



Nepali Times issues #67 (9-15 November 2001), #199(4-19 June 2004) and #229 (7-13 January 2005).

Deuba's denouement

A Maoist insurgency had flared up in the western mountains, but in Kathmandu Sher Bahadur Deuba treated it like a law and order issue. When he finally acted, it was to get the police to launch campaigns code named Kilo Sierra 1 and 2. Ordinary people were terrorised, driving them into the Maoist fold.

During his second term as prime minister in 2001-02 following the massacre of the royal family, the army was dragged into war and casualties escalated. More people were killed in the year after the Royal Nepal Army joined the conflict than in the previous six years.

In 2002, Deuba dissolved Parliament (much like Oli did this year), declared a state of emergency and was eventually sacked by King Gyanendra who in a televised address called his prime minister "incompetent".

The king used and disposed of Deuba like a raggedy doll, bringing him back as prime minister for his third time (2004-05) and then promptly put him under house arrest for corruption after he staged a royal-military coup on 1 February 2005.

Despite the ignominy, Deuba kept resurrectoring himself. He returned to Baluwatar after 12 years in 2017 after consolidating his grip over the Nepali Congress and cobbling a coalition with the Maoists. Being prime minister between two phases of the election, after much bargaining with Dahal, Deuba handed over the Home Ministry to the Maoists.

He must have had a strong sense of déjà vu when he had to undertake identical negotiations last week with Dahal over the Cabinet. This time, not to repeat the mistake and with an eye on the 2023 elections, Deuba kept the Home Ministry but had to relinquish Finance to the Maoists. Now that he has won the vote in the House, there will be more

parties to reward and appease with ministerial posts.

There are no permanent friends and foes in politics. But it is an irony of ironies that Deuba is now at the helm with the help of Pushpa Kamal Dahal who tried to assassinate him, and on whose head he had announced a ransom during the conflict. Dahal is now trying to wield political influence in the coalition through a 'High Level Political Mechanism'.

The return of Sher Bahadur Deuba signifies a break from the paralysing power struggle that prevented the Oli administration from addressing the people's everyday concerns during the pandemic. The confidence vote this week also saves the exchequer an estimated Rs100 billion for an early election that will now not be needed.

And because this is essentially an election government, Deuba will have to get his disparate coalition to perform and deliver like never before. If he can maintain cabinet discipline, showcase transparency, make breakthroughs in vaccination, job creation and disaster relief, voters may take kindly to him.

But the signs are not good. Even before he won the vote, Deuba got his party colleague Bijja Gachhedar, who was convicted of corruption, released on bail. He has vowed to free another party member, Aftab Alam, who has been detained for murder.

With this kind of track record, and given that this is a coalition with the Maoist Centre, we cannot expect meaningful progress on transitional justice for the victims of the conflict either.

If the Deuba government behaves like it has before, it will only give a reunified UML the chance to exploit the NC's incumbency disadvantage to return to power in 2023.

Few national leaders are offered so many chances to get it right.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Deuba's checklist

Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba won a trust vote in the House this week, capping more than two years of political turmoil, and the country has avoided holding expensive early elections.

But this is just the beginning and Deuba has his work cut out, with vaccinating 70% of Nepal's population against Covid-19 his biggest responsibility. But the fact that he has yet to appoint a Health Minister hints at his priorities.

His first ministerial appointments to appease members of his own NC, Pushpa Kamal Dahal's MC and the Bhattarai-Yadav JSP is proof enough that it's politics as usual in Nepal.

Ironically, 20 years ago this week, Deuba was appointed the PM for the second time, after Girija Prasad Koirala was forced to step down. Much like now, he had a long-to-do list, which looks frighteningly similar to what Nepal and Nepalis still need.

The only question is if he can deliver where he has failed so many times before. Excerpts from page 1 story from issue #53 27 July-2 August 2001:

Getting elected prime minister by his parliamentary party was the easy part for Sher Bahadur Deuba. Now comes the hard part.

It was an indication of just how difficult even simple things could be that it took him four days to cobble together a 13-member cabinet. He had to satisfy dissatisfied dissidents, appease recent defectors, oblige those who had supported him in Pokhara – all the while trying to keep the party united and get a relatively honest, efficient and accountable



team. It was a thankless and near-impossible task.

Deuba immediately activated his links with the underground Maoists and announced what almost appeared like a joint suspension of offensives. For the first time in the six-year war, state-run radio and television broadcast a statement by Maoist Chairman Prachanda. He "requested" his militia to stop all "pre-planned armed attacks and go into active defence" mode.

With the immediate problem postponed, Deuba has bought some time to address other pressing issues. But no one will envy his long-to-do list:

Make the truce hold while considering Prachanda's demand of confidence building measures: making public the whereabouts of missing rebels, exchanging prisoners and annulling the previous government's moves to fight the insurgency, including the paramilitary and the hearts-and-minds ISDP.

Deliver on promises left unfulfilled by his predecessor: maintain law and order, improve governance and control corruption.

Deal with an impatient parliamentary opposition led by the UML as things hot up ahead of local elections next year.

Boost investor confidence, business and tourism. All three are related to political stability and resolving the insurgency.

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

ONLINE PACKAGES



What started out as a decorative item for weddings, festivals and homes traditionally made by women has turned into a commercial art form, enabling female artists in Nepal's Tarai to gain financial independence and fame. Read report on page 6-7 and watch video on our YouTube channel. Subscribe for exclusive multimedia content.

TRIED, TESTED AND FAILED

It is sad that Nepali people are saddled by the same proven failed leaders ('Deuba .5', Shristi Karki, #1070). Deubaji failed four times, and it is certain he will again.

Lal Bahadur

It is not about the continuing rotation of PMs. It is about the culture of graft, corruption, power seeking, sitting safe at your desk and making no decisions, and a complete lack of concern for the Nepali population. Until the political culture changes and the people overthrow these useless leaders, nothing will change.

Roger Ray

The Nepali parliamentary system is designed in such a way that we continue getting the same old and tried leaders. It should be like the US where the public directly vote for them, then we might see some changes.

Samir Shrestha

The political crisis we face today has been in the making for the past 25 years, and Mr Deuba was always a part of that circle ('Nepal's accidental prime minister', Shristi Karki, nepalitimes.com). How could someone who was a part of the problem now be a solution?

Felix Rütsche

Nepal will remain a developing country if people like Deuba keep ruling the nation.

Chhunku Ukyab

Yet another old man! When will Nepal enter the 21st (let alone the 20th) century and get someone on the healthy side of 60 to run the country, preferably in their 50s at most!

Eric Fairman

His astrologer said he will be Prime Minister seven times, so two more to go ('Reinstate, Replace, Repeat', Shristi Karki, nepalitimes.com). Nothing will change!

Biniya Dhital Goperma

Meet the New Boss, same as the Old Boss.

Alex Ferguson

VACCINES

Yes, please for the forgotten 65+ ('Once Nepal gets vaccines, they need to be fairly distributed', #1070).

Prabhakar Shrestha

We would be so fortunate if this expert advice is followed for the entire response. The information from the JHU-Nepal group researchers is extremely important. Glad that it was also published in Nepali in Himal Khabar.

Salina Tamrakar

A huge step forward ('Nepal's disabled get a shot at Covid', nepalitimes.com)! People with disabilities are at greater risk of contracting Covid-19. They also have a higher possibility of developing severe symptoms and even death in case of an infection. Which is why getting vaccinated for them is very important. Thanks to the Ministry of Health and the US Embassy for making it possible.

Handicap International

Once more doses of vaccine are available, anyone who works in the tourism sector like taxi drivers, hotel workers, restaurant staff, trekking guides etc ('Vaccine too little, too late for Nepal?', Sonia Awale, #1069). should be prioritised for the shot which might help make tourists feel comfortable about planning their trip to Nepal this Fall.

Julie Palais

CONTROVERSIAL BHUTAN AWARD

No person should be rewarded if they are responsible for the torture of fellow human beings ('Japan award for Bhutan minister opposed', nepalitimes.com)

Arvind Das Joshi

The 'stable' government and development of Bhutan the result of the policy implemented forcibly by its government three decades ago.

Nirmal Bajracharya

NATURE AND CONSERVATION

We have to also urgently protect the Chure-Bhavar regions ('The Kosi's sorrow and scope', Kanak Mani Dixit, #1069). The Bhavar zone is the only tract that permits monsoonal water to infiltrate surface run-off but we do not observe any type of robust advocacy to safeguard this fragile tract from politically motivated human encroachment, deforestation, sedimentation. Some 55% of this area is now human settlement, and hence there is no vegetation for water seepage and recharge downstream leading to flash floods.

Abdul S Ansari

CHINESE CHUNGI

The Ass would be surprised by how well the Chinese play chungu ('Nepal's Olympics dreams', Ass, #1071)! Hard to beat them.

Rastra Raj Bhandari

WHAT'S TRENDING



Vaccines need to be fairly distributed

With low vaccine coverage against the Covid-19 in Nepal and the slow arrival of doses, it is imperative to ensure that they will be equitably distributed across the country. JHU-Nepal Covid-19 Vaccine Advocacy Group's report online.

Most reached and shared on Facebook



Vaccines start trickling into Nepal

by Ramu Sapkota

Much-delayed vaccine supplies to Nepal appear to be picking up with consignments from the US, China and Japan, but the country is still a long way from vaccinating 70% of its population. Visit nepalitimes.com for latest developments.

Most popular on Twitter



Deuba.5

by Shristi Karki

As Nepal grapples with the multiple crises during the pandemic, this will likely be fifth-time PM Sher Bahadur Deuba's most challenging tenure. Will he be up to the task? Most think not. Hop on the discussion online.

Most commented

No light at end of trans-Himalayan tunnel

While Nepal pushes paper and twiddles thumbs, China makes substantial progress on its side of the trans-Himalayan network. Read up on the engineering, financial and geopolitical challenges that remain for Kerung-Kathmandu railway line.

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Most Nepalis, while glad that the uncertainty in the UML has ended, are dismayed that the parties could find no one more promising than Deuba to lead the country.



ART @AmulyaSir
Deuba's endearing qualification: not as abominable as Oli



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Sher Bahadur Deuba has been appointed prime minister for the 5th time. What happens next?



Ajaya Deuba @AjayaDeuba
Oli lost the political game which he didn't play fairly and in the interest of the people. Hope Sher Bahadur Deuba does not toe his line and pursues a people-centric approach!



Sujan Dhakal @SujanDhakal90
The distortion and damage the leadership of Nepal had done to the political space of the country is irreparable and repercussions seem to be long lasting. Though we got a new PM, clouds of uncertainty are still hovering.




Naresh Joshi @JoshiNares
He becomes a PM a couple of times more and that's it. That's all the timekeepers wrote.

Nepali Times

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Being good is not easy

Lessons from the Mahabharata from Gurcharan Das' book The Difficulty of Being Good

● Buddha Basnyat

Even eleven years after it was first published, *The Difficulty of Being Good* by Indian author Gurcharan Das is more relevant than ever. Two-thousand years after it was written, so is the *Mahabharata*.

For those who want to read the *Mahabharata* but are intimidated by the very thought, Das' interpretation of the epic is well worth the time. Das does not just go to the holy city of Banaras, but to the Regenstein Library in Chicago with its fabulous collection of South Asian text, to explore the Hindu classic.

His 'academic holiday' of several years there resulted in this magnificent and riveting book. Das felt that places of learning in Banaras, the natural choice, would discourage him from 'interrogating' the text, but that the University of Chicago with its Sanskrit scholars like Sheldon Pollock and Wendy Doniger, would be more suitable. And indeed, the book proves that this was the right decision.

The *Mahabharata* is made up of almost 100,000 couplets, and is seven times longer than Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined. But it is just as gory.

Besides the length, the big difference with the Greek classics is that every time there is a showdown in the *Mahabharata*, amazingly, there is a battle-stopping discourse, and the warring parties weigh in and discuss moral pros and cons of the violence they are unleashing on each other. The *Iliad*, on the other hand, just gets on with the action.

Like many religious texts, the *Mahabharata* also has its share of wacky stories. For example, the Kaurav brothers, who are fighting their Pandav cousins, create an impenetrable military formation called the 'Chakra Vyuh' on the twelfth day of the Mahabharata war to kill Pandav warriors like Yudhishtir.



A gory battle scene from the Mahabharata depicted in a Nepali painting from the 1800s.

black and white answers with an idealistic Ram and an evil Ravan.

The climax of the Mahabharata is when Yudhishtir is about to enter heaven. Indra, heaven's gatekeeper, comes in his celestial chariot and requests Yudhishtir to please get in so they can ride into heaven together. The self-effacing Yudhishtir, looking a bit puzzled, asks

Indra's permission if they can also take in a stray dog who has been following him for a few days.

Indra initially declines, Yudhishtir pauses, looks around and says, "My Lord Indra, in that case I will forgo heaven." This little episode with the dog was actually Indra's test of compassion for Yudhishtir, which he passes with flying colours and he enters heaven with the stray.

Das posits that the editors of the *Mahabharata* may have been influenced by the Buddhist concept of 'karunamaya', or compassion, as the book was written much later (between 400 BC – 300 AD) than the actual *Mahabharata* war in Kurukshetra (950 BC).

In fact, the author asks a very important question: what would have been the outcome at Kurukshetra if Arjun's charioteer had been Gautam Buddha instead of the clever Krishna?

The Difficulty of Being Good is replete with graphic, lyrical, and evocative prose, as this passage by Das illustrates:

In the summer, I returned to India to visit my mother. On the

When Arjun, from the Pandav side, is fighting elsewhere in the battlefield, his son, Abhimanyu, successfully penetrates the military formation and stops the Kaurav's menacing advance towards Yudhishtir.

However (and this is the incredible part) Abhimanyu had learnt about how to enter the Chakra Vyuh when he was in his mother's womb, as Arjun was describing it to her. Unfortunately, she fell asleep before Arjun could explain how to exit the treacherous m    .

As a result, Abhimanyu did not hear about the exit strategy from this battle formation and so he is trapped and mercilessly killed by the Kaurav generals including Karna, Drona and Ashwasthama.

Another riveting episode in the *Mahabharata* is Pandu, the father of the Pandav brothers. He is actually not their biological father because he has been cursed to die if he has coitus. Kunti, his wife, being a resourceful woman, utilises a gift from the ill-tempered sage Durvasha whereby she could invoke any god and have a child by him. And this she does.

Gurcharan Das's book shows us how the *Mahabharata* differs from other sacred texts, chiefly because rather than handing the reader a clear-cut cook book of instructions for the entry criteria to heaven, it bewilderingly asks more questions than it answers.

Almost confirming that the ultimate truth may not even be available here on earth, it shows us that we can only have intimations of the truth — a core belief in sophisticated Vedic thinking.

The *Mahabharata* is also true to life with flawed characters populating the text, quite unusual for a holy book. For example, Yudhishtir's weakness for gambling, Duryodhan's jealous streak, Karna's status anxiety, Krishna's guile — all add up to make it more human and readable.

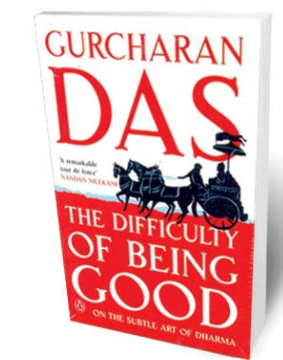
In fact, as Das points out, the *Mahabharata* almost humanises the Kaurav (who are the bad guys) in an attempt to portray the good Pandav guys with empathy (*Tat Tvam Asi*), to kindle a universal moral sentiment. In contrast, the *Ramayana*, the other Hindu holy text from an earlier era has more

way, the train stopped at a very sleepy station, about a hundred miles north of Delhi. I stepped on to the platform and discovered that this was no ordinary station: it was historic Kurukshetra where the Mahabharata's futile war of annihilation had been fought. In the burning heat of the summer afternoon, I began to imagine the brutal magnificence of the raging, ruthless battles. I saw a dithering Arjun, the greatest warrior of his age put down his Gandiva bow and refuse to fight — leaving his debonair and confident charioteer, Krishna, who is also God, with a problem on his hands. I visualised ruthless Drona grinding the exhausted Pandav armies into the dust. Suddenly he turns anxiously to his pupil, Yudhishtir to ask if the rumour about his son's death is true. Yudhishtir — who has never spoken false — tells a white lie and his fabulous chariot, which always traveled slightly above the ground, sinks into the dust.

In a sense, this is a book review of *The Difficulty of Being Good*, which itself is a book review of the Mahabharata 2,000 years after it was written.

As we put down the book, it is hard to erase the image of Arjun folding his hands in front of the flamboyant Krishna, refusing to fight, while the ruthless Drona and remorseful Yudhishtir are carrying on a conversation in the heat of battle. 🇮🇳

Buddha Basnyat is a physician at the Patan Institute of Health Sciences. Disclaimer: Gurcharan Das is his phauja, uncle.



The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma
Penguin Paperback, 2012
499.00
by Gurcharan Das

prabhu BANK



Kathmandu-Delhi flights

The Cabinet has decided to allow six flights a week on the Kathmandu-New Delhi route up from the current two flights from 24 July. Nepal and Air India will fly three flights a week on the high-demand sector.

Turkish Airlines to Newark

Turkish Airlines will now be flying to Newark, New Jersey in the US with daily frequency, making it the carrier's tenth American city and 325th destination worldwide. "We are pleased to expand our presence in North America with our tenth US gateway, and look forward to welcoming travellers aboard this new route," said Airlines' board chairman Ilker Ayci.

NIBL Euromoney Excellence

Nepal Investment Bank Limited (NIBL) has received the Euromoney Award for Excellence 2021. This is the second time the bank has won the prize.



Nexon EV launch

Tata Motors is launching its popular Nexon EV line of electric vehicles on 27 July in Nepal. The EV comes with a warranty of eight years on its lithium-ion batteries or for the first 160,000 km, and three years or 125,000 kilometres for the car.

Nepal Travellers' Mart

House of Rajkarnicar is organising the Nepal Travellers' Mart (NTM) 16-19 September to offer strategic solutions for Covid-induced domestic tourism damage. NTM 2021 expects to bring in 50,000 Nepalis and expats and will feature Tourism Poster shows, outdoor cuisine events and adventure sports workshops.

Samsung AI Washing Machine

Samsung has launched Nepal's first artificial intelligence (AI) enabled washing machine with a multilingual user interface. All new models come with Hygiene Steam technology that removes ingrained dirt and allergens along with the proprietary EcoBubble™.



India Covid aid

Indian ambassador Vinay Mohan Kwatra handed over 150 ICU beds to Justice Minister Gyanendra Bahadur Karki on 18 July. Ambassador Kwatra reiterated India's commitment to helping Nepal manage the pandemic through cooperation on critical health infrastructure. Prime Minister Deuba also said he had been assured by Prime Minister Modi that vaccines would soon be made available to Nepal.



New IFC Director for South Asia

The International Finance Corporation (IFC), a member of the World Bank, has appointed Mexican national Hector Gomez Ang as its new regional director for South Asia. "We



Creating Markets, Creating Opportunities

stand with the people and governments of South Asia as we continue to invest in the region's private sector despite market uncertainties," says Ang, adding that the IFC is using climate and Covid as cross-cutting entry points.

Ujwal Thapa Memorial Fund

The late Ujwal Thapa's family has set up a memorial fund to support Covid victims across the country with Rs4.2 million in surplus funds from Thapa's crowdfunded treatment campaign. It will support seven grantees, Heartbeat, Bhore Nepal, Madhesh Human Rights Home, Nepal Critical Care Development Foundation, Oda Foundation, National Innovation Center and Sano Paila covering all seven provinces, address Dalit and Musahar rights, trafficking prevention, health sector innovations and youth mobilisation.

Nepal Airlines privatisation still stuck

Mired in debt and mismanagement, the flag carrier needs to be rescued fast

● Masta KC

The long-overdue privatisation of state-owned Nepal Airlines has become a political hot potato, but with Sher Bahadur Deuba of the Nepali Congress (NC) now taking over from K P Oli the loss-making carrier may have a better chance at divestment.

The last days of the Oli administration was rife with speculation that the airline's board was preparing to offload some of its shares to the Yeti Group, which many believe was close to the former prime minister.

The once reputable Royal Nepal Airlines has been mired in scandals and mismanagement ever since the restoration of democracy in 1990. Political parties in government used the carrier as an employment agency, and pocketed kickbacks on aircraft leases.

Now, despite strong opposition from employee unions and some in government, the Covid-19 pandemic and its economic fallout has left Nepal Airlines Corporation (NAC) no other option.

companies is wrong.”

The airline's debts have skyrocketed because of its purchase of four brand new Airbus jets before the pandemic hit, as well as the induction of six Chinese-made turboprops which have been grounded. The government currently shoulders all of NAC's debts, pays off all its loans and is also the company's guarantor and manager.

Partially privatising the carrier would ensure that the government handles only its own share, while hopefully making the company competitive and profitable. It would also lessen the revolving-door politically-influenced appointments and interference in management.

A corporate culture of meritocratic employment and reward, more professional management and improvement in reliability and service could turn the airline around. Just relying on flying Nepali overseas workers and the diaspora would guarantee a strong load factor.

Even so, plans to privatise and transition the company from full state ownership to only majority control have been repeatedly

As a result, the state has shied away from concrete action on privatisation even if it would remove immense financial burdens. Now, with the NC back in government, there is a chance Nepal Airlines de-nationalisation could be in the cards — even though the worst scandals in the carrier's history have involved NC politicians.

To be sure, Nepal has had privatisation success stories too, with the likes of Nepal Telecom, Nepal Bank, Electricity Generation Company, Rastriya Baniya Bank and Timber Corporation Nepal all in profit, and they have improved their service after switching to a company model.

The airline's Board of Directors' move to privatise was based on a report by the Corporation Reform Committee in mid-September 2019 to then Aviation Minister Yogesh Bhattarai.

'Preparations must be made to convert the Corporation into a limited company under prevailing laws,' the report said, while also recommending restructuring ownership so that 51% of the airline remained in government hands.

the National Planning Commission's Shankar Sharma. This task force presented its suggestions in 2002, backing the recommendation that the airline should either be privatised or dissolved.

A report by the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) recommended in October 2004 that NAC be split into two companies for domestic and international air travel.

Other committees followed in 2005 and 2010 recommending that NAC be scrapped with its employees, contracts, capital and liabilities shifted to a new Limited Liability Company (LLC) and registered with the Company Registrar's office. Like all the committees before them, these reports just gathered dust.

But perhaps the most promising move towards privatisation came in 2017 when the government actively sought strategic partners from the US, Australia, France, Australia and Germany. Only Lufthansa Consulting from Germany responded, and the Nepali side managed to bungle even that deal, with the Council of Ministers taking too long to give the Finance and

The flag carrier lost over Rs5 billion last year as flights were grounded and domestic passenger volume shrank by 73%, and international passengers went down by 86%. These losses could be a mortal blow to the company, which has racked up a debt of Rs47 billion, and never registered a profitable year in its 63 years of existence.

Yet, even when flying through severe turbulence, NAC has somehow stayed afloat because of multiple government bailouts totalling Rs31 billion over the years.

Now, NAC's situation has become so desperate that the government's benevolence is wearing thin. As prime minister in 2019, Oli rebuffed pleas for government subsidy from NAC executives saying the carrier had to learn to stand on its own feet.

"Currently NAC is a costly white elephant," says Surya Raj Acharya, an expert in development and infrastructure policy. "The practice of the government always having to rescue public sector

shelved over the years even as other state-owned companies were privatised.

NAC employees padlocked offices and went on strike on 6 July after the Board of Directors sent management letters and draft regulations for privatisation to the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation on 27 June.

In response, on 11 July NAC senior management released a notice categorically denying any move towards privatisation.

Government hesitation to act and employee agitation stem from a history of bitter experiences. Nepal's post-1990 liberalisation boom saw the then-ruling NC initiate a wave of privatisation, albeit with disastrous results.

Most newly-privatised companies, such as Gorakhkali Tyre, Bhrikuti Paper, Harisiddhi Bricks, and Bansbari Leather Shoes were unable to cope with the ownership change and folded.

'Once the company is set up, ownership must be structured and shares distributed in such a way that it gives 1/3 of total paid-up capital to those responsible for management while sharing the rest among industries in tourism, local banks and financial agencies, company employees, the government and the general public,' the Advisory Committee's report notes.

Member of the NAC Board Buddhi Sagar Lamichhane says: "Our understanding is that the corporation cannot survive under the existing structure, and managerial capacity. However, the government has the final say on any decision."

But the state's backtracking has dismayed pro-privatisation executives. As early as 2002, another committee had recommended that the NAC switch to a company model with only majority government ownership.

A new task force was then set up to review that report and present an action plan with

Tourism Ministries the go-ahead.

"Strategic partnerships are a must if the flagship is to be saved," says former Finance Secretary Shankar Prasad Adhikari. "There is no reason for the government to keep bailing out a company that perennially haemorrhages tax-payers money like Nepal Airlines."

There are lessons to be learnt from Air India which accumulated losses of a staggering INR5 trillion, as the government finally moves to private the flag carrier.

However, experts caution that with the global downturn in aviation, even privatisation may not save Nepal Airlines. Even so, cutting costs, streamlining the fleet, and launching a strategic recovery plan could still save the carrier. But it would be unrealistic to expect that without privatisation and better management. 🇳🇵



Nepal Airlines fleet



सग्लो
समाज

● Anita Bhetwal in Janakpur

Janakpur, the birthplace of Sita and the cradle of the Mithila civilisation, is seeing a revival of its heritage, culture and traditional art.

The origin of Mithila art is rooted in the legend of King Janak ordering his subjects to paint walls of homes to welcome Lord Ram when he came to ask for his daughter Sita's hand in marriage.

Mithila paintings then were done at weddings, festivals and feasts using flour, clay, and cow dung. The artists were mostly the women of the family, who bore the decorative responsibility in their homes. As the art evolved, the paintings became more than a way to beautify homes — they provided women with a creative outlet to tell the stories of their lives.

This centuries-old art form has now gone commercial, enabling female artists to hone skills passed down from one generation of mothers to the next generation of their daughters. This now gives them financial independence, recognition and respect within Nepal and, increasingly, across the world.

Madhumala Mandal was born and raised in Kuwa village near here, where Mithila culture is as ingrained into young girls as household duties and responsibilities. Guided by her grandmother and mother, Mandal would paint pictures of deities to

decorate the doors and walls of her house.

But her interest in the traditional draughtsmanship soon stretched beyond the walls of her home, she would make shapes out of clay and paint idols on trips to the village *mela*.

"Even while I was out herding cattle and doing farm work, I was always drawing idols and shapes on the ground," she recalls.

Mandal would eventually have a family of her own, but she retained her passion for Mithila art. She now works at the Women's Development Centre in Janakpur where she creates Mithila paintings on canvas.

"It took many years for me to convince family and friends that I was doing the right thing," she explains.

Mandal's four brothers went to school, but as the sole daughter in the family, she was excluded. Having learnt to be independent from a young age and now with income of her own, she supports her own daughter's education.

"The income and respect I earned through my artwork gave me the courage and the means to support my daughter," she says. "This is the greatest achievement of my life."

Her days of drawing shapes in the mud long behind her, Mandal's art now stays with traditional motifs but is almost impressionistic. Her work has been exhibited in the US and Hong Kong, and accent the walls of many homes across the world.



The ancient Mithila kingdom spanned territory that now lies on both sides of the India Nepal border. Recently, there has been a renaissance of Mithila literature, dance forms and art.

Acclaimed Mithila artist Mithileshwari Devi Karna was born and raised in Bihar's Madhubani district and settled in Janakpur after marriage, grew up learning the Mithila art form from her mother in India.

Karna used to train artists at the Women's Development Centre and faced similar experiences of societal pressure as many other women like Mandal in the Tarai who have chosen to become artists.

Her community expressed disapproval when she prepared to travel overseas for an exhibition of her art. "People are always going to judge and make comments," she says dismissively, "but I stood my ground, and went to Japan."

The steadfast pursuit of her art has earned her respect, financial security, and most importantly, self-satisfaction. Karna, 65, was recently honoured by the Nepal Academy



Vibrant M thrives in

Centuries-old art form a
gain international reco





Mithila art in Nepal

allows female artists to
cognition, and income



of Fine Arts and now only paints as a hobby. Even so, she is never without a paintbrush and canvas within reach.

The popularity of Mithila art and handicrafts spread across the world after the 1980s due to Professor Rajendra Bimal and American artist Claire Burkert, who meticulously documented all the existing Mithila murals in Janakpur.

Together, they established the Women's Development Centre here in 1992 and trained women in Mithila art for the first time in Nepal, making sure that artists were financially independent through their art, and the techniques were preserved.

As a result, the women who have received training and worked in the Centre have played a role in making Mithila art famous not only within Nepal but all over the world.

Sunaina Thakur is among those who institutionalised and promoted Mithila art internationally. Thakur organised Mithila art exhibitions in India, Japan, and the US, and now runs her own art gallery in Janakpur where she employs and trains 30 female artists in the techniques as well as in running an art business.

"I have been constantly trying to mobilise unrecognised talent to empower artists and encourage gender equality, both through recruitment efforts and through the art itself," says Thakur, "I now want to pass on what I know to the next generation of women."

Among the artists employed at Thakur's gallery is Binita Devi Sah, who recently earned her first-ever paycheck through her own Mithila paintings. Family obligations and responsibilities towards her children had confined Sah at home for almost three decades, but when her sons completed their education, it opened the door for her to finally pursue her own interests.

"I stepped out of my house 26 years after getting married and



Crossborder Mithila civilisation

Mithila art is the cultural heritage of the entire Mithila region, which was a single kingdom before being divided by the 1816 Sugauli Treaty. And while Colonial India got a bigger chunk of the state, Nepal retained 25% of the territory, including the capital of Mithila in Janakpur where the art form originated.

When the state of Mithila was divided, the art form began to be referred to as Madhubani art in India. But Mithila and Madhubani art are one and the same, explains Sunaina Thakur.

"As in Mithila art, Madhubani art, too, depicts the marriage of Sita and Ram, and the two art forms have the same style," she adds. "The difference is that Madhubani art is more well known internationally than Mithila art."

Mithila art conservationist and campaigner Sudarshan Lal Karna says that the art form has not developed, or been promoted in Nepal to the extent that it has been in India, where it was first propagated in 1966.

The then Union Minister of Bihar, Lalit Narayan Mishra, who was familiar with the art form, introduced his foreign guests to Mithila paintings. They in turn were amazed how similar they were to Picasso's paintings.

"That marked the beginning of the institutional development of Madhubani art in India," says Karna, while there was no progress in Janakpur. The Women's Development Centre is one of very few Nepali organisations that actively works to promote and nurture Mithila art.

"But although the evolution of the art in Nepal is slower, the quality of the talent with the two nations are at par with each other," notes Karna, who would like Mithila art to be included in the school curriculum, and not just in Province 2.



earned Rs12,000 through my work. I have not stopped sharing my happiness with other people even as my sons continue to tease me about it," smiles a proud Sah. "We never thought that this art, which we learned to make as children, could be a means for earning a livelihood."

The Mithila museum at the Janaki temple has also played an important role in documenting and conserving Mithila art. The museum, established under the leadership of Mahant Ramat Peshwar Das, houses Mithila paintings, sculptures, murals, decorative items as well as Maithili music and hymns that showcase the rich history of the art form.

Satish Shah, director of the Women's Development Centre, agrees that Mithila art in Nepal has not been able to evolve as much as it has in India where there are more well-equipped institutions. Moreover, the Centre is not as influential as it once was, and has become a cause for concern regarding the future of Mithila art and artists. The pandemic has made working conditions worse in the last two years, and it is difficult to pay the 40 artists employed.

Yet, even as they hope for support from the local and state governments, Shah and Karna both

acknowledge that elected officials in Janakpur and Kathmandu do not understand the importance of Mithila art and culture.

"The government must invest in preserving this institution as well as Mithila art," says Shah, adding that leaders could start by displaying the paintings in their offices.

Mithila art featured heavily during weddings, festivals and celebrations, and even in items of daily use in Janakpur city until two decades ago. The artwork decorating the streets of the city included depictions of ancient earthen houses, artistic interpretations of the traditional *jhizhiya* dance, daily household items, and vibrantly painted birds. But with modern life, the practice is slowly fading.

S C Suman, former head of the Department of the Folk Arts at the Nepal Academy of Fine Arts, says the reason is that cement houses have replaced the clay walls where the paintings were done. Nepali galleries now import Indian Mithila paintings and pass them off as originals.

"While commercialisation to a certain extent is necessary, hyper-commercialisation can also make it difficult to preserve Mithila art," he says. "Nepali art is incomplete without Mithila art." 🇳🇵

EVENTS



Virtual Heritage tour

This installment of the Virtual Heritage Tour series designed by Story Cycle will take viewers on a journey to Taplejung, home of the Red Panda. Make reservations on a Google form at Story Cycle's Facebook page. 30 July, 4pm-5pm

Sooriya virtual studio

Join Sooriya Wellness and Yoga centre's virtual studio for yoga sessions available to everyone for self-practice at home. Sessions are available on prior appointment. Go to the Sooriya Wellness Facebook page for details. 9818481972

Summer Flash Fiction

Submit a work of fiction or nonfiction in any genre in less than 1,000 words for a chance to win \$1,000 and get published in The Writer Magazine. Learn more at writermag.com/contests. Deadline: 12 August



Le Sherpa Market

Support small businesses. Shop for fresh and organic vegetables, fruit, cheese, bread, meat products, honey, and much more. Saturdays, 8am-12:30pm, Le Sherpa Maharajgunj

Nepal Reads

Explore acclaimed works of poetry, autobiographical fiction and memoirs by authors Billy-Ray Belcourt, Kai Cheng Thom, Maia Kobabe, Ocean Vuong, Saeed Jones, and Samra Habib during Nepal Reads: Gender and Sexuality 2021. Go to Book Bus Nepal's Facebook page to sign up for the event. Until September

DINING



Anatolia

Anatolia's Indian and Turkish dishes are packed with spices and an unforgettable assortment of flavours. From the Mutton Kofta Curry to the Baklava, the dishes will keep customers wanting more. All the food is halal. Thamel (01) 4258757

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Poetry Foundation

Discover all things poetry. Browse through collections of classic and contemporary poems, readings, poetry news and the entire 100-year archive of Poetry Magazine. Go to the website to start.



Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya

Browse through the collection of Nepali archived content, including manuscripts, newsletters, sketches and photographs on the Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya database.

Global Digital Library

Looking to enhance children's vocabulary while schools remain shut? The Global Digital Library has educational material and storybooks for parents and educators classified according to reading levels, including books in Maithili, Nepali, and Newa languages.



Comic Library

Find a variety of comic books available from the British Council Digital Library, including Star Wars, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Disney classics. Visit the website to find out more.

GETAWAY



Peacock Guest House

Housed in a World Heritage Site, three-storied Newa-style building provides splendid views of the Dattatreya Square and the Bhimsenthana temple. Bhaktapur (01) 6611829

Mystic Mountain

Situated amid the forest of Nagarkot, the resort is exquisitely built using ultra modern designs and world-class comfort. Nagarkot, 9851277701

Dwarika's Resort

Dwarika's Resort boasts luxury accommodations, an attentive staff, fantastic amenities, and award-winning dishes from around the world. Dhulikhel (01) 4479488



Summit River

The Summit River Lodge is an expansive 16-lodge property with an infinity pool, semi-tropical vegetation and authentic Nepali cuisine made from local organic produce. The rustic lodge incorporates traditional wood designs with minimalistic accents. Kurintar, Dhading, 9801151166

Balthali Village

A small, cosy retreat just beyond Kathmandu Valley with a bird's eye view of green terrace fields dotted with ochre painted houses. Panauti, Kavre, 9851087772

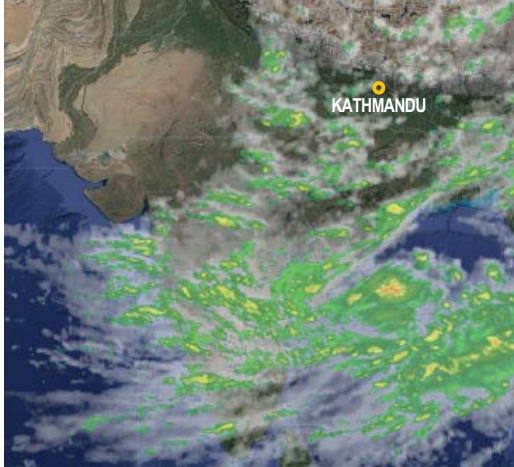
Everfresh

Perfect for brunch and breakfast lovers, Everfresh offers the best elevated avocado toast, fluffy pancakes, brioche French toast and buckwheat crepes. Lazimpat, 9803700736



The Chocolate Room

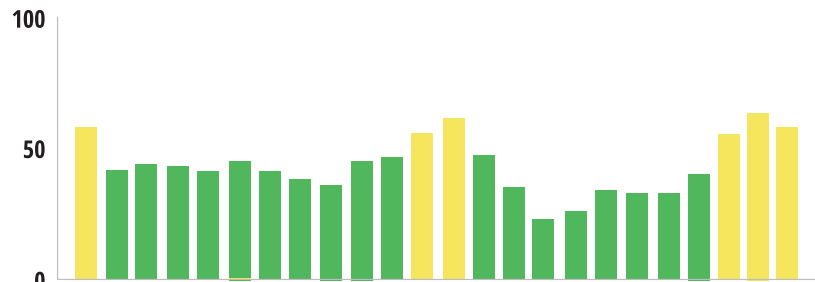
Enter a world of cupcakes, decadent brownies and chocolate of every size and shape. Between the chocolate, try the Peri Peri fries and milkshake. Jhamsikhel, 9823837885



From the weekend and into next week Nepal is going to be caught in a pincer-like movement of the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal arms of the monsoon. A huge low pressure trough is moving eastwards over Central India, while a large circulation is building up over the northern Bay of Bengal. After the monsoon catches its breath on Friday, we may be heading into a wet Saturday-Sunday as these two systems converge.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
27° 20°	29° 19°	29° 20°

AIR QUALITY INDEX



9AM 21 June to 8AM 22 June measured at US Embassy, Phora Darbar

With the lockdown all but lifted, and traffic building up in Kathmandu Valley, the Phora Darbar monitoring station shows a clear correlation between monsoon showers and Air Quality Index (AQI). Suspended particulate matter in the ambient air rises above 100, and drops to below 50 after the rains wash away the pollutants. Less visible, but as dangerous, is the carbon monoxide from all the motorcycles on the roads.

OUR PICK



Queen Sono, Kagiso Lediga's 2020 South African crime drama that ran for six episodes, follows the titular Queen as she seeks to uncover the truth behind the assassination of her mother, an anti-apartheid freedom fighter, that left her orphaned. Years later, recruited by the South African Special Operations Group, Queen becomes a highly skilled intelligence operative, still continuing to investigate the identity of her mother's murderer. Stars Pearl Thusi, Vuyo Dabula, Sechaba Morojele, Chi Mhende, and more.

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



It took me months to adjust to lockdown life. Being cooped up in my tiny studio apartment caused a lot of anger and frustration. But as an essential worker at a health centre, I had the freedom to leave the apartment to walk back and forth from work, which helped my mental sanity.



LIFE TIME

Anjana Rajbhandary

This was followed by six weeks of working from home. Being a social person with a wide network of friends, having to stay locked within the four walls was difficult. Living alone, I had to do everything in my power not to lose my mind.

I started daily yoga and rode my bike to keep myself physically active and mentally sound. I attempted to meditate several times, but it did not work for me. I Face-timed with people, and though it felt good for the hour that it lasted, once the call was done the emptiness returned.

Being an anxious person by nature, spending time alone all day made it worse. You can only watch so much Netflix and exercise to kill the hours. I started to clean more obsessively, but there is a limit to that too. The only respite was the grocery trips, and the chance to get out and breathe fresh air.

As a mental health professional, people started asking me how they could take care of themselves in this difficult time. I gave them the best advice I could. But I did not realise that listening to others experiencing the same frustration and anger would only add to my own.

Struggling with my inability to stay strong, I started to absorb other people's negativity and feel weaker by the day. My work recommended we talk to other therapists to help ourselves, and I did. My therapist told me to separate other people's problems from my own and not take them in, but I could not.

I continued to listen to my family and friends about how low they felt. I made sure to be everyone's cheerleader by checking in on them and encouraging them to try every technique that was proven to work. But while helping others, I did not notice that I needed help myself. I could not share this with others because this was my field of work. How could I, someone trained in helping others with their mental health issues, admit that I was losing my mind?

Embarrassed and feeling inadequate, I could not understand how despite following every piece of advice in the book, I was unable to uplift my spirit. I exercised, ate healthy, cleaned and kept in touch with loved ones, but I kept sinking deeper and deeper into this hole.

I kept telling myself that this will pass, and everything will be okay again. I started working with a kind and understanding therapist, and I finally started to feel validated and comfortable in admitting that even mental health professionals need help.

Eventually, I got used to the lockdown and staying indoors. I tried gardening, but I could never get myself into it. I moved to another place, and I began to spend time walking in the backyard and looking at the trees and the birds.

As the lockdown eased, people were so excited to get back to their everyday lives. I thought I would feel the same. After all, I had been waiting for this and I was fully vaccinated, so I felt safe and responsible about going out.

But it had taken me so long to

Readjusting to life post-Covid

Getting back to life before the pandemic may take time, and that is OK



acclimate to being inside that being out in the world again caused me more anxiety. It felt wrong to be outdoors, and I could not enjoy it. I pushed myself to go out and see people, but I would always come home feeling uncomfortable and guilty, thinking of people still struggling at home.

A widespread technique practised by mental health professionals is to write down one thing they appreciate in their lives. I started to do that. I am grateful for many things in my life, but the fluctuation between suddenly being stuck indoors and then having the freedom to run around was harder for me than many others that I know of.

I find it challenging to go out and enjoy myself also because I got so used to being on my own. Last year in July, one of the psychologists I interviewed for an article had told me that people would have a difficult time readjusting to 'everyday life'. I could not understand why at the time, but I do now.

I have lived in many cities and adjusted to different lifestyles over the years, but by far, this has been the hardest. There is a constant battle between my rational mind, which tells me that we must adjust to changes to live everyday life and move on and my emotional mind that is stubborn and reluctant to change. I am envious of people who can reacclimate when I feel completely stuck. The truth is that, it does not matter what others say, the most important thing is to try and keep trying till you achieve the desired goal.

My biggest fear is having to go back to the lockdown days again. See-sawing between a life of freedom and being comfortable on my own is one concern that I never imagined I would have. I did not think it would be this hard.

While some people can adapt to changes more quickly, others like me are cautious about adjusting to the new normal because Covid is not over. I yearn for the day when I no longer live in fear. But getting back to my life before the pandemic will not happen overnight. All I can do is be responsible and take care of myself while giving myself time. 🇳🇵

Anjana Rajbhandary lives and works in Chicago. She writes this fortnightly *Nepali Times* column *Life Time* about mental health, physical health and socio-cultural issues.

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Vaccines, variants and a third

With the vaccination rate up Nepal is better placed to stop another surge, but only if safety measures are strictly enforced

● **Sonia Awale**

For the first time in weeks, Nepal recorded more than 3,000 new cases on 20 July. There were 25 deaths. The country is on the tail end of what has been a deadly second wave, but the rate of decline in infections and mortality has stalled.

Public health officials blame it on sudden reopening following two-months of lockdown in which many mingled without masks, low vaccination rate, and minimal testing and tracing.

While some experts say Nepal and India are now safe against another major surge of the Delta variant that was largely responsible for the second wave, others warn of a third wave if safety measures are not enforced.

The Delta mutant is now ravaging Indonesia, and spreading across Europe and North America. And scientists say it has affected mostly countries and regions with low vaccination rates.

"The third wave is a matter of when not if. And if we don't vaccinate as many people as soon as possible, there will be a continued threat of more dangerous variants, and we will be repeating the whole cycle," warns Buddha Bansyat, a physician at the Patan Academy of Health Sciences.

So far, Nepal has fully vaccinated 1,158,130 people, 3.6%



MONIKADEUPALA

of its total population. Some 10% Nepalis have received the first dose of either AstraZeneca Covishield, Chinese Sinopharm VeroCell or single-shot Johnson & Johnson jabs.

Another 8 million doses of various Covid-19 vaccines are expected by September – some purchased from China, more doses from COVAX, as well as a direct grant from Japan. This should take the total fully vaccinated population near 20%, which together with antigen positive population could cushion the impact of a possible third wave.

"We have now moved on

from vaccinating the elderly and frontline workers to groups less at risk of the Covid-19, and we have more vaccines in the pipeline," says Shyam Raj Uprety, head of government's Covid Vaccine Strategy. "We have applied to buy 10.5 million more doses of vaccines from the COVAX at a subsidised rate."

Indian public health experts have projected the third wave to hit that country in late August. What happens in India usually follows in Nepal within 12-13 days, and if that is true this time too, Nepal cannot be unprepared like in March.

"If the vaccination program progresses as smoothly as it is happening now compared to the first two surges, the third wave might not be as significant if it happens at all. By Dasain, a significant chunk of Nepalis should have been vaccinated," explains Sameer Dixit of Centre for Molecular Dynamics Nepal.

Apart from vaccines, in case of a sudden surge, hospitals need to be ready with sufficient beds and ICUs, oxygen, life-saving medical equipment, drugs and functioning oxygen plants. Hospitals must also prepare their paediatric wards since

the third wave could affect a younger population.

Since the peak of the second wave when there were close to 10,000 new cases a day and over 200 daily fatalities, international donors have been supplying essential medical equipment to Nepal.

The Health Ministry received 385 ventilators and 970 oxygen concentrators in May-June from various donors. District hospitals at local levels have also received direct supplies from aid agencies. These should be in running condition and on standby instead of being stockpiled in Kathmandu,

Nepal has no health minister as Covid-19 cases rise again

Deuba appoints supporters in powerful portfolios but leaves the helm of Health Ministry vacant

During his address to Parliament on 18 July while seeking a confidence vote, Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba claimed his government's topmost priority was vaccination and managing the Covid-19 pandemic.

"The government's first priority is vaccination, second priority is vaccination, third priority is vaccination," he said emphatically.

This week, he had a photo-op with American Ambassador Randy Berry as the handicapped received the Johnson & Johnson single jab inoculations. He then waited in line with others to get his own shot.

He then summoned health officials to Singha Darbar for a pow-wow and instructed them to be at battle stations against a possible third wave by setting up holding centres at the border as well as increasing testing, supply of oxygen, beds and ICUs in hospitals.

After becoming prime minister for the fifth time, Deuba has spent most of this first week in office dealing with Covid-19, leading many to believe his priority is indeed the health sector.

However, he has yet to appoint a health minister, even as he was quick to name trusted supporter Bal Krishna Khand as Home Minister and hand over powerful finance and the energy and water resource portfolio to the Maoist Centre.

This is in direct contrast to the Oli administration that switched five Health Ministers in three years, and four since the pandemic. The very lead ministry in tackling the pandemic has been plagued with uncertainty and indecision.



PMO

Nepal might be at the tail end of the second wave but the rate of decline in daily infections and deaths has stalled. There is also the threat of a possible third wave and spread of newer strains as the country struggles to increase its vaccination coverage.

"Unstable leadership affects the entire system and its operations. And in a country like ours with underdeveloped mechanisms,

stable leadership is of utmost importance," says Bhoj Raj Pokhrel, former Chief Election Commissioner.

Bhanubhakta Dhakal was the Minister of Health in January 2020 when the first case of Covid-19 was detected in Nepal. He was in charge when the first scandals broke in the procurement of Covid-19 test kits, which were found to be faulty and overpriced.

Hiradyesh Tripathi then took over and

was entrusted by the Oli administration to buy 5 million doses of the Sputnik V vaccine. That did not materialise, and he negotiated with the Serum Institute of India (SII) to buy 2 million doses of the AstraZeneca Covishield vaccine. But only 1 million doses were delivered before India banned the export.

Tripathi later blamed SII's representatives in Nepal for trying to take a bigger commission from the next order of 5 million doses. This was followed by the devastating second wave.

Tripathi was succeeded by Sher Bahadur Tamang, who served just three weeks as health minister before the Supreme Court ordered Oli's Cabinet appointments null and void. Krishna Gopal Shrestha, who was also the Education Minister, had an even shorter tenure because the Oli government fell on 13 July.

Former director of the Epidemiology and Disease Control Division Baburam Marasini says that at a time when the Health Ministry should have been most proactive it became a victim of politics.

There are rumours that Deuba may appoint Gagan Thapa as health minister, and many remember his previous tenure during which he showed decisiveness and knowledge of the job.

He says: "Only when the leadership is strong and stable can all agencies of government effectively implement a strategy. It is imperative that the government appoint a can-do, well-informed health minister soon."

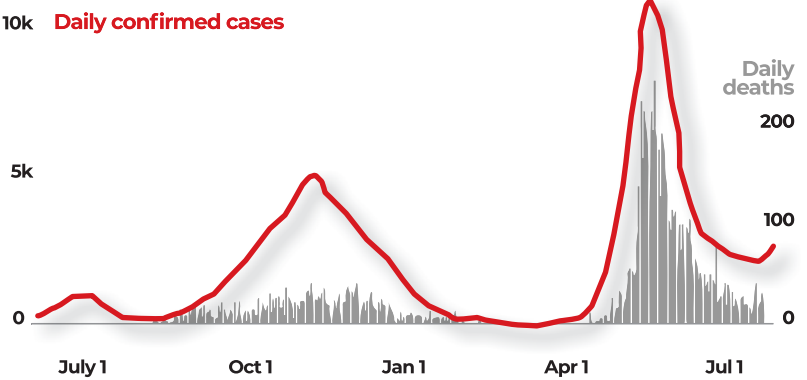
Masta KC

wave

Future Covid-19 Vaccines in the Pipeline

Vaccine	Donor/From	Doses	Arrival
VeroCell	China	4 million purchased, 1.6 million in aid	July
AstraZeneca	Japan	1.6 million direct aid	July
Not specified	COVAX	350,000	August
Not specified	COVAX	10.5 million	Yet to be finalised
Johnson & Johnson, VeroCell	USA, China	Not specified	Yet to be finalised (negotiations underway)

Covid-19 trend in Nepal



say doctors interviewed for this report.

With the vaccine supply chain less constrained, there is now a debate about reprioritising the doses and a more strategic distribution of supply. Some experts have suggested a ‘firewall strategy’ wherein densely populated cities are fully vaccinated to reduce transmission, and to revive the economy that will in turn restore jobs. Equitable vaccination is ideal, but in epidemiological terms inoculating a thinly-spread population is not the best use of limited doses. Inoculating younger adults mean they are



AMIT MACHAMASI

less likely to carry the virus and transmit it to children, the largely unvaccinated group. Even within cities, the focus must be on the urban poor in congested areas.

“Moving forward, we must now prioritise crowded cities and highly mobile groups for vaccination to help blunt the effect of another wave and save as many lives as possible,” says Sher Bahadur Pun, a virologist at Teku Hospital.

However, epidemiologist Lhamo Yangchen Sherpa worries that focussing in cities may mean the underserved are neglected. “While reprioritising, our strategy should be such that the supply isn’t misused and the neediest aren’t missed out.”

At present VeroCell and J&J vaccination drives are running in parallel across Nepal. Soon, the Japanese grant of 1.4 million AstraZeneca will be used to inoculate the elderly who have been waiting for four months for their second doses.

Social media is rife with speculation about the jabs and who should and shouldn’t get it, leading to widespread confusion and vaccine hesitancy. People are also comparing the efficacy level of one vaccine against the other.

“Let’s take any vaccine available, they do what they are supposed to do, prevent deaths and hospitalisations in most cases,” says Buddha Basnyat. “I encourage people with heart conditions, cancer and liver diseases to vaccinate, they are high-risk group, as well as pregnant women.”

According to Public Health England, Covid-19 vaccines have so far prevented 13,200 deaths and 39,700 hospitalisations in the United Kingdom, even while the country sees a surge in Delta variant cases. As Nepalis inoculate against SARS-CoV-2, people are starting to forgo safety measures even if the majority of the population remains unvaccinated. They are back on the streets taking part in political rallies and conducting crowded indoor meetings. Jam-packed and poorly-managed vaccination centres could themselves be super-spreaders.

Says Sameer Dixit: “In midst of vaccines, variants and new surges, we cannot forget masks and physical distancing, it is still our first line of defence against the coronavirus.”

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I spy

We fail to understand the big hoo-hah in India about the gobarment there using the Israeli-designed Pegasus software to infect the WhatsApp of opposition leaders, activists, journalists and even Delhi-based ambassadors, including our very own plenipotentiary extraordinaire at Barakhamba Road.

Don't know why they even bothered. Indian spooks thought they could extract inside information on Nepal's multi-pronged strategy to reclaim Limpiyadhura by penetrating Nilamberji's phone with zero-click malware.

Instead, all they would have eavesdropped on would be top secret conversations about arranging appointments at Apollo Hospital for a former prime minister, or requests for college scholarships from folks back in Kathmandu.

They also would not have found any conversation on vaccine diplomacy because if our envoy was working on a deal, Nepalis would have by now got the 1 million Covishield doses we already paid for.

The semi-intelligent folks in the intelligence community did not really need Pegasus to snoop on the intelligentsia. Spying physically on political opponents has been honed into a fine art here, and being known as a secret agent has prestige and status in society.

In fact, when a Nepali tabloid once exposed a list of secret agents of foreign intelligence agencies like the CIA, KGB, Mossad, Raw, Medium Rare and Well-done, there were some senior government figures who felt insulted because their names were not on it.

The point is that they didn't really need to plant spyware on smartphones, they could have relied on human sleuths. During the Panchayat, the regime deployed spies everywhere. They planted spies to spy on their own spies.

There were even assets deployed at the Central Zoo in Jawalakhel to check if any of the inmates in the Large Mammals enclosure were anti-national elements plotting to overthrow the monarchy. Little did they know that the moles were double agents.

Still, the Pegasus scandal should send a chill down every ultra-nationalistic spine and give all patriots goose pimples. We just cannot let our guards down in this age of electronic cloak-and-dagger stuff.

We wouldn't go as far as to say that our counter-espionage systems have to be beefed up, since that would ruffle religious sensibilities in some quarters, but there is no doubt that they need to be buffed up. And I would not be revealing any state secrets if I told you that all three arms of the government are wide open for surveillance by foreign and domestic secret agents.

The Nepali landmass is being constantly monitored by low-orbit satellites, and VIPs should therefore be careful about reading top-secret files with their windows open. They should also wear N95 masks at all times to disguise themselves.

The PMO in Singha Darbar is bugged. So the Council of Ministers should refrain from discussing anything of national importance at cabinet meetings. They should also not discuss any state secrets at home since there may be bed bugs.

And any fifth columnist trying to bug the Ass' not-so-smart phone beware: I'll plant a butt call.



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