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PHOTOS: SRIJANA DEVKOTA

SAVE OUR MOTHERS

● Aruna Uprety in Achham

Far away from the media glare on the general conventions of Nepal's main political parties and their lavish display of money and power, in a remote village here in western Nepal, Dhiru Bista is recovering after her 12th pregnancy nearly ended in death.

Saving the lives of mothers like her in underserved communities, and new risk from the omicron variant could not be further from the minds of politicians gearing up for elections in 2023.

Dhiru Bista is only 35, but looks much older. Married at 15, she gave birth to a baby daughter just two years later. Since then, seven of her 12 babies have survived -- all daughters. The oldest is now 16, the youngest 18 months old.

The stillbirth four months ago nearly killed her due to a ruptured uterus. When we met her recently at her small clay brick house in Babala village, Dhiru was out and about, spreading the buckwheat harvest to dry. Her daughters played nearby,



babysitting younger siblings.

Her husband is within earshot, and Dhiru finds a quiet corner to whisper: "I only had daughters, and had to keep trying for a son. My husband does not comfort me."

Development indicators like female literacy, maternal and infant mortality in Achham are much below the national average.

Preference for boys here means daughters are married off early, and because they are so young and undernourished at childbirth, many mothers die at home, or while being rushed to hospital.

After Dhiru Bista started getting

contractions, neighbours carried her to a bus that could take her to Bayalpata Hospital. She had lost a lot of blood by the time she arrived at emergency. The baby was in a transverse position with one of its hands sticking out of the cervix, already dead.

The surgery took four hours, but Bayalpata's doctors managed to save Dhiru Bista's life. For surgeons, this was their most difficult maternity case. The public-private partnership run by Nyaya Health Nepal with support from the Far-West Province, Sanfebagar Municipality, and international

FEELING AT HOME: Dhiru Bista, 35, was married at 15 and has had 12 pregnancies. Recovering from a recent delivery that nearly killed her, she posed (left) with her husband, and her eldest and youngest among seven surviving daughters.

funding provides free treatment at Bayalpata, a model for rural Nepal.

Nepal's maternal mortality rate has dropped from 539 per 100,000 live births to less than 170 in the past two decades, but improvement has stalled. During the pandemic, expecting mothers could not travel for check-ups, and institutional deliveries dropped dramatically.

Increased investment in health care in remote settings is necessary to further reduce Nepal's maternal mortality rate. Next is education for girls to discourage early marriage.

With elections a year away, political parties will once more promise jobs. But for many women and children here in Achham, it is more a life or death struggle.

Aruna Uprety is a public health expert and a Board member of Nyaya Health Nepal.

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TURKISH AIRLINES

**BOSTON
CHICAGO**

Turkey to open embassy in Nepal

Newly appointed Turkish Ambassador to Nepal Firat Sunel reveals to *Nepali Times* that his government plans to establish a resident embassy in Kathmandu in 2022, when Turkey and Nepal mark 60 years of bilateral relations.

Sunel covered a wide range of topics including better air connectivity between Kathmandu and Istanbul, and the prospect of increased trade, investment and tourism.

Ambassador Sunel is an accomplished historical novelist and is researching a book on the involvement of Indian and Nepali soldiers in the Gallipoli campaign during World War I, which saw approximately 300,000 casualties including 1,000 Gurkha soldiers.

Excerpts of interview:



SONIAAWALE

Turkey establishing resident embassy in Kathmandu to mark 60 years of bilateral relations with Nepal.



consistently elected the best carrier in Europe. It also flies to more destinations than any other air carrier. Turkish Airlines connects Nepal to Turkey as well as to the rest of the world. We plan to be back to pre-Covid flight frequency between Kathmandu and Istanbul.

What is the potential for tourism? Nepal is a famous tourist destination, the world knows about its natural beauty, heritage and hospitable people. Almost every child in Istanbul knows about Mt Everest. What Nepal needs now is better infrastructure for tourism. Turkey as the sixth most visited country in the world can help Nepal do this.

Tourism is not just a source of revenue, but it connects people and contributes to cultural understanding. We have to promote Turkey in Nepal as well, the more mutual understanding there is, the more interactivity there will be. We especially encourage people to stopover in Istanbul for a few days on their way to Europe and North America.

And prospects for trade and investment?

Our trade and commercial relations are good but do not reflect the true potential. Turkey is willing to change that. Turkey is already one of the top five countries for Nepal's trade exports. On the other hand, Turkish companies are producing European-level goods at a cheaper price, which might be of interest to Nepal.

At the same time, Turkish investors are interested, especially in Nepal's construction sector. Turkey has built a name for itself in infrastructure, and has expertise in highways, tunnels, hydropower and telecom. There are some more agreements pending, which will attract more investors from Turkey.

Nepali Times: What are some highlights of Turkey's bilateral relations with Nepal?

Firat Sunel: Next year Turkey and Nepal are celebrating 60 years of establishment of diplomatic relations. On that occasion my government has decided to establish a resident embassy here, and we have started the process.

I discussed this with Prime Minister Deuba when I met him today (Friday), and he received the suggestion very warmly. We also

agreed to deepen bilateral ties. We urge Nepal also to open its embassy in Ankara, because if we have embassies in each other's countries it will help in closer relations.

As it is, Turkey and Nepal have cooperation in many areas. We were in fact the first country to arrive with a 97-member health and rescue team in Kathmandu in the immediate aftermath of the 2015 earthquake.

Turkey spans two continents and

is a bridge between East and West. What commonalities do you see between Turkey and Nepal?

There are a lot of cultural similarities between the two countries. The first and foremost is the importance we give to family life and our respect for the elderly. Next is our food, which is suitable for the Turkish palate.

Here in Kathmandu I feel like I have gained weight because of all the eating I have done. And culinary relations are a brilliant way

to connect people, so is language. A lot of our words are the same, like *keema*, *kitab*, *insaan*. In fact, linguists have found 9,000 words from Turkish that are in Hindustani, so there must be quite a few in Nepali as well.

Does Turkish Airlines plan to increase its connection between Kathmandu and Istanbul to pre-Covid levels?

Turkish Airlines is one of the world's best airlines, and has been

prabhu BANK



ADB loan

The Electricity Grid Modernisation Project that was signed between the Asian Development Bank and the Ministry of Finance in November 2020 has received an additional \$60 million loan. The project which had a start in February amounts to \$156 million and has been allocated to the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA). The project aims to strengthen and modernise Nepal's transmission capacity and electricity distribution system.

Tourism picks up

International tourist arrivals increased by 58% in July-September, compared to the same period of 2020. This is still 64% below average 2019 levels and 76% below pre-pandemic levels, according to the UN World Tourism Organisation. The figure will stay at 70-75% below average 2019 levels for the remainder of 2021. Mobility



restrictions, vaccinations, and traveler confidence have meant improvement in parts of Europe and the Americas during the third quarter of 2021, but arrivals in Asia-Pacific were down almost 95%. The tourism sector could lose \$2 trillion this year, the same as in 2020.

Turkish Kora

Jayan Madhikarmi is the winner of the 2021 Kora Cycling Click 2 Win photo contest 2021 (#MYKORACHALLENGE). The winner received a free roundtrip ticket to Istanbul sponsored by Turkish Airlines, which has been partnering with the organisers for the past three years. The winner was selected by professional judges and based on Facebook likes. Turkish Airlines has been partnering with the Kora Cycling event organized by Social Tours and Kathmandu Cycle City Network, supported by Pangro with 3,000 cyclists every year.



Himal journalist awarded

Ramesh Kumar Neupane of *Himal Khabarpatrika*, a sister publication of *Nepali Times* has been awarded by the Society of Economic Journalists Nepal (SEJON) for his investigation into high-level insider trading of Sarbottam Cement IPO shares. Following the expose, the CIAA launched a probe into Nepal Securities Board chair Bishma Raj Dhungana, after which he was suspended. Nepse CEO Chandra Singh Saud and board member Chandra Dhakal also resigned from their posts for their alleged involvement.

Cathay fares

Hong Kong's Cathay Pacific has redesigned its economy fares divided into Light, Essential, and Flex for Nepali passengers. Light fares allow customers to have one piece of checked-in luggage while 'Essential' fares allows an extra piece of luggage, seat preselection and the option to upgrade using Asia Miles. The 'Flex' category gives passengers full control over their travel plans. Cathay Pacific is also shifting its baggage policy from a weight-allowance to a piece-allowance system.



Ban on alcohol ads

The Advertising Association Nepal, Nepal Media Society, ANFA, Media Alliance Nepal, and Nepal Beverages and Cigarettes Industries Association have issued a joint statement opposing the Nepal Advertisement Board's ban on ads of alcoholic beverages in the print media.

The ban is unlikely to reduce consumption, the statement say, calling instead for placements that do not actively promote drinking. As per global standards, there are next to no restrictions on the advertisements of alcoholic beverages. It urges the Board to reverse the ban to prevent further losses for the struggling media sector that derives its revenue from liquor advertising.

Jyoti for the elderly

Jyoti Bikash Bank this week distributed warm clothing for the elderly at the Matatirtha Old-Age Home.



Assistant General Manager of the Bank Ram Hari Acharya, Kathmandu Valley Regional Office Chief Dilip Raj Baral and Branch Manager of Balambu Prakash Shrestha were present.

Rs 2,758,424,164

Nepali rupee currency notes worth Rs2,758,424,164 is in circulation across the country, according to Nepal Rastra Bank which is in charge of note issuance and management. There was new note stock worth Rs79.81 billion until last fiscal year, which is a six fold increase compared to a year before. The paper currency most in circulation is Rs1,000, of which there are 488,615,058, whereas there are only 348,705 bills of the old Rs250 notes in the market.



MONIKA DEUPALA

Face-to-face to counter Facebook

How Nepal can develop 'herd immunity' against disinformation, lies and propaganda on social media

Sakar Pudasaini, founder at Karkhana explores innovation, technology, education, and their social consequences in this new monthly column for *Nepali Times*.

The recent release of the 'Facebook Papers' and public testimony by whistleblowers have drawn attention to the use of social media, specifically Facebook, as a tool of civic and political action.



MAKESHIFT
Sakar Pudasaini

The ensuing firestorm has drawn much needed scrutiny and triggered a debate on how to regulate the social media giant. It has also made clear that the global governance of social media will deprioritise peripheral countries such as Nepal.

Both technological and human resource solutions that regulate social media are unlikely to take local needs into account. Thus, it is incumbent on domestic actors to develop 'herd immunity' through social consensus on how they use Facebook and other social media to advance their agenda and, engage in contentious debate.

Documents from Facebook whistleblowers show that the company does not treat all countries equally. Tier 0 (higher priority countries) such as the United States and India get strong content moderation that includes algorithmic monitoring and 'war rooms'. Facebook develops

technology to proactively identify misinformation, falsehood and inflammatory content in these high-priority markets.

These technological tools, built to understand local languages and local patterns of social media use, are supplemented by local moderators with contextual knowledge.

However, in Tier 3 countries like Nepal, Facebook appears to make no proactive effort to identify and moderate polarising content. Instead, it relies on user reporting to identify problematic content. In a Tier 0/1 country, content inciting violence could be proactively removed by algorithms or moderators. In a Tier 3 country, significant challenges would have to be overcome before such action is taken.

To begin with, enough local users would have to flag the content as a problem. Then, a moderator who is unfamiliar with the local context would have to make a decision to remove the content. Even if such a scenario comes to pass, it is unlikely to happen fast enough to prevent significant harm in rapidly-evolving situations.

It is therefore important that countries like Nepal develop mechanisms to fend for ourselves. The most important domestic actors that need to buy into the need for self-regulation are political parties.

There are three reasons:

First, disinformation, untruths and polarising propaganda are most prevalent around elections when both emotions are elevated and the stakes are high. With political power and its benefits at stake, political partisans will be more willing

to cross the line from political posturing to problematic polarising messaging during these times. This is particularly relevant to Nepal, where federal and local elections are due in early 2023.

Second, political parties have the power to amplify content. Political leaders have massive followings on social media, but even more importantly, parties are nation-wide networks of people that can reshare and reinforce messaging. Recent research suggests that political influence on social media works differently from traditional advertising.

In traditional advertising, messaging is carried to a large number of people by a celebrity they know and trust, which is why Nepal's *MaHa Jodi* seem to be selling us everything from cement to water tanks. This is thought to drive sales by positive association with the trusted figures. Political influence on social media, however, appears to be more effective when information is (re)shared in small groups of trust, rather than by a widely followed influencer.

Finally, political parties have the means and skills to craft effective messages. While it is easy to blame technology for causing the problems of disinformation, we have to remember that a human hand guides it. Political parties have skilled communicators with a deep understanding of the public's moods, desires and also prejudices.

At their best, these people help advance democratic discourse by effectively representing the different streams of public sentiment in the national dialogue. However, this same skill in capturing public

sentiment also allows them to construct rumours, disinformation and conspiracies that capture the public imagination and go viral.

It may seem fanciful to imagine that political parties, especially in the heat of the battle for power, can be relied on for self-regulation. Yet, there are many examples of this in Nepal. The most obvious one is the peace process that some have poetically described as leading from the 'bullet to the ballot box'.

More encouragingly, political violence, such as 'booth capture', have steadily declined to the point where individual incidents are rare enough to be widely noted.

This suggests that there are ways to cultivate consensus by making political forces understand the self-interest. Political violence diminishes their legitimacy to rule and increases the risk to their person and cadre. Thus, it is worth trading the momentary advantage of violence in one location to ensure advantages in the exercise of national power.

Social media manipulation and polarisation through disinformation have similar, perhaps even more destructive consequences. Around the world we see what political scientists McCoy and Somer call pernicious polarisation — an *us vs them* mentality where the drive to identify with your political tribe outweighs other sociopolitical considerations, the politicisation of masking and vaccination for example.

Pernicious polarisation fragments social and political structures so as to make nations impossible to govern, but also

creates national security risks. Highly fragmented and polarised societies are primed by their own political leaders to believe disinformation and polarising propaganda are easy targets for manipulation by international powers.

It is tempting to imagine there are technological solutions to technologically enabled problems. The Facebook Papers, however, make clear that countries like Nepal must not depend on faraway technological wizards to find us solutions because we are not their priority. Technological solutions, even if they can be found, will take a long time before they can be customised for the local context. Instead, we must face Facebook ourselves.

While it is not possible to prevent all attempts to infect the social and political system through social media manipulation, a 'herd immunity' that protects us from the worst of it, can be achieved by building a self-regulation consensus among key actors, chief among them political parties, with the skills and resources to mount large scale manipulation campaigns.

Fortunately, this is possible in the most low tech way through face-to-face conversations over countless cups of *chia* and many plates of *samosa*. 🇳🇵

Sakar Pudasaini, Founder at Karkhana, explores innovation, technology, education, and their social consequences in *Makeshift*, a new monthly column in *Nepali Times*. The name *Makeshift* gestures to the tenuous uncertain nature of new ideas and initiatives as well as their potential to drive profound change.



MONA

At first glance, it screams utter sorrow. It projects out-and-out unhappiness of the mind, body and soul, a feeling of having given up on life itself. It is dark, it is lonely, it is sad.



FOR ART'S SAKE
Rajan Sakya

But do not dismiss the painting, give it some time to grow on you. The painting may fleetingly transport viewers to painful periods of their lives, long repressed. Most of us have experienced such 'dark' moments, where we struggled and persevered only to emerge elatedly on the other side.

This painting is the work of 16-year-old Dipesh Nepali (pictured right) who is from a village in Jumla district, in the isolated mountains of north-western Nepal. An ordinary school student, Dipesh has had a difficult life in a harsh environment where food is often scarce, winters are long and dreary, and access to basic healthcare and education is minimal.

In his spare time, after finishing his household chores, Dipesh likes to draw and paint. It is his escape from the daily grind, a chance to express himself and bare his soul.

"Art was my escape from the world, and from myself," Dipesh told me recently. "It is a way to be truly free from the chains of family and society. It is where the chaos of my mind and soul find rest, art is a medium to bring it all out."

Talking to the young artist in Kathmandu recently helped me understand the written and unwritten rules of society, not least materialism and the desperate search for instant, superficial gratification which ultimately led him to seek solitude, go into hiding, and retreat into himself.

Yet, in his work, Dipesh has retained the curiosity of his childhood, the questioning and seeking, and in doing so he has discovered that art resided within him. It only needed to be kindled gently to become a powerful tool.

At first glance, this painting does not seem to inspire much, it looks ordinary and is not pleasing to the eye, either. But give it time and space to incubate, and it radiates a quiet energy, like an inner applause for a battle won over negative emotions. Proof that the artist has been at a low point in his life, and is back up to show us how it felt.

Dipesh Nepali's dark light

A painting that transports the artist and viewer to life's dark period, and deliverance from it



If we reflect on the painting long enough, it may bring back our own dark moments, reminding some of us of the process of recovery, how we emerged stronger, determined and self-reliant. No matter what our struggle, there is always more ahead to look forward to. But evoking and honouring these memories empowers us to meet adversity head-on and overcome them.

Dipesh was confused about himself and about his passion for art. So, he travelled to Kathmandu seeking skill and exposure. Luckily, his older brother was in the city and took care of him.

"Yet, internally I found no relief, being weighed down with my own thoughts, feelings and emotions. I submerged myself in my work, as an escape. Hard work became a form of a band-aid, but it never really healed the wounds," Dipesh relates.

As a teenager, I too had issues like Dipesh. And as a way to escape them, I travelled to the United States at age 17. My band-aid was

enrolling as an exchange student, my senior year in high school. Folks in Nepal covered my costs, and I lived with an American family for a year.

Unfortunately, I had developed vitiligo, a depigmentation of skin colour. For a teenager trying to adapt to a new society, this was disheartening. With no relatives or friends, I felt totally isolated, not because I was bullied, but due to the turmoil inside me.

My horror at my own appearance and how people would view me was unbearable. I lacked confidence, kept away from people, afraid of how they would react. It got to the point where for four months I ate my lunch in the school bathroom, and then went straight to class. There was a sense of achievement in just avoiding people.

Today, I no longer feel embarrassed or inferior. I believe those hard years gave me a solid foundation to face anything and everything that life throws at me.

Dipesh Nepali's art transports me back to that time of my own life: the sadness, the loneliness, the anxiety, the feeling of being trapped by powers beyond my control. Yet it also reminds me of a personal battle that I waged and won over myself. I would not be who I am today if it was not for that ordeal.

Dipesh's mind has travelled further than his young body. With an incredibly mature and unique vision of the world, one finds in his work expressions of anguish and a yearning to be free. Painting has become an outlet to bring out his repressed emotions and feelings.

The depth in his art is there for everyone to see, but less obvious are numerous and varied technical skills he has improvised to create his painting — his choice of oils to achieve a unique blend and shades of colours. The painting is now on exhibit at the Museum of Nepali Art (MoNA) in Kathmandu.

A work of art can mean a different thing for different people, response is by definition subjective. Dipesh Nepali's art touched the deepest and darkest parts of my own past, and reminded me of my own struggles. But I also found contentment and peace in the darkest reaches of this canvas. 🇳🇵

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.

MoNA is unveiling The Dark Light and conducting an art discourse on 9 December.

Mothers teach daughters how to make clay murals, empowering a new generation of Maithili women



How a

● Anita Bhetwal

Manjula Thakur was married at age 12. By the time she was 20, she had three children. At 32, she still did not know how to read or write. Her world was limited to the four walls of her house. Instead of taking care of the family, her husband spent the little they had on alcohol.

What kept Manjula going was her love of art. Like generations of Maithili women before, her mother had taught her how to make traditional clay murals and paint the walls of their home.

M





ALL PHOTOS: MONIKA DEUPALA

Art empowers Nepal's women

Even after getting married, she spent hours painting the walls and floors of her home. What she did not know was that the art she learnt as a child would help her gain fame and independence now in her 50s.

"Mithila paintings have taken me not only around the country but also around the world," says Thakur, who has been to the United States and Spain to exhibit her paintings.

In 1988, when American visual artist Claire Burkert came to Nepal to document Mithila wall paintings, she asked Thakur to paint something for her. She was paid Rs50. That was the first time Thakur realised that despite being illiterate, she could still earn money.

She was then offered a job at the newly established Janakpur Women's Development Centre (JWDC) which was set up by Burkert, and is still run by women artists.

"I went from living for my family to contributing towards their livelihood," says Thakur, who now supports her household with earnings from her art. She has bought a plot of land in her village and supports her children's education.

This economic empowerment has also meant that her role in the household has changed. These days, she makes most of the family

decisions, her husband playing a supportive role.

Living in a society where women are usually relegated to household chores and confined within the walls of their homes, it was not always smooth sailing for Thakur. It took her 25 years to change the perception of the society.

"Although it was difficult initially, I am more confident now and have gained a lot of respect and love because of this art," she says.

Thakur is in Kathmandu this week with three other women from JWDC to prepare a mural for the Kathmandu Triennale 2077 festival. Just off the busy streets of Boudha, up the entrance of Taragaon Museum, the four women clad in colourful saris and traditional silver jewellery are busy painting and creating murals using a mixture of clay, husk, and flour.

"When we paint, we forget everything. When we travel to new places, we gain more confidence," says Madhumala Mandal, a part of the art troupe. Mandal's earnings help pay for care for her son who suffers from spinal cord injury.

When Sudhira Karn's husband died 20 years ago, she struggled to raise her only son. She remembers people gossiping when she went to train at JWDC. Today, her son is a graduate and works at a bank.

These days, Karn spends time with books, some of her favourites being *Prem Sagar*, *Ramayana*, *Sukha Sagar*, *Bhagwat Gita*, *Madhavi* and *Sitaram*. "I get more ideas for painting after reading books," says Karn. In Kathmandu this time, she wants to spend a part of her earnings to buy more books to take back home to Dhanusa.

Another artist, 53-year-old Rewati Mandal, is also happy to have pursued Mithila art as a profession. "I earn more through painting than toiling the fields night and day," says Mandal, who is the sole breadwinner in her family.

Her sons live separately, but because of her skill, Mandal does not have to ask them for money. "I earn my own keep. I earn up to Rs10,000 per job. That is enough for me to buy groceries for an entire year," she adds.

All four women believe that opportunities trump luck, and given a break a woman can do as well as, or better than, menfolk in every sphere of life.

Sheelasha Rajbhandary, the curator of Kathmandu Triennale 2077 says that the event will set an example by highlighting traditional women artists. She says: "Traditional art done by women is still not counted as art. That is why we need to highlight art forms like Mithila art. After all, women empowerment begins at home." 🇳🇵



EVENTS

**KIMFF 2021**

The 19th Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival will spotlight stories that reflect the realities of mountain communities in sustaining and protecting their natural environment through this year's film selection.

9-13 December

KT2077 Kurakani

Mithila artists Madhumala Mandal, Manjula Thakur, Rebati Mandal and Sudhira Karna from the Janakpur Women's Development Center, will join moderator Urmila Chaudhary for a discussion session in this installment of the Kathmandu Triennale Kurakani series.

Read their story on page 6-7.
3 December, 3pm, Taragaon Museum

**Mobile Library**

Mobile Library Nepal is now at Kathmandu University's Department of Art and Design and will organise meet and greets, workshops and other ways of connecting with the art community in Kathmandu and beyond.

Kathmandu University School of Arts, Hattiban

The Art Market

The Art House, a space for artists to exhibit, buy, and sell artwork, will resume with its Christmas edition.

3 December, 4pm-7pm, Maya Manor

**Sooriya studio**

Join Sooriya Wellness and Yoga centre's studio for yoga and meditation sessions, or for virtual studio sessions for self-practice at home.

Lazimpat, 9818481972

DINING

**Hankook Sarang**

Satisfy the hankering for Korean food with a variety of mouthwatering dishes like Tteokbokki, Pork Je Yook Bokum, kimbab and more from Hankook Sarang.

Tangal (01) 4421711/ Thamel (01) 4256615

ON STAGE

Ram Krishna Dhakal live

Musician Ram Krishna Dhakal will pay tribute to Narayan Gopal on the anniversary of the iconic singer's passing.

3 December, 6:30pm, Blue Note Cafe, Sanepa

Animal Farm

See Katha Ghera's Nepali adaptation of George Orwell's ever-relevant Animal Farm.

Ticket booking from 28 November.

Until 18 December, Tickets: Rs500, Kausi Theatre, Teku

**Raithane music**

Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory's Raithane Music concert will feature artists Jhuma Limbu, Ser o Duo and others who will play native instruments in a presentation of indigenous Nepali music fused with modern elements.

4 December, 6pm onwards, Moksh

Stop Kiss

Adapted from playwright Diana Son's Stop Kiss and directed by Loonibha Tuladhar, this One World Theatre production is not merely a lesbian play from the 1990s North America.

Read review: page 9.

Until 4 December, Tickets: Rs500, Rs700 (for front-row seats), Shilpee Theatre, Battisputali

**Dance classes**

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

9860588626

Christmas concert

Lareso Music's Christmas concert will include original songs and feature performances by Sherpa and Lova artists. Call or go to Lareso Music's Facebook page for details.

10 December, Sang's Restaurant, Tinchuli, 9080107344/9860616139

GETAWAY

**Kalsee Ecolodge**

This quaint collection of cottages in the midst of forest hills with a magnificent view of Annapurna and Machhapuchhre is located in Tanchok, a ridge 35km northwest of Pokhara off the Lumle Highway.

Kaski, 9851038873

Soaltee Westend Premier

Located in the green plains of Nepalganj, this expansive resort is one of Nepal's more energy efficient and eco-friendly getaways.

Nepalganj, (081) 551145

**Gokarna Forest Resort**

The resort is a paradise, thick 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

Meghauri Serai

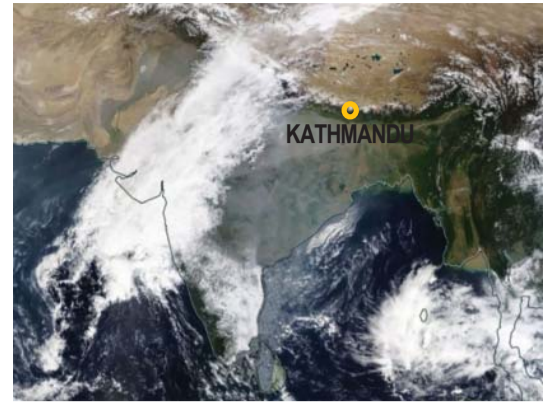
The luxurious safari lodge at the heart of Chitwan National Park overlooking the Rapti River offers scenic views as well as accommodation that integrates local culture and art.

Chitwan National Park, 9801301969

**Baber Mahal Vilas**

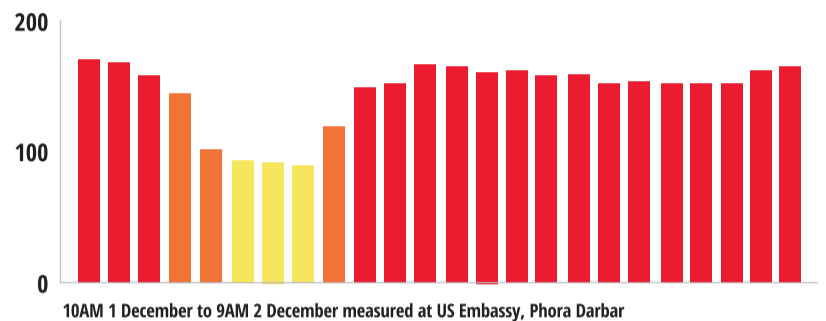
A neoclassical architectural marvel, the historic Baber Mahal Vilas is now a quaint boutique hotel with Newa accents, Mustang designs and Tarai influences.

Tanka Prasad Ghumti Sadak (01) 4257655

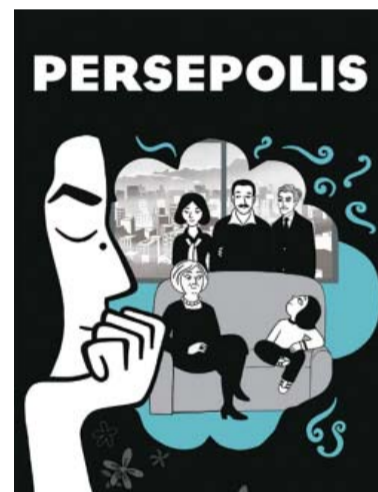


A slow-moving low pressure circulation that is moving out of the Arabian Sea will bring a westerly front over western and central Nepal in the next few days. Although the system will be fairly weak by the time it reaches us, it will dump snow in the higher elevations. Friday will be mainly overcast, with maximum temperature dropping to 18°C, but the clouds will part by the weekend. Hot on the heels of this is another trough in the Bay of Bengal that is intensifying to cyclone strength, the periphery of which will graze Kathmandu early next week bringing snow over the high mountains of central and eastern Nepal, and rain elsewhere.

AIR QUALITY INDEX



The crop residue fires in India and Pakistan have now dissipated, but there is still some burning going on in central India. Combined with industrial pollution and Kathmandu Valley's vehicular emission being trapped in an inversion layer, the AQI will worsen over the weekend. The impact will not be as bad as preceding weeks because of a shift in wind direction which will bring cleaner and crisper air from the northwest. There is a chance of some precipitation on Friday, and again early next week which could wash down suspended particles -- but only temporarily.



OUR PICK

Directed by Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud, *Persepolis* is a 2007 animated biographical drama based upon Satrapi's autobiographical graphic novel of the same name. The film follows Satrapi's childhood in Tehran against the backdrop of the 1979 Iranian revolution, subsequent political upheaval, and the Iran-Iraq war. As the government imposes stricter laws, young Satrapi's opposition to the fundamentalist rules begin to threaten her safety, leading her parents to send their child abroad to Europe, where she faces new struggles to adjust to a completely new way of life. Stars Chiara Mastroianni, Catherine Deneuve, Danielle Darrieux, and Simon Abkarian.

कोरोना लागेपछि
न धुँदा जाने, न रुँदा जाने
त्यसैले कोरोना लाग्नै नदिन
भीडभाडमा नजाने

महिला स्वास्थ्यकर्मीहरूले सबैलाई सुरक्षित राख्न सक्छन् र अन्ततः सबैलाई सुरक्षित राख्न सक्छन्।

संस्थापक: विज्ञान बोर्ड

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Take a gastronomic tour of Nepal at Raithaane, where every dish on the menu is connected to different communities of the country, made with locally sourced food.

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Jawalakhel, 9813493902

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The price of a kiss

After a pandemic-induced break, One World Theatre stages a drama of first love

Nepal in recent times to focus on queer women. The premier on 25 November was on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, and will run till 4 December during 16 days of activism.

Mitini Nepal estimates that 38% of lesbians and 62% of transgenders across the country continue to face violence in Nepal. Discrimination aside, people who belong to the LGBTQ+ spectrum have few safe spaces to open up, and feel comfortable in their own skin.

But, surely, for many young progressives today, the play might appear demure or too gentle. "There isn't enough sex," one might say. Or "Why are there no mobile phones, so much of the trouble could have been avoided with a mobile phone!" After all, in the two decades since the play was first produced, much has changed in the world. But a lot remains the same. *Stop Kiss* is not merely a lesbian play from the 1990s North America. It is also a reminder that despite vicious attacks and protests the LGBTQ+ movement around the world today has reached a point where its members can consider getting married, holding hands and expressing themselves.

And it is even more important in a country like Nepal where progress is incremental, and the reminder is encouragement to fight for one's right to love without judgement and violence. Tuladhar and Kavita Srinivasan's co-direction and the cast of *Stop*



PICS: BIJAY TAMRAKAR/ONE WORLD THEATRE

Kiss do not shy away from this scope and significance of their stage production.

Tuladhar admits she was nervous at first, unsure whether she was right for the role. "But violence against women and the queer community in our society takes many forms, and often it is quiet and we don't even realise that we are being violent," she says.

The show's co-director, Kavita Srinivasan echoes this: "Many women and queer people are not comfortable going out alone at night, but why should we fear to exist in our own society?"

Ranjana Bhattarai and Samapika Gautam shine as Callie and Sara, their chemistry natural. Bhattarai plays Callie's New York 'up in the air' traffic news reporter. Gautam is the perfect counterpart, as grounded and methodical as Sara, a

third-grade teacher.

The two women are riotous together – they dance, laugh and yell, hands making wide gestures as they try to wordlessly communicate the stirrings in their hearts, perhaps felt by both for the first time. There is also tension, as they do not know the right thing to say or to do.

But Bhattarai and Gautam convince us that in their apparent differences is touching resonance. Both intense and hilarious, they carry the entire emotional weight of the play in their performances, going from unsure awkwardness of new acquaintances to wild, gushing nervousness of first-time lovers.

The supporting cast is also impressive. Gaurav Bista is the agonisingly heterosexual George, Callie's on-and-off boyfriend. Loonibha Tuladhar steals the scenes as Mrs Winsley who

witnesses the attack on the protagonists. Anahita Sarabhai is excellent as the Nurse, and Sushrut Acharya as Detective Cole and Bruno Deceukelier as Peter make the most of their few scenes.

But the real stars of the show is the relentless crew, they have the toughest job at Shilpee every night: making sure everything looks seamless on stage and nothing falls over and breaks during scene changes. The story is told out of order, so it unfolds in sets of 'before' and 'after' the attack.

The set design is aptly minimalist and modern, and the soundtrack of hit 90's tracks adds to the vibe of New York.

Stop Kiss is far from the stereotype of sad and fatal LGBTQ+ stories that either end in death or separation. Instead, it is open-hearted, warm and determined to impact audiences of all ages and background.

"While physical, external violence forms the backbone of the play, there is also a play borne of shame, judgement and discrimination," adds Srinivasan: "Hopefully it will create momentum for conversations to make our society truly inclusive." 🇳🇵

Stop Kiss is playing at Shilpee Theatre in Battisputali until 4 December 2021. Runtime is 2 hours and 10 minutes with no intermission. Ticks: Rs500 9861053015/stopkiss@owtnepal.org Showtimes: 5:30PM, with an additional 1PM show on 4 December.

• Ashish Dhakal

Sara and Callie are taking a walk late at night through the West Village. They have just been out at a bar and the night is young. Against the colourful high-rise of bricks and windows projected onto plywood screens, they give into the whirlwind of emotions, and they kiss.

Enter an angry bystander (this is New York, after all) and what could have been the best night of their lives turns into an ugly nightmare. He attacks the two lovers violently, and Sara suffers injuries that sends her into coma.

This is where American playwright Diana Son's *Stop Kiss* begins, and it is being staged 23 years later at Shilpee Theatre in Battisputali. Directed by Loonibha Tuladhar and presented by One World Theatre (OWT) with support from the US Embassy, the revival is an English-language adaptation.

This is the first play staged in

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Birendra Kumar Singh

1954 - 2021



The class of 1969 of St Xavier's School is deeply saddened by the untimely passing on November 25 of their friend and classmate Birendra Kumar Singh. Always upbeat, cheerful and generous to a fault, Birendra was the life of all class get togethers with his phenomenal memory of our school days.

Birendra could recount in minute detail events, conversations, and happenings involving students, teachers and staff of Godavari school and was the unofficial archivist of our collective past.

Birendra had a long and distinguished career with the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal, and the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, where he served Nepal with professionalism and integrity.

We pray for the eternal peace of the departed soul and offer our deepest sympathy to his family and loved ones.

'The Sixty-niners'

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The enigma of

The re-consecration in Kathmandu of a sacred sculpture 40 years after it was stolen sets a precedent, but throws up new dilemmas

● Ashish Dhakal



DIVINE ROUNDTRIP: Plate depicting Laxmi-Narayan before its theft in 1984 (above) as it appears in Lain Singh Bangdel's *Stolen Images of Nepal*, 1989.

Patko Tole resident Bhai Raja Shrestha (right) remembers the day the idol was stolen in 1984 from the shrine. Here, he poses next to the 1993 replica of the sacred 800-year-old sculpture.

The replica will now be relocated to the left wall to make space for the original that has been returned to Nepal by the Dallas Museum of Art.

Workers are readying the Patko Tole shrine for the re-consecration of the idol on Saturday (far right).



ALISHA SIJAPATI

A narrow street behind Patan's Krishna Mandir leads to Patko Tole with its two-tiered temple dedicated to Laxmi-Narayan. It was from here that a 800-year-old stone idol was stolen one night in 1984.

Devotees came in the morning for their daily prayer rituals to find an empty niche where the Laxmi-Narayan statue used to sit, with bricks strewn around. Six years later, the stele finally surfaced in New York while being auctioned at the Sotheby's.

It was bought by David Owsley, an American collector of antiquities, who gave it to the Dallas Museum of Art (DMA) on a 30 year loan where it was displayed in 1993 for first time after its theft.

Back in Patan's Patko Tole, Bhai Raja Shrestha remembers the commotion that morning 37 years ago when neighbours found their god missing. The idol was eventually replaced with a replica.

"People still came to do *puja* every day, but it was not the same thing," recalls Shrestha, who is now 79. "We had no hope of finding the lost god and with the disappearance of our patron deity, the community also started falling apart."

Information about the Laxmi-

Narayan finally was found first time since the theft in a DMA catalogue in 2013, but the real breakthrough came six years ago when an anonymous blogger posted a picture of the exhibit at the Dallas Museum of Art and American artist Joy Lynn Davis located the idol on display through Google image search.

Davis was familiar with the statue because the Laxmi-Narayan was one of the paintings in her 2013 exhibition at the Patan Museum depicting shrines in which she replaced the stolen sacred objects with their images in gold.

It took another six years for the Dallas museum to remove the stele from its display. After relentless media coverage, an FBI

probe, and diplomatic pressure, the Laxmi-Narayan was flown back to Kathmandu in April and given to the Patan Museum for safekeeping.

"The fact that so many of Nepal's cultural and religious artifacts have been stolen is tragic - but it's a tragedy that I hope is reversing," says US Ambassador to Nepal Randy W Berry.

"I'm so proud that the United States was able to help bring Laxmi-Narayan back home ... We hope to inspire other countries and museums to look into the issue and help reunite Nepali communities with their lost artifacts. We will do whatever we can so other pieces of Nepali cultural and religious heritage come home as well," he

added.

The god will be enshrined once more in its original sanctum at the temple in Patko Tole after a procession on 4 December — after nearly 40 years in foreign custody.

"It is a truly joyous occasion," says Bhai Raja Shrestha.

The Patko Tole community has deliberated long and hard about where to put the idol that depicts a composite figure of Laxmi and Vishnu and carved sometime between the 10th-15th century.

Only seven of the eight arms on the stone sculpture are still intact, and carry various objects attributed to the two gods: wheel, mace, lotus, manuscript, mirror and water pot.

The replica at the temple has

its lost arm holding a conch shell restored, and it has already been moved to the left side of the shrine to make way for the original, which will be prominently displayed and anchored to the altar with concealed stainless steel bars.

"The fact that it is a little damaged is not a major concern," says Bhai Raja Shrestha. "We will worship both the original and the replica at the temple."

Shrestha dismisses concern that the statue might be stolen again. Besides the steel bars put up by the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust (KVPT), the Kathmandu University Department of Electrical and Electronic Engineering has installed infrared movement

What about all the other sacred

American arts crime professor Erin Thompson believes that appeals for repatriation from now on can be made to museums and collectors using two arguments: legal and ethical.

"Private collectors often hold the objects because there is sentimental value, so you can appeal to their love of culture," Thompson says. "They can also be offered an opportunity to experience the meaning of the object first-hand by inviting them to Nepal for the restitution."

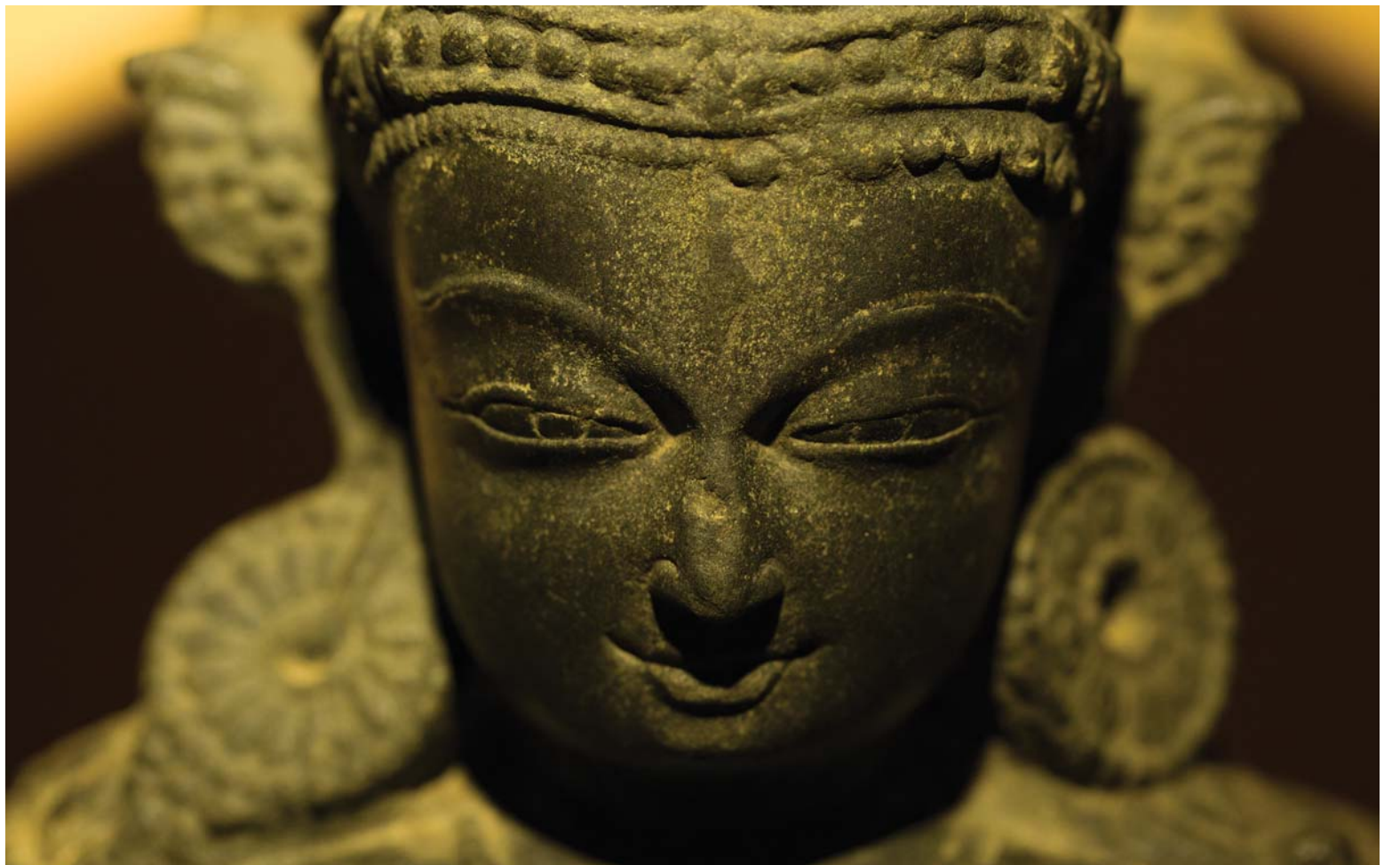
With the museums, the approach has to be different, as the recent restitution of several sacred objects from the United States, Austria and other countries have shown.

"Museums do their research, record provenances, and as such do not have an excuse to say they did not know if a certain object was stolen or not," says Thompson.

Indeed, more than legal arguments, museums can be pressured by naming and shaming on media, raising ethical concerns, diplomatic pressure and negotiations.

"Publicity is really important in this case," adds Thompson. "Since these collections are driven by public interest and attention, and the Laxmi-Narayan restitution sets an important precedent."

The return of the 800-year-old idol shows that because these are objects of living worship by communities, attention should be paid to restitution and not just repatriation.



MONIKA DEUPALA

arrival of Nepal's gods



AMIT MACHAMASI



JOY LYNN DAVIS

RESTITUTION THROUGH ART:

The Laxmi-Narayan figure in gold (above) as memorialised in a painting by American artist Joy Lynn Davis (right) in 2013 for her exhibition *Narratives of Faith and Memory: Remembering the Lost Sculptures of Kathmandu*.



sensors, CCTV coverage, and door contact detection gadgets.

"There is no market value for the statue now. Because of the media coverage, no museum or collector will want to buy or hold a stolen item," says KVPT's Rohit Ranjitkar.

American arts crime professor Erin Thompson agrees. The US, UK and Nepal are among 141 countries which have ratified the 1970 UNESCO international treaty to prohibit and prevent the illicit import, export and transfer of ownership of cultural property.

"Plenty of museums, collectors and dealers will say that there is no problem as long as the objects left Nepal before 1970," says

Thompson. "But that's not legally true since the objects are still essentially stolen no matter when."

In the US, the legal climate is changing and public prosecutors have been seizing antiquities, no matter when they were stolen.

For artist Joy Lynn Davis, the return of idol to its original home is vindication of her activism to raise awareness about stolen deities.

"I wanted to ask through my art if it was possible to imagine a future for the idols and the shrines," says Davis, who like Thompson, has flown to Kathmandu to attend the consecration ritual at Patko Tole.

Patan Museum has been holding several stolen objects that

have been repatriated from abroad. At 11AM on Saturday, the Laxmi-Narayan will be adorned with a special copper garment and carried in a palanquin from the Museum to Patko Tole in a ceremonial procession for the *kshyama puja* – a ritual seeking forgiveness.

"This ceremony is a historical event, the Laxmi-Narayan also restores our faith and belief," says Roshan Mishra of Taragaon Museum, who is involved with the Nepal Heritage Recovery Campaign.

The Campaign was launched in September 2021 as a collaborative international effort for the repatriation and restitution of Nepal's sacred stolen objects, as far as possible to its original

community in Kathmandu Valley.

The driving force for the Campaign as well as the restitution has been the continued significance and role of the sacred sculptures in Nepal's culture, faith and heritage.

The figures used to be actively worshipped when they were stolen, but became sterile *objets d'art* when exhibited at museums, or in the living rooms of rich collectors abroad without any context.

"At the Dallas Museum, the Laxmi-Narayan was in a nondescript corner of the gallery with a tag that just mentioned the statue's name, date and Nepal as place of origin, so unless you knew something about Nepal and Nepali culture beforehand, that was really

all you got," says Joy Lynn Davis. "Unlike other ancient objects, it was not dug up but rather stolen, that too not long ago."

Indeed, deities stolen from Kathmandu Valley were part of a vibrant living culture still in practice.

An anonymous initiative on Facebook, Lost Arts of Nepal, has been tracking down on Nepal's stolen heritage, including Laxmi-Narayan, abroad.

The administrator told *Nepali Times*: "The restitution of the Laxmi-Narayan sculpture is a milestone in ongoing repatriation efforts. It will show to the world how important our gods are to the country's cultural heritage." 🇳🇵

objects stolen from Nepal?



DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART

Museums abroad often argue that the objects are much safer in their collection than in Kathmandu. And the theft of a rare stone deity in Godavari's Nau Dhara this week bolsters that argument.

However, Thompson believes that the Laxmi-Narayan's successful return to its original temple makes a strong case for museums abroad to return other stolen gods they are holding.

"Having seen the communities and shrines first-hand, I know that it is lie that the sacred objects are safer in museums abroad," says

Thompson. "It is ridiculous to think that Nepalis do not care about these statues and sculptures."

Egypt and Greece have for decades been demanding that the British Museum and the Louvre return antiquities stolen from them in past centuries. In October, Germany and Nigeria signed an agreement setting out a timetable for the return of 1,100 objects from German museums.

Artist Joy Lynn Davis says there is now a more conducive international climate for repatriation of antiquities, and Nepal can

Erin L. Thompson
@erinthompson
Yooooooo, Rubin Museum – here's a modern torana (entrance archway) above the doorway of a vibrant Buddhist monastery in Patan, Nepal. It's holding space for the stolen one now in your collection. Maybe speed up that repatriation you say you're looking into?
Thanks to Patan!



© BBC/AF - 1 APRIL 2021 - Twitter via iPhone

MUSEUM PIECES:

(From left to right) Detail of the 10th-15th century Laxmi-Narayan stele after it was returned to Nepal and stored in safekeeping at Patan Museum.

The Dallas Museum of Art where the Laxmi-Narayan can be seen at centre, right, before it was repatriated to Nepal in April 2021.

Erin Thompson tweeted this week after visiting Yampi Mahavihar in Patan. The original torana is now at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York.

take the lead: "Now, there are other countries, such as Cambodia, which are looking up to Nepal's efforts in repatriating their own stolen artefacts."

Appealing to the conscience of collectors has worked in the past. In August 1994, an American collector voluntarily returned four stolen gods after he was shown Lain Singh Bangdel's photographs proving their public ownership: a 12th century Saraswati, a 9th century Buddha, a 14th century Surya, and a 10th century Vishnu. In 2000, the Museum für Indische Kunst in Berlin returned the 12th

century Uma-Maheswar stolen from Wo Tole in Dhulikhel in 1982.

In April, a 13th century Chaturmukhi Shivalinga was handed over by the Art Institute of Chicago to the Nepal Embassy in Washington DC, and in September the Denver Art Museum returned the 10th century Uma-Maheswar that had been stolen 50 years ago from Ga Hiti of Patan.

One pressing concern is that the original shrines may have been destroyed or damaged in the 2015 earthquake. Some communities may also not be prepared to take the objects back right away.

Suresh Man Lakhe of Patan Museum says that while the best option is always to give the repatriated objects back to the community, museums in Nepal should also be prepared to hold them for safekeeping until the community is ready.

"The priority is always full restitution," Lakhe says, "but when these objects return, they do not immediately go back to their original places. So, Patan Museum is opening a gallery for returned objects while they await re-installation."

Apart from safekeeping, museums can also conduct necessary documentation and research, since some returned objects may not have been properly identified.

Lakhe adds, "To install them *in situ* is our priority. The deities become stale and stagnant in museums. Restored to their shrines, the gods can be worshipped once again." 🇳🇵

Ashish Dhakal



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The Maoist Centrists

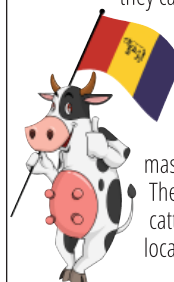
need to instil fear in Nepalis by reminding them of the party's violent past, but in a gentle sort of way. Which is why we recommend an awesome Mutant Ninja Turtle character for its party mascot so it can show who is boss.



The **UML** started the ball rolling, and showed it has unparalleled finesse in the publicity department. Its choice of convention

mascot is a naked two-legged one-horned rhino holding the party flag. (Since this is a family newspaper, we have put red undies on the upright rhino-soreass.)

Nepal is a nation of copycats, and it is only a matter of time before the other parties also nominate mascots. To save time that they can devote to intra-party feuds, the Ass offers these ideas free of cost:



The **RPP** is having its convention this week, and its mascot can only be the Holy Cow. There is still time to craft fibreglass cattle and place them at strategic locations at the convention venue.



Then there is the **JSP**, for which a scapegoat holding the party's umbrella election symbol would be the most appropriate.

Bibeksheel Sajha will need a cartoon character as a convention mascot so it appeals to the youngest voters.



As long as we are at it, the Donkey would like to nominate itself unopposed for president of its very own **Asinine Party of Nepal (Revolutionary)**.



The next in line to hold its party convention is the **Nepali Kangres**. Since Sher Budder is likely to be re-elected party prez, the mascot will have to be a Lion. But since there are no lions in Nepal, Kangres will have to make-do with a tiger as mascot. Meow.



The Ass

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