com**
Go online for an unabridged version of the interview.

Mahat

too careful about whose toes he would be stepping on.

He does refer to the Indian Blockade of 2015, but does not dwell much on how those five months became an economic and geopolitical watershed for modern Nepal. He is ideally placed to discuss the potential debt trap of being over-beholden to the Chinese, but there is not enough discussion of that here. As Nepal rushes headlong into infrastructure development, Mahat should have made his position clear on what is propped up as the ‘development vs environment’ debate, but he takes a pass.

Mahat does warn that reliance on remittance has ‘reduced pressure to generate more productive employment leading to loss of the country’s competitiveness’, but the author was well placed to provide a guide to generating in-country employment. Similarly, a wide-ranging work such as this required rumination on the climate crisis, which is set to hit Nepal’s population and economy. 🇳🇵



Trials, Tremors and Hope
Adroit Publishers, New Delhi (2019)
242 pages

Writing about Nepal from afar



SAKINA ABIDI

Novelist Samrat Upadhyay says more writers today are pushing the barriers of ‘Nepali culture’

When asked how he balances writing about Kathmandu while living abroad, Samrat Upadhyay asks: “What do we mean by authenticity? According to whom?”

“I come here often enough,” he says. “I did spend my formative years here. I understand the ubiquitous Nepali character, if there is one. Authenticity is such a curious term that implies there is like this one Nepali culture.” Upadhyay arrives at Himalayan Java in Thamel for the interview nursing a cold, a day after an award ceremony for a short story contest of *La.Lit* magazine, where Upadhyay was the sole judge.

Popularly known as the first Nepali-born writer to be published in the United States, Upadhyay is Nepal’s most accomplished English language novelist, with seven books and various accolades.

When Upadhyay started out, there were few people in Nepal writing in English. Now, he says, there are not just more people writing, but more people serious about writing – going on retreats, winning fellowships and getting published both here and abroad.

We circle back to his depiction of Nepal and if he is afraid of missing something when he is away. “I don’t mean to say I don’t need to keep up at all, as if Nepal has remained ossified,” he adds, “but I am also not walking around with some mental diary saying ‘Okay, let me figure out what has changed and what has not.’ I just absorb things.”

Like many others who write about their home countries in English,

Upadhyay is often criticised for catering to a western audience. His writing has also been characterised as one that injects sex where it doesn’t belong, with readers falling on both sides of the critique.

For his part, Upadhyay seems more concerned about pushing past what is publicly shunned in what he considers traditional culture. He says *La.Lit*’s Writing Nepal 2019 shortlist had two stories that explicitly explored sexual boundaries: “People are becoming braver and bolder, expanding the notion of what it means to be Nepali.”

Transcending language is an issue too. Writers try to overcome the barrier in their own way, whether it’s by publishing an entire chapter in their native script or by approximating their language’s syntax quite literally into English.

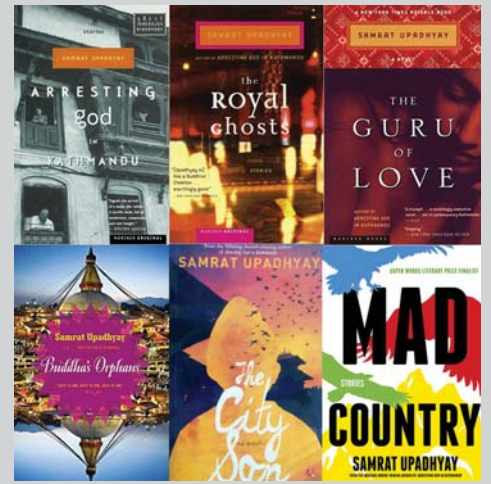
“That’s the craft of writing for those of us who write in English about a landscape where the majority of the people are not speaking English constantly,” Upadhyay says. “It is kind of a judicious thing you do. I believe language is fairly malleable.”

Upadhyay waves off pages of Nepali dialogue with footnotes (‘It’s so passé’) describing it as something that will not reach a wider audience. On the other hand, he does not have his work translated into Nepali – although he has received, and rejected, samples by other people, yet found his own attempt at translating to take too long.

“I thought, ‘Do I want to spend like two years translating my own work or do I want to spend two years writing a new novel? Which would be more pleasurable for me?’ The answer was obvious.”

His latest novel? “It’s still a work in progress,” says Samrat Upadhyay, “I am working on, I guess you could call it some type of a dystopian novel set in Nepal ... Not full fantasy. It has strange moments, which I have enjoyed writing.” 🇳🇵

Sakina Abidi



A nostalgic Hindustani novel

Amitabha Bagchi’s *Half The Night Is Gone* is melancholy and artfully written

Sakina Abidi

There is not much to add about Amitabha Bagchi’s *Half The Night Is Gone* that has not already been said. The winner of this year’s DSC Prize for South Asian Literature, awarded at the Nepal Literature Festival in Pokhara last month, the book has been readily deemed the ‘Great Indian Novel’ of our time.

Bagchi sets most of his novel in Delhi, with parts in Agra and Banaras. Writing in pre-independence times, Dilli’s rich lore and the old *ganga jamuni tehzeeb* of North India is woven beautifully into the novel – with intercuts of a harder, less forgiving modern-day shown in letters between chapters.

Bagchi carefully constructs his plot – a long winded ambitious tale that tells the story of two families and their men sprawling across generations. This story is told by the fictional, award-winning Hindi novelist, Vishwanath, who takes breaks to pen letters to his brother, his dead son’s girlfriend and his estranged wife.

Goswami Tulsidas’s *Ramcharitmanas* (an Awadhi retelling of *Ramayana*) undercuts the novel being written within the novel, with additional Sanskrit *sloka*, Hindi-Urdu couplets, and Qur’anic *hadith* referenced throughout, each with an English translation. Bagchi’s greatest feat is the way the quoted verses always add to the narrative, never distracting or pulling a reader away. As *The Hindu* put it, this is not an ‘Indian novel in English’, it is an Indian novel.

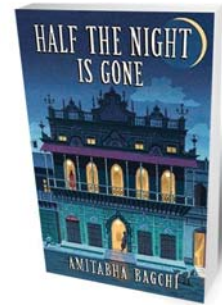
The men Vishwanath writes about are deeply flawed and violent – they beat, rape and abandon their wives (stylistically depicted



as ‘claiming their conjugal rights’) and yet, somehow, they are always portrayed as layered and interesting individuals. The writing is confusing, it is unclear if the framing of women as always youthful, inherently lustful and scheming is meant to highlight the predicament of women in Indian society or if Vishwanath is just a bad writer. Whatever the motivation, it is the novel

has one glaring fault. It is difficult to read as Omvati (She manages to get a name – something not every female character in the novel is granted) who is molested by her father in law, and as she stabs and wounds him in a ‘... a coruscating sweep that left her quivering. She felt arousal’.

Later in the novel, her husband reaches for her and Omvati throws up again and again. In response, her husband beats and



Half The Night Is Gone
By Amitabha Bagchi
Juggernaut, New Delhi, 2018
320 pages 550 INR
ISBN:978-9386228703

bribes her and ‘takes to visiting prostitutes’. There is never an effort to depict her inner feelings and trauma – only his frustration.

Bagchi is a gifted storyteller, creating varied and interesting relationships between his characters both within their families and across them. Diwanchand, the younger son of Lala Motichand, is so devoted to Tulsida Ramcharitmanas, he leaves his inheritance, wife and child to dedicate his life to the work.

Makhan Lal, Lala Motichand’s illegitimate child, is a Marx-loving schoolteacher who resents his father. Vishwanath is devastated by his son’s death in a road accident, and only in his grief does he begin to try and repair his relationships. It is only the caricatures of women that leave an unfortunate stain on the novel, a book that otherwise speaks to nostalgia, of interfaith harmony and complex family dynamics. 🇳🇵



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Good old bad days

So, it looks like we have come full circle, and the good old bad days are here again. After struggling for freedom for five decades since 1960, we are finally rediscovering that war is peace, freedom is slavery and ignorance is strength in the Federal Democratic Republic of Animal Farm.

But we detect a certain complacency setting in among the Comrades: they are showing signs of smugness and hints of laxity in decisively cracking down on dissent. It looks like The Dear Leader and his Commie Hardliners are losing the fire in their bellies, and becoming somewhat half-hearted tyrants. After coming this far and burning all our bridges, we can't let this happen. There is still a long way to go before we can aspire to be DPRK.

The Party therefore now has to ask itself: is it being draconian enough in safeguarding Nepal's hard-won authoritarianism? Why this piecemeal approach towards total control? As Mao said: "Revolution is not a dinner party, you cannot make a cheese omelette without milking a few yaks, and political power comes out of a barrel of whiskey."

So, what are they waiting for? Why are they pussyfooting with the IT Bill, Media Council Bill and the Grocery Bill? This is no time for hemming and hawing, they should roll up their sleeves and get to work, since time and tidal wave waits for no man. More vigilance, that is what we need. And more vigilantes.

I wouldn't make the mistake of saying our crackdowns have to be beefed up since that would ruffle religious sensibilities in a friendly neighbouring country, but there is no doubt that they need to be buffed up.

We can't afford to leave even one stone turned upside down to weed out the vestiges of freedom. How come independent journalists and activists are still roaming around the streets in broad daylight hours? Why aren't they in custody yet? We are now three days into 2020, and the Ass is still not under preventive custody for ridiculing, demeaning, and belittling the liliputs in government. Such a lackadaisical attitude towards implementation of our laws just won't suffice. What do we have to do burn some tyres and set fire to effigies?

A cross-party caucus of politicians united under the umbrella group, the All-Nepal Federation of Unjustly Undetained Caucasians, threatened to launch a decisive nationwide stir if their demand to be arrested without further ado is not carried out with immediate effect by the concerned higher-up authoritarians in a ham-handed manner with excessive use of force.

The statement of the caucus said: 'If they don't put us under house arrest immediately, then we will escalate our protests and go into cardiac arrest.'



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INSIDE VALLEY

Durbarmarg, Capitol Building.
Contact No: 014244748, 9843833871, 9819133595

Chabahil Chowk, Beside Chabahil Plaza Entrance Gate
Contact No: 9819009338

Ason, Kamalakshi, Opposite to Prime Bank
Contact No: 9851065706, 9808631557

People's Plaza, Shop no. 107
Contact No: 014157590

Koteshwor, Opposite to Prime Bank
Contact No: 9841368259, 9866474767

Kumaripati, Opposite to Janata Bank
Contact No: 9843144204

Eyeplex Mall, 1st floor, Shop no. 24, New baneshower
Contact No: 9860806194

OUTSIDE VALLEY

Pokhara, Chipledhunga, Opposite to Trade Mall
Contact No: 9856086634

Dharan, College Road
Contact No: 9824311855

Biratnagar, Traffic Chowk
Contact No: 9824311855

Bahrabise-4, Sindhupalchowk
Contact No: 9851047099

Birgunj, Adarshnagar, Beside Kailash Hotel
Contact No: 9855021294

Dang, Ghorahi, Beside Kalika Tel Mill
Contact No: 9813338636

Butwal, Singh Complex
Contact No: 9857025137, 9817507475

Chitwan, Narayanghat, The Town Center, Lion's Chowk
Contact No: 9855052851

Jhapa, Damak, Mishal Bazaar, Namuna Marga
Contact No: 9852670837, 9815099351

Bhairahawa, Prahari Tol, Infront of Siddhartha Bank
Contact No: 9857034359, 071438229



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