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High-risk remittance

The Nepal government knows how much this country is dependent on remittances from Nepalis working abroad. It pays the salaries of politicians and bureaucrats from the money they send home.

They should also know how vulnerable the economy is to tensions in the Persian Gulf or Southeast Asia, or global emergencies like this pandemic. The Iraq War, the UAE and Saudi Arabian blockade of Qatar, and tension in the Straits of Hormuz between Iran and the United States highlighted the risk.

In 2004, twelve Nepali workers employed by contractors at a US military base in Iraq were shot to death on video. Fourteen Nepalis guarding the Canadian Embassy in Kabul were killed in 2016 in an attack by Taliban militants. Hundreds of Nepalis had to be evacuated from Libya when civil war broke out there in 2011.



UPASANA KHADKA

And when the massive blast rent downtown Beirut on Tuesday, there were Nepali domestic workers and peacekeepers who were caught up in the horror. Because Nepalis are now scattered all over the globe, any conflict or natural disaster is likely to involve nationals of this country. More Nepalis have died of COVID-19 (190) in 38 countries, than in Nepal itself (60) so far.

The vulnerability of Nepal's economy to over-reliance on migrant labour has been driven home by this pandemic. In Asia, Nepal is second only to Kyrgyzstan in terms of reliance on money sent home by its overseas workers – a full 28% equivalent of Nepal's GDP comes from remittances.

More than 15% of Nepal's population is working abroad. Of these 2.5-3 million (no one knows for sure) are in India. Of the other 2 million, 60% work in just four Gulf countries: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE and Kuwait.

Of these, an estimated 200,000 have returned from India. And of the 210,000

who have registered with Nepal's missions abroad to come home, only 32,000 have been repatriated since 15 June.

For the past two years, the number of Nepalis migrating overseas for work had been steadily declining, although remittances held steady. The pandemic now threatens to reduce that income.

The monthly remittances through official channels in April this year was half the amount for April 2019, although it has picked up since. The World Bank estimates that remittances globally this year will fall 20% below last year's level, and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) puts the losses at 28% for Nepal as its overseas workers are laid off, or get reduced salaries.

The \$7 billion a year that Nepali workers abroad send home helps pay for Nepal's imports, of which the highest proportion (16%) is petroleum. At the household level, surveys have shown that migrant earnings help pay for food and education of most families back home.

Nepal's absolute poverty declined by half to 25% in the past 20 years – most of this is credited to increased household income from workers abroad. A fall in remittances could set Nepal back a decade in terms of gains in maternal and child survival, nutrition and poverty rate.

The hope was that many of the returnees could be re-engaged in agriculture to grow food on land that has been fallow because of out-migration. This has happened to some extent this planting season, but because no government campaign was launched to provide credit and other inputs, it will not be at levels where national food production will go up this year.

There is also the argument that most Nepali workers in India and overseas still have their jobs, and have not returned. Even though there is an economic downturn, host countries still need migrant workers to do the dirty, dangerous and demeaning jobs that their nationals will not do.

But that is a slim hope. The pandemic shows no sign of abating. And as long as structural distortions in the economy that forced Nepalis to migrate (and be exploited and abused in the process) is not addressed, it is unlikely that those who have returned will stay.

There is no realistic government program on the horizon for mass job creation at home for returnees, the backlog of Nepalis waiting to go abroad, and the 600,000 new entries into the labour market every year.

Nepal's over-reliance on migrant labour has been driven home by this pandemic

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Many of the articles printed in this edition continue to remain relevant even after 20 years. As the world fights the global pandemic COVID-19, Nepal battled the spread of HIV/AIDS as the death toll rose to 35,000. 'Into the Valley of AIDS' was a *Nepali Times* investigation on the epidemic. Excerpts:

Public health experts are shocked by the frightening speed at which the disease is spreading in Nepal, and especially in Kathmandu Valley. They are also dismayed at the lack of political will and the prevailing official confusion over preventive measures.

There is growing recognition of the serious economic consequences of an Africa-type nationwide epidemic but Nepali officialdom is still largely in denial.

"We are sitting on top of a volcano," says Michael Hahn, of the UNAIDS office in Kathmandu. "Nepal has entered a concentrated epidemic, and there is a window of opportunity to prevent a generalised epidemic if steps are taken."

COVID-19 has caused a turmoil in the aviation industry since the beginning of March in Nepal. While Nepal was aggressively planning new international airport amid international airline traffic, the pandemic and the ban on flights have turned into a loss for the industry.



On the #4 print edition of *Nepali Times*, 20 years ago (9-15 August 2000), the paper extensively published news on the ties between Nepal-India. While Rajendra Dahal from New Delhi wrote an exclusive report 'What India wants from Nepal', Salil Subedi and Alok Tumbahangphey interviewed ten individuals from both Nepal and India on how they perceive each other.

For instance: Buddha Air's flight to Varanasi and Kolkata are also being reconsidered.

Binod Bhattarai's article Private airlines eye international routes is as ironic as it gets. Nepali airlines are blacklisted in Europe and it still hasn't managed to get any international routes except Himalaya Airlines and Nepal Airlines. Excerpts:

The government is getting ready to renew its call for private operators to apply for international routes. And learning from past experience, it is tightening procedures and enforcing stricter licensing terms. Nepali private airlines will henceforth be required to pay royalties to fly the various routes on offer, and only airlines that plan to use jet aircraft will be allowed to bid.

But at the same time, airlines which were earlier required to begin services within six months of getting a licence will now be given a year to commence operations.

Alpine Air and Air Nepal International, the two Nepali airlines that had been squatting on permits to operate international routes out of Kathmandu for five years, had their licences scrapped in May 1999 after the expiry of the final extension. The two had received licences to operate flights to India and Europe, but were woefully unprepared to start operations.

For the archives of *Nepali Times* of the past 20 years, site search www.nepalitimes.com.

ONLINE PACKAGES



WALKABOUT WITH ANIL: GAI JATRA

Nepali Times launches a new fortnightly video series 'Walkabout with Anil'. Visit our YouTube channel for the first episode where heritage expert Anil Chitrakar explains how Nepal's Gajatra festival came about and its relevance today in the COVID-19 world. Look out for the next episode.

TIGER TRADE

Shame on the poachers but a greater shame on the judicial system that does not do its job properly and goes soft on these criminals ('Lax laws make Nepal haven for tiger poachers', Tufan Neupane, #1021).

Sue Chamberlain

KANCHENJUNGA GLACIERS

Very captivating and widely researched article, sheds light on the GLOFs occurrences ('Tracing past glacial floods in Kangchenjunga', Alton C Byers, #1021).

Govindaraj Ravi

IN SERCH OF YETI

I too am sorting through years of memorabilia but due to quarantine and unexpected house renovations ('Sorting through history for the Yeti', Lisa Choegyal, #1021). Enjoyed this tremendously. I uphold and enjoy the Yeti myth! And I find myself waiting for the cleverly crafted penmanship of your next article, thanks.

Beverly Hines

COVID-19 AND CHILDREN

This cuts deep ('COVID-19 leaves millions of South Asian children hungry', nepalitimes.com). I became a father during the lockdown. Living in Kathmandu, we able to afford fantastic healthcare, nutritious food stockpile formula for months. But things are drastically different for parents in remote areas with poor financial conditions. Mothers have had to give birth at home risking their life as well as their babies'. This singular focus on the COVID-19 pandemic has come at an unacceptable cost.

Björn Söderberg

SOLAR VS HYDRO

Don't you think solar is better option ('Generating electricity (and cash) for Nepalis', Raju Baskota, nepalitimes.com)? India is building solar farms in less than a year. It takes 10 years to successfully build the hydro dam and bring it to power generation.

Gyurme Dondup

BOOK TAX

Well then they should build public libraries with that extra tax ('Nepal taxes not just electric cars, but also books', Alisha Sijapati, nepalitimes.com). No one knows where and how our taxes are being utilised.

Eemā Budhā

■ Taxing books is as absurd as it can get. Does the government want to keep people ignorant? That way, there will be equality of ignorance for all!

Kalps Para

SCHOOL CLOSURE

I wouldn't say 'Lost' as the effort made by teachers and volunteers will continue ('A decade of work lost in 4 months', Sheryl Lee, #1021). The students are aware too. Let's take this as an opportunity to make positive changes, which wouldn't have been possible if the same system and consciousness had remained.

Sujat Ou Sarju

FOOD IMPORTS

Government should subsidise on agro entrepreneurs ('Nepal agro imports at all time high', Ramesh Kumar, nepalitimes.com). It's cheaper to import than to grow here. How are the locals going to keep up with that?

Tsultrim Tenphel

■ The way I see it the only solution is for Nepalis to focus on local agro products rather than being gullible about cheap and fast foods. Nepalis also have the responsibility to help promote domestic products, because without agriculture, many people will suffer.

Ngawang Tenzin

■ It might help to invest in the support network for local farm good: storage, transportation, irrigation and more greenhouses at higher altitude.

Nathan Hagen

Nepali Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



Lockdown may be over, but the pandemic is not

Editorial

When the lockdown was lifted on 21 July, it gave many Nepalis a false sense of security. There are now fears that the COVID-19 is spreading in the community. Visit our website to read about what Nepal's government and people should do next.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

'A decade of work lost in 4 months'

by Sheryl Lee

Nepal's schools have been closed now for nearly 5 months, and while some have shifted to online classes, it's not the solution for rural education. Now teachers fear many students will have dropped out when schools reopen. Join discussion online.

Most popular on Twitter

Most commented



Lax laws make Nepal haven for tiger poachers

by Tufan Neupane

Despite being the first country to double its big cat population, Nepal remains an important corridor for trafficking of tiger parts to China. An investigation on how tiger poachers bribe their way to freedom when nabbed by anti-poaching units in Nepal and India. Exclusive report in nepalitimes.com.

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
A mobile video of a Nepali security guard in #Malaysia getting beaten up by his supervisor with a truncheon has gone viral in social media, causing outrage in #Nepal and its migrant worker community in Malaysia. Read story. Watch the clip. #migrantworkers

Sam L. Shrestha @samyaklal
Justice has to be served! This evil supervisor needs to be held accountable. No one has the right to treat anyone in this inhumane manner. This is a big opportunity for the Malaysian authorities to set an example. People are waiting to see how they handle this.

travel2photograph @travel2photo
This is an inhuman behaviour and cannot be tolerated. I hope the officials will fire the supervisor and he will be prosecuted.

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Are we air-brushing #history by toppling statues? Adulatory statues may represent past atrocities or #inequality, but keeping them visible may help remind the present generation of historical wrongs, argues of Iván G Somlai of EthnoBureaucratia.

ShrijuPradhan @ShrijuPradhan
Great start! Listening to him is like being there at the site. His perspectives are just amazing as always!

Krishna Joshi @krishna_joshi01
Great initiative! Congratulations!

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Last week, it looked like the rift in the ruling NCP between PM K P Oli and co-chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal was finally settled after a compromise deal. But it looks like NCP power struggle is headed for yet another showdown.

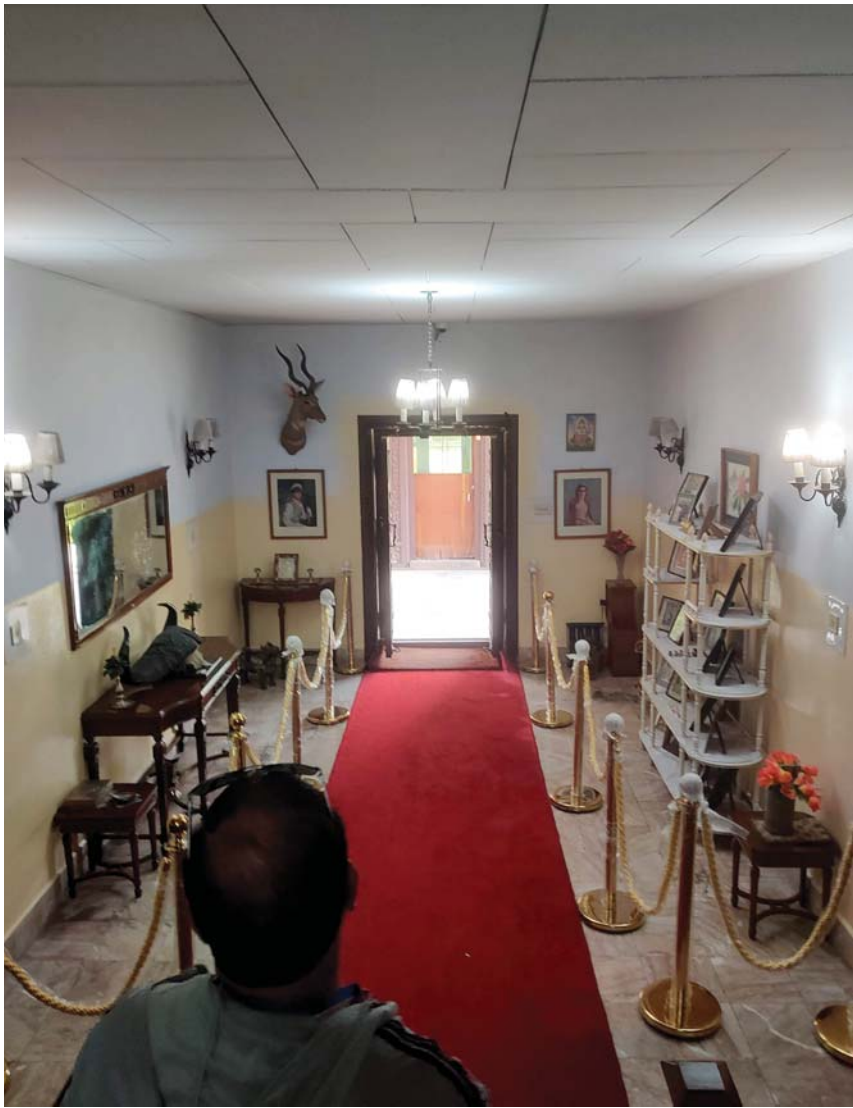
Alisha Maharjan @alisha_mah
The drawing/cartoons of this site are amazing. Too good.

Nepali Times

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Royal home

King Birendra designed this three-storey cottage named Shree Sadan for his family when he was Crown Prince. It will soon be open to the public, and has preserved the rooms exactly like it was when the entire royal family was killed in a massacre in 2001.

The living room, bedrooms, dining hall and even the bar alcove show the king's simple lifestyle and plain taste.

King Birendra walks with Queen Aishwarya and his favourite pet, Jit, in 2000 (*below, left*).

The royal family in 1991 (*below, right*). All five were killed in the palace massacre of 2001.

bedroom and a small terrace with a punching bag, where he often practiced boxing. Nirajan was 23 when he was killed.

The Prince's study room had stickers of cartoon characters Goofy and Mickey Mouse. He has a collection of Laughing Buddha figures on his shelf, and picture frames on the wall. Everything is as it was 20 years ago – even Nirajan's class schedule for Kathmandu Management College pinned to the wall and a weekly schedule printed in dot matrix: 'Wake up at 6.30 and head to bed by 23.00. Friday wake up at 10 am and FRIDAY NIGHT from 19.00 to 23.00.'

Princess Shruti's room is different. She was two years older than Nirajan, and it is more feminine: pink flowered closets, family portraits, single bed, study table with VCR tapes which she often shared with her brother. In the driveway below Shree Sadan are three small toy cars -- black, red and white -- in which the three siblings often played when they were children.

The opening of Shree Sadan has been delayed by the pandemic and bureaucratic hurdles. But Director of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum Bhesh Narayan Dahal says they are being sorted out: "Yes there were a lot of delays and mismanagement, but we don't want to wait any further. There is much more of an emotional connection with the royal family in Shree Sadan and it is a searing memory of the tragedy."

Because of his links to the royal family, Gurung was disappointed that visitors were not happy with the ceremonial palace and its exhibits. But he is confident that Shree Sadan will be a much more intimate addition to the museum.

There are other sections of the palace that are still out of bounds. Trishul Sadan to the east of the main palace has a salon, medication room, gymnasium, indoor swimming pool and private rooms of the prince and princesses. It has not been opened because it is part of the Mahendra Manjil, still the private residence of Queen Mother Ratna who is now 92, and was allowed to live there after 2008.

Gurung says that although King Birendra had winter and summer palaces in Chitwan, Pokhara and Nagarjun, his favourite was always Shree Sadan, a place where he truly felt at home and where he liked to relax while gardening and reading.

Narayanhiti is named after the Malla-era water spouts near the Narayan Temple. Prime Minister Bir Shumshere Rana, who had his daughter marry King Prithvi Bir Bikram Shah, made a palace for the king as a dowry in the late 19th century.

However, that neo-classical palace was destroyed in the 1934 earthquake and King Tribhuvan rebuilt the house called Tribhuvan Sadan -- the building where the massacre took place.

Says Buddhi Bahadur Gurung: "We look forward to welcoming visitors to this museum after the COVID-19 crisis. We have put our heart and soul into it to preserve it just as it was two decades ago on the day of the tragedy." 🇳🇵

Preserving King Birendra's family home

20 years after palace massacre, visitors to Shree Sadan can soon see rooms exactly as they were then



Alisha Sijapati

When Narayanhiti Palace was opened to the public in 2009 soon after Nepal was declared a republic, Nepalis flocked in to see what daily life of the royals looked like. They were not impressed.

Many thought they would also see Tribhuvan Sadan, the building where the 2001 family massacre took place in which ten members of the royal family were killed, and which was later demolished.

The pink pagoda shaped building with a tower designed by American architect Benjamin Polk was a ceremonial structure for official functions, and there was not much to see there about the private life of royals.

Now, the Narayanhiti Palace Museum is set to open Shree Sadan, King Birendra's private family residence, which has been kept intact since the massacre at 8:45 PM on Friday, 1 June 2001.

Nepali Times got an exclusive sneak preview of Shree Sadan this week, and it is like a time capsule – Prince Nirajan's room still has his class timetable stuck to the wall, the alcove bar has King Birendra's favourite brandy, and in the bedroom is a small cot where the king's beloved German Shepherd, Jit, used to sleep.

"Everything is the same as it was 20 years ago, we wanted it

to be as it was, a place where our king, queen, princes and princesses walked, this place holds attachment, and tampering with the memories would be a disservice to Nepal's history," says Buddhi Bahadur Gurung as he walks through the dark and slightly musty-smelling rooms.

This is an emotional project for 54-year-old Gurung, who worked closely with King Birendra ever since he was employed at the royal palace at the age of 21. He is now entrusted with sprucing up Shree Sadan so it can be added to the Narayanhiti Museum once the COVID-19 lockdown is fully lifted.

Despite the coronavirus restrictions, workers have used the past four months preserving the artefacts in Shree Sadan, while taking care not to disturb anything in the rooms. The building lies between the current museum and the Republic Memorial to the east.

Entering the lush driveway, visitors will be reminded that this was the route King Birendra took every day as he went to and from his office with Jit. There is a deep stillness in the air, and Shree Sadan has a raw and foreboding look.

Gurung remembers King Birendra as a simple man with plain tastes, and did not want an ostentatious building: "He preferred it this way, he loved the natural charm of the brick and tiles."

Crown Prince Dipendra did not live in Shree Sadan because royal tradition demanded that he stay separately from his parents once he turned 18. He had moved to Tribhuvan Sadan, where the shooting of the royal family took place in 2001 during a regular royal family dinner gathering.

Birendra had also moved out of the home of his father, King Mahendra, when he turned 18. That is when he built the 3-storey and 12-room Shree Sadan for himself.

The main door leads to a red carpeted hallway and a double staircase with a portrait of the extended royal family on the left. The shelf centres a painting of King Birendra's mother, Queen Indra – her immaculate beauty captured on a crystal frame. In contrast, the hallway also has some grisly taxidermy heads of bears, deer and mountain goats along the wall, a life-size mirror reflecting them.

The ground floor has the study of King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya, which was Crown Prince Dipendra's bedroom before he moved out in 1988.

The living room has portraits of Dipendra, Princess Shruti and Prince Nirajan, and the dining hall has a large brown marble table under a blue ceiling where only the family was allowed.

Off the dining area is a small alcove bar where King Birendra sometimes hosted his brothers for

after-dinner drinks and a cigar. He would pour himself a brandy, and fix drinks for Prince Gyanendra and Prince Dhirendra.

Upstairs, the first floor leads to the King and Queen's personal chambers and the hallway has oil-on-canvas paintings of landscapes and wildlife by Princess Shruti, an accomplished artist herself.

To the left is a common living room, with blue themed walls and furniture. There is a bulky cathode-ray Sony tv set and a stereo with cassette tapes in a corner. This area leads to Queen Aishwarya's vanity room where there is a small dressing area with a three-sided mirror table, a partition for changing. Adjoining it is a *puja kotha* (prayer room).

To the right on the first floor is the personal room of the King and Queen which is modest, almost frugal. A 1990s National tv set faces a king-sized bed attached to a mirror that goes up to the ceiling. The side table has a dial telephone along with a framed image of Khaptad Baba. The bathrooms are simple with pink tiles, a bathtub, a small mirror and an ordinary sink.

Next to the door is a small cot for King Birendra's favourite pet, Jit the German Shepherd. Jit died soon after the royal massacre. "It was depression," Gurung says.

Princess Shruti and Prince Nirajan lived on the second floor. To the right of the hallway is Nirajan's chamber: his study room,



SUBHAS RAI IN NEPALI TIMES #51, 13-19 JULY 2001

Why Nepal is stuck

New book by ex-World Bank adviser blames state capture by politico-business syndicates

Kunda Dixit

As a former broadcast journalist and ex-employee of the World Bank's Nepal office, Rajib Upadhyaya (pictured, right) is the right person at the right time to come out with an account of the political economy of Nepal's development since 1990.

The title of Upadhyaya's book released on 5 August, *Cabals and Cartels: An Up Close Look at Nepal's Turbulent Transition and Disrupted Development*, pretty much sums up its content. During his tenure at the Bank between 1995-2018, Upadhyaya served as the eyes and ears for successive bosses in their dealings with Nepal's politicians and bureaucrats.

The result is an insider look at how the powerful multilateral lender interacted with Nepal's officialdom. Over the years, the Bank has on the one hand been criticised for meddling too much in state functions, and on the other for not meddling enough when Nepal was in deep crisis. So, it must be doing some things right.

The book begins in the heydays of the mid-1990s when democracy and the market economy brought

hope that Nepal could finally take a great leap forward. However, some comrades took 'great leap forward' to mean something else and waged a ruinous war.

Upadhyaya's first task at the Bank was to work on a report titled *Political Economy of Reform in Nepal* which concluded that politicians with short-term time horizons, a rent-seeking culture, and vested interest groups were preventing reforms. Sound familiar?

Cabals and Cartels takes us through the early reform years of the 1990s, the insurgency, Gyanendra's reign, the peace process, and finally the new federal system – with Nepal's politico-business nexus as the thread running through it all.

The book is a roll call of World Bank experts who visited Nepal: Ashraf Ghani, Mac Maharaj, Emmanuel Tumusiime. There were Bank's successive South Asia chiefs like Mieko Nishimizu and Praful Patel, as well as past Country Directors that Upadhyaya



KISHOR KAYASTHA

advised: Hans Rothenbühler, Ken Ohashi, and Johannes Zutt.

They all came and went at various historical milestones in Nepal's past 25 years, and Upadhyaya has revealing anecdotes about their meetings with Nepali officials. Rothenbühler arrived in Nepal in 2000 just as 'shit was

about to hit the fan' (in his own words) over the Bank's insistence on reforms in Nepal Bank Limited and Nepal Banijya Bank which were being bled dry by wilful defaulters.

Needless to say, they were cartel members with cabal protection, as the *Nepali Times* reported at the time. They were so powerful that they could collude to get the CIAA to frame reformers on trumped up charges, and leaned on Supreme Court justices to convict them.

Upadhyaya becomes close to Madhav Ghimire at the Foreign Aid Division of the Finance Ministry who fought hard for reforms, and later in his career conducted

the tricky 2013 elections. He was killed in a car crash in 2016.

Madhav Ghimire was in a panel discussion with David Dollar of the report *Assessing Aid*, which the Bank had asked me to moderate in 2000. Upadhyaya's account of that conference reminded me something I had long forgotten: how difficult it was to get government officials in the audience to ask a question. Ghimire was irritated because he had coached them to be pro-active.

Nepal's misfortune is that we do not make bureaucrats of the calibre and integrity of Madhav Ghimire anymore. Upadhyaya recalls that Ghimire went to Manakama Temple in 1998 to ask for his wish to be fulfilled. But he did not have a personal request for the priest, he asked for divine help to complete the Melamchi Water Supply Project. Twenty-two years later, plagued by corruption and mismanagement, the project is still in limbo.

Upadhyaya played a behind the scenes role in setting up the Society of Economic Journalists of Nepal (SEJON) with a bunch of bright young boys, some of whom like Ameet Dhakal, Prateek Pradhan, Kiran Nepal have gone

on to become editors of influential media.

Cabals and Cartels has some fascinating chapters on how even an honest prime minister like K P Bhattarai could be forced by the cartels to appoint Tilak Rawal as Rastra Bank governor. Some at the World Bank office in Kathmandu described this as akin to 'putting an arsonist in charge of the fire department'. Finance Minister Mahesh Acharya resigned over the appointment, and Rawal had so much clout he got his dismissal overturned by the Supreme Court.

The next Country Director Upadhyaya worked under was the soft-spoken but plain-speaking Ken Ohashi. He wrote surprisingly critical op-eds, including for *Nepali Times*, but in one of them in *Kantipur* he defended the government raising fuel prices that triggered student protests. Ohashi summoned the student leaders to his office, and convinced them about why it needed to be done. Among the student leaders was Gagan Thapa, now an opposition MP.

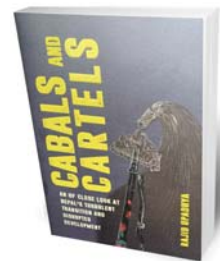
Upadhyaya is also critical of the Bank's colonial heavy-handed approach. He cites how bosses in DC even suspected that Ohashi had 'gone native' when he started engaging with Babu Ram Bhattarai and Pushpa Kamal Dahal after the peace process. The Bank also got flak for its \$50 million grant for Maoist camps, after Dahal boasted on candid camera that he had hoodwinked donors by inflating guerrilla numbers four fold.

Experts the Bank had invited accurately analysed Nepal's malaise. Asraf Ghani, the author of *Fixing Failed States*, who is now Afghanistan's president, put his finger on the root causes: over-politicisation, last-minute problem fixing, lack of rule of law, and low performance.

Mac Maharaj, a confidante of Nelson Mandela, advised Nepal not to follow South Africa's example in the peace process. Ugandan public finance expert Emmanuel Tumusiime said 'lack of money is not a problem in Nepal, access to easy money is'. Even as far back as 1964, an early World Bank consultant had concluded about Nepal: 'The central government in Nepal is not conditioned to get things done ... money is certainly not the problem'.

Upadhyaya notes rather depressingly: 'For all the outward signs of progress, our structural problems remain fundamentally unaddressed since the early 1960s ... the World Bank economists could be writing about present-day Nepal.'

Indeed, Nepal's progress is stymied because of state capture by a cartel of cannibals. We know what the problems are, we know the solutions. Nepal just does not have leaders with the political will and capability to implement them. 🇳🇵



Cabals and Cartels: An Up Close Look at Nepal's Turbulent Transition and Disrupted Development by Rajib Upadhyaya

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Nepalis caught up in Beirut blast recount horror

For the mostly female domestic workers in Lebanon, the disaster comes on top of economic woes

Some of the estimated 2,200 Nepalis in Lebanon, most of them female domestic workers in Beirut, have been injured in the massive blast on Tuesday that killed more than 100 people and injured over 5,000.

However, Nepalis on social media groups in Lebanon report that most are safe, and even the ones with injuries do not need hospital admission.

“From the window, I saw the first explosion but I did not make much of it. But the second one was huge and it felt like the building would collapse. It felt like a huge earthquake,” recalls Sanju Waiba, who was in a church. “Something hit me hard and I could not tell what was happening. I went down seven floors and a Lebanese friend drove me to hospital.”

Since her injury was not severe and the hospital was dealing with many serious patients, Waiba was sent to a pharmacy which bandaged the injury on her arm.”

Waiba was taken to hospital by Nepali domestic worker Pramila, who also remembers the first



explosion as not being so loud. “But the second one was so big it shook my house,” Pramila said on the phone.

Rita, another domestic worker, who lives near the explosion area said: “The explosion was the loudest I have ever heard, I still cannot hear properly. My hands are still shaking. The glass in our windows are all broken. My employers were also afraid, and thought there would be another explosion.”

Lebanon was already in the midst of a pre-coronavirus economic crisis which was

exacerbated by the lockdown, and has impacted migrant workers more than the pandemic itself. There have been street protests, and migrant workers were already struggling because of the collapse of the Lebanese pound which has lost over 80% of its value against the dollar.

Ashok Thapa, Chairman of the Non-resident Nepali Association of Lebanon told Nepali Times: “The pandemic is a secondary concern for workers here given the relatively low number of cases, although things have deteriorated in the past week.”

Lebanon re-imposed the lockdowns last week after cases started rising. Not all Nepali workers are similarly impacted. Those who earn in US dollars are relatively better off, although there are some who are working for reduced salaries. But Nepalis workers earning in local currency have been hit hard by the devaluation.


Nepalis who work part-time in multiple households and live in rental accommodations have been worst affected by the economic crisis. Thapa adds, “At least those who live-in with the employers or work in companies do not have to worry about rent or food expenses.”

Rama, a live-in domestic worker is aware that she is lucky to have an employer who treats her like family. “When I heard my employers talking about not being able to afford basic foodstuff, I asked them whether I should start making plans to go back to Nepal. But my employer assured me that they can afford to keep me,” she said.

Rama describes that supermarket visits are different these days with limits on the quantity of items that can be purchased owing to shortages, such as only one packet of rice or two soaps per visit.


Pramila is undocumented and lives with fellow Nepalis in a rented apartment. “As live-out, part-time workers during a pandemic, employers are reluctant to hire us for fear of the virus,” she says. “The price of rice has tripled, and we have reduced our meals. I don’t have much of an appetite these days anyway.”

Pramila is one of the 30 Nepalis in Lebanon who have registered to return home, and it will be a struggle to pay the \$700 air fare. This is a smaller number than other countries because of the lack of jobs and the spreading coronavirus back in Nepal, as well as the high air fare amid the Lebanese currency crisis. Others are stuck with employers who are not in a position to clear their dues.

Many Nepali women have come to Lebanon despite a ban on domestic workers going to West Asia, some had not been able to go home for several years to see their children and families because of the fear that they will not be allowed back out. However, last year the government allowed current workers — many working in Lebanon — to return to their jobs after home visits. 


Some names have been changed.

 **nepalitimes.com**
Watch video clips. 

**BIZ BRIEFS**

Himalaya repatriation flights

Himalaya Airlines will operate repatriation flights on 8 August to ferry Nepalis from Doha and Kuala Lumpur. Passengers must present proof of negative COVID-19 PCR or RDT test before boarding flights.



ACCA and AUDAN

The Auditors’ Association of Nepal (AUDAN) and ACCA (Association of Chartered Certified Accountants) have formalised relations for a sustainable partnership, undertake joint research, leverage on each other’s networks, and to support professional development.




Ncell online

Ncell has collaborated with PABSON and NPABSON to use Ncell’s mobile connectivity for online teaching and learning activities. Under the agreement, students, teachers and staff members will be able to subscribe to a bundled service based on a recommendation letter of PABSON and NPABSON.

NMB Bank

NMB Bank has signed an MoU with nCloud Pvt Limited to promote a digital payment channel in the transportation sector through the use of contactless cards and POS terminals in public vehicles. The project will initially begin with a partnership with Kipu Bus Sewa. The project is in line with Nepal Rastra Bank mandate towards digitisation.



Nabil Bank

Nabil Bank has been awarded Nepal’s Best Bank per the Euromoney magazine’s Awards for Excellence for the second time in a row. The bank was awarded on the basis of services and profit growth among others. Euromoney’s Awards for Excellence was introduced in 1992, during which Euromoney has distributed awards to international, regional and national level banks for their contribution to banking services.

Everest Bank

Everest Bank has handed over an Auto Refractometer and Keratometer to Lumbini Institute of Ophthalmology’s Shree Rana Ambika Shah Eye Hospital and Research Center. The machine will be used for eyeglass prescription.




Hydropower agreement

NMB Bank has successfully inked the Financial Closure Agreement of Madame Khola Hydropower Project at Madi Rural Municipality in Kaski. The Financial Closure Agreement was signed with lead financing from NMB Bank and NIC Asia Bank, and with Prabhu Bank and Employees Provident Fund as consortium member banks and financial institutions.

BoK and NIC

Bank of Kathmandu Staff union donated Rs251,000 to the National Innovation Center (NIC), which has been producing PPE in Nepal to fight the spread of COVID-19. President of the BoK staff union Arun Shrestha handed over the financial assistance to NIC chairperson Dr. Mahabir Pun.





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EVENTS



Art Exhibition

Curated by Ujen Norbu Gurung, *Samrachhen* is an art exhibition presenting national and cultural heritage in the form of realistic pen and ink drawings from artist Prashant Shrestha. Visit the exhibition at Dhokaima Café or online on Tulikaa.com. 7 August, Dhokaima Cafe

WOW Virtual Nepal

On the occasion of the International Day of World's Indigenous Peoples, WOW emcee and curator Malvika Subba will talk to Chini Maya Majhi and Kalpana Limbu, Nepali women who have championed the identity of indigenous women and have strived to advocate for indigenous knowledge and culture. Visit Facebook for more information. 9 August, 5pm-6pm



Sunday Sessions

This International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, writer, researcher and indigenous activist Tashi Tewa Dolpo will join Pratibha Tuladhar to speak about his deep involvement with the Nepali indigenous movement and how he took up writing to tell stories of Dolpo. Stay tuned for the Facebook live. 9 August, 7pm



Quilling workshop

Looking for a creative outlet? Participate in a quilling workshop with Happy Hands Nepal and learn how to quill. 9 August 11am-2pm, Happy Hands Nepal, 9813888170

Art 25

Sattya Media Art collective's speed painting competition Art 25 is virtual this year. Flex those painting skills right from the comfort of home. Artists from outside Kathmandu can participate. Sign up for the virtual live painting competition at bit.ly/art25online by 15 August.

LibriVox

Not a reader? Download and listen to audiobooks of thousands of novels and poetry in the public domain, read by volunteers from all over the world.



Kurzgesagt

Kurzgesagt – In a Nutshell creates animated educational content on scientific, technological, political, philosophical and psychological subjects. If teachers, parents, or casual viewers are looking for creative educational material, head on to the Kurzgesagt YouTube channel.

Imago Dei Cafe

The menu Nourish by Imago Dei features a limited option for each weekday, yet thoughtfully created with a healthy balance of nutrition and 5 great taste. Healthy food was never so good. Nag Pokhari, Naxal (01) 4442464



Hotel Kaze Darbar

Enjoy mouthwatering Japanese delicacies at Hotel Kaze Darbar. Do not miss the grilled pork in Miso paste. Kamalpokhari (01) 4439303

Phalano Coffee Ghar

This casual eatery serves great coffee, filling sandwiches and special baked goods at record time and attentive service. Pulchowk (01) 5534555

Le Mirch

At Le Mirch, bold and exciting flavours of Indian cuisine are subtly influenced by the refined and sophisticated French fine-dining. Gluten free and vegetarian options are available are well. Labim Mall, Pulchowk (01) 5527437



ONLINE ARCHIVES



Google Heritage tour

Go on a virtual adventure and explore world heritage sites through Google's UNESCO International heritage virtual tour. Visit 30 heritage sites from home, including the Jasovska Cave in Slovakia, the Archaeological Areas of Pompei, Stonehenge, and more.

The Doers

A platform for successful Nepali entrepreneurs to share their ideas and opinions on the world of business. Find The Doers on Listen Notes and YouTube.

Herne Katha

The web series shows untold stories of ordinary people in the form of short documentaries. Head on to their YouTube channel to start.

DINING



Chez Caroline

Tucked away from the street noise and fumes, this is the place to visit for authentic French and continental cuisine in Nepal. The restaurant offers catering and takeaway services too. Try the Profiteroles au Chocolat and Choux pastry filled with vanilla ice cream and hot chocolate sauce. Baber Mahal Revisited (01) 4263070/ 9841569365

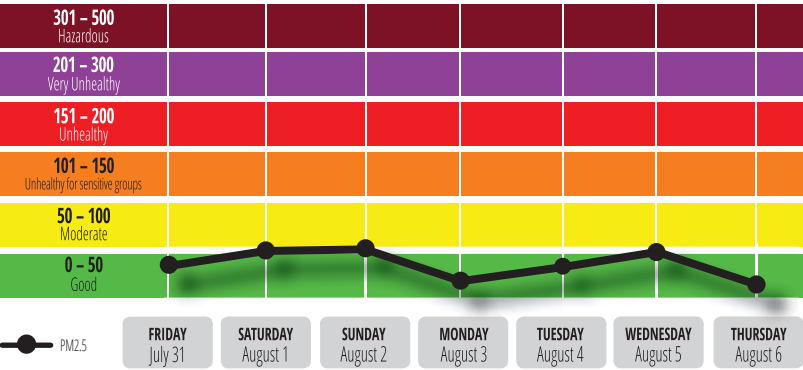


The pattern of passing showers with heavy night rain with bright mornings is set to continue into Friday and Saturday. This means sultry and hot days ahead with the maximum in Kathmandu exceeding 31 degrees. Cloud cover will probably increase on Sunday as a new monsoonal trough arrives from the east. Rain will likely be light to moderate.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
30° 20°	30° 21°	28° 20°

AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 31 July - 6 August



Just look at that graph and see what overnight monsoon shower can do. Every night, it cleans up the muck that we emit into the air we breathe. The daily average Air Quality Index (AQI) has remained almost within the Green 'Good' Zone all week. That is because we have had heavy night rain that flushes the pollutants down, especially the really harmful soot particles below 2.5 microns. Mixed with COVID-19, air pollution can be even deadlier. The combination of rain and the re-imposed odd-even rule brought down the AQI to a record low on Thursday. Hope the good news lasts. <https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

KRIPA JOSHI



Plastic bottles are resource-intensive to manufacture, fill, and ship around the globe, and thus have a massive carbon footprint. They are made using fossil fuels and need more than three litres of water for every one litre bottle produced. Even though plastic bottles can be recycled, more than half of them are not, so millions of bottles end up in landfills and the ocean. Plastic bottles leach toxic chemicals into bottled water if exposed to heat or left to sit for a long period of time. Bottled water is also much more expensive, sometimes even 2,000 times more expensive, than tap water. Bottled water can be useful if we live in an area with contaminated water or if the water supply is unreliable due to a disaster. But for most of us they are completely unnecessary. We can put filters for our tap water and get into the habit of carrying reusable bottles made of stainless steel, glass or BPA free hard-plastic.



OUR PICK

A dysfunctional family of adopted sibling superheroes must reunite to solve the mystery of their father's death and the threat of an impending apocalypse in this American web television series based on the comic of the same name written by Gerard Way. Two seasons in, the adaptation features an ensemble cast of Ellen Page, Tom Hopper, David Castañeda, Emmy Raver-Lampman and Robert Sheehan.



नेपाल सरकार

सञ्चार तथा सूचना प्रविधि मन्त्रालय

सूचना तथा प्रसारण विभाग

Air-brushing history by toppling statues

Keeping them visible may help remind the present generation of historical wrongs

Ivan G Somlai

For thousands of years, adulatory statues have been installed and, at one time or another, defaced or removed. We are consumed by statues as they are visibly symbolic reference points. But were we too seriously research the background of those represented in the statues, many of us may be surprised.

The births of many modern nations had been initiated by the arrival of 'western' interlopers. Nepal's founding monarch Prithvi Narayan Shah is said to have quipped that they brought *bazaar* (trade), bible (religion) and *banduk* (guns to motivate obedience), leaving an undoubtedly confounding legacy. His statue at Singha Darbar intersection, with an index finger symbolising unity, was nearly toppled in 2006.

It would be difficult to find a name or representation of one from any culture whom we could comfortably absolve of atrocities. Thus, unless one prefers statues of only Mother Theresa, Chief Dan George, Albert Einstein, Greta Thunberg or Gandhi (though even that has been disfigured in London recently) almost any other historical statue will inevitably be of people who have had binary actions and effects (think Genghis Khan, Mao Zedong, Simon Bolivar, Kwame Nkrumah, and even Nobel laureates like Mandela and Aung San Suu Kyi).

Many of the memorials erected have been for multipolar, compartmentalised characters with a record of welcome changes for some, but blood on their hands for others. One who helped liberate a country only to then abet massive programs of executions and famine to bring people to accept a 'utopian reform' (Lenin and Mongolia).



DANIEL W EDWARDS

Another, intimately involved in liberating a continent while simultaneously allowing a famine to overtake millions on another continent (Churchill and Europe, and India). Spurred by the Black Lives Matter movement, demonstrations, protest marches and various forms of damaging and destroying statues have spread across the world.

Collectively, we accept many aspects of dissatisfaction, because much of it is too obscure or wickedly complicated to pursue by all, but those dedicated to extensive research and pursuit of solutions.

Focus therefore shifts to visible, physical representations of systemic weaknesses, especially during increased societal tension. Yet, statues are not the only simulacra of histories forgotten or revived.

Around the world, roads, canals and railroads have been built wholly or partially through

slave or indentured labour. Yet, we continue to tour on them without a thought.

Then there were those who did unforgivable things from which, in the end, they personally profited. It is reasonable to assume that their decisions were calculated with knowledge of the consequences: Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Pol Pot, Enver Hoxha ... the more infamous of the most egregious tyrants.

Targets for mass killings and enslavement included those who were indigenous, or from a different religious, ethnic, racial, economic or political group. So, for those enmeshed in the purposeful planning, commitment and/or oversight of major atrocities, I have no sympathy. Yet many in between, such as Castro, Kagame and MBS, have been implicated in contradictory liabilities.

Difficulties start when considering people who were

basically well-intentioned within incredibly complex contexts, wherein their weighing of best alternatives sometimes resulted in decisions with deleterious impacts. So, were these errors of character, of fact, or of process?

London Mayor Sadiq Khan recently set up a Commission for Diversity in the Public Realm to recommend which statues in London should be removed. Discrete options already in practice elsewhere include Coronation Park in Delhi, where statues of former officials from the colonial era have been relocated. In Berlin's Spandau Zitadel special museum visitors can touch most of the objects relegated to a protected indoor display. In Nepal, statues of Ranas in heroic poses on their steeds have been relegated to obscure corners of Tundikhel. Statues of the Shahs were similarly removed in 2006.

Altering, dismembering or



ANDOR D HELLER

STATUESQUE: Statue of Jang Bahadur Rana in Tundikhel in the 1972 was removed to a remote corner of Tundikhel (*left*).

Stalin's statue toppled on the streets of Budapest in the 1956 anti-Soviet uprising (*above*).

stomping on statues or other representations, protesters transform their frustrations onto a rehumanised embodiment of their focus. But by doing this, are they not exemplifying a moral reaction obverse to their own desired ethical behaviour by others?

Toxic outrage may force the elimination of symbols of racism or other atrocities, but in the long term it can only be deliberate policy and regulatory improvements in governance, education and civic action that would gradually change the culture of attitudes and behaviours.

As Israel's Prime Minister Golda Meir said in 1975, "One cannot and must not try to erase the past merely because it does not fit the present".

Rather we must take advantage of history, including unsavoury history, and keep it visible so as to enable enhanced learning from past misdeeds and errors by showing measured, humane, non-violent responses.

Young and old alike must learn that there is not just day and night, but dawn and twilight as well. 🇳🇵

Iván G Somlai is Director of EthnoBureaucratia based in Canada, and was a former consultant with Nepal's Ministries of Health, Industry, and Tourism.

Adventures of a lone archivist

Nepali overseas worker takes it upon himself to collect as much as he can of Nepal's historical memorabilia

Alisha Sijapati

Archiving should be a state responsibility, and Nepal does have a National Archive. But a Nepali working in the Gulf has shown how much can be achieved by just one individual with a passion for history.

No one can find the original of the 1816 Sugauli Treaty anywhere. Important historical documents, agreements with Tibet, China and British India are also missing. Many of them probably went up when Singha Darbar caught fire in 1973.

Which is why Santosh Khaderi has taken it upon himself to archive as much as possible of official records, early photographs, letters and ephemera from Nepali history as he can. What started out as a hobby, has now become an important contribution to archiving in Nepal for this 28-year-old Dang native and college dropout.

He has been in Abu Dhabi for the past six years, working night shifts. He found so much factually incorrect news about Nepal that he started collecting digital records of the country's past wherever he could find them on the Internet. Working 6-7 hours during the day, Khaderi has built up a collection that he also shares widely through his Twitter account and with regular well-researched articles in *Annapurna Post*.

"Being away from Nepal has made me value my homeland even more, and to stay in touch while being relevant to my roots and upbringing," Khaderi says. "In addition, it gives me the opportunity to correct historical inaccuracies, bending of facts, or deliberate lies."



ROYAL TROPHY: King George V with Prime Minister Chandra Shumshere Rana with a dead tiger in Chitwan in 1911.

Khaderi says it is thanks to the corpus of knowledge on the searchable Internet that he can do this work. Without the net it would be immensely complicated since the documents, records, news clips and film footage are scattered around the world.

"It's all there on the net, you just have to know how to search for it," he says. "But I am limited to material that is in the public domain, I don't have the money to pay for other content."

Khaderi's archive so far has 600 videos, 700 books and newspaper clips, numerous

government letters, even invitation cards from Mohan Shumshere for a diplomatic reception at the Nepal Embassy at Barakhamba Road in New Delhi in 1950. Khaderi has dug up news clips from 100 years ago to piece together Bishnu Shumshere Rana's affair with a Hollywood dancer, and his eventual death in the Bahamas.

"It is disappointing that our country does not have any papers related to the Kalapani border issues and whatever news has been printed is just mudslinging



between two governments, there are few fact-based statements," he says.

Among Khaderi's archives is correspondence between Indian Ambassador

and Prime Minister Nehru in 1950 in which he cites the Royal Nepal Army's lack of preparedness to deal with external threats. Within two years of Prime Minister Matrika Prasad Koirala's visit to India in 1952, Indian military communication units were placed at 17 points along the India-Nepal border.

Khaderi has also dug up reports filed by Indian military about patrols to Kalapani in 1959 that prove that the Indian Army already had bases perhaps as long before as 1956.

"Our country and the government has a handful of shortcomings, but the biggest shortcoming is the lack of archives," Khaderi says. "these should be digitised, stored, and even made public. Hardcopy files can be destroyed, misplaced or even disappear."

Khaderi says he went to the UAE for financial reasons, but he is itching to get back to Nepal where he wants to set up and maintain a historical archive, and what he has collected so far will be the starting point. 🇳🇵



ALL PHOTOS: AJAY NARSINGH RANA

Ajay Narsingh Rana

We have been home now for more than four months, and as a blogger, nature and wildlife photographer, the shelter in place restrictions have been excruciating. The great outdoor was always my comfort zone, and now being confined within the home has forced me to reflect on the work I was doing and explore ways to enhance it.

The whole world is suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic, and Nepal is also affected by the great disruption. The spread of the virus was supposedly being controlled by the lockdown, but now it seems otherwise. The total number of cases and fatalities in Nepal continue to rise.

With all assignments and projects probably cancelled for the rest of the year, I fell back on macro photography, which was what got me started into capturing images of nature and wildlife in the first place back in 2008. It was time to challenge myself again.

And where better than the small patch of greenery outside my home in Kathmandu. It is alive with insects, arthropods, reptiles of various shapes and sizes walking, hopping, buzzing, fluttering, and flying around under the monsoon sky. The patch is bursting with life, especially during the rainy months.

Many people recoil at the sight of insects and spiders, and we are culturally hardwired to regard them as being harmful. Some of you might get goosebumps and chills down the spine even thinking about them. I share this feeling when it comes to leeches, I admit, but these critters in the garden form an amazing urban ecosystem. The very fact that they are still around means we have not completely obliterated them with chemicals of mass destruction like insecticides.

Charismatic mammals like tigers, pandas and rhinos get all the attention in nature programs. The smaller members of the animal kingdom tend to disappear underfoot. But when we talk about conservation, forests, and wildlife, we have to include everything in it, because they are all inherently interlinked. Even the tiniest insects are part of a larger whole in nature, each of them contributing in their small way to biodiversity and the health of nature. The *aphid* is as important as the bat, if not more. And we are not even talking about microscopic organisms that cannot even be seen with the human eye.

And as the COVID-pandemic has shown, we ignore nature at our

own peril. The spread of zoonotic infections is happening because of modern industrial society ignoring and destroying the natural world. The biosphere is being sterilised with urban sprawl, monoculture crops, or plantations. Factory farms are mass producing meat, and there are 25 billion broiler chicken worldwide at any given time. Chicken bones will be the lasting legacy of the anthropocene era.

Lockdown mornings in Kathmandu start early for me as I am awoken by the *kooo-ooooo kooo-oooooo* of the Asian Koel that perches on the Persian Lilac tree nearby. This bird has been visiting the neighbourhood every March to April, and makes its presence known far and wide.

You must have heard of the cuckoo that was geo-tagged and on its annual 12,000km migration from southern Africa, across the Arabian Sea, the Subcontinent, and through most of Asia to its breeding ground in Mongolia – the longest bird migration ever recorded. I don't know where our Koel migrates.

These mornings the song of the Asian Koel often overlaps the Oriental Magpie Robin's long symphonies from a treetop which opens up the dawn into a beautiful brand new day. Because of the lack of traffic, the cacophony of vehicle horns, machines, loud music, construction nearby is replaced by an all-day silence – broken only by bird songs. And if you hear them, you can also see them.

With the first rays of the sun hitting the dew-moist flowers, Honey Bees are out busily buzzing about. A soft and moist breeze pushes through the Holy Basil, disrupting tiny Sweat Bees from landing on the small flowers – they navigate to land on the swaying stamens while pollen sticks to their tiny hair (scopae). Then they ride to the next flower to pollinate it, a process repeated over and over.

As I sit nearby observing their daily rituals, a parasitoid Spider Hunting Wasp lands on the ground, and moves around from one shaded area to the other searching for prey and ultimately making its way to my thigh before flying away.

A moment later it is dragging a paralyzed spider towards its burrow in a nearby grass patch. The wasp will lay its egg on the abdomen of the spider, and the larvae will feed on the spider as it grows.

While I explore this magnificent macro world, the life cycle of insects become even more interesting, and I realise how human disturbance can hamper a species, and affect the food chain.

IT'S A SMALL WORLD

'Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.'

- Albert Einstein

This is also the season for butterflies, and they are flapping about in force. I observe a caterpillar constructing a cocoon cage before going into the pupa incarnation of its metamorphosis. The constructed cage looks very elaborate, and this was my second time seeing such a structure after almost six years. As I get accustomed to the patterns in the foliage, I notice more life forms and in their small worlds.

Documentation through video also became a priority during the lockdown. I stumble upon a jumping spider, and this became a moment for the next two days of seeing the world from its perspective. I started filming it from the instant it emerged from a dead leaf where it was sheltering, scanning around for prey, and strutting around gingerly.

Documenting nature is difficult when you are filming on your subject's terms and conditions, not yours. This is how it should be and, how I like it to be.

As I look around the garden for other bugs to take portraits of, I am surprised to find so many species of spiders in such a small area. One of them is a tiny Orb-weaving Spider, making its web. The engineering instinct with which it instinctively wove the flimsy silk into the web with its hind legs was fascinating.

While the small world can take up all my attention, from time to time I look up at the nearby tree for the *tsee-tsee* notes of the Oriental White-eyes making a hopping flight from another tree in the distance. The bird cautiously jumps from one branch to the other, browsing through the countless flower buds for nectar, and also dining on hapless insects that are also trying to do the same.

Common Tailorbirds also frequent my tree to feed, and sing at the top of their voices *cheeup-cheeup-cheeup* before vanishing again. They must be taking a strand of leaf to weave into a nest that they are meticulously crafting on another nearby tree. Far in the distance, the Koel is once more calling for a mate, but has been hard to spot after May when it seems to have moved on.

The days close with flocks of parakeets streaking across the sky, like fighter bombers, to their nesting tree. They are always on the same flight path, in formation on an eastward heading and announcing their passage with loud self-important squawks.

They seem to be proliferating. Ichangu and Nagarjun have resident Slaty Headed Parakeets, and on the eastern edges of Kathmandu Valley there are Rose-Ringed Parakeets along with Alexandrine Parakeets. I was able to spot a Grey Treepie, Blue-throated Barbet, Spotted Dove, and more Red-vented Bulbuls in the past months – birds that were relatively rare before.

Then there are the many species of bees, hornets and wasps, damselflies and butterflies. There are insects that amazingly walk on water, so light that they keep afloat through surface tension. The dragonflies on their jagged flight plans swoop down to take a sip of water while airborne, the propwash creating tiny ripples on the water.

And at night, the Black-spined



Toads are up and about croaking loudly, hoping that there are some eager females within earshot. They navigate their way through the maze of potted plants on the porch, and then hop away in search of a pond to plop into.

The male Garden Lizards appear in the early morning sun to greet the sun, and showing off their crimson head and black throats to attract females who seem to go for that kind of pigment. A Ground Skink pokes its body out from a crack in the rock wall to bask in the warm sun, and I take a closeup look at the guy since I had not seen him in such proximity in my location.

The monsoon is also the Slug season, and they are making their ultra-slow locomotion. If it has rained overnight they seem to want to climb the wall of the house for no explicable reason. Sometimes the sun comes up before they are where they want to go, and they dry up, their dessicated bodies falling down to the grass below. There used to be lots of Ground Beetle larvae that loved to hunt and feast on slugs when we were kids, but it is rare to see them these days.

As the day comes to a close, there are many variants of moths that are attracted by the fluorescent light in the porch. The sheer number of moth species is staggering, a vastness and richness of wing patterns that is much more than I ever expected. By this time, our resident Barred Owlet is up and about. After being hungry all day, it is in a hurry to feed and is giving a wild shriek from its perch on an electric pole on the street.

Despite becoming more and more a concrete jungle, Kathmandu still has hidden small worlds where wild life clings on to patches of nature. It just needs a keen observer to find them, and to get the reassurance that despite everything they are going about their business in a human-dominated world.

Long-distance travel is still not on the agenda even though the lockdown has eased. And when restrictions are lifted, it may still not be advisable yet to get on a crowded bus to the starting point of a trek on the Valley rim.

The best option for now is to bike up to Ichangu, Nagarjun or Shivapuri which are the closest really wild places from the city. The transition from the urban jungle to a natural one can be quite sudden. One moment you are biking past provision stores with garlands of gaudy plastic wrapped crackers hanging outside, and the next you are inside a forest where large drops of water are falling from the leaves to the undergrowth.

Along the way, there is a White-throated Kingfisher flying to a branch overlooking a small stream, patiently waiting for a frog or fish to appear on its radar. Nearby, more Oriental White-eyes are raising a chorus from a tree.

Far in the distance, in between the Nepal Alder trees there are a bunch of White-crested Laughing Thrush making their presence known. A Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler is singing at the top of his voice from the top of another Alder, so loud that it is drowning out other birdcalls. The Warblers are also out, singing and flying around the pines.

Just then, I notice a pair of Chestnut-headed Bee-eaters chasing and catching insects in mid-air while a Verditer Flycatcher watches their antics from a nearby tree. Ichangu has always been a birder's haunt because of the promximity of Nagarjun forest, but like all other places, it is also being built up.

The last time I was here for birding, I was infatuated by the insects and used my macro lens, while the birds observed me, circling above, seemingly bemused by what I was doing on all fours on the forest floor.

I had read about how aggressive a Black Drongo can get to protect its nest, and sure enough, one of these silky black fork-tailed birds aggressively chased a kite away from its nesting area. The Kite was surprised by the sheer din the little fellow made, and decided to glide away down the slope.

There are lots of flybys in Ichangu. The Golden Oriole, Blue-throated Barbet, Blue Magpies, Grey Treepie are all doing a constant flypast from my vantage point. But I am here today to record insects with my closeup lens, and I will leave the birds for another day.

Macro photography is a genre of photography where your subjects are tiny, either natural or man-

made and anyone with basic photographic gear or a mobile phone, can get up close and personal with a subject. I use a Sony APSC camera with a prime lens paired with a lens adaptor and an improvised diffuser.

No equipment is adequate, and one always feels like a gear upgrade will make a picture technically better. But, take it from me: equipment is secondary. The biggest asset needed in this genre of photography is patience and respect for nature.

While exploring small worlds with or without a camera, the main point is that these critters are important in the balance of the nature. As Jonas Salk, an American medical researcher, and virologist puts it: "If all insects were to disappear from the earth within 50 years, all life on earth would end. If all human beings disappeared from the earth within 50 years, all life on earth would flourish."

As I write about my experience during the lockdown, reminiscing the past assignments and adventures in the wilderness is the motivating factor to look forward to similar experiences in the future. From Sagarmatha National Park to Rara National Park and, Gaurishankar Conservation Area to Annapurna Conservation Area, you realise that Nepal's natural diversity is richer than anywhere else in the world.

From 156m to 5,416m elevation, the range of flora and fauna I was able to see has had its appreciation in the *What I Saw* segment of my *PrakritiNepal* blog. There are some memorable sightings that left me spellbound, like seeing a Mountain Weasel running in a meadow at an altitude of 4,470m and being able to take a picture of it gave me a high that lasted days. Photographing and documenting the flora and fauna in sub-zero temperatures in the mountains to humid and hot Tarai jungles have their own stories.

There were times when I was just able to enjoy the sightings of various mammals and birds and not have enough time to be able to photograph them, but the happiness I got from was more intense than the ones I was able to photograph.

The visual memory that runs later in the mind is a lesson on what I should do next time to avoid a mistake, and also a reminder that sometimes it is better observing the species and not be too focused on clicking away. As my journey of visual documentation continues, I am even more excited to find out

what the future holds. I am also nervous with the thought that in my quest to see and document the flora and fauna of Nepal, the country's rapid development is happening at the cost of nature and perhaps the extinction of species we did not even know existed.

The new decade of the 2020s started on a disastrous note with the global pandemic. It has lessons for us about ignoring nature, and taking nature for granted. But the lockdown has also slowed us down, given us time to ponder our place in the cosmos, provide the natural Earth a chance to regenerate.

Before the pandemic, the major issues were climate change, deforestation, pollution, forest fire, the extinction of species. Those anthropogenic crises are still there, and the longer we wait, more species will have become extinct and the health of human societies will also be more precarious.

We need more voices to speak up for nature, which does not have a voice. Those voices need to be amplified and communicated. We need to share it so that it sparks inspiration and spreads the message of conservation.

Documenting nature's mysterious treasures through photography freezes time so we see the evolutionary changes that have made species to look like and behave as they do today. And they are still changing – millions of years from now they will look and behave differently. 🌍



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Smart lockdown

Nepal braces for COVID-19 surge as neighbouring India reels under pandemic

Sonia Awale

Prime Minister K P Oli held a meeting with 20 public health experts on Tuesday to discuss steps to deal with COVID-19, especially in cities bordering India – a sign that his government is taking a recent surge in cases seriously.

Nepal reported 360 new cases on Thursday, taking the total number so far to 21,750 and the number of fatalities up by five to 65. Kathmandu Valley detected 87 new cases and now has 876 confirmed cases with six deaths.

The government this week put six districts with over 200 cases (Kathmandu, Rautahat, Kailali, Mahottari, Parsa and Doti) in the Red Zone. In Kathmandu, 72 staff at Nepal Police Headquarters have tested positive and the premises are sealed off. Eight staff of the Ministry of Law, and a minister of Province 2 have tested positive.

Speaking at the interaction, Prime Minister Oli said: “We must lower the infection rate to zero, and treat those who are sick. But as long as we keep the border open, there will be more cases ... so we have to test them before allowing them to travel to home districts.”

Experts present noted that although the numbers are rising, the World Health Organisation (WHO) still puts Nepal in the ‘cluster spread’ stage, where the virus is not showing community transmission. They advise the government against re-imposing a lockdown, saying it was not a long-term solution.

Most public health experts favour a ‘smart lockdown’ where localities with cluster outbreaks are sealed off, and tested – while strictly enforcing masks in public places and preventing crowds. On Wednesday, the government re-imposed the odd-even rule for vehicles.

Since the lockdown was lifted on 21 July, the rate of infection has increased to 5.4%, indicating rapid spread in districts bordering India where all major cities like Birganj, Bitartnagar, Dhandagi, Nepalganj, Janakpur and Rajbiraj are under curfew.

Officials in Kathmandu Valley are also said to be considering lockdown, but experts say it is more advisable to seal off neighbourhoods rather than a strict blanket closure.

Medical experts fear that another shutdown is likely to kill more people than the disease it seeks to control, as people with non-coronavirus ailments cannot get to hospital for treatment, and the economy suffers even more, lowering nutrition levels of people.

Government figures show that there were 30% more child deaths in April-May this year compared to last year. Maternal mortality has also gone up because many more mothers gave birth at home instead of going to hospital. There has been a spike in measles and other infections because of delays in vaccination campaigns.

“A lockdown is not the solution to the coronavirus crisis. We must first analyse why we did not do the previous four months to take measures to control the spread,” says Sher Bahadur Pun of the Ministry of Health, “another lockdown will not make a difference.”

Pun adds that uncontrolled movement of people across districts during the lockdown with thousands crossing the Indian border to reach their homes, led to the flare-up in the infection.

“It is only going to get worse from here, especially as winter approaches,” predicts Buddha Basnyat of Patan Academy of Health Sciences. “We have to accept this and prepare for it, but another lockdown is only the last resort.”

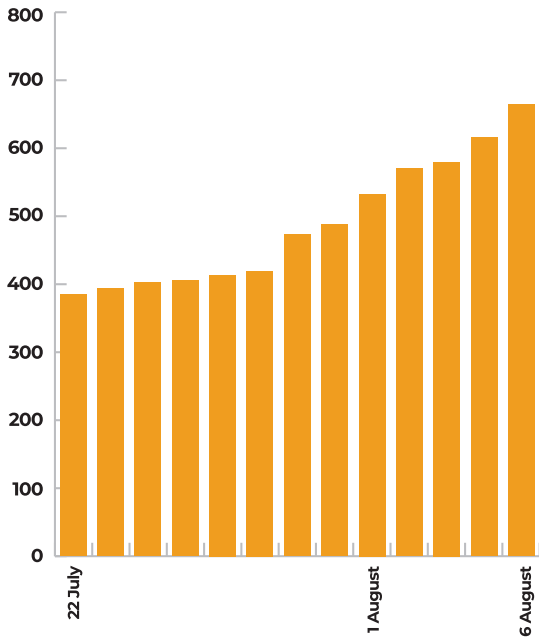
Basnyat says the government has to get on a war-footing to increase testing in the Tarai districts enforce mask-wearing and physical distancing, and as the number of severe cases rise, develop a treatment taskforce.

Hospitals should be better equipped



MONIKA DEUPALA

Confirmed cases Kathmandu Valley



to handle the increase in symptomatic and severe coronavirus cases being seen now, with clear treatment guidelines identifying the most effective drugs and therapies for Nepalis, so there is no expensive over-prescription.

As the ICUs get filled up, there is an urgent need for ventilators and oxygen concentrators, Basnyat adds. There are now 50 ICU patients with COVID-19 across the country, with 24 in Bagmati Province, which includes Kathmandu Valley. Birganj is said to have reached saturation in ICU capacity, and hospitals in other Tarai cities are also filling up.

Experts are also advocating for regular mass testing in cities with more movement of people. And if there is indeed another lockdown, they say testing in densely populated urban centres is a must.

A recent surveillance based on swab samples of 10,000 of the people who entered Kathmandu Valley last week found that 0.7% of them tested positive for SARS-CoV-2. Despite this seemingly low positivity rate, health officials say that the finding is significant because those individuals would have been carriers in their families and communities.

More worryingly, there is now a rise in cases with serious symptoms across Tarai districts, unlike in the past when most were asymptomatic or had co-morbidity. Hospitals in the Tarai are seeing a surge of typical COVID-19 symptoms with advanced pneumonia.

“Most hospitals and doctors in Nepal are now starting to feel the devastation this virus can cause, as it did in Lombardy, New York and parts of India,” says Buddha Basnyat. “Which is why despite low fatality rate in this part of the world and the concept of herd immunity, there is no time to be complacent.”

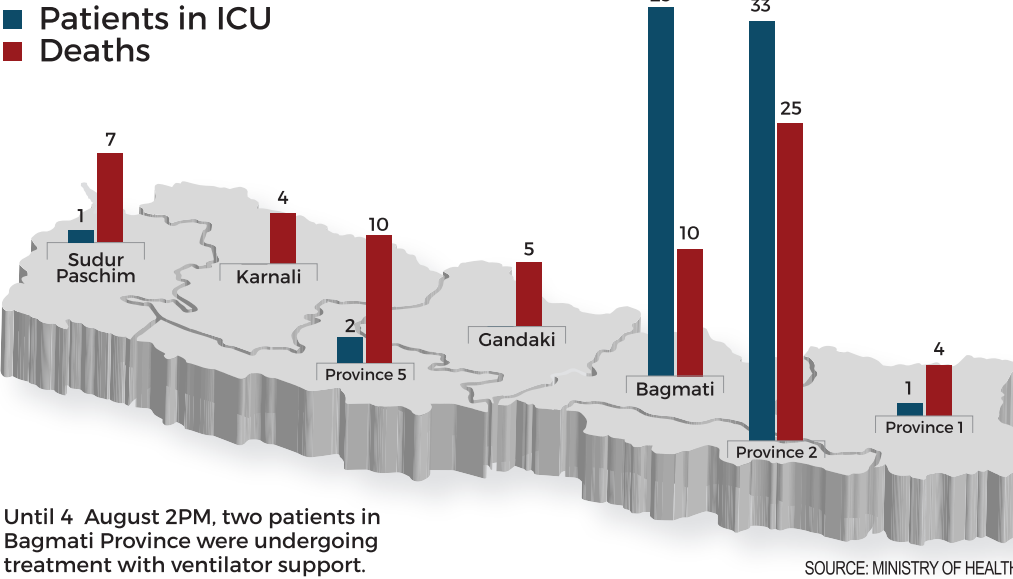
A rise in influenza in the rainy season could also be a reason for misdiagnosis because flu and COVID-19 have similar symptoms. Experts suggest flu to be tested with COVID-19, especially as winter approaches.

But even with all the planning in the world, strategies, drugs and medical infrastructure, the most effective tools against the virus are the three simple safety measures: physical distance, masks and hand hygiene.

Says Sher Bahadur Pun: “Testing, tracing and treating are important. Government action is crucial. But how strictly Nepalis follow safety guidelines and adapt it into their everyday lives will make the most difference.”

Health experts say that while Nepal may not be able to build hospitals in a week like Wuhan did, the government can start mass testing in the high-risk zones, set up tents and ICU beds and stockpile life-saving drugs and medical equipment. 🇳🇵

Toll of COVID-19 infections



Confirmed, Active, Death and Recovered Kathmandu Valley

