

Parliamentary whiplash

We will finally know in 12 July the fate of the dissolved House, whether or not K P Oli stays on as prime minister, if Sher Bahadur Deuba becomes prime minister for the fifth time in 20 years, or if Nepalis have to vote in early elections in November.

After two weeks of deliberations, on 12 July the Supreme Court's Constitutional bench is set to decide on writ petitions challenging Prime Minister Oli's dissolution of the Lower House and President Bidya Devi Bhandari's rejection of leadership bids by both Deuba and Oli on 21 May.

Throughout the submissions by petitioners and government lawyers, depositions by the four members of the amicus curiae, as well as questions from the bench, the debate has boiled down to this: in a multi-party democracy, does the party whip have more legitimacy in a floor test than a non-party individual vote?

Can MPs from a ruling party seeking a confidence vote side against it, and even back the candidacy of an opposition leader to replace their own prime minister?

There were spirited arguments by lawyers from both sides. The petitioners went beyond censuring Oli to accuse President Bhandari of complicity and failing in her duty to protect the Constitution from Oli's ambition to cling on to power.

Both Oli and his main challenger, former prime minister Madhav Kumar Nepal, have claimed that their actions were constitutional, and it was the other side that is acting against its letter and spirit.

The Constitutional Bench itself was formed last month on the basis of seniority by Chief Justice Chandra SJB Rana and includes Justices Dipak Kumar Karki, Anand Mohan Bhattarai, Mira Dhungana, Ishwar Prasad Khatriwada.

We have no way of guessing which argument the individual justices will favour, but if some of its recent judgements overturning Prime Minister Oli's moves one by one are anything to go by, they may also restore the dissolved House on Monday.

If you remember, after Prime Minister Oli got president Bhandari to dissolve the House for the second time on 21 May, Deuba of the Nepali Congress, Pushpa Kamal Dahal of the Maoist Centre and dissidents from Oli's own UML and the JSP gathered 149 signatures to

stake a claim to form the new government.

Oli got wind of this, and also claimed majority support with all 122 members of his own party and 31 from the JSP, even though rebel factions from both parties had sided with the Deuba-led alliance.

President Bhandari rejected both claims saying two groups cannot claim a majority. This prompted the politicians from the five-party alliance to file a slew of petitions in the Supreme Court on 24 May, not just challenging the dissolution of the house but also asking that Deuba be declared prime minister.

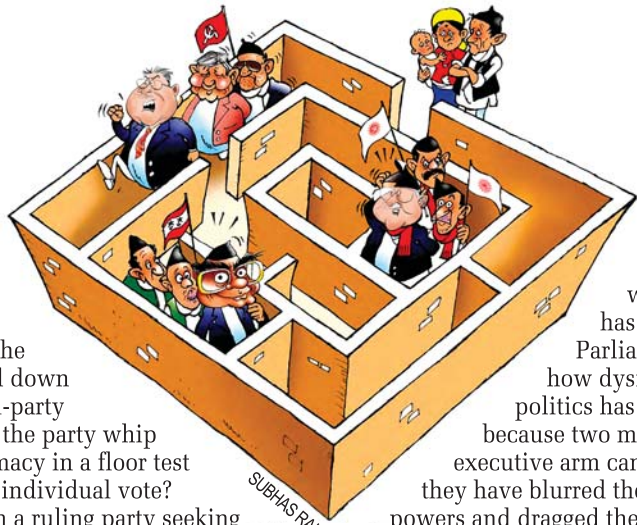
The fact that the judiciary has to decide on who should be prime minister, which party has a majority in Parliament, shows just how dysfunctional Nepali politics has become. Just because two members from the executive arm cannot get along, they have blurred the separation of powers and dragged the judiciary in to pass a verdict on a matter that should have been decided by the people's elected representatives in the legislature.

On Monday, we will know if the House will remain dissolved and Oli will lead an election government till polls on 12 and 19 November, or if the President will once more call for members to

show a majority in one month. Which is why some young turks in the UML have been desperately trying to prevent the party from splitting because either way it needs to be together to confront the opposition coalition. If the UML unites, no matter what the Supreme Court's verdict, the opposition alliance will fall apart.

A UML working group has been desperately trying to patch up differences between Oli and Nepal, which is mostly an ego-clash, but also involves compromises like Oli backtracking from his induction of 23 Maoist MPs into the UML Central Committee that diluted Nepal's clout in the party. Nepal wants either the prime minister ship or party chair, which Oli has flatly rejected.

The bargaining goes on at great cost to governance at a time when the country faces a pandemic, a disastrous monsoon and an economic crisis. Hopefully, by this time next week the Supreme Court verdict will show us a way out of this rigmarole.



Hopefully, by this time next week a Supreme Court verdict will show us a way out of this maze.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

No more war

Many Nepalis do not know, or will find it hard to remember, that 20 years ago, Nepal was mired in conflict. An average of 50 Nepalis were being killed every week at the hands of fellow-Nepalis.

The Maoists launched their armed struggle saying parliamentary democracy was too messy to fix the injustices and inequities in society. The end justifies the means, and the violence.

Yet, two decades later, the former guerrillas are in the government, the same old problems persist: poverty, malnutrition, costly healthcare, inequitable development and defective education system. What good did the loss of 17,000 lives achieve?

The Maoist demands were not unreasonable, but their method was anything but reasonable. A Nepali Times editorial published 20 years ago this week stated it plainly.

Excerpts from issue #50 6-12 July 2001:

There is no one in Nepal who has any quarrel with the Maoists' demands for streamlining education, for gender equity, for land reform, or for their other 40 original agenda points, barring one or two.

The only difference is over the method used. After all, despite all its shortcomings, this is still a democracy that is striving to install the checks and balances needed for majority rule, minority rights and elected governments to get on with the job of reducing poverty, providing basic services and tackling inequities.

We have a parliament that has passed the local self-governance



act to devolve powers to communities, it is in fact cracking down on graft in high places, and it will soon pass a bill to grant property inheritance rights to women and citizenship to the disenfranchised. There is a vibrant free press which allows at least eight newspapers sympathetic to the Maoist cause to be printed in the capital alone.

True, in the past 12 years we have elected leaders who have destroyed themselves and nearly destroyed the country by ignoring aspirations, squandering mandates and abandoning accountability. The way to correct that is to ensure

democracy is more effective and efficient, and to make it unbearable for elected crooks to cling on to power.

Ultimately, the battle is over ideas. The only way to counter support born of fear and intimidation is through an even freer and fairer society that fosters greater public debate and forges a truly representative democracy. Gaggling the press and reviving draconian laws are sure to backfire. Democracies must ensure their people a free press: censorship just plays into the hands of those who remain outside the constitution, and will undermine the very democratic value system that we need to nurture.

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

ONLINE PACKAGES



There was a class divide in Nepal's education even before Covid-19. The pandemic just widened the gap between urban-rural, private-government, rich-poor. But it is also an opportunity to fix a defective education system and narrow the digital divide. *Sagla Samaj* is aired on DishHome Channel 130 every Monday evening at 8:30pm. Story: page 5.



Accompany Kanak Mani Dixit on a trip down from the source of the Kosi near Melamchi to the Chattara and to the Kosi barrage on the Indian border. Learn about the geography, history and arithmetic of Nepal's biggest river. Story: page 10-11.



Drone surveillance in immediate aftermath of the Melamchi flood on the night of 16 June was a test case for future disaster response in Nepal. Go online to watch dramatic aerial video of the aftermath of the flood. Story: page 10.

VACCINES

Nepal has little chance of receiving vaccines in the near future. This will not just result in more sickness and deaths, but will also have a large economic impact on the country. As long as Nepal stays on Amber or Red alert level, tourists are unlikely to visit. Kuwait was followed by other Gulf countries in only accepting fully vaccinated workers. Without jobs and an effective vaccination program, business levels will be constrained, and daily wage earners will continue to be short of work and money. They make up as much as 30% of Nepal's workforce. Add all three of these together and in a fairly short period of time, Nepal might take a hit that will be hard to recover from. It is difficult to think of any other country that so badly needs, and justifies, the provision of vaccine at the earliest time.

Robin Marston

Great article that gives a complete and unbiased lowdown on the vaccine fiasco ('Hope, hyperbole and hypocrisy of COVAX', Kul Chandra Gautam, #1068). Richer nations twisted everything in their favour, but the suffering of poor nations has been accentuated by their incompetent and corrupt politicians. This is a great opportunity for China to step in to fill the void left by the West's self centeredness.

Krishna Joshi

OLI VS NEPAL

Factional and personal animosity are rather impossible to patch up than the so-called ideological differences, especially among Communists ('Making up is hard to do', Santa Gaha Magar, #1068). History is witness, Stalin and Mao executed or tortured far more fellow communists than non-communists.

Jainendra Jeevan

"It can easily be resolved if the two sit down together and find a middle ground." Absolutely sure that "middle ground" will not be anything ideological or even healthy political. It will be pure bhagbanda of a "you loot this, I loot that" kind.

Dipak Gyawali

Come to think of it, sadly, there is so little in Nepali politics that is really ideological.

Ajaravan

LYONPO DAGO TSHERING

How is that a country like Japan is awarding a criminal ('Japan award for Bhutan minister opposed', nepalitimes.com)?

Kesh Gharti

NIGHTLIFE

Met one in my kitchen yesterday night, had to ask him (or her) to leave ('Kathmandu's nightlife', Lisa Choegyal, #1068).

Shirin Barakzai

Pokhara could benefit from promoting firefly tourism just like Japan, Taiwan and Malaysia have (Pokhara comes alive at night, Krishnamani Baral, nepalitimes.com).

Dambar Pun

So happy to see fireflies again. They almost died out at one point.

Denise Tomecko

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



Portrait of a photographer in rural Nepal

by Monika Deupala

She may not know how to read or write, but she makes a living taking pictures. Meet Nani Maya Buda, a photographer from rural Jumla in this profile which was widely shared on social media last week, on nepalitimes.com

f Most reached and shared on Facebook

The extraordinary lives of ordinary Nepalis

by Shristi Karki

Web series Herne Katha has uplifting stories of struggle, survival and triumph, a message especially important at a time when Nepalis are suffering such hardships. Read up on the journalists turned story-tellers behind the show.

t Most popular on Twitter



Making up is hard to do

by Santa Gaha Magar

An ego-clash between two UML alpha males, Prime Minister KP Oli and Madhav Kumar Nepal goes back two decades. With so much bad blood between them, will they ever patch up? Weigh in on the discussion online, even as the Supreme Court decides on their fate.

“ ” Most commented

Angel meets an angel

by Sonia Awale

Angel, a street dog that grew up greeting passengers at Kathmandu airport is herself flying to a new home in Canada. Visit our website, read Angel's story and find out how other street dogs are faring amidst the pandemic.

🔴 Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

"There is a trust deficit between the two leaders (KP Oli and Madhav Kumar Nepal) that has built up over the years, but it is not ideological. It can easily be resolved if the two sit down together and find a middle ground."



Forester @kuenvmgt504

Tried and failed many times over to waste Nepal's many opportunities



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Portrait of a photographer in rural #Nepal. Nani Maya Buda may not know how to read or write, but she makes a living taking pictures. Monika Deupala in #Jumla



Ss. @tinytrex_

This is impressive and so cool. I hope Nani Maya becomes/is already an inspiring figure for young girls and boys in her village.



Dr Kanchan @_doctorchan

What an inspiring story!



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

"I try to write it and rewrite it, so that I can tell myself it was not my fault." @prateish recounts a sickening experience from 17 years ago.



Eva @kafleeva

The same things certain people so easily dismiss are things that fester within, and rot and become something else altogether. It's such a hard feeling to put into words, to articulate, to rationalise. Maybe this piece will give you an inkling of what it's like.



Anbika Giri @aanbika

Reading this made me cry and angry for what you went through. You, me and all of us have stories to write where we thought it was us, we should not have done this and that. It took years for us to release from that guilt. Hugs @prateish



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Lyonpo Dago Tshering served as Bhutan's Home Minister between 1991-98 and saw the eviction of 100,000 Nepali speaking Bhutanese. Now, Bhutanese diaspora wants Japanese PM Yoshihide Suga to withdraw his country's decision to confer an award to Dago Tshering



Aseem Sharma @Ha5hman

Who next? Junta of Myanmar!!!

Times

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Vaccines too little, too late for Nepal?

● **Sonia Awale**

Only effective and equitable mass vaccination will save Nepal from a possible third wave

There is breaking news every other day: the United States donates 2 million Moderna shots to Bangladesh and Pakistan. Denmark announces 250,000 AstraZeneca doses to Bhutan. Japan pledges surplus AZ vaccines to Sri Lanka and the Pacific Islands.

Nepal is never in the news, even though 1.4 million people still wait for their second doses of Covishield AZ vaccines and another 20 million people need to be inoculated before a possible third wave this year.

So far, Nepal has only been gifted or bought vaccines from India, China or the COVAX initiative. It has not even got 1 million vaccines from Serum Institute of India that it paid for, and all other promises from western countries were never kept.

Nepal's vaccine diplomacy has failed miserably. And the only silver lining is that there are four million doses of the Chinese Sinopharm VeroCell starting this week to immediately inoculate its above 55 population. Nepal is still recording an excess of 2,000 new cases a day and is seeing a slight daily increase following the relaxation in travel restrictions. Everyone, the public and the government, seem to have forgotten that the real peak during the first wave last year took place only after the lockdown was eased.

"The third wave is already on its way, our figures are going up and we must assume we will be hit by new variants," says Buddha Basnyat, a physician at Patan Academy of Health Sciences (PAHS). "We must vaccinate as many people as quickly as possible, if not we will get more difficult variants that are potentially resistant to the vaccines."

In other news, the Oxford Vaccine Group which developed the AstraZeneca (AZ) vaccine has found that administering two doses 44-45 weeks produced the highest antibody boost. This news, announced by Andrew Pollard, one of the developers of the AZ, is glad tidings for countries like Nepal where people above 65 are waiting for their second doses.



MONIKA DEUPALA

Pollard said antibody levels remained elevated for close to a year with a ten-month gap between AZ doses, as well as antibody levels twice that after the second dose among volunteers who were administered a third booster dose, pointing to a long-term, possibly life long immunity, also against variants.

"This is great news for the elderly, many of whom are panicking, unable to get their second dose in the recommended time frame. The additional time the study has afforded us shouldn't lead to complacency in our effort to procure vaccines," says Sher Bahadur Pun, an epidemiologist at Sukraraj Tropical and Infectious Disease Hospital.

Norway, Czech Republic and Denmark have unused AZ shots they want to donate to Nepal, but have been forced to go through COVAX, which is unlikely to deliver the doses before the end of 2021. On 1 July, Denmark announced that it would donate

250,000 vaccines to Bhutan. However, it is understood that these grants still need to be facilitated by the EU.

Also in the news this week is the result of a new modelling study published in the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control's medical journal Eurosurveillance that further strengthens the link between AZ vaccines and a rare blood clot.

The study models four months of a vaccine distribution strategy in France from May 2021 and concludes that using AZ on the entire adult population would avert 10 deaths from Covid among 18-39-year-olds. However, it would be associated with 21 deaths from blood clots in the same age group over the same time period.

In other words, clot risk to younger people from the AZ vaccine is twice as high as Covid death risk. But public health experts in Nepal maintain that the benefit of mass vaccination still far outweighs the risk.

"Similar studies in the context of the South Asian population are needed but as it is, transmission risk of Covid is much higher than the individual risk of blood clots here," says epidemiologist Lhamo Yangchen Sherpa.

Buddha Basnyat of PAHS concurs: "The UK with over half of its population fully vaccinated is now being hit by the delta variant, although it has been largely spared from severity due to the mass inoculation. Nepal being mostly unvaccinated is unprotected both from transmission and severity. This should show us where our priority should lie."

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control finding about clot risk therefore could indirectly be a blessing in disguise for countries like Nepal by further freeing up AZ stockpiles in Europe, as well as Korea and Japan.

Even so, blood clot risk has prompted leaders including Germany's Angela Merkel to opt

for Moderna as a booster shot to her first dose of AZ jab.

Several EU nations including Germany have said mix-and-match doses are safe for Covid prevention, which according to new findings also point to a better immune response. This could also offer much-needed flexibility when vaccine supplies are uneven or limited.

"We need to introduce mixing and matching also in Nepal in the face of more virulent delta variants, particularly for the elderly who are at the higher risk of developing severity from an infection, instead of waiting endlessly for Covishield," says Basnyat.

At a time when Nepal is yet to recover from a devastating second surge, only an equitable vaccination strategy will prevent an even more deadly third wave. But a mere 2.6% of Nepal's population has been fully vaccinated, and less than 9% has received a single dose of either Covishield or VeroCell shots.

And even the doses are unevenly distributed within the country. More than half the first dose of VeroCell was distributed in Bagmati province, according to the government's own figures. Moreover, 97% of the booster jabs of VeroCell were used only in Bagmati Province.

"We are seeing a similar kind of disparity in vaccination that we saw in testing, concentrated in urban centres and in particular Kathmandu," notes epidemiologist Lhamo Yangchen Sherpa. "The excuse for using most of the doses in Kathmandu is that people elsewhere refused to inoculate. If that's the case what is the government and others doing to dispel vaccine myths?"

Virologist Sher Bahadur Pun says the government should immediately deploy its 60,000 or so female community volunteers and healthcare workers who have historically done such effective work in non-Covid childhood vaccination drives.

He adds: "They are spread across the country and are best placed to communicate the significance of vaccines and increase vaccination uptakes at local levels." 🇳🇵

prabhu BANK



International tourism

The World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) predicts an uptick in international mobility with the global vaccination rollout and adoption of digital solutions for safe travel. But four of the 10 top source market, which generated 25% of all international arrivals in 2018, have been advising their citizens against non-essential travel abroad. Destinations with the strictest measures have some of the lowest rates of vaccination, establishing a link between the speed of mass inoculation and easing of restrictions.

"Governments are instrumental for the restart and recovery of tourism through collaboration, use of data and digital solutions," says UNWTO Secretary-General Zurab Pololikashvili.

Khalti collaborations

Khalti and digital cross-border payment company WorldRemit has launched a service which will allow anyone to receive money from more than 50 countries directly to the Khalti App and get a Rs200 bonus each time in doing so.

The digital wallet with Veda app has also launched 'Haat, Haat ma Shikshya' Facebook campaign for students and educators. The winning teacher and a student will get a new laptop each. Four runner-ups will receive Rs5,000 in their Khalti account.



Election budget

The Finance Ministry has allocated Rs7.73 billion for the election of the House of Representatives to be held in two phases and slated for 12 and 19 November. The budget will cover operation, management and equipment costs. However, the Supreme Court has not yet ruled on the writs to restore the dissolved House.



Ban on mothers migrating

Chitwan's Ratnanagar is restricting women with children under two years to travel abroad for foreign employment from 15 August despite there being no national law against it. The rule will apply to all mothers with babies under two years regardless of what kind of work they will be doing abroad. Previous bans have used the age of women, this is the first time a local government has ruled using the age of children as a criteria.

DishHome expands service

DishHome's Fibernet expansion has now started service in Butwal and Bardibas. Presently, DishHome offers 30, 40, 60 and 100 Mbps schemes but it is soon planning to launch 200 Mbps Internet.



NIBL Fund

The NIBL Ace Capital Ltd has launched a participation fund scheme for its customers to mark the second year of its operation. Rewards under the scheme



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OPPO awarded

OPPO took home 12 awards at the Computer Vision and Pattern Recognition Conference (CVPR) 2021. It



received one first-place, seven second-place and four third-place awards in categories Multi-Agent Behaviour, AVA-Kinetics and 3D Face Reconstruction from Multiple 2D Images.

Lessons not learned from the pandemic

Nepal has squandered another opportunity to fix a defective education system

● **Dhurba Basnet**

Over the past year-and-half, concerns about lockdowns, economic collapse, limited healthcare and shortage of vaccines have taken centre stage. Almost forgotten are millions of Nepali children who have been out of school for that long.

Except for a few weeks earlier this year, there have been no classes since 23 March 2020. Meanwhile, the government and the Ministry of Education has been behind a fig-leaf of remote classes, when surveys have shown that 80% of children do not have any access to classes online, by radio, tv or mobile.

After the first wave, there was enough time to ensure wifi connectivity for public schools at least in urban centres, and prepare for alternative methods of teaching such as remote radio, tv classes and Zoom lectures.

None of that was done. Instead, there was a blanket shutdown of schools nationwide, even in sparsely populated mountain districts with negligible Covid-19 spread where classes could easily have been held with mandatory masks and physical distancing.

"Nepal is a federal state, the decision to open or close schools should be a matter for local governments, but Kathmandu forced schools nationwide to close. This has resulted in unnecessary loss for students," says former education secretary Mahashram Sharma.

Before the Covid-19 crisis, students used to have 180 days of school. Attending class with fellow students and interacting with teachers was an essential part of their upbringing and personality development.

The lack of physical classes and face-to-face learning have meant that even students who are attending online classes have suffered. But a majority of students, especially in government schools, have not had any classes at all.

Most urban private schools have been conducting online classes now for more than a year, teachers and students adjusting and learning to the new technology as they go.

But Nepal's digital divide has also created an education divide. Most of the government school children have not attended classes – online or otherwise. Even if they have mobile phones there is not



enough bandwidth for digital classes.

"We tried everything from Zoom, Facebook messenger and Google Meet to Google Classroom and Microsoft Teams. We also trained our teachers to conduct classes online," says Batuk Lal Tamang, Principal of Annapurna School in Bharatpur. "But barely 50% of our students attended their classes, the number was much lower for lower grades."

Annapurna School later surveyed its 700 students to find out how many of them had access to the internet or electronic devices. Less than 20% had internet at

home, and only 10% could access data via smartphones. And this is in a city in Chitwan with fairly good infrastructure.

All 280 students at Yasodhara Baudha School in Lalitpur are from rural areas, mostly children of either daily wage labourers or who work as household help. They gave their meagre earnings to parents, and even before the pandemic did not even have enough money for stationery and uniforms.

"Alternative learning is just not possible for us, and our experience is that online classes do not work in government schools, attendance was very low despite the free data

scheme for the students," says Yasodhara's assistant principal Bina Shakya.

If that is the situation in Kathmandu Valley, it cannot be much better elsewhere. At the Mangal Prasad Secondary School in Nepalganj, teachers have tried online and radio classes for its students who come from 10 districts of western Nepal. But many of the pupils have been out of touch for the past year.

"We have tried our best for students who are still in contact with us, but it is a small proportion of the total student body," admits Sandhya Sharma, a teacher at the school.

There was a class divide in Nepal's education even before Covid-19. The pandemic just widened the gap between urban-rural, private-government, rich-poor.

There are six million students enrolled in schools across the country, a majority of them in government or community schools. Educationists had told the government that the pandemic actually offered an opportunity to upgrade IT facilities in classrooms, train teachers in online instruction, and narrow the digital divide.

For the second year in a row, schools have not been able to hold Secondary Education Examinations (SEE) and have allowed teachers to

conduct internal assessments. But in many schools students have not attended neither online nor physical classes.

The second wave is cresting in Nepal but public health experts are already asking the government to prepare for a possible third wave of the pandemic in which new coronavirus strains put children at risk, and there is not even a WHO-approved vaccine for those under 18.

Experts say that since the second wave has peaked, focus should now shift to restarting physical classes in areas with minimum Covid-19 spread, while maintaining strict mask wearing with distancing in well-ventilated classrooms where possible. Elsewhere, schools should upgrade their technical and teaching capacity for online classes, and equip students with devices and connectivity.

The Education Ministry should have already done all these things, of course, but ministers have changed so often in the past two years due to political turmoil that there is no continuity.

Children in Nepal have missed 61 weeks of school, whereas even countries worst affected by the pandemic like India and Brazil have had fewer weeks of closure: 56 and 53 weeks respectively. 🇳🇵



सग्लो समाज

Kanak Mani Dixit of Himalmedia's tv magazine *Saglo Samaj* interviewed former education secretary Mahashram Sharma about the role of local governments in revamping Nepal's education sector post-Covid. Excerpts:

Kanak Mani Dixit: The gap between private and public schools is increasing, more so after the pandemic. How worrying is that?
Mahashram Sharma: From 2000-2015, the world over, the focus was on increasing school enrolment, especially of girls. Nepal did well on score, but not so much on quality. We have not prepared our education sector for times of crisis like this.

Private schools are more accountable to parents and students, but government schools do not have a system to incentivise

Devolution for education

teacher performance. Until that happens, quality will not improve.

But quality was supposed to improve after federalism put education under the purview of local governments.

This is a textbook case of being given rights, but not resources. Local governments are woefully under-funded. A few municipalities have education experts. At the end of the day, just devolving responsibility doesn't solve anything. The focus should be on capacity-building and empowering local governments.

Can the pandemic be an opportunity to rebuild our education sector?

We have been lagging in information technology, and the pandemic could kick-start a campaign to set up computer labs and connectivity in all schools. Digital instruction is the way forward, and the pandemic may spur our acceptance of that fact, even if we eventually get back to the physical classroom.

But it looks like the pandemic has actually widened the digital divide.

Yes, and that is precisely why the government should be playing a leadership role to implement plans to help poor and disadvantaged children with resources. Local governments should take the first step, and make an inventory of electronic devices and connectivity of each family at the local level and plan accordingly.

Why did we have to close all schools during the pandemic?

First and foremost, education is not on the agenda of local governments. What made matters worse was the blanket closure by the central government. Just before the lockdown, I was in Manang, Lamjung and Syangja, they had no Covid there. Yet schools had been closed for months.

The centre is responsible for developing policies but the management of schools is up to the local governments, they just need to be facilitated, especially when it comes to community schools.

King Palden Thondup Namgyal, the last Chogyal (monarch) of Sikkim with his wife Hope Cooke.

Letting go of Sikkim's ghost

Learning from history, Nepal must ensure domestic stability to strengthen its sovereignty

● Ajay Pradhan

Nearly half-a-century after the overthrow of Palden Thondup Namgyal, the 12th and last Chogyal of Sikkim and India's formal annexation of the tiny kingdom, the ghost of Sikkim still haunts neighbouring Himalayan states.

Till today, there are frequent dark references by media commentators to New Delhi's plans for the 'Sikkimisation' of Nepal as well.

Sikkim was the smallest of the three Himalayan kingdoms, sandwiched between Nepal and Bhutan to the west and east, and between China and India in the north and south. Its location magnified tiny Sikkim's strategic importance.

Although it was a sovereign country, after Indian independence in 1947, Sikkim (like Bhutan) had ceded to New Delhi authority over three important state affairs: defence, foreign relations and communication.

After the British left India, under a treaty signed on 12 December, 1950 Jawaharlal Nehru gave Sikkim a special protectorate status, maintaining the kingdom's independence under the Chogyal, the king.

However, the Chogyal began to show an increasing desire to chart an independent course in foreign relations for his country. When Indira Gandhi became prime minister of India in 1966, she showed little patience for the Chogyal's authority, and even less tolerance for Sikkim's desire for increased independence.

Internal political turmoil in Sikkim eventually gave India the pretext to wrest power from the Chogyal and install its own administrative head to rule the country in 1973. The Chogyal wanted to renegotiate the 1950 Treaty between Sikkim and India, and made attempts to establish independent foreign relations.

Indira Gandhi was especially suspicious of the Chogyal's American-born wife, Hope Cooke, and the influence she had on him. She was suspicious of Sikkim's unusually large new embassy building in New Delhi's diplomatic quarter.

Then, in March 1975, the Chogyal and Queen Hope traveled to Kathmandu to attend King Birendra's coronation, and even met Chinese and Pakistani leaders who were also attending.

Moreover, while in Kathmandu, the Chogyal gave a press conference all but denouncing India as a hurdle in Sikkim's attempts to raise its international stature. The Chogyal instantly became even more of India's *bête noire*.

The Chogyal's desire to break out of India's influence was audacious. But at a time when he needed to shore up public support within Sikkim to stand up to India, Sikkimese of ethnic Nepali origin who made up 75% of the population

were against him.

Several political organisations, especially the Sikkim National Congress led by Kazi Lhendup Dorji and Sikkim Janata Congress, had widespread support from Sikkimese Nepalis. They demanded greater political freedom and preferred to put emphasis on the country's development.

Three days after the Chogyal returned to Gangtok from Kathmandu, the Indian Army surrounded his palace on 9 April 1975. New Delhi then stage-managed a referendum to let the Sikkimese people decide whether the country should remain independent, or to be assimilated into India. The result was a foregone conclusion.

Ironically, Sikkim's ethnic Nepali majority voted overwhelmingly in favour of Sikkim's assimilation with India rather than for an independent kingdom. The reign of King Palden Thondup Namgyal, the Chogyal, came to an end and Sikkim became India's 22nd state on April 26, 1975.

Kazi Lhendup Dorji became the first Chief Minister of the new Indian state of Sikkim. To this day, politicians in Nepal perceived to be close to New Delhi swiftly earn the 'Lhendup Dorji' label in the media.

For Nepalis in Nepal, however, India's annexation evoked deep-seated fears that New Delhi could plan something similar. Unlike Nepalis in Sikkim, Nepalis in Kathmandu staged street demonstrations against India, calling the referendum a charade.

Big Brother

India has loomed large right through recent Nepali history. Nepali politicians have found India-bashing to be a potent tool during elections to drum up nationalist support. And India has often obliged by behaving like Big Brother.

After the first Constituent Assembly abolished Nepal's monarchy in 2008, there were murmurs of India's 'grand design'. These voices grew louder when Nepal's first Vice President Parmananda Jha, a member of the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum (MJF) took his oath of office in Hindi.

The MJF itself emerged as a credible political force, a power-broker and king-maker, and there was widespread belief in Kathmandu that it was New Delhi's pawn. India was accused of using Nepal's Madhesi population, just as it had used Nepali-speakers to foment unrest in Sikkim half-a-century earlier.

The activities of successive Indian ambassadors after 2006 were minutely followed by the media, which reported on their actual and fictitious meetings with Nepali politicians. The envoys appeared to have direct access to parlours of politicians in breach of diplomatic norms, and the press had a field day covering what it saw as New Delhi's meddling.

Given Nepal's overwhelming economic dependence on India, and the history of New Delhi's heavy-handedness in its neighbourhood, paranoia about Indian intentions is understandable. But it is a



King Palden Thondup Namgyal with Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Queen Hope Cooke in New Delhi in 1966.

bit of a stretch to fan fears of an imminent 'Sikkimisation' of Nepal.

Nepal's modern foreign policy history is starkly different from the Chogyal's Sikkim, and the country's geostrategic situation has much stronger stock value than Sikkim ever did. Nepal's shares a substantially longer border with India and China's Tibetan Autonomous Region, providing both neighbouring countries to the north and the south a strategic geopolitical buffer.

The very fact that a neutral Nepal allows both China and India not to have to deploy the kind of military presence as they have amassed eyeball-to-eyeball in Arunachal Pradesh and Ladakh means huge savings for them in money, men and matériel.

On the other hand, Sikkim's much smaller size did not give it that advantage. Its location astride India's 'Chicken Neck' corridor between Nepal and Bangladesh had made Sikkim too strategic for its own good because of the proximity of China's Chumbi Valley.

In Nepal, suspicion and paranoia about

India takes flights of fancy – especially among those living north of the Chure-Bhavar line. For the most part, this unfettered obsession about Nepal being swallowed up by India distracts attention from the real danger – New Delhi's unspoken expectation of subservience from landlocked Nepal.

Even though Indian politicians and diplomats may not articulate it so clearly, India's rowdy media is obsessed about ungrateful Nepalis always on the verge of selling themselves off to China.

'Sikkimise' or 'Tibetise'?

On the other hand, the single-minded preoccupation of Nepalis that we are about to be 'Sikkimised' comes from our own deep-seated sense of insecurity, magnifying and perpetuating it. This is not only unlikely, but also unfortunate and misdirected.

Nepal never had the quasi-sovereign status that Sikkim had. It has always vigorously sought to establish independent foreign relations with other countries, establishing



The King and Queen of Sikkim in regal robes in Gangtok in 1970.

foreign missions, embassies and consulates. Diplomatic relations between Nepal's kingdoms and the Chinese empire go back to the 7th century, when they first exchanged emissaries. Nepal is the only country with a consulate in Lhasa. Modern China after Mao's revolution annexed Tibet just as India subsumed Sikkim. But although Chinese imperial regimes sometimes sought to bring Nepal under their sphere of influence, Beijing never attempted to 'Tibetise' Nepal. However, this is not to say that New Delhi and Beijing have no interest in Nepal, and both will leave Kathmandu to its own devices. They have tried, and will keep trying, to exert influence in Nepal for their own national and strategic interests. China may be comfortable with the status quo as long as Nepal is not a launch pad for Tibetan nationalism, while India will try to maintain the sphere of influence that it inherited from the British. The 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty, widely seen in Nepal to

be unequal, is an example of New Delhi's attempt to maintain its dominance. The 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed on 31 July 1950 by a newly-independent India with the Rana regime was skewed. For example, it requires Nepal to consult with India prior to importing weapons from other countries, a clause that was used to impose the blockade in 1980 when Nepal sourced anti-aircraft guns from China. The Treaty was an encroachment on Nepal's sovereignty, and is at the root of much of the persisting anti-India sentiment in Nepal. It tends to crop up in the manifesto of just about every political party in Nepal at election time, including the Maoists' 40-point demand before the start of the conflict in 1996. However, Nepal's have to recognise that the 1950 Treaty also gave Nepal what Sikkim never had. Article 1 explicitly provided that 'there shall be everlasting peace and friendship between the Government of India and the Government of Nepal. The two Governments agree mutually to acknowledge and respect the complete sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of each other.' At least in letter and spirit, if not in action, India was bound by the Treaty to maintain peace with Nepal and not play the



role of an aggressor. More importantly, India explicitly acknowledged 70 years ago that Nepal was an independent, sovereign country and that it respected its territorial integrity. Unless a Nepal government attempts to undermine India's territorial integrity on its own, or by tilting too far towards China or Pakistan, New Delhi will have no reason to 'Sikkimise' Nepal. Besides, there are an estimated 60,000 Nepali nationals, apart from Indians of Indian descent, enlisted in the Indian Army. Some Nepali analysts tend to exaggerate the parallels between Sikkim and Nepal, and this serves no purpose except to fan the paranoia. Nepal's foreign policy may be mishandled from time to time, but it is distinctly independent. We have only ourselves to blame when it does not work, for example, with the failure of our vaccine diplomacy at the moment.

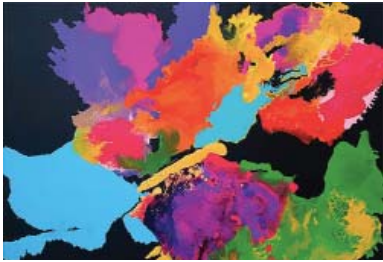
Zone of Peace Regionally, despite the signing of the 1950 Treaty with India, Nepal has strategically charted an equidistance with India and China. New Delhi diplomats tend to scoff at the word 'equidistance', but it has stood Nepal in good stead in keeping both giant neighbours at arm's length. The policy is derived from King Mahendra's attempt to establish warm relations with China. His son, King Birendra, took the policy forward with his Nepal as a Zone of Peace (ZOP) proposal, a not-so-subtle attempt to tell the world that Nepal wanted to wriggle out of India's sphere of influence. Over 100 countries endorsed Nepal as a ZOP, with the notable exception of India. While it signaled to the world Nepal's foreign policy aspiration, King Birendra's proposal did not do much to keep India off Nepal's back. By 1990, widespread street protests forced King Birendra to abolish the Panchayat system and turn himself into a constitutional monarch from an absolute one. Prior to the invasion and formal annexation of Tibet by China in 1950, India considered Tibet, not Nepal, as its strategic buffer with China. When the Chinese invaded Tibet, India needed Nepal not only as an ally but also to serve as the next buffer line against China. The Treaty of 1950 was a clear and

distinct move by India to transform Nepal into a 900-km long frontier wall with China to protect its densely-populated Gangetic Plains of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal. This means that if India annexes Nepal, it will have to be on the frontlines with an economically and militarily ascendant China across the mountains. Why would India want to do that? Naturally, New Delhi would prefer to preserve and extend its influence in Kathmandu. After the bruising blockade in 2015, the Indian mission is not engaged in overt influence-peddling, preferring a more low-key approach. This does not mean it has lost interest, New Delhi possibly now sees a politically stable Nepal being more in its interest than its policy of 'controlled instability'. It is now up to the Nepali people and their political leaders to be careful not to provide a motivation to rouse the Indian tiger with needless provocation to be an aggressive, expansionist force. Nepal must realise that its sovereignty is strengthened by domestic stability. The kind of perpetual infighting and disunity that has characterised Nepali politics especially in the past two years, only undermines our independent status. Even the Chinese, who usually left Nepal's political parties to sort out their own problems, had to step in when infighting within the NCP last year ultimately split the party. Learning from the 2015 Madhes Movement and blockade, Nepal's politicians should not allow Tarai politics to be a pretext for future Indian meddling. For this, Nepal must be a much more inclusive state, mindful of devolving political decision-making to neglected and marginalised groups. This ensures long-term stability, and cannot be seen as something that 'disturbs communal harmony'. Externally, Nepal should show restraint when ultra-nationalist pressure groups bring up the reclamation of Nepal's historical territory ceded to British India in 1816. However strong our claim to Limpiyadhura, it is too sensitive an issue for Nepal's political factions to use as nationalist ammunition against each other. As long as Nepal seeks mutually respectful bilateral relations with India and China that builds on its own internal stability, it can play a positive role at a time of global polarisation and increased regional tension. Nepal must live its policy of peaceful coexistence, be a peace-keeper in areas of conflict, and move forward as a confident nation, once and for all shedding its fear of Sikkim's ghost. 🇳🇵



Ajay Pradhan is an expatriate Nepali living in Vancouver who works for the Government of Canada as senior policy advisor for treaty negotiations and reconciliation on comprehensive land claims.

EVENTS



Art Exhibition
Visit Siddhartha Art Gallery's Bold and Beautiful, an exhibition displaying a collection of paintings from artist Shivangini Rana.
11-30 July, Babarmahal Revisited

Reading Circles
This month, Mobile Library Nepal's Reading Circles will focus on a collection of works that encompasses the country's traditional architecture, art history, contemporary practices, and indigenous expressions. Send an email at mobilelibrarynepal@gmail.com for the reading materials and the meeting link.
14&28 July

Kimff 2021
Fill in the Kimff 2021 entry form and send relevant films produced after 1 January 2019. Go to <https://kimff.org/kimff-21/> for more details.
Deadline: 1 September



Dance classes
Sign up to take Bharatnatyam, Ballet, Hip Hop, Freestyle, and contemporary dance lessons from Sushila Arts Academy. Call for details.
9860588626

Labim Bazaar
From fresh produce to crafts by local businesses, there's something for everyone at the weekly market at Labim. Safety guidelines apply.
Saturdays, 9 am, Labim Mall

DINING



Attic
Enjoy Attic's signature Royal Aloo, Attic chicken chop, bacon potato roll, or get some chicken barbecue. Go to Attic's Facebook page for more information.
(01) 4417843

VIRTUAL TOURS

Virtual street art
Google Arts Project: Street Art showcases the world's greatest graffiti works and tells the stories behind them, including those of Nepal. Viewers can take virtual walking tours, view online exhibitions and learn about the artists themselves.

This is home
Visit traditional homes from countries around the world with the This is Home virtual tour. Learn about the history behind each of these places and get a glimpse inside the unique structures with Google Street View.



Europeana
Discover cultural heritage from 3,000 museums, galleries, libraries and archives across Europe. Head online to read about historical places, watch exhibitions, photographs, ancient manuscripts and more.

The world at home
Travel may be limited these days, but discovering incredible experiences from across the globe doesn't have to be. Get your Guide's The world at home initiative brings some of the top tours, activities, and attractions online. Find everything on YouTube.



Underwater tour
Take the Life in the Ocean Deep underwater tour and discover the mysteries of the sea with Sir David Attenborough. Watch videos and underwater maps, and learn about the unique creatures that inhabit the world's oceans.

Cafe de Tukche
Tired of trying to figure out what to cook for lunch day after day? Get authentic Thakali food from Cafe de Tukche. Order the Thakali Khana set, or take a break from rice and try the Thakali Dhedo set instead. Check out the menu online.
Lazimpat, 9828937500

Blenders Milkshake
Beat the humid monsoon afternoons with fresh cold milkshakes out of reusable bottles. Find flavours that suit at Bhojideals and Foodmandu, or call to order.
9860675655

Casa Mexicana
Experience the best of Mexican food. Try the Carnitas burrito, Tinga quesadilla and the traditional Tres Leches cake. Head to Foodmandu to browse for more.
9803624067

GETAWAY



Shivapuri Heights
Enjoy home-cooked meals, meandering walks, and get pampered at the outdoor spa at the Shivapuri Heights cottages. Go to Facebook or <http://www.shivapuriccottage.com/> for more information about the weekend package.
Shivapuri Hills, Budanilkantha, 9851088928

Club Himalaya
Escape to this cosy mountain resort with breathtaking views away from the bustle of the city for the weekend
Nagarkot, 9801321201, 9801321203

Dhulikhel Lodge Resort
This resort is nestled amidst the beautiful terraced hills of Dhulikhel. Services offered include the Stupa restaurant, spa, excursion, and lounge and bar.
Dhulikhel (011) 490114, 9801002102



Grand Norling
Take a trip to the outskirts of Kathmandu to the scenic Gokarna, and enjoy sights of the golf course, monkeys and deer herds, and the garden. Get details about the resort's monsoon package on Facebook.
Gokarna (01) 4910196

Chandragiri Hills
Chandragiri Resort sits atop lush green hills overlooking Kathmandu Valley. Catch glimpses of the Himalayas, marvel at stunning sunsets, and take a dip in the infinity pool to beat the heat.
Thankot (01) 4314400



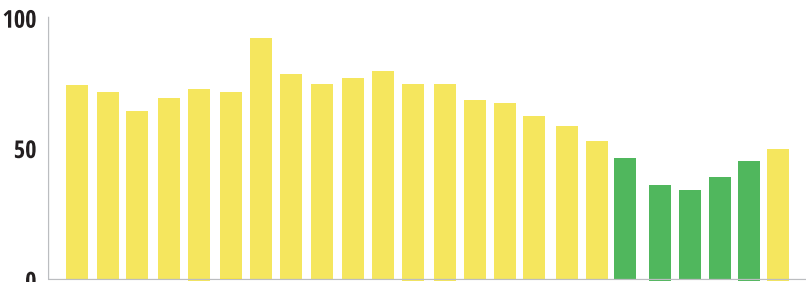
Flat Iron Grill
Although this eatery is known for sandwiches, the desserts here deserve more recognition. Go to <https://www.flatirongrill.com.np> to get burgers, salads, desserts and meat products delivered.
9808200961



The monsoon has now covered the whole of Nepal, and there is a new pulse headed our way from northern Bihar. This trough will bring more torrential rain to Central Nepal, most of it falling on Friday and Saturday and with a slight let-up on Sunday. This is bad news for highways blocked by landslides and for riverside settlements and infrastructure. The system is not moving very fast, so expect the showers to linger into next week.

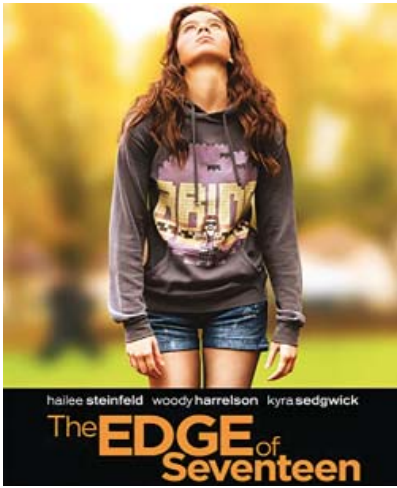
FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
27° 19°	28° 19°	27° 19°

AIR QUALITY INDEX



The Air Quality Index (AQI) saw a marked deterioration after restrictions on the movement of vehicles in Kathmandu Valley were further lifted on Tuesday. The showers washed away the grime, but the air pollution built up again quickly – especially the harmful particles smaller than 2.5 microns, as seen in these hourly AQI measurements at the US Embassy monitoring station at Phora Darbar from 9AM 8 July to 9AM 9 July.

For live air pollution readings in Kathmandu, go to www.nepalitimes.com



OUR PICK

Writer-director Kelly Fremon Craig's acclaimed 2016 comedy-drama *The Edge of Seventeen* follows seventeen-year old Nadine Franklin, a junior in high school who has a difficult relationship with her family—especially after her father's death four years ago. Nadine grapples with resentment towards her older brother Darian and mother Mona, with her only confidant and support system being her best friend from childhood, Krista and unwillingly, her high school teacher Mr Bruner. Stars Hailee Steinfeld, Kyra Sedgwick, Woody Harrelson, and Haley Lu Richardson.

बालबालिका माथि हुने हिंसा, दुर्व्यवहार, शोषण भएको, जोखिमपूर्ण अवस्थामा रहेको वा बालअधिकारको उल्लंघन भएको छ भने बाल हेल्पलाइनको पैसा नलाग्ने

फोन: नं. १०९८ मा खबर गरौं ।



नेपाल सरकार
सञ्चार तथा सूचना प्रविधि मन्त्रालय
सूचना तथा प्रसारण विभाग



No direction

I try to write it and rewrite it, so that I can tell myself it was not my fault.

Over the years, it has become harder and harder to write about Katuwal. I have thought of writing about him repeatedly in the last 17 years. Even though the incident occurred so long ago, it has been stuck inside



SUBURBAN TALES
Pratibha Tuladhar

me all this time—the way you feel when you swallow something you do not like the taste of and the distaste clings to your throat long after. I am about to re-tell you something I had told a local newspaper some 17 years ago. It was October. It was nearly time for Dasain-Tihar break. Before we closed, the students hung out in empty classes. We talked about *bhogatey*. I said grapefruits were important items for *Kija puja* and *Mhaa puja*. Katuwal, who had just finished his lecture, had lingered for a while, listening to our conversation, smiled and left after wishing us all a happy Dasain. In this all-girls’ institution at the heart of Kathmandu, teachers would sometimes hang out with students in the canteen and drink tea. They would exchange numbers in case students had questions and conduct open-air lectures on the lawn or in the canteen, and sometimes at the teacher’s home. Teachers were our deities. It was just ahead of Tihar when I received a call from Katuwal, saying he had some *bhogatey* for me



PRATIBHA TULADHAR

and that I should come with a big bag to Bhatbhateni. In those days, Bhatbhateni was a place known for its temple and not a department store. I asked my mother if I should go collect the fruits. She gave me big sling bag to put the fruits in. This was a time when I still had not learned to ‘dress like a girl’. I would always wear jeans, t-shirts, sneakers and wore my hair really short. Some friends called me ‘tom boy’, an expression which I now consider a slur. As instructed, I waited outside the temple. Katuwal showed up and said I should follow him to his house to collect the fruits. Some five minutes’ walk from the temple

and we were in a yard with some trees and a house. I followed him up the staircase into a room with pale yellow walls, with a small bed by the window. There was a stack of books in one corner. He offered me black tea with sugar. I still had not seen the grapefruits yet. I sat on a chair near the door. When I was done drinking my tea, I started getting fidgety. I wanted to ask him where the *bhogateys* were. But he was sitting on his bed reading a weekly Nepali magazine. He asked me if I liked photography. I said I liked photos. He motioned me to go over and look at what he was reading. I knelt down on the floor, looking at the photos. There were old photos of Kathmandu. But their preciseness blurs from my memory because he leaned down and put his mouth on mine as I looked at them. “*Ke garnu bhako!*” I shouted, pushing him away, my palms applying force on his chest. What was he doing! I stood by the chair for a few seconds, fuming. *Risako?* He asked me. As though anger was not the response he had hoped to elicit. I said nothing. I picked my back and left, walking all the way home. The only thing I can recall from that walk were my ears—they felt like they were on fire.

My mother asked me what had happened to the fruits. I lied. I told her I could not find his house. I did not know what I should have done after that. If I reported him to the Principal, they would also ask me why I had gone to his place to begin with. It occurred to me that I could write about it. So, I wrote about it. As honestly as I could. Then I called up a reporter I had met at some poetry reading event and asked her if their newspaper would publish my experience. I also briefly told her what had happened. I remember my voice breaking as I confided in her. She was the first person I was talking to about it. This was in the time of landlines and I had to lock myself up in my parents’ room to call her up. The day my piece was published, however, I felt like my humiliation had been taken to a different level. An illustration, showing a man in a Nepali cap seated on the floor wearing a smirk, poking his girl student with a pen, had been used. The size of the illustration was generous, and so was the degree of humiliation it inflicted on me. It mocked my experience, because it made it look like a joke, completely eclipsing the gravity of my experience. I suppose, when people picture harassment or assault, they imagine serious crime scenes and not subtle events leading up to them. I suppose the mention of *bhogatey* made my experience sound like a joke. What kind of an idiot goes to her teacher to get grapefruit? Perhaps my experience had become just an article that filled the

columns on a weekend supplement. When classes resumed, some students who had read the article said: nice story. They thought it was a fabricated tale. For me, the rest of the year was woven tightly around basking Katuwal’s classes. Fortunately for me (or so I thought then) Katuwal received a scholarship and soon left for the US. My rage and discomfort spilled over to the newspaper reporter. I complained about how insensitively the publication had been handled. I told her the illustration had made fun of my experience instead of raising an issue. I asked if there would be a corrigendum. She said it did not qualify for one, and that it was the cartoonist I should talk to. I let it go. I hated myself for sending the article for publication. I hated myself for writing it. And I hated myself for showing up greedily for *bhogatey*. I felt stupid and decided it was my fault. I had gone there on my own two feet and had knelt by the bed and then gave Katuwal a chance to stick his mouth on mine. It filled me with self-loathing and I wanted to scrape the feeling off of me. It took me years to realise it was not my fault. I’ve tried to write about Katuwal many times. I try to rewrite my experience to undo the self-flagellation I put myself through. And in all of those rewrites, my humiliation stares back at me in the form of the cartoon in the newspaper. I cannot rewrite it enough to undo the sickening feeling of Katuwal’s mouth on mine. But neither the chill I felt when I opened the newspaper, and the cartoon hit my face. 🇳🇵

Suburban Tales is a monthly column in Nepali Times based on real people (with some names changed) in the author's life.

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The Kosi's sorrow,

Exploring Nepal's largest river during a destructive monsoon

● **Kanak Mani Dixit**

- Three decades after it was first proposed, a 26.5km tunnel starts supplying water from Melamchi to Kathmandu.
- A deadly flood on the Melamchi-Indrawati in Sindhupalchok on 16 June kills at least 27 people, and destroys infrastructure.
- The much-delayed 465MW Upper Tama Kosi hydropower plant starts feeding electricity to the national grid.
- SJVN says it has completed half the work on the 900MW Arun III project and the Investment Board awarded it another contract to develop the 679MW Lower Arun as well.
- Work has begun on the Sunkosi-Marin Diversion, to channel water to the Bagmati Basin and irrigate much of Province 2.

All five events have one thing in common: they are all on the trans-boundary Kosi Basin that drains 75,000 sq km of territory in China, Nepal and India.

At the Pati Bhanjyang on the northeastern rim of Kathmandu Valley, pour a glass of water on one side and it flows into the Gandaki watershed. On the other side it flows into the Kosi river basin which flows 200km east before tumbling into the Tarai and Bihar to join the Ganga. The Kosi is the largest tributary of the Ganges.

The Kosi's origin in Nepal is near Kathmandu. But its largest tributary, the Arun, originates in Tibet where it is called the Phung Chu, makes a mighty arc in Tibet and cuts through the Himalaya between Mt Makalu and Mt



The Kosi Barrage on the Indian border where the river funnels out into the inland delta in Bihar.

Kangchenjunga to meet its siblings Sun Kosi and Tamor at Tribeni. Geologists say rivers like the Arun that slice through the Himalaya are older than the mountains.

The Kosi watershed therefore drains an enormous vertical landscape. Six of the world's 13 peaks above 8,000m are therefore a part of the Kosi catchment. These mountains block the monsoons which weathers them down relentlessly, making the sedimentation load of the Kosi the heaviest for any river in the world.

The topography of this mighty river has shaped Nepal's history

and culture, and can determine the country's future prosperity as well. Watershed expert Madhukar Upadhyay says, "We have not even begun to understand the hydrological and geological specificities of our mountains and rivers and yet are rushing headlong into ever-larger infrastructure development."

Last month, landslides blocked the Melamchi-Indrawati, unleashing a deadly debris flow that destroyed infrastructure, homes and livelihoods (see below). It imperilled the Melamchi project, and its tunnel supplying water

to Kathmandu was saved only because the gates were closed for maintenance just hours before the onrush.

This week, the Tama Kosi project started generating electricity, and will provide one-third of Nepal's total power demand. But there was a scare just days before the inauguration: China informed Nepal that a massive landslide had blocked the river upstream, threatening the Rs55 billion project. Fortunately, the river found its way around the blockage.

Other flash floods this year in Manang, Kaski and Lamjung also

showed that while our rivers hold great promise, we ignore the risk to settlements and major infrastructure at our own peril. Our engineering methods have been inherited from the West, and do not account for cloudbursts and extreme Himalayan weather events, risks exacerbated by climate change.

In Melamchi, the power of the flood last month is evident in the steel hulk of the Indrawati Bridge that lies crumpled in the muddy river 100m downstream amidst room-sized boulders. The new sand bank is 25m thick, indicating the flood's maximum height. It may

Drones to the rescue in Melamchi

UAV surveillance in immediate aftermath of the flood was a test case for future disaster response

The devastating floods in Melamchi on the night of 16 June provided a test case of how drones can be deployed in future rapid disaster response in Nepal to assess damage, rush relief and to quash rumours.

Drones can be airborne in the immediate aftermath of floods, landslides or earthquakes, and they are cheap to set up and operate. Nepali engineers have also amassed a wealth of experience in using drones for everything from collecting tuberculosis samples in remote mountain areas to anti-poaching wildlife patrols.

"Hourly drone images at the Melamchi headworks allowed us to capture the extent of the damage, and made us realise the importance of having a ready to deploy experienced drone team within the country," says engineer Uttam Pudasini of Nepal Flying Labs, an initiative that started in Nepal and now present in more than 30 countries around the world.

Drone surveillance of a disaster-hit area has many advantages besides being cheaper and faster to deploy. In Melamchi, for instance, heavy rain hampered helicopter rescue and reconnaissance flights, and cloud cover meant that satellite images were not immediately available. Immediately after hearing of the disaster, Geovation Nepal scrambled pilots who had many hours of flight experience in difficult terrain, and transported them to Melamchi.



Before and after interactive map of Melamchi Bazar and the confluence of the Indrawati-Melamchi rivers.

After the floods, a consortium of various private and non-profit organisations including Nepal Flying Labs carried out rapid aerial assessments of flood-hit areas. The team consisted of disaster risk reduction and management experts Suraj Gautam at the Institute of Himayan Risk Reduction, Basanta Raj Adhikari from the Tribhuvan University Institute of Engineering, Pravin Lamsal of GeoVation Nepal led all aerial missions to collect data, which are currently being processed for analysis.

Since accessibility is a crucial factor to plan emergency rescue and relief activities after a disaster like the floods in Melamchi, high resolution images from drones provide a clear picture of the terrain and conditions in the disaster affected area.

Early oblique images from Melamchi showed the damage to

roads from Melamchi Bazar to the headworks site in Helambu, and interpretation of the orthophoto maps showed that many bridges had been washed away. This allowed the local government to plan for alternative access routes.

The drone images came handy because helicopters were grounded for most of the next few days because of poor visibility, and satellite images of Sindhupalchok from Planet Labs were obscured by clouds. Drones could fly below the clouds to capture clear and sharp images of the terrain below.

The Melamchi Drinking Water Supply Project and Geovation Nepal conducted an aerial inspection of the headworks area on 18 June. The team took off from Amathang 2 km from the headworks area and captured high resolution hourly images of the



IMAGE ON RIGHT ON 20 JUNE BY GEOVATION NEPAL.

damage to the intake structure.

On 18 June, the team carried out an aerial inspection of the damage to Melamchi Bazar. But these were disturbed by frequent helicopter flights in the area which kept the air space busy. Says Pudasaini: "Rapid, locally-led drone deployment demonstrated that it is an effective technique for real-time damage assessment, as well as the dynamics of the river and debris flow."

For Nepal Flying Labs, some of the lessons learnt from the Melamchi experience was the need to coordinate with helicopter search and rescue flights in the area. Drones need to be deployed immediately, so the permission process needs to be expedited as well as coordination with air traffic controllers at nearby airports, and local security agencies.

Fully vetted drone pilots need to be on a roster so they can be

called upon during disasters. Drones equipped with infrared and thermal sensors can play a significant role in helping first-responders to identify missing people. Nepal must now also develop data-sharing protocols so drone images are easily available to rescue teams and local governments. 🇳🇵



OVERVIEW OF DISASTER

Go online to www.nepalitimes.com to watch videos taken from drones flying over Melamchi Bazar and the headworks of the Melamchi project to assess the damage caused by the debris flow on 16 June.

and scope



The source of the Kosi in Nepal is near this confluence of the Indrawati and Melamchi Rivers which saw devastating floods last month.

where, after its epic journey from the Tibetan Plateau and between the highest mountains in the world, this great river fans out into the plains.

North of the bridge is the site of the proposed mammoth Kosi High Dam. The 300m high dam will create a enormous reservoir submerging huge tracts of the Sun Kosi, Arun and Tamor Valleys. India needs the dam for flood control and to facilitate inland navigation by storing monsoon water and discharging it in the dry season, but there are many questions regarding the proposed mega project.

To begin with, the high silt load means that a future Kosi Reservoir would soon fill up with sediment. There are alternatives to dams: people in the Kosi plains have learnt to live with annual floods which deposit valuable soil nutrients, and diverting water through earlier river channels would ease flood impact.

The 60-year-old embankments that jacket the Kosi upstream and downstream from the Barrage

have created the potential for a massive future disaster. Because of the river's heavy silt content, the Kosi now flows on a deck 3-4m above the surrounding land. In 2008, the Kosi breached the eastern embankment at Kusaha, causing destruction downstream in Sunsari and Bihar. And that was when the river was not even in spate.

With extreme weather caused by climate change, or a confluence of cloud-bursts in the mountain catchment, a record-breaking flood in future could cause an engorged Kosi to bypass the barrage altogether and unleash a catastrophic flood downstream.

The Kosi Barrage was meant to be a temporary solution, and the Kosi High Dam was always in the minds of the Indian authorities. There is a need for transparent and independent study by water experts, social scientists and technocrats to study the pros and cons of the Kosi High Dam.

Siltation, seismicity, adaptation and mitigation, all need to be

factored in with projected future climate impact. Meanwhile, across the world, ecologists are warning that the price to pay for large dams is too great because of the destruction of river ecosystems.

A massive rockfill dam on a seismically active zone, the geopolitical implications as well as the social and environmental costs may outweigh the planned benefits. To make up for the mistake of the Kosi Barrage, we may be making an even greater blunder with the Kosi High Dam. 🇳🇵



THE KOSI STORY

Accompany Kanak Mani Dixit on a trip down from the source of the Kosi near Melamchi to the Chattara and to the Kosi barrage on the Indian border. Learn about the geography, history and arithmetic of Nepal's biggest river.

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Republic of animals

Nepal's Supreme Leader is Lord Pashupatinath, the ruler of all animules. As country's patron deity, Pashupatinath has our backs at all times. And whenever we have no government, like now, he is our default Head of State.

Given that our forebears were four bears, it is not surprising that our leaders make references all the time to creatures great and small. Prime Minister Oli likes animal metaphors, and has said he will "unleash hornets" on his trolls — one of the few promises that he has actually fulfilled.

Premier Oli is living proof that you can indeed teach old dogs new tricks. Just the other day, he said that despite the dog-eat-dog world of current Nepali politics, he has "not yet been bitten by a mad dog".

However dramatic that admission may have been, it did not make it to the headlines because, as we know from journalism school, it is only news when man bites dog, and not when dog bites man.

Ganesh Man Singh once called Nepalis who keep voting for the same leaders "a flock of sheep". Things have progressed since then, today Nepal's social butterflies like to assert that the country is "going to the dogs". This is factually wrong, it is actually going to the hyenas.

Another Nepali leader (his name will come to me in a minute) compared Parliament to a "goat market". If that is true, then Nepal could then be actually described as a country of sheep led by goats, which may be why we have to make so many sacrifices.

However, we have to be careful during these wokish times not to overdo the animal analogies for fear of being labelled speciesist. Ostriches, for instance, could easily take umbrage at being compared to Nepali politicians during the pandemic. Even pigs would not want to be associated with the level of greed on display in affiliating medical colleges.

However tempting it may be to say that the vaccination drive is moving "at a snail's pace", we have to be sensitive to the feelings of garden slugs who could rightly contend that the velocity of their locomotion is perfectly appropriate as far as they are concerned in getting from one place to another.

We are in such awe of a certain country to the South whose name is a five-letter word beginning with "I" that we fear to call it by its real name, referring instead to "the elephant in the room". Given the current dispensation, however, it may be more accurate to call it "the Bull in the China shop".

Let me also take this opportunity to voice strong reservations about retaining the cow as our national animal. It is regressive, status quoist and reeks of sexism. Why not the bull? Aren't our oxen good enough to be proud symbols of our patriarchal republic?

And when someone says something authoritative, why do we insist on saying it is from "the horse's mouth"? It would be just as credible if it came from the Ass' mouth.



The Ass

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