



(Geo)political football

For many outsiders, Nepal must seem like a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma. Indeed, even Nepalis agree.

In 2017, a Nepali Congress-Maoist coalition government led by Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba concluded an agreement in Washington DC for a \$500 million US-funded Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact to upgrade Nepal's electricity grid and highways.

Signing it was Finance Minister Gyanendra Bahadur Karki. Deuba is now prime minister again in a coalition once more with the Maoists, and Karki is the minister for law and parliamentary affairs. Four years later, the MCC is still stuck because it has been weaponised by squabbling parties and political

factions which are heavily influenced by regional rivalry between India and China on the one hand, and global polarisation between the US and China on the other.

After K P Oli became prime minister following the 2017 elections, he strongly backed the MCC. But his rivals in the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) including Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal, and dissidents from his own UML, used provisions in the MCC that they saw as being anti-national against Oli, and ultimately brought him down.

Since 13 July, Deuba has led a coalition made up of the Maoist Centre (MC), the breakaway CPN (United Socialist) and the Janata Samajbadi Party (JSP) which are all opposed to the MCC. It is now such a political hot potato that

the 5-party coalition could not even include it in the common minimum program unveiled last month.

Nepal's chronic political instability has brought development to a standstill, pandemic response is erratic, but the most concrete collateral damage has been on the MCC which would have helped upgrade Nepal's power grid with a new high-capacity 400kV transmission line between Hetauda-Damauli-Butwal, a distance of 315km.

In the next three years, more than 3,000MW of electricity will be added to Nepal's national grid, doubling present generation capacity. The new line would allow this power to be distributed within Nepal, and also to export monsoon surplus to India.

If the MCC transmission line is not built, much of the new electricity generated will be wasted, putting private energy investors at risk.

The anti-Oli faction in the CPN led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Madhav Kumar Nepal were so effective in building up public opinion against the MCC that grassroots cadres are now dead set against it because they believe it is part of America's Indo-Pacific Strategy to encircle China.

The MCC's vice-president Fatema Z Sumar arrived in Kathmandu on 9 September amidst street protests.

Deuba has been trying to get Oli on board the MCC and cobble together enough votes to get Parliament ratification, which would destabilise the coalition even before it can complete forming a government.

Deuba tried to placate his partners last week by approving an absurdly worded letter from the Finance Ministry to the MCC, asking if the agreement undermined Nepal's sovereignty — as if it was for the Americans to decide even if it was. The MCC responded by saying it would not, that it would not be above Nepal's constitution, and there was no military component to the project.

The MCC is seen as America's response to China's BRI at a time when the Deuba government is walking a geopolitical tightrope between India and China. It set up another committee to investigate a border pillar issue in Humla even though a previous committee concluded that there has been no encroachment by China.

And more than a month after the death of a Nepali on the Mahakali wire bridge, Nepal finally sent a tepid diplomatic note to New Delhi last week about that and helicopter overflights near Kalapani.

With Nepal's rival political parties playing geopolitical football with the MCC, the NEA has to start working on a Plan B in case the project is not ratified. Either way, Nepal urgently needs those transmission lines. 

**A flood of
recrimination**
EDITORIAL
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A flood of recrimination

On 31 July this newspaper carried a report titled 'Kathmandu's Flash Floods Are 4 Decades in the Making'. The analysis by Tom Robertson stated that there was nothing 'sudden' about floods in Kathmandu Valley, and they would get much worse.

We derive no satisfaction in saying, 'we told you so.' On the night of 5 September the capital received over 120mm of rain in 24 hours and another 100mm in three hours on Monday morning. The rain was the heaviest recorded in the Valley for decades.

Monsoon modelling by the South Asia Climate Outlook Forum had predicted 20% higher than normal rainfall in most of Nepal this year, but the total precipitation has been

destructive floods of 1981 dumped 170mm of rain in 24 hours on Godavari, unleashing floods on the Bagmati's tributaries. Makwanpur saw an unimaginable 540mm of rain in 24 hours, and the resulting debris flows filled up the Kulekhani reservoir and wiped out half its life-span.

Such extreme events will be more intense and frequent as the atmosphere warms up. That is a given. But instead of preparing for them, we are making them even more disastrous by impounding water with new housing, perimeter walls, or garbage blocking drains.

Blaming just the climate for this week's inundation of Kathmandu is a copout. Though heavy, the Valley's natural drainage system of the Bagmati and Bishnumati would have been

able to absorb the excess water by letting it spill over what used to be wide floodplains.

As Robertson notes, those areas are now built over, natural drainage has been blocked and impermeable concrete and asphalt prevent water from seeping into the ground. In the past 40 years, Kathmandu's population grew four times. More houses were built, and as land got scarce, they encroached into the flood plains. The rivers have

been constricted into narrow channels.

Bulldozers are clawing at the Valley rim, removing the slopes that used to store rainwater like gigantic sponges, and let it out slowly. Now, with the buffers gone, even moderate intensity rainfall leads to direct runoff

and flooding.

The problem is the same in the Tarai. Sand mining and logging of the Chure has increased flash floods downstream, sedimentation raises river beds, and new highways and embankments in Nepal and across the border in India act as dams, inundating towns and farms.

The problem is slightly different in the mountains. Haphazard road construction has increased landslide danger, but as we are seeing with Melamchi this year, there is rain where snow used to fall on loose glacial deposits and this is washing them down in deadly debris flows.

Glaciologist Rijan Bhakta Kayastha in a recent *Nepali Times* op-ed made a case for more weather stations in the high mountain catchment areas to measure the intensity of rainfall in real time, and communicate the data to the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Authority so settlements downstream can get early warning.

All that is well and good, but as long as we continue to block the natural drainage of rivers, floods will get worse. And there is no point blaming climate change for that.



AMIT MACHAMASI

even heavier than that in many places, causing death and destruction. The rains have been sustained and relentless, and we saw nearly as much rain as Kathmandu gets in the whole of September falling on just Sunday and Monday.

Scientists are much more categorical than they have ever been in drawing a correlation between such extreme weather events and the climate crisis. A warming atmosphere means more water vapour in the air, which translates into more than normal rain.

This year saw record-breaking downpours in the Ahr Valley of Germany, floods in China's Henan province in July killed 300 people, and remnants of Hurricane Ida dumped 80mm of rain in just one hour on New York, leaving 50 people dead across northeastern US, including three Nepalis.

Meanwhile, Siberia, the Canadian Arctic and California baked in unprecedented heat waves and droughts, with wildfires sweeping across them for a second northern summer in a row. Nepal itself had a five-month drought last winter which sparked historic forest fires that engulfed the whole country in smoke.

Nearly 80% of Kathmandu's annual rain falls in just four months: June-September. People in Nepal and the Indo-Gangetic plains have learnt to live with the annual floods, and need them to replenish their farms with nutrients valuable for next year's crops.

Kathmandu has seen cloudbursts before. The

So, Kathmandu was submerged again this week. Why is that even surprising?

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Déjà vu

Nepal is less and less able to feed itself. It is our current reality, just as it was the fact 20 years ago. Not much has changed.

Nepal imports soyabean oil from Paraguay and Brazil, lentils from Australia, cooking oil from Russia, chillies from Indonesia and Vietnam, potatoes from Bangladesh, beans from Burma.

This week, Nepali Times reported on the country's increasing dependency on food imports because agricultural productivity that hasn't been able to keep pace with the growing population and rising income. More on this on page 4.

Exactly 20 years ago this week in issue #59 7-13 September 2001, Romyata Limbu in her report wrote about Nepal's decreasing grain production and ways to increase food security.

Take notes, these points are still relevant today, particularly due to the continued lack of government support for agriculture. Excerpts:

Till the late 1960s, Nepal used to be a food exporting country. Today it is importing nearly Rs6 billion worth of grain and other foodstuff every year. Fifty-five of Nepal's 75 districts-16 mountain districts, 33 hill districts and six Tarai districts suffer from chronic food shortage.

The area under rice production, especially in the Tarai, has plummeted in the last two years after cheap rice from India flooded the Nepali market. Farmers have turned to dal, sugarcane or other cash crops.

Not enough to eat



This year's grain requirement is sure to go up because of natural population increase, and the import bill for rice and wheat will increase slightly. Nepal's population is growing at 2.5% a year, faster than grain production of 2.3%.

While short-term measures are needed, analysts say it is much more important to increase agriculture productivity, improve access and affordability. They say indigenous crops like millet and barley should be pushed to counter declining trends and crops like potatoes, pulses and vegetables should be encouraged

for their nutritional value or to enhance farmer income.

Agriculture in Nepal has been support-driven rather than demand-driven. The effect of this has been magnified because the government's inefficiency in support and extension has failed to take into account the needs of Nepali farmers who make up 80% of the population. Example: small farmers around the country have been asking for irrigation facilities. But the irrigation department, under the Ministry of Water Resources, provides irrigation schemes for land not less than 25 hectares. Despite government and politicians harping on the fact that agriculture is the backbone of Nepal's economy, they have over the years never followed those words with real action. The country has seen 15 agriculture ministers, eight directors and eight secretaries in the past 11 years.

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

ONLINE PACKAGES



JEEVAN RAJOPADHYAY

In this edition of his column For Art's Sake, Rajan Sakya of the Museum of Nepali Art analyses 'Untitled', an abstract painting by Jeevan Rajopadhyay. Watch a video profile of the artist where he explains his beginnings, training under the late Lain Singh Bangdel and shifting back to his roots of abstract art, and the unique challenges and satisfaction associated with it. More on [page 6-7](#).

RESTART TREKKING

I have absolutely no issue with Nepal requiring vaccination proof for visitors to the country ('Livelihoods matter, restart trekking in Nepal', Michael Henry, #1077). What I see as an issue is foreign countries barring, or at least strongly discouraging, their citizens from visiting countries that are listed in the 'red' category. A government travel advisory 'Do Not Travel to Nepal' generally precludes a traveller from obtaining travel insurance. Even if we are allowed to visit Nepal we have to take into account the likelihood of being required to undertake lengthy and costly quarantine upon return. Nepal has to take more proactive and effective steps to control the spread of the virus.

Tony Parr

● I totally agree with the author. It has been nearly two years since the outbreak of Covid-19. Many parts of the world are opening for tourists. Humanity cannot continue to live in lockdowns. Of course everybody must mask up, vaccinate if possible and sanitise regularly but it is time to ease the restrictions for tourists. Moreover, the Nepal Tourism Board and the Immigration Department do not provide much information online for travellers.

Kevin Hantel

● As an avid trekker who has gone to Nepal at least every other year since 2008 for six months at a time I think this proposal could be implemented as suggested without involving the incompetent government. I hope the fall season trekking works out for our Nepali friends, but frankly am doubtful. International airlines will need to simplify registration, there should be no onerous quarantines, and the paperwork must be cut down.

Roger Ray

● Unsaid and perhaps not understood when discussing opening up international tourism is the elephant in the room: Nepal's millions of migrant workers who are sort of equivalent to tourists and are increasingly vaccinated.

Jamie McGuinness

AYURVEDA

Awesome... and likely found all along the Great Himalaya Trail ('Medicine goes back to its roots', Sonia Awale, #1077)!

Mac Odell

● Nepal really could become like the Switzerland of the East, a health and wellness tourism hub, moving away from just selling its sacred mountains for climbing.

WildYak

● I was cured of two decade long uric acid-related issues. Therefore, I think many others can also benefit. Ayurveda and Allopathy can be considered complementary because symptomatic/initial protocol is Allopathy and preventive/curative is Ayurveda.

Kyu Yeti

CLIMATE CRISIS

For the sake of the urban population there must be a reduction in pollution and inefficient waste disposal, and for rural areas, strategies to spread risk and reduce vulnerability to the effects of climate change ('Nepal doubles its carbon footprint', [nepalitimes.com](#)).

David Seddon

● Many of today's flash floods have human origins ('Kathmandu's flash floods are 4 decades in the making', Tom Robertson, #1073). The haphazard development of the Valley, and not just the floodplains, have created conditions that make the floods both more common, and more serious.

Himali Shrestha

● We are already seeing extensive failed crops in many countries, and along with the current global shipping supply chain crisis, we will soon see the major grain exporting nations ceasing to export ('Nepal less and less able to feed itself', Ramesh Kumar, [page 4](#)). Those who do not produce their own will starve.

Alex Ferguson

TOILET TALES

Beautifully written ('Toilet encounters', Pratibha Tuladhar, [page 9](#)). In France women are not afraid to invade the gents' toilet if the queue is too long for the ladies' toilets. But it's true, the men's loos smell and are never as clean.

Marianne Heredge

KATHMANDU'S GARBAGE

Funny, infuriating, and heartbreakingly relatable ('Garbage in, garbage out', Ass, [page 12](#)). If you've ever lived in Nepal, you too have likely used garbage smell and neighborhood corner mini-mountains of plastic waste as landmarks for directions.

Shuvan Rizal

GET VACCINATED

It's not true that there is no difference between getting vaccinated and unvaccinated ('Behind the masks', Sonia Awale, #1076). Unvaccinated people are much more likely to get severe symptomatic infection that requires hospitalisation, which can lead to death and other serious health problems as well as overload the health care system for everyone. Get vaccinated.

Sean Edwards

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



Medicine goes back to its roots

by [Sonia Awale](#)

Nearly two years after the Covid-19 pandemic began, there has been a revival of traditional Ayurveda medicines that boost the human immune system. While some dismiss herbal treatments as quackery, even allopathic doctors are now prescribing them. Go online to catch up with the debate.

f Most reached and shared on Facebook

Blood, sweat, tears

Editorial

To put it bluntly, Nepal is bankrupt. The money earned from the blood, sweat and tears of migrant workers leaves the country again to pay for growing imports, particularly petroleum and agricultural produce. Visit nepalitimes.com to read this thought-provoking editorial.

t Most popular on Twitter

Livelihoods matter, restart trekking in Nepal

by [Michael Henry](#)

A seasoned trekker, Michael Henry makes a strong case for reopening mountaineering and trekking in Nepal, albeit with stringent public health protocols including vaccine proof. Read feedback, and join the discussion online.

66 Most commented



Nepali pioneers new route on Kilimanjaro

Everest summiteer Dawa Steven Sherpa is helping Tanzania by blazing a new trail up Africa's highest peak that aims to follow the sustainable ecotourism model by lifting local living standards. Find out how on our website.

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
#editorial Newly released Nepal Rastra Bank trade figures show that the country is, to put it bluntly, bankrupt.



nisha onta @nepalinisha
Our economy relies on the blood & sweat of the migrant workers, who don't have any support or voting rights. I remember the images of youth lining up to get a simple document as QR codes vaccine certificates.



Ashish Pokharel @asis_pokharel
Surely reducing dependency on petroleum imports via adoption of EVs and increasing agricultural productivity is possible in Nepal.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Despite two-thirds of its population dependent on #agriculture, and having fertile land ideal for farming, #Nepal's annual food imports are rising exponentially due to a growing population and rising income.



ART @AmulyaSir
Nepal just cannot compete with the productivity of India due to scale of efficiency and world's greatest ineptitude of Nepali malgovernance.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Sunday night's inundation of large parts of #Kathmandu reminds us that it was not a "flash flood" but a result of urban expansion into floodplains choking rivers. #urbanplanning #floods #monsoon



Dixit Ajaya @dixit_ajaya
For better flood response, flood risk reduction is more about drainage than control. Rivers must be given space. Tools are needed to address extreme events and understand them better. Focus should go toward interdisciplinary water education.

Times

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Nepal less and less able to feed itself

Growing population, rising income and stagnant domestic production mean more dependence on food imports to meet growing demand

● Ramesh Kumar

Despite two-thirds of its population dependent on agriculture, and having fertile land ideal for farming, Nepal's annual food imports are rising exponentially due to a growing population and rising income.

Imports of staples like rice, vegetables, and fruits that can easily be produced in Nepal are rising steeply. In the last 60 years, while Nepal's population more than tripled from 9.4 million to almost 30 million, paddy productivity has merely doubled from 1.8 tonnes per hectare to 3.8. As a result, Nepal's grain import touched Rs80 billion in the last fiscal year, of which rice alone made up Rs50 billion.

Maize harvests have only risen from 1.6 tonnes per hectare to 2.6 in the last three decades, and Nepal had to import Rs16.5 billion worth of maize in the last fiscal year. Vegetable production has been increasing steadily, but it is not keeping up with demand.

Nepal is less and less able to feed itself. Educated people are giving up farming for salaried jobs or migrating overseas, leading to falling production. The country's imports of food items alone reached Rs3.23 trillion – three times higher than 2014.

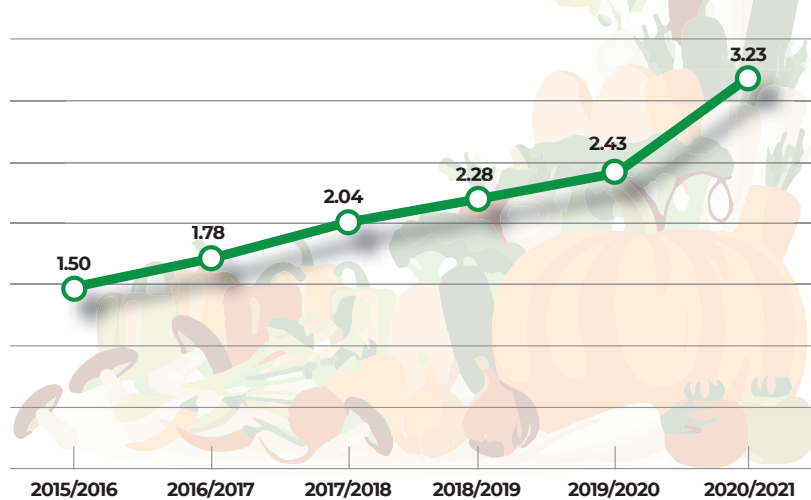
A third of all remittances the country earned from foreign employment re-exited the country to foot the food import bill. Once a country with agricultural surplus, Nepal exported only Rs84 billion worth of food items.

Imports of even products like mangoes and guava which grow abundantly in Nepal have gone up. Nepal spent Rs1.2 billion importing just those two fruits in the past year. Nepal is a producer and exporter of tea and coffee, yet it imported Rs9.5 billion worth of the two products. The country's dairy production has also increased, but Nepal still imported Rs2 billion worth of milk, cheese and other products.

India normally accounts for up to half of these imports, with its post-lockdown share at 25%. Indian farmers receive support and subsidies in seeds, fertiliser, technology and irrigation, producing crops at competitive prices, which in



Agricultural Imports
(in trillions)



turn flood the Nepali market. As a result, traditional Nepali variants are disappearing, replaced by cheaper, widely-available rice and other food items.

Nepal imports soyabean oil all the way from from Paraguay and Brazil, lentils from Australia, cooking oil from Russia, chillies from Indonesia and Vietnam, potatoes from Bangladesh, beans from Burma. Nepal may be self-

sufficient in poultry products, but imports maize for chicken feed from Argentina.

“Cheaper and competitive imports, especially from India, are discouraging local farmers from commercial production,” says Devendra Gauchan of Nepal Agricultural Economics Society. Self-sufficiency in agriculture has been the motto of every government in the past decades, but Nepal's

dependence on the outside world for food is only growing.

The neglect of agriculture is evident in the fact that even though two-thirds of Nepalis depend on farming, the share of agriculture in the GDP has fallen to 25%.

A number of systemic issues plague the sector and waste Nepal's agricultural potential, according to Gauchan. Workers are shifting away from agriculture to foreign employment and service-sector jobs, the latter now accounting for 61% of domestic production.

Only 56% of all arable land in Nepal is irrigated, with even less area getting year-round irrigation, meaning most farms still depend on the rains. Productivity is also falling because of the fragmentation of landholdings. In addition, government investment, research and development and commercialisation towards agricultural technology, production and storage are sorely lacking. Only 6% of fiscal year 2021/22's budget has been appropriated for agriculture. Meanwhile, farmers do not have access to markets, leaving produce to rot in the fields.

Despite plenty of potential, a lack of concrete supportive policies

has left the country dependent on others for food it could produce itself. Policymakers do not know what products to promote and derive maximum benefit from, says agriculture expert Jeewan Rai.

“The mid-mountains have optimal conditions for fruits given enough research and investment, but the government has done nothing,” says Rai. Once exclusive to supermarket shelves, avocados are now available in every corner shop. Nepal imported 120,000 tonnes of avocado last year, some from as far away as Tanzania and Kenya.

To be sure, there are also positive trends. The rise in imports also indicates higher living standards and greater purchasing power of Nepalis. Once a country ravaged by malnutrition and hunger, the percentage of stunted children has dropped sharply from 57% in 1996 to 36% in 2016.

Much of the increased spending on food items is driven by a remittance boom, which brought in Rs9.61 trillion in the past year despite the pandemic – a near 10-fold growth in 15 years.

Transportation and globalisation have displaced local mainstays like buckwheat and millet with rice, which has become more affordable to the average Nepali. An emergent middle class is also driving up demand for more expensive long-grain and fragrant Basmati variants, most of which Nepali farmers can be nudged towards producing.

Demand for beer, for example, is also responsible for the dramatic rise in rice imports — beyond what Nepalis consume for food. Statistician Ram Krishna Regmi at the Ministry of Agriculture says domestic production figures for items like rice are over-estimations, swallowing up more and more imports to cover the data gaps.

But while a well-fed population is encouraging news, the priority must be to feed them with local produce and reduce the gaping trade deficit. The country must strive to produce and commercialise products tailored to its climate and soil, says Saurav Dhakal of Green Growth, which promotes local farming.

Dhakal adds, “If local varieties of fruits and vegetables can be researched and promoted, reliance on foreign imports can be cut.”

prabhu BANK

Nepse tumble

On Sunday, Nepal Stock Exchange (Nepse) recorded the highest-ever fall in its history after the market tumbled by 5.03% in just the first two hours of trading. Leading 60 companies saw their share values decline by 10% before the circuit break. It recovered a bit but fell another 3.7%.

The slump has been attributed to Nepal Rastra Bank's (NRB) tightness on share collateral, new investment avenues post lockdown and poor investment trends. Finance Minister Janardan Sharma has asked NRB governor Maha Prasad Adhikari to ease some restrictive monetary policies.

Everest Fashion

After two years of nearly zero income from tourism, the Mt Everest region will be the venue for a fashion event this month to promote post-pandemic eco-tourism, and establish Nepal as a centre for sustainable fashion. K Films and Kasa Nepal are partnering with Endemol Shine India for season 2 of the Mt Everest Fashion Runway to be held near the base camp of Mt Cho Oyu in Gokyo on 23 September to promote sustainability in the fashion industry by displaying biodegradable, renewable and ethically-sourced fabrics such as silk, pashmina and wool.



Samsung ACs

Samsung has launched its 2021 range of air conditioners that also works as an effective air filter. The 5-in-1 Inverter ACs with Anti Dust & Bacterial Protector clean the air, are energy efficient, and have customised cooling and heating modes and comes with durability of 10 years on Digital Inverter compressor.



“With people working and studying from home, the need for clean air, durability and energy efficiency are the primary concerns for consumers today. Our new ACs ensure health and hygiene,” says Alok Kumar Gupta of Samsung Nepal. Samsung has also unveiled two flagship smartphones, the Galaxy Z Fold3 5G and Galaxy Z Flip3 5G, priced at Rs229,999 and Rs124,999 respectively.

US Covid aid

The Utah Air National Guard's 151st Air Refueling Wing in coordination with the US Transportation Command delivered medical equipment and humanitarian supplies to Kathmandu airport on 1 September. Members also conducted training in firefighting with the Nepal Army.



Korean O2 support

South Korean Ambassador Park Chong-suk and KOICA Alumni Association of Nepal have handed over 378 units of oxygen concentrators worth \$604,500 to the Health Ministry and hospitals across the country.

WorldLink's Photon Internet

WorldLink has launched the Photon series of broadband service for 300 Mbps powered with Mesh wi-fi system for homes. It uses Nokia Beacon 1.1 routers and smart installation and networking so that all desired zones within the house have high-speed Internet.



SmartSpeak

Dakshya Nepal has launched an interactive educational series that enables a reader to recite lessons and images accompanied with music by tapping the book's pages. SmartSpeak comes with a talking pen which helps children read with correct phonetic pronunciation and combines reading, writing and listening.

Upaya City-UKAID

Upaya City Cargo and UKAID have collaborated to launch a two-wheeled cargo transportation service. The program will equip more than two thousand drivers with customer service, e-commerce and digital literacy skills for self-employment.



Suzuki Dasain Offer

Suzuki Motorcycles, has announced a Dasain offer of Rs10,000 cashback on the purchase or exchange of any Suzuki motorbike and scooter. Every two weeks, a lucky winner will receive Suzuki Intruder motorcycle as the bumper prize. Each new purchase is also exempt of the road tax for a year.



For nearly 18 months, regular educational activities of children across Nepal have been disrupted. The closure of schools to reduce the spread of Covid-19 has amplified the many other ways the



pandemic has eroded the academic and social experiences of students, and with this, their mental wellbeing.

The impact of this will be felt for many years by the students themselves and nationally, as Nepal's economy, like other countries, witnesses a reduced rate of economic return.

Children from poorer families and those in remote parts of Nepal have been especially affected. The pandemic has laid bare inequality in access to education.

The Nepal government's *Students' Learning Facilitation Guidelines* 2020 notes that a large number of students do not have access to innovative delivery of distance learning programs. Rather, they depend on the distribution of printed learning materials and person-to-person contact that has been difficult to sustain during the pandemic.

Even before Covid, Australia and Nepal shared challenges with the delivery



of education to students living in remote locations.

In the central desert area of Australia is the Alice Springs School of the Air (ASSOA), reputedly the biggest school in the world. ASSOA's classrooms are spread over 1.3 million sq km, yet it has only 120 students and 14 teachers.

For over 60 years, it has been delivering education by radio for children who live a day's drive or more from the nearest school. ASSOA is one of several Schools of the Air operating across the vast Australian outback. So it should come as no surprise that during the pandemic Australia has been supporting the delivery of education to children in rural Nepal.

The Australian government has partnered with Rural Education and Development Centre (REED) Nepal to deliver a program that is enabling continued learning in the far reaches of Nepal.

Schools of the Air

Nepal and Australia deliver education by radio for students learning under Covid-19

The *Promoting Stability in Education (PSE): Continuity of Learning and Strengthening Resilience* program builds on the experiences of REED's successful Teacher Training and Quality Education Program in Solukhumbu district, supported by the Australian Himalayan Foundation.

Parents, teachers, community volunteers and local governments are working together to encourage and ensure children's access to learning opportunities in communities that have limited access to the Internet.

Under this initiative, lessons are broadcast daily through local radio stations to over 23,000 households, reaching over 66,000 children and 14,000 parents. Radio sets, worksheets and other educational materials are being distributed to children's families. The program will assist the transition back to in person classroom learning when schools reopen.

Nearly two months after the launch of the program, PSE has been warmly received by students and educators alike.

Bahjang Secondary School student Pramila Ratala, who lives with disability, has welcomed the way *Learning by Radio* has brought her school to her home.

"I used to walk two hours to go to my school but nowadays, I am learning from my home," she said. "In addition to regular school curriculum, I also learn life skills and issues of gender equality. In the future, I want to work for the benefit of children with disabilities and be like the award-winning author Jhamak Ghimire."

Through PSE, educators visit homes, distributing learning materials and radio sets to families and providing support to parents and community members.

Local governments are closely engaged in the program. Education representative of Haleshi Tuwachung Municipality of Khotang district, Padam Karki said, "With the federal government's decision to close schools, we were quite worried about what we could do to ensure we backstop learning loss among our children".

"*Learning by Radio* is instrumental in continuing education for our children. We are ready to cooperate with the program by visiting households and interacting with the parents and other stakeholders of children's education, distribution of radio sets, workbooks and worksheets, and mobilising volunteer teachers," Karki added.

The benefits of programs like *Learning by Radio* are not confined to Covid; rather, they provide innovative learning models for all who have difficulty accessing traditional education due to disabilities or their remote location. As Keshari Rai, a teacher from Janajagriti Basic School in Dudhkunda, Solukhumbu observed, "There is very limited access to smartphones and reliable internet. Children have to walk a long distance to come to school every day."

Delivery of pre-recorded educational materials also benefits parents and local communities with information relevant regardless of age. Ishori Nepali from Talkot Rural Municipality, Bajhang district, said she found her child's radio lessons on gender equality and life-skills useful to her as well and she has become a regular listener.

Barun Lamichhane, station manager of Beats FM, Sindhuli, agreed that *Learning by Radio* has applications beyond the formal education setting. "The program has helped deliver life-skill education and public service announcements including information on the pandemic, gender issues and disaster preparedness.

From Australia's cattle stations to Nepal's Himalayan communities, students and their families are benefiting from schools of the air. For all the challenges Covid-19 has presented, it has also reminded us that old technologies combined with new thinking can help chart a more positive future. 🇳🇵

For additional information:
<https://www.schooloftheair.net.au/>
<https://www.facebook.com/SchoolOfTheAirAliceSprings/>

Felicity Volk is the Australian Ambassador to Nepal.

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HYUNDAI

LAXMI

Rajkumar Shakya, 1967-2021

The artist inspired a whole new generation to preserve Nepal's heritage



● Anil Chitrakar

Raj Kumar Shakya, who died of Covid-related complications in June at age 54, was the world's foremost repoussé sculptors, excelling in the craft of preserving traditional methods of forging malleable metal sheets into devotional art objects.

Having met, known, and worked with Raj Kumar for nearly three decades, his short life is a lesson on what it takes to be a successful artist. This was a tragic loss to Nepal, and to the world, where his work is on display from Bhutan to Japan, from Shanghai to Munich.

Raj Kumar was passionate about his art and craft, and set big goals. When it came to any assignment, no matter what the size or scale,



Raj Kumar Shakya during the construction of the enormous copper repoussé statue of Padmasambhava in Bumthang of Bhutan.

Raj Kumar knew he could do it. He came across as supremely confident about his abilities, and there were few tasks that he could not fulfil.

But he was also realistic, and knew his own capacity. However, he was always eager to take it to the next level to test his own limits. The colossal statue of Guru Padmasambhava that Raj Kumar built in Bumthang of Bhutan will stand as a testament to his talent as an artist and, yes, even his engineering and logistical expertise.

Comparable in size and scope to the Statue of Liberty in New York, the Padmasambhava in Bhutan is also made from the

repoussé method that Raj Kumar had perfected and scaled up during his short working life.

Raj Kumar succeeded because he had the passion, and he believed in himself. The time and effort it took to craft each of the masterpieces the artist has gifted to the world did not matter to him, because he loved what he did. He was dedicated to promoting and preserving the repoussé art form, and all the skills and techniques that went with it. The most important lesson of his life is that we must not be afraid to set big goals.

Raj Kumar's art did not exist in a vacuum. He was rooted in the community, and articulated his craft through traditional art of the

Jeevan Rajopadhyay's Untitled

"When I look at a blank canvas long enough, I see my art."

The genre of 'abstract expressionism' may be best described as artwork resulting from 'controlled accidents', where artists periodically and purposefully collide their conscious mind with the subconscious to create a work of art.



FOR ART'S SAKE
Rajan Sakya

Such art becomes surreal, but with insinuations of sublime realism. They do not seem to belong in this worldly realm, and yet evoke poignant emotions.

How do we even begin to understand such art? It may feel like one has to take a few courses on art and art history just to scratch its surface. Curators and art connoisseurs go on and on about strokes, colours, palettes, and influences of the period. But how much of even that is really understood?

Art is not like having a glimpse at a picture, but rather watching

events unfold in a movie that is continually being directed by the moviegoers themselves.

Jeevan Rajopadhyay's 'Untitled' sounds abstract in the title itself. At first glance, it stirs a disparate range of emotions. While viewing this piece with a small group of art enthusiasts, one will likely focus only on a few prominent aspects, and let the imagination and thoughts run wild.

As we seep into the bleed of colours, we come across two distinct squares of white and grey which can be appreciated aesthetically and philosophically. Aesthetically, they give certain visual breaks within the blurriness of the colour mix. We stop and look at it again, this time a new set of colours unveils itself. Distinct figures shaped like rocks in the river serve as eddies of emotions.

Philosophically, the work exudes uncertainty and impermanence, which after all is what life is in a nutshell. But there are also certain aspects to life we can count on. This perspective radiates hope, no matter how bleak the future may seem.



As we shift our focus to the centre, we see busy palettes with multiple strokes and dabbing of the brush. This brings the artist to our attention and his state of mind. What is he trying to express?

Is he confused, or in emotional flux? Is he trying to impart lived experiences, the impermanence of the present, or the lack of surety about tomorrow? Is he trying to hold on to something so tightly that

he loses everything in the process?

Art, if understood, lets you into the heart and the soul of its maker. Jeevan recently lost his loving wife and now lives with his ageing mother who has Alzheimer's.

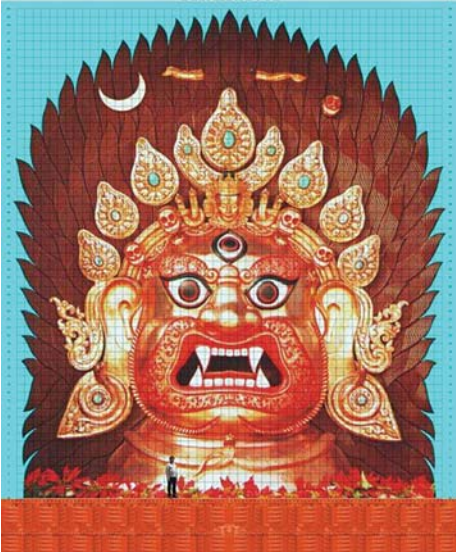
Art is his only outlet, a realm where he can express himself and find some peace. Here the conspicuous bull signifies movement to a hopeful future, but the past still haunts him in the form of a frowning girl seated backward on the bull.

Trained under Lain Singh Bangdel for over 12 years, Jeevan holds the highest regard for the late artist. "Bangdel Sir never took a single rupee from us. Instead, he would buy paint, brushes, canvases for us," Jeevan recalls. "Teaching was his passion and he used to say — all I have learned I want to pass onto the future generation."

We do see certain influences of his mentor in Jeevan's work, but he believes that his art should be sufficiently different and have its own elements. He is humble nonetheless. "These are my works, my experiences. With the great teachings of Bangdel Sir, I want to represent myself."



NEPALART VILLAGE



A computer model of Shakya's Bhairab mask statue.

Raj Kumar Shakya with a model of the Bhairab under construction at the southern edge of Kathmandu.

Kathmandu Valley. He learnt from countries like South Korea and Japan that in any major project, human resource is the most valuable — and the biggest variable.

Therefore, he was always on the lookout for skilled people like himself, or young passionate artisans whom he knew he could train. He inducted them into his team and then painstakingly and generously shared his knowledge and skills with them.

For this, he knew trust was essential. It was due to this mutual trust that he was able to expand his work into the larger community, and the community reciprocated that trust and respect. Raj Kumar was always at the forefront, engaged in many community events, speaking there about the need to preserve tradition. He spoke clearly and persuasively, putting out his ideas as any good communicator.

Raj Kumar Shakya was also a mentor, and this is his most important legacy — ensuring that his knowledge and skills were passed on to the next generation. He was worried that there were too few families left in Kathmandu carrying on the repoussé tradition.

It is Raj Kumar's efforts in the past 30 years that has revived the skills and talent not just in Patan, but in Nepal and beyond the world.

A whole new generation of successful artists in Patan have benefitted from working with Raj Kumar, where they started from scratch, making mistakes and learning along the way, under the watchful eyes of the master.

As more and more work was generated, more young people returned to their traditional craftsmanship. With economic growth in Asia and greater understanding of Buddhism and its significance, the demand for these skills will grow.

Raj Kumar understood and applied science, technology and geometry to his work. The ability to open minds to new and relevant information, new tools, and techniques and to constantly be learning are the key characteristics of a successful person.

Raj Kumar was one of the early

users of computers in his work, employing CAD and mixing the latest technology to refine traditional craftsmanship. He insisted that his colleagues and protégé learn the science, be good with numbers — and he practiced what he taught.

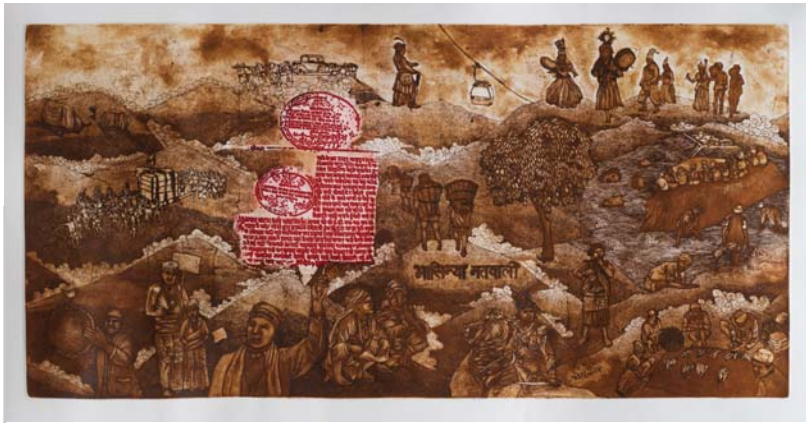
He could generate 3-D computer models of whatever he was working on, and use these perspectives also to teach. He felt that art made without perfect mathematical proportions did not do well in the market. This ability and dedication to combine the best of modern applied science with traditional art is what made his creations so successful. And once his work was scaled to large sculptures, these architectural and engineering calculations mattered more than ever.

Most artists do not know much about business, and some are even proud of the fact. The history of art is replete with geniuses who died paupers, and whose works today fetch millions of dollars in auctions.

Not Raj Kumar. He was a good businessman, with a sense of the art market, and knew how to promote his work. He had built a large network of suppliers, shippers and skilled workers whom he could mobilise. He was good at raising money for large work, and sometimes invested his own earnings well — and this allowed his firm (On Metal) to expand. Many artists and smaller businesses benefitted from On Metal contracts.

After finishing his famous statue in Bhutan, Raj Kumar was working on other large orders when he died: a large Buddha statue in Lumbini, restoration work at Mahabouddha, and he had taken up his dream project of putting up the largest and tallest mask of the Bhairab at the southern edge of the Kathmandu Valley in the Nepal Art Village (NAV).

If we really want to honour the legacy of Raj Kumar Shakya, his life and work, this project must be completed. Fortunately, he leaves behind a new crop of traditional artists to carry on his work. 🇳🇵



Masinya Matwali

Tamang history, memory and identity

Printmaking artist Subas Tamang's exhibition 'History, Memory, Identity', is a tribute to the struggle and resistance against oppression of Nepal's Tamang community.

Tamang was recently awarded the Himalayan Light Art Scholarship, a grant created by Chinese artist Zhao Jianqui to encourage and promote young Nepali artists and their work. He was one of 141 contemporary Nepali artists whose work was featured in Italian businessman Luciano Benetton's 2017 *Imago Mundi* collection as well as the book *Nepal: Legends*.

Tamang was born in Morang and in school he recalls that there was a complete absence of any subject regarding the Tamang community in the curriculum, and this prevented him from learning more about his people.

Now, his knowledge and exploration into the struggle and socio-political oppression historically experienced by his community are etched into his artwork.



Pipa I

One of his pieces, an quaint etching titled *Masinya Matwali*, illustrates the story and history of the Tamang community — the work stretching across the paper an account of generations of hardships faced by his people. The piece's title comes from when Tamang people were classified as *Masinya Matwali*, which means 'enslavable alcohol drinker', under Jang Bahadur Rana's 1854 *Muluki Ain*.

"Subas' visual narrative is a powerful artistic expression of the Tamang people's social, economic and political grievances," says Sangeeta Thapa of the Siddhartha Art Gallery, "His works provide us a visual chronicle of the plight of his community and the scars that still linger in their collective memory."

Among the striking artwork within the collection depicting Tamangs in battle, at work, and in song and dance with their traditional *damphu* — is a recreation of Volkmar Wentzel's 1950 photograph of a team of Tamang porters carrying an old German-made Mercedes to be used to drive the Rana nobility around Kathmandu.

Another one of his pieces at Siddhartha is a Woodcut print titled *Pipa I*, named after the non-combatant position that Tamangs were reduced to in the Nepali military. The piece depicts men donning *doko*, and is a representation of the unpaid labour that Tamangs were subjected to under the *rakam* system imposed by the Ranas to toil in state-owned land, especially in royal mango orchards.

The art has been printed on Nepali paper, which Tamangs were forced to produce from the stripped bark of the lokta plant. Nepali paper and mangoes are among the recurring motifs in his artwork.

His other woodcut prints titled *Gole Kaila* honours Tularam Tamang who fell in battle while fighting for liberation from Rana rule. 🇳🇵

Subas Tamang's काइनेन History, Memory, Identity will be on exhibit at Siddhartha Art Gallery from 10-28 September.



MONA

Meet the artist

When Jeevan Rajopadhyay was studying fine arts at Lalit Kala Campus in Kathmandu, many of his contemporaries tried to discourage him. There is no future in this field, they told him.

But the young man was not thinking of making a living, he was just pursuing what had always captivated him. Even as a schoolboy, he was more interested in drawing and sketches than getting good grades in the exams.

"It is indeed difficult to make a living as an artist," concedes now 61-years-old Rajopadhyay. "But there is also no greater peace than working as one."

For a long time, Rajopadhyay worked with landscapes, until one day he got tired of it with a realisation that the

mountains and the trees in his paintings were limiting his creativity. He then started experimenting and returned to his roots of abstract art, the skill which he had honed training under the late Lain Singh Banglel.

"I found happiness in the fact that I could break free from the limitations of predetermined shapes and boundaries of landscape paintings," says Rajopadhyay.

But it was not easy, the artist had to transfer his style from one technique to another, he wasn't even sure if he was doing it right until he presented his new works at an exhibition. The public loved it.

Says Rajopadhyay: "I felt like I was on the right track. My longing for something new led me to the path I am in now -- the correct path, as far as I am concerned."

"Immature", "reckless", "childlike", "wacky", "illogical", are some of the words whispered in museums exhibiting contemporary art. Art is not about logic or how easily it was created, it is not even about what you see in it — it is about how it moves you.

In this particular work, we were fortunate to have an intense in-depth conversation with Jeevan for hours. Without insights into his life and into the motivation and circumstances of this creation, we could not have been able to decipher the emotions behind his brushstrokes, drips of paint, and dabs of colours.

"When I look at a blank canvas long enough, I see my art," says Jeevan. And if you look at a work of art long enough, you can see yourself in the art.

A free-flowing mind is a must to be able to create such a masterpiece. Abstract expressionism is the artistic equivalent of stream-of-consciousness narrative, and hence could be the purest and rawest creation of the human mind.

For artists like Jeevan Rajopadhyay the paint paints itself, the creation creates itself, and the artist is just the medium holding the brush. 🇳🇵

Rajan Sakya is the founder of the Museum of Nepali Art at Kathmandu Guest House, Thamel and contributes this monthly column For Art's Sake in Nepali Times.

EVENTS

Visual art workshop
Art students and enthusiasts are invited to join an intensive Master Class workshop at Bikalpa Art Center's Visual Arts Studio led by Saroj Mahato, a professional visual art practitioner and curator. *Details at <https://www.bikalpaartcenter.org/visual-arts-studio-master-class/>*

Photowalk
Join aspiring photographers for walks across the valley and take pictures that inspire. Follow distancing protocols. Get details about Photowalk schedules on PhotoWalk Nepal's website.



Sooriya yoga 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 appointments. Go to the Sooriya Wellness Facebook page for details.
9818481972

Women in Entrepreneurship
Participate in a three-part discussion series hosted by Juna Mathema, co-chairperson of the Women Entrepreneurship Development Committee (WEDC), to learn about personal experiences, challenges and opportunities of women and minorities in entrepreneurship. *Sign up at: <https://forms.gle/oWCvKoHKPjzSrj7> 15-17 September*

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

DINING



Hankook Sarang
Satisfy the hankering for Korean food and enjoy a variety of mouthwatering dishes like Tteokbokki, Pork Je Yook Bokum, Kimbab and more.
Tangal (01) 4421711/ Thamel (01) 4256615

DOCUMENTARIES



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

Netflix on YouTube
Netflix has released some of its documentaries for free on YouTube for educational purposes in light of the global coronavirus pandemic. Watch the award-winning documentary Our Planet from Sir David Attenborough to start.

Journeyman Pictures
Watch groundbreaking award-winning factual films about some of the most pressing issues across the globe including politics, the environment, and the current pandemic. Find Journeyman pictures on YouTube.

VICE
Watch documentaries about anything and everything from all over the world on the VICE YouTube channel. Start from documentaries about Nepal's honey harvesters, The Nepalese Honey That Makes People Hallucinate, as well as the most recent documentary on human trafficking in Nepal.



Real Stories
Go to the Real Stories' YouTube channel to watch compelling award-winning documentaries from all over the world. Watch factual films about war, crime, mental health, technology and more.

Belgian Waffles
Get mouthwatering waffles from Belgian Waffles Nepal. Order the classic Belgian Chocolate Waffle, or try the Kiki And Cream Waffle, Maple Waffle and more. Delivery options online.
Darbar Marg, 9849636013

Tasneem's Kings Kitchen
Order Tasneem's mouth-watering authentic Bohra Muslim cuisine. Peruse through the menu for flavourful and spicy biryani, and others. Call or order from Foodmandu.
Jhamsikhel, 9801121212

Organic Smoothie Bowl
Perfect for those looking for healthier options, Organic Smoothie Bowl and Café plates fresh, fast and Instagram-worthy smoothie bowls, sandwiches, drinks and more. Call to order.
Lazimpat, 9843514612

GETAWAY

Dom Himalaya
Dom Himalaya Hotel offers a space for visitors to indulge in traditional Nepali cuisine, relax with Tibetan singing bowls and bask in the vibrant chaos of Thamel.
Thamel (01) 4263554



Park Village
Spend the weekend hanging out by the pool with a cold beverage at Park Village Resort, in a quiet corner of Kathmandu.
Budhanilkantha, (01) 4370286

Marriott Hotel
Take a dip into Marriott's refreshing infinity pool. As for the food, the shrimp cocktail is a must.
Naxal (01) 4443040



Gokarna Forest Resort
The resort is a paradise, dense with century-old trees rustling out natural tunes and great restaurants for fine dining, with the golf course set against the backdrop of the Himalayas.
Gokarna (01) 4450002

Baber Mahal Vilas
A neoclassical architectural marvel, the historic Baber Mahal Vilas is now a quaint boutique hotel with Newa accents, Mustang designs and Tarai influences.
Tanka Prasad Ghumti Sadak (01) 4257655



Raithaane
Committed to using locally sourced food, every dish on Raithaane's menu is connected to different ethnic communities. Take a gastronomic tour of Nepal right here. Look at the menu online.
Patan Darbar Square, 9801002971



Kathmandu Valley got more than 100mm of rain in just 3 hours on Monday morning. The record downpour would not have caused so much damage if the rivers still had a floodplain to spill into. Urban expansion and lack of drainage were the real reasons for the inundation. That cloudburst was part of a system that has moved on, but we will see more rain on Friday with a slight let-up on the weekend. There is still a lot of moisture about, so expect some hefty localised showers.



The heavy rains in the past week brought the Air Quality Index (AQI) to below 20 on Monday morning as Kathmandu's air was scrubbed clean. But as we can see from the graph, the concentration of particles below 2.5 microns mainly from diesel exhaust and open burning rises as soon as the showers stop. From now on, as the rings taper off we will see a steady worsening of AQI in Kathmandu. Keep our masks on to filter the coronavirus and the pollution.

snatch

OUR PICK

Guy Ritchie's 2000 cult-classic crime comedy ensemble *Snatch* follows the suddenly intertwined lives of a boxing champion, an unscrupulous boxing promoter, a slot machine owner, amateur robbers, Russian gangsters, and other shifty characters from the London criminal underworld. The stories of these characters come together as they race against each other to track down a priceless stolen diamond. Stars Brad Pitt, Jason Statham, Benicio del Toro, Dennis Farina, Rade Šerbedžija, Stephen Graham and more.

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त्यसैले कोरोना लाग्ने नदिन
मीडमाडमा नजाने

कोरोना लागेपछि: कसले साथी गलतफहमी र अज्ञानताले चलाउँछन्

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Dir. Nikos Labôt
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Dir. Stefano Cipani
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Germany, France

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Latvia, Belgium, Lithuania, France

WOMEN ON THE RUN
Dir. Martin Horsky
Czech Republic

Afghans in Nepal await

Refugees from Afghanistan living in Kathmandu struggle to survive while waiting for asylum

● Mukesh Pokhrel

Ever since the most recent Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, they had been fleeing Kandahar and Kabul to Kathmandu in the hope of third-country asylum.

They have been waiting in limbo for years, and have been watching the shocking images from Kabul airport of their compatriots trying to escape the Taliban. This has dashed their hopes of ever returning to their homeland, but raised the prospect of a speedier asylum process.

Humayun Shahzad, an Afghan refugee living in Kathmandu, has not been able to sleep ever since the Taliban began their rapid advance across Afghanistan last month that led to the collapse of the Afghan government.

"I have been watching what is happening in Afghanistan, and thinking about our friends and family still there," says Shahzad, who has been anxiously following the Taliban's rapid takeover and the collapse of the Afghan government.

"On the one hand, I have had to constantly think about how I



(From right) Mohamad Arif Ahmadi, his wife Safika and sons Siar and Zuber.

will manage to support my family without a job here in Nepal, on the other hand there is also the worry about what the Taliban will do to my country," Shahzad adds.

Like dozens of other Afghan families languishing in Kathmandu, Shahzad fled first to India and then came to Kathmandu, hoping it would be easier to apply for asylum here.

Taliban forces had vastly weakened in the first six years after the US occupied Afghanistan. However, the militants then began to tighten their stranglehold in and around rural Afghanistan, leaving many with the choice of either

following along, or escaping their harsh rule.

Shahzad was operating a successful photography business in Grishk district in Afghanistan's Helmand province, and chose the latter. He took his family and flew to Delhi, and then to Kathmandu in 2014.

C R Ahmed had never imagined that he would one day have to flee the country that he had been born and raised in. He owned a thriving gold shop in Kandahar, and lived happily with his family through all the years of Soviet occupation, the mujahideen war, the American bombings. But when the Taliban

took over for the first time more than two decades ago, he left.

"The Taliban ruined Afghanistan," says Ahmed. "They will ruin it again."

The Taliban grew out of the US-backed mujahideen fighters who drove out the Soviet military in the 1990s. They became radicalised after coming to power, and were finally banished to the fringes after the US occupied Afghanistan in 2001 following the 11 September attacks — exactly 20 years ago this week.

The Americans retaliated against al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan, and initiated a state-

building process with elections and governments that they backed. But corruption and mismanagement allowed the Taliban to regroup, conduct horrendous terrorist attacks against civilians and inflict heavy casualties on US and NATO forces.

The West finally lost its will to fight, and US forces abruptly left Afghanistan, allowing the Taliban to take rapid control. Provincial capitals fell one by one, as Afghan forces either surrendered or were routed.

The whole of August, the world witnessed heart-wrenching scenes of thousands of Afghans flocking

A short walk up the Panjshir

● Lisa Choegyal

Kids playing on rusted tanks abandoned by the retreating Russians, war debris comfortably incorporated into stone walls to contain sheep and goats, and flickering green flags of the martyrs' graves, too many graves, under a cloudless sky.

These are the enduring images of the Panjshir Valley, wild flowers, willows and orchards lining the clear streams beneath the grand arc of barren hillsides, rocks and caves used to hide the resistance fighters loyal to Ahmad Shah Massoud, the legendary 'Lion of Panjshir'.

Nestled deep within the Hindu Kush, Massoud's faithful foot soldiers, the fierce unforgiving geography and its defensible narrow entrance enabled the Panjshir Valley to hold out against waves of invasions — the Soviet Union in the 1980s and the Taliban in the 1990s.

In 2001, just two days before the 9/11 terrorist attack in New York, the revered commander of the former Northern Alliance, lover of poetry and mujahideen leader was targeted by al Qaeda and the Taliban, assassinated by a bomb detonated by two Arabs posing as journalists in one of his Panjshir forts. This week, it will be 20 years since his assassination and the 9/11 attacks that brought American retaliation on al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan.

Remembering an eco-tourism project in Afghanistan, following the footsteps of Ahmad Shah Massoud

'More than five years after his assassination Massoud remains a national hero to many Afghans,' *Time* magazine wrote in 2006. 'Passengers at Kabul airport are greeted by a mural of him standing several stories high. Massoud's place in history is assured by the fact that he was arguably the most brilliant practitioner of guerrilla warfare in the late 20th century.'

High praise in a country where rebel insurgency has been honed into an art form over the turbulent centuries.

These Panjshir fields and villages are currently holding out against the Taliban's otherwise successful swoop throughout Afghanistan, the last stand for freedom in a nation gripped with uncertainty and fear, tribal recriminations and revenge that have festered over the past twenty years. This time the young Ahmad Massoud has stepped into his famous father's shoes to lead the resistance from their Panjshir stronghold.

Panjshir Valley lies in the northeast of Afghanistan, and



Mujahideen guides took us to the northernmost part of the Panjshir Valley.

PHOTOS: LISA CHOEGYAL

in October 2005 we travelled through it to the furthest northern border in search of trekking and tourism ideas that would benefit local homeowners, guides, horsemen and crafts people. My hopeful notes show that our

suggestions included Afghan village guesthouses, the Mir Samir trek 'a short walk in the Hindu Kush', a five-day hike 'in the footsteps of Massoud' circuit, visitor information, and a saddlebag and blanket weaving enterprise.

One of the issues to overcome in rural Afghanistan was to persuade our hosts that they must charge money for tourist services. So powerful are the traditions of hospitality ('guest is god'), sharing what little they have, that taking

resettlement



(From left) Amit Jaffrey, Murtuza Jaffery and Humayun Shahzad.

PHOTOS: MUKESH POKHREL

to Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, clinging to the undercarriage of aircrafts in an attempt to flee the return of the Taliban.

At the time of their departure, American and coalition forces had evacuated more than 122,000 of their nationals, diplomats, and Afghan allies from Kabul. But not everyone made it out when the last US Air Force C-17 flew out on 31 August.

The Afghan refugees in Nepal left long before the recent upheavals, but say they escaped because they knew what was coming if the Taliban took over.

Zubair Ahmed recalls the Taliban’s oppressive regime making it impossible for Afghans to continue to live in the country of their birth.

“Many of us Afghans wanted to educate our children, especially our daughters, and see them go on to become doctors and professionals, but the Taliban would not allow it,” says Zubair Ahmed. “And women were not allowed to leave the house. We saw what the Taliban did 20 years ago, we know what they are capable of.”

With the Taliban taking control of Afghanistan once again, the doors have all but closed on the

chances of Afghans in Nepal ever returning home. But life here in Nepal, while certainly safer, has not been easy at all — especially with already meagre employment opportunities drying up due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Murtuza Jaffrey, 37, owned and operated a welding shop in Kandahar Province, but was forced to flee his home with his family after the Taliban threatened him for doing welding jobs for the American military. When they fled Afghanistan, his family was forced to separate. Jaffrey and his four children came to Nepal via India. Meanwhile,

his mother and four siblings went to Iran.

For Jaffrey, the years in Kathmandu have been a constant struggle for survival. The pandemic, however, has made it especially difficult— he is now without a job, and has not been able to pay his rent for two months. Moreover, the Rs18,000 annual grant that the UNHCR provided for each of his children’s education has stopped in the last two years.

Like Jaffrey, Mohammad Arif Ahmadi operated a successful business in Kandahar and was contracted to install bars on the doors and windows of buildings for the Americans.

“The work was good, but the Taliban would not let us live in peace, they threatened to kill me for helping the Americans,” recalls Ahmadi, who believes that Afghanistan has fallen back into the hands of “terrorists” following the Taliban victory.

Unable to live in constant fear for his life, Ahmadi, his wife and four sons decided to leave Afghanistan and come to Kathmandu seven years ago. The family has been struggling to make ends meet ever since. The pandemic-induced closures have made it worse for the family, four of whom worked at various grill and welding shops in Kathmandu.

“We do fine as long as we can find work,” says Sophika Ahmadi, “But when the jobs dry up, we are not even able to feed ourselves for the day.”

For all the Afghans struggling to get through every day in Kathmandu, the journey from Afghanistan to Nepal has been long and painful. A few, like Ahmadi and Jaffrey, paid

traffickers as much as \$2,000 for each family member to come to Nepal — a country unfamiliar to them in terms of language, culture and geography.

Similarly, Humayun Shahzad came to Kathmandu after a broker he met in Delhi convinced him to move to Nepal, which he described as a beautiful country where he could find better opportunities. The broker charged Shahzad’s nine-member family \$1,000 per person just to come from New Delhi to Kathmandu. They used up all their savings from selling their possessions in Afghanistan for the trip.

“We had thought the price was worth it because Nepal was a faraway place, but the broker brought us here within two days,” says Shahzad. Seven years later, his family is still here, and struggling to stay afloat.

Shahzad was convinced to come to Kathmandu by brokers who assured him that the UN refugee agency UNHCR in Nepal would provide him with the necessary support. But the reality in Nepal has been vastly different, and Afghans living in Nepal believe that the UNHCR has abandoned refugees like them.

Now, Afghans living in Nepal have one main demand, that they be compensated for their time living in Nepal, and be resettled in third countries. Additionally, the refugees have also been imploring the Nepal government to exempt them from having to pay the fines for staying in Nepal without a visa.

Without any meaningful support from UNHCR, and running out of money, the future for Afghan refugees in Nepal looks bleak.

For Murtuza Jaffrey, circumstances here have worsened to the point that he is considering going back to Afghanistan, and taking his chances with the Taliban, a sentiment he says other Afghans in Kathmandu echo.

“If we return to Afghanistan, the Taliban will kill us, and that will be it,” says Jaffrey. “Here, we feel like we are dying day by day.” 🇦🇫

payment for what we consider normal tourism services such as meals, accommodation and guiding was an alien concept which they struggled to accept.

“Your visit here was at a time when there was hope and great expectations for the country,” remembers Ali Azimi, our Asian Development Bank client and an Afghan American with deep-rooted insider networks within the community.

In Kabul he always seemed to know when and where there would be trouble, much better informed than the United Nations security system who was nominally responsible for us. He insisted on accompanying me to Panjshir to help “find ways to put money in pockets of village folks through tourism initiatives”.

As we drove out of town in a large white vehicle bristling with antenna and aerials, we failed to feel an earthquake which shook the city. Leaving behind the acrid fragrance of war, Ali Azimi morphed from his usual persona of a neatly-bearded grey-suited ADB executive into the country’s ubiquitous flowing robes of anonymity.

I tried, no doubt less successfully, to blend in with scarves and shalwar kameez. It was Ramadan, the time of fasting, but as travellers the rules did not strictly apply. ‘Mobile sex’ was the SUV’s call sign, but Ali was happy to lose contact once the signal weakened in the countryside, preferring to rely on local knowledge of his Panjshir guides, hand-picked former mujahideen of course, who joined us soon after entering the valley.

These fighters were hard-core, the trauma of years of mountain



Children play amongst rusted remains of Russian tanks in the Panjshir Valley in 2006.

combat etched into their weathered faces and wild eyes. They prayed at every shrine, honoured every grave, showed us their hideouts, revealed their hunting trails, took us into their homes, unrolled their carpets, shared their food, played with their children, and talked with urgent low voices on flat mud roofs under the stars in Dari which I could not understand.

It all made sense when Ali explained that our two mujahideen friends were Massoud’s personal bodyguards, his most trusted elite, still haunted by the guilt of the day they waited outside their commander’s room having admitted the ‘journalists’ with a deadly device concealed in the television camera.

As part of the TRC Tourism team of Kiwi and Nepali consultants, we worked in Afghanistan for ADB and the Aga Khan Development Network on three missions in 2005, 2006 and 2008 that included Kabul, Bamyan, Band-i-Amir lakes, Wakhan Corridor and the Panjshir Valley. Ali wrote recently: ‘You will be pleased to know your recommended ecotourism policy is being practiced in Band-i-Amir.’

Most of all we remember the harsh beauty of the landscape, the unexpected warmth of its people caught in an eternal loop of historical conflict, and hearing the chilling tales of horror under Taliban rule.

Twice we arranged for groups of Afghan officials and tour operators

to visit Nepal’s ecotourism models in 2009 and 2011, including the governor of Bamyan, Hariba Sarabi, a remarkable Hazara woman who was part of the Doha peace talks.

The Nepal trips to study sustainable tourism were led by my New Zealand-funded Bamyan ecotourism project colleague, Amir Foladi. The work included a visitor centre dedicated to the remains of the Buddhas of Bamyan, carefully collected by UNESCO.

Foladi showed me tragic metal pieces from the explosives that destroyed these 6th century monumental statues in 2001, still embedded amidst the mud and plaster fragments which are all that is left – except the massive blank empty niches.

Throughout the catastrophic drama of last week’s departure following the Taliban takeover, it is impossible not to mourn for an Afghanistan that might have been. The progress over the last two decades, however imperfect, is dissipated. Particularly, the fate of women is desperately unclear.

One ray of light amidst the grief and despair of the withdrawal is that my friend Foladi and his ecotourism teammates have arrived in Auckland, six Afghan families evacuated to safety through the chaos of Kabul airport by the New Zealand Defence Force just 24 hours before the fatal bomb. They are the lucky ones, so many left behind to face a frighteningly unreliable future. 🇦🇫



Garbage in, garbage out

The good people of Okharpauwa in Nuwakot finally signed a ceasefire agreement with the litterbugs of Kathmandu last week to not refuse our refuse anymore. So, just as we had started getting used to living with garbage, here we are having to adjust to clean sidewalks all over again.

Pity, because rubbish heaps had become such an important part of everyday life that it had become a vibrant symbol of our nascent federal democratic republic, an emblem of our hard-won freedoms. So let no nation (especially neighbouring countries currently trying to move our border pillars) underestimate our resolve to pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to safeguard our right to litter wherever we want within Nepal's sovereign territory.

The rotting rubbish was proof that we are well on our way to attaining Middle Income Status by 2025. The fact that we can throw away so much stuff means we have much more where it came from, which in turn shows that Nepal's GDP is relentlessly rising.

The garbage dumps had also become important repositories of endangered species of plant, animal and fungal life. These biodiversity reserves were the last remaining refuge for the Greater Urban Holy Cow (*Bos nipalensis*) whose alimentary tracts evolved to allow them to digest styrofoam. By moving the rubbish we have removed the last habitat for endangered species, and their disappearance will be a loss not just to Nepal, but for the planet at large.

The absence of the friendly

neighbourhood garbage piles also means that we have lost vital navigation waypoints that had replaced Google maps to help people find their way around in a city without street names and house numbers.

We can no longer give visitors directions on how to get to the *Nepali Times* office by telling them to take Tootle to Pulchok, and follow the smell of the decaying trash at the intersection, turn left after 50m, and we are the brick building above the momo shop. If you see another, bigger garbage pyramid blocking the road, then you have gone too far.

We now know that no two biodegradable garbage heaps smell the same. The one on our street has the bouquet of rotting water buffalo viscera combined with the aroma of fish scales in an advanced stage of fermentation, recalling the sophisticated odour halfway between mature gorgonzola and a freshly-cut wet toenail.

However, the Ass had noticed that the garbage mound at the gateway to Thamel has an even stronger olfactory quotient, clocking 8.5 magnitude on the open-ended Richter scale that can knock over innocent bystanders within a radius of 20m from the epicentre.

The Hotel Association has belatedly realised the tourism potential of charging an entry fee to drop by at Kathmandu's garbage piles, which have become such popular selfie-spots for foreign visitors. It is upon us to restore the rubbish, and preserve this important part of the city's cultural heritage.



The Ass

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