



SWORUP NHASIJU

PURCHASING POWER

enough to cover campaigning costs. This means falling back on big business for funding.

Rajyalaxmi Golchha has publicly stated that she became a UML MP by paying the party Rs70 million. Businessman Moti Dugar of the UML was Minister of State in K P Oli's government, while Umesh Shrestha of the NC is a state minister in the current government.

Nearly all big business houses set aside 'facilitation fees' to donate to parties across the political spectrum to ensure protection.

"The business community fears that a party which has not been placated may make things difficult if it comes to power," says a prominent FNCCI member.

Numerous laws like the Banking and Financial Institutions Act, the Medical Education Bill, or the Foreign Investment and Technology

Transfer Act were passed by businessmen MPs in parliamentary committees.

Tycoons often pay political leaders under the table to get them into the legislature under the proportional representation mechanism.

Businessmen say they have no choice because they are tired of party extortion ahead of every election. Politicians use brokers to raise cash, and they are promised a pound of flesh.

The blurring of the boundaries between business and politics undermines democracy and development, says political science professor Krishna Khanal.

"I don't blame the business community because it is entirely up to the leaders to decide whether to take their money or not. Trouble is, politicians have no integrity," Khanal adds.

Battle lines drawn for Nepal elections
EDITORIAL
PAGE 2

MORE ON PAGE 10-11

● Ramesh Kumar

Nepal's richest who used to bankroll parties from the sidelines in exchange for personal, professional and policy favours, have decided it makes more sense to enter politics themselves.

Money, not political competency, has therefore become a deciding factor in who is ultimately elected into leadership. But because politics and ill-gotten wealth feed each other, governance suffers.

Nepal's political parties, meanwhile, have to fudge poll

spending because of expense limitations set by the Election Commission.

The Nepali Congress (NC) listed only Rs48.7 million in election expenses, the UML Rs20.9, while the Maoist Center just Rs8.3 million in 2017. The NC also listed Rs20.9 million in donations, while the UML said it got only Rs40.6 million from businesses.

In reality, a study by the Election Observation Committee shows that campaigning expenses were vastly underreported in 2017. It estimates that parties spent Rs51 billion in just local elections, and

Rs46 billion was used to garner votes for the federal Parliament.

"I had never seen so much cash in one place before," said a member of the NC's election-targeted finance management committee. "We saw businessmen come and go with suitcases full of money. It was strictly cash. They did not want to leave a paper trail."

Political parties have also relied on membership fees to raise funds. The UML raked in Rs41.9 million through such levies in the last fiscal year. But that is nowhere near

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Battle lines drawn for Nepal elections

The inauguration of the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) 'Unity Convention' on 1 December in Kathmandu provided a preview of the issues that will dominate Nepal's elections a little more than a year away.

Invited were leaders of other main parties, and they went at each other with hammers and tongs about secularism and monarchy. It sounded like the hustings already, indicating the likely fault-lines in the 2023 polls.

From the RPP stage, Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba mumbled platitudes about "the need for like-minded parties to work together for the betterment of the country". Madhav Kumar Nepal of the Unified Socialist who split from the UML, urged the RPP not to "slide backwards" – meaning don't bat for monarchy.

But it was CP Mainali of the CPN (Marxist-Leninist) and Pushpa Kamal Dahal of the CPN (Maoist Centre) who showed that despite both being once diehard Communists, the comrades had widely divergent views on Nepal's erstwhile monarchy.

Mainali extolled King Mahendra's nationalist credentials, adding that every political change in Nepal in the past half-century was a result of foreign (read "Indian") interference. Mainali, who suffered serious injuries in a highway crash last year, has of late been making pro-monarchy statements.

Dahal played to the gallery saying his Maoist party and the RPP may have divergent views but both were "patriots". He then took a dig at Mainali, saying it was absurd for a republican who once decapitated class enemies to support a return to monarchy.

"Maybe he should be heading the RPP," Dahal said, a proposal enthusiastically endorsed by former prime minister and RPP leader Lokendra Bahadur Chand.

Ironically, the debate over secularism and monarchy now threatens the RPP's own unity because of the defeat of incumbent party chair Kamal Thapa by newbie Rajendra Lingden.

The campaigning itself was fairly civil, with both candidates meeting ex-king Gyanendra separately to seek his blessings. (King G, it is said, nodded sagely and told both to "go ahead".) Lingden beat Thapa 1,817 to 1,617 on Sunday.

Kamal Thapa served King Gyanendra loyally, and was home minister when security forces cracked down on pro-democracy supporters in April 2006. Obviously, he was not loyal enough to the royal.

After the results were out, Thapa lashed out at both Gyanendra and an unverified tweet from Himani Shah dripping with satire, lamenting being punished by 'Nirmal Nibas' for being loyal to the monarchy.

Indeed, throughout the RPP convention both Thapa and Lingden had been trying to outdo each other's monarchist connections, the primary agenda of the party's political document called for the restoration of monarchy and Hindu state.

Besides Lingden, his supporter and Nepalganj mayor Dhawal SJB Rana (a former *Nepali Times* columnist) won general-secretaryship. Supporters of Kamal Thapa did manage to keep significant senior party positions.

Lingden's elevation to RPP chief will mean the party will be even more aggressive in promoting the royal-Hindu line throughout 2022. This will also have a ripple effect on

other parties, especially the UML. After all, K P Oli openly backed Lingden's campaign in the 2017 elections against Krishna Sitaula of the NC, thus winning him the only RPP seat in Parliament.

There is even talk of a UML-RPP electoral alliance, and if that happens Oli's

not-so-subtle drift to the Hindu-right during his prime ministership will not look so surprising.

The NC is having its own convention next week in Kathmandu where it looks like Deuba will be re-elected party leader. But even in the NC, there is Shashank Koirala and others backing

the Hindu state agenda.

The 'alternative' Bibeksheel Sajha Party and its leader Rabindra Mishra is also pushing the anti-secularism, anti-federalism and monarchist line. He made a scathing attack on "those who garland Mao, but disown Mahendra" at a party unity gathering in Patan last week. When political parties cannot be distinguished by their socio-economic or political agenda, it is tempting for them to fall back on religion and the 'order' of the monarchy days. The parties have felt the public pulse, and detect disenchantment with the current federal polity, and especially against secularism which is seen to be foisted by outside forces.

India's gravitational pull on Nepal also means that the election campaigning next year could end up being a proxy battle reflecting the secularism debate in India itself. We are already beginning to see political alignments between and within Nepal's parties reflecting this, and it will be more apparent in the coming months.

Will these predictions come true? Changes in a whole range of socio-economic and human behaviour could make the reality better or worse, such as:

- The number of men visiting sex workers, including men who go abroad as migrant labourers and visit sex workers there.
- The number of other women with whom they have sexual relations in Nepal, that is, the size of their "sexual networks".
- The number of men with whom the women have sexual relations, for example when their husbands are away from home.
- The increase or decrease of the sex industry in Nepal.
- The sexual interactions of injecting drug users with sex workers and the general population. This is another "network".
- The success or failure of "harm reduction" initiatives, especially condom use in sex workers and needle exchange in drug users.

Of course, we cannot predict how the behaviour of the population will change in the future. Will there be further liberalisation of attitudes to sex, increasing sexual networks and a disregard of the consequences of unprotected sex? If so, the predictions above will be exceeded. Will people grasp the risk factors and look for ways to protect themselves and their families? If so, the HIV situation will not be so bad as predicted.

What can be done and who should do it? Ultimately, only we can change our behaviour. The responsibility lies with each one of us.

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

ONLINE PACKAGES



MADE IN NEPAL

An up-and-coming business led by a Japanese entrepreneur is set to put a remote district in eastern Nepal on the world map for its premium natural peanut butter. The company has set up a factory in Khotang District, training women farmers, providing them with skills and income. Watch video on our YouTube channel and read the story on [page 5](#).



PEDALLING FROM PORTUGAL

Meet Portuguese rider Pedro Bento who cycled 10,000km from his native country to Kathmandu in 2019, defying medical science. He was in Nepal this time on a mission to reach Everest Base Camp at 5,450 metres from Kathmandu (1,300 metres) on his bicycle, carrying a 20kg backpack to raise funds to feed and educate underprivileged children in Nepal. Subscribe to our YouTube channel for exclusive video content.

NEPAL ELECTIONS

Where are the economic, social and political commitments of the parties that self identify as 'communist' or 'Marxist-Leninist' ('Battle lines drawn for Nepal elections', Editorial, [page 2](#))? Such labels are a camouflage of personal patronage systems with authoritarian agendas and not a strategy for sustainable and equitable development.

David Seddon

LAXMI-NARAYAN

This 800-year-old Laxmi statue was stolen in 1984 from its Patan Temple Shrine ('The enigma of arrival of Nepal's gods', Ashish Dhakal, #1088). Such an abundant joy that it was returned (from Dallas) to its rightful place.

James Aplington

- Thanks for bringing this back. Only if the culprit could be named.

Bhumi Limbu

- Thanks to those responsible for bringing this home.

Shankar Rimal

GREENING OF KHUMBU

Very informative and deep review on landscape history of Khumbu ('The greening of Khumbu', Alton C Byers, [nepalitimes.com](#)). The report is supported by evidence from repeated photography, pollen charcoal and soil records. Dendro ecological studies might also provide evidence for the existence of forests in recent centuries.

Sanu Raja Maharjan

CLIMATE EMERGENCY

Climate change is the most serious and challenging issue of our time, a crisis hovering over our heads, right now ('Climate change is a disaster in the Nepal Himalaya', Sonam Choekyi Lama, #1084). It is, in fact, threatening our entire existence. Rapid climate change and its impacts like the Covid-19 knows no boundaries and respects no nationality. Its dire consequences are evident everywhere, from glacial lakes of the Himalayas down to the sea levels. Since the problem is a global one, it clearly can't be solved by a group of activists, organisations, leaders or even countries, for that matter.

OHS Nepal

VULTURE HAVEN

This Vulture Safe Zone is proven safe by vultures themselves, as is shown by data collected through intensive research and monitoring of satellite-tagged birds ('Nepal is a model for vulture conservation', Karun Dewan, [nepalitimes.com](#)).

Krishna Bhusal

- We must focus on opening more vulture restaurants to bring up the numbers and save the vultures.

Sandesh Bastola

MITHILA ART

OK, so you are proud of Mithila artists and their art, great ('How art empowers Nepal's women', Anita Bhetwal, #1088)! These artists are mostly from Madhes, the Tarai region of Nepal. But people from Madhes are often treated with discrimination and a lack of respect. You need to respect the artist to be proud of their art. After all, the art is the product of the artisans.

Shaswati Sarbagna

PARTY CONVENTIONS

All the leaders above 60 need to retire first ('Nepal's rudderless political leadership', Santa Gaha Magar, [nepalitimes.com](#)). Otherwise, absolutely nothing else will change.

Gyurme Dondup.

COUNTING TIGERS

This is affected as their habitats are constantly being encroached on by people ('Nepal counting tigers', [nepalitimes.com](#)).

Sunil Sakya

POKHARA AIRPORT

Hopefully, the old airport will be downgraded to a domestic airport instead of an international one ('What to do with Pokhara's 'extra' airport?', Masta KC, #1087). Can you imagine how much more smog and noise there will be?

The Space Between

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



The enigma of arrival of Nepal's gods

by Ashish Dhakal

Nearly 40 years after it was stolen, the Laxmi-Narayan statue was reinstalled at its original shrine in Patko Tole, Patan amidst a ritual celebration last week. But the arrival of Laxmi-Narayan also poses questions about all the other sacred objects stolen from Nepal. Go to [nepalitimes.com](#) for full story.

Most reached and shared on Facebook



'Prosperous Farm, (Un)happy Animals'

by Shristi Karki

Katha Ghera's adaptation of George Orwell's 'Animal Farm', deviates from the original to include more diverse voices, and is a reflection of Nepal's current politics. Visit our website for this widely-shared review.

Most popular on Twitter



Nepal's rudderless political leadership

by Santa Gaha Magar

With Nepal's political parties holding party conventions left, right and centre, take a deep dive into the past and present of national conventions, the power play within the parties and the future of Nepal's politics. Read feedback and join the online discussion.

Most commented



Turkey to open embassy in Nepal

In an interview with *Nepali Times*, newly appointed Turkish Ambassador to Nepal Firat Sunel talks about the plans to open a resident embassy in Kathmandu in 2022 as well as air connectivity between the two countries, and the prospect of increased trade, investment and tourism.

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

The fact that the new #Omicron strain has over 30 mutations in its spike protein is a cause for concern, and virologists urge caution and stricter enforcement of precautions.



Kishor Kokje @kokje9

Be cautious about the new trend.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

After nearly 40 years, at 11AM today, the Laxmi-Narayan will return to the two-tiered temple in Patko Tole, Patan. But what about all the other sacred objects stolen from Nepal?



Prabhakar Shrestha @prabshr

The Gods are returning - a good sign for Nepal.



Dr. Silva Mathema @silvamathema

The pics documenting the return of the stolen statue to its rightful home is everything. #laxminarayan #nepal #stolenimages



KYU_Yeti @KyuYeti

Let's celebrate this first - focusing on the remaining will take away from what we have to what we would like to have.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Revisiting HIV/AIDS



In the early 2000s, there was no exact estimate on the number of people infected with HIV/AIDS in Nepal but it was rampant, primarily in western Nepal where seasonal migrant workers returning from India passed it on to unsuspecting wives.

Unprotected sex, sharing needles, unsafe blood transfusions were among the main reasons for Nepal's HIV epidemic. But there was an additional challenge: the stigma faced by patients. The state deployed health workers to educate the public about safe sex behaviour.

Two decades later, Nepal's ability to control the epidemic has lessons for the pandemic – especially in prevention through safe behaviour.

Excerpts from a report published on issue #71 7-13 December 2001 twenty years ago this week:

The UNAIDS prediction is that by 2010, the prevalence of HIV in Nepal will be 1-2 percent, there will be 10,000 to 15,000 AIDS cases and AIDS will be the commonest cause of death in the 15-49 age group. AIDS deaths, currently 3000 per year, are predicted to reach more than 6000 per year by 2005.

A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER 

TIME TO MEET AGAIN: USA

Have a healthy journey with all precautions taken down to the smallest detail for your in-flight safety.



TURKISH AIRLINES

BOSTON
CHICAGO

Omicron may not be as risky, but take care

Boosters for high-risk groups, and vaccines for as many Nepalis as soon as possible

● Sonia Awale

The fact that Omicron was detected in an individual (now recovered) who had arrived in Nepal five days before the new variant was first identified in Botswana is proof it was already circulating and travel bans do not work.

The new strain has been detected in 57 countries just over two weeks after it was first found. What is known is that it is highly transmissible but likely not very severe. No significant increase in hospitalisation is found among infected individuals in places with outbreaks.

“Looking at preliminary findings I don’t think it will lead to another major surge or lockdowns like Delta, but having said that we must be prepared and contain it to prevent further mutation and more virulent strains,” says epidemiologist Lhamo Yangchen Sherpa of IPAS Nepal.

She adds: “We do that by vaccinating as many people as possible including boosters if they are nearing expiry date, following safety measures especially indoors and by better communicating government policies to control the spread of new strains.”

One of the main concerns with Omicron is mutations in the spike protein that binds it to the receptor. Most vaccines including Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca and J&J primarily target this spike protein, so there are worries that the new variant will escape immunity afforded by jabs.

Mutations are natural, but coronaviruses make fewer of them than other viruses because of their much stronger proofreading system to survive.

Speaking with *India Spend*, Polly Roy, professor of virology



AMIT MACHAMASI

at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine said: ‘Even though we have a mutation, it’s not in the receptor-binding site area so much. Thus, if they change too much, the virus will not bind to host cells and will not survive. And the vaccines target that area, so the vaccines will still work against Omicron infection.’

Says infectious disease specialist at HAMS Hospital Anup Subedee: “Even if the vaccines are less effective against this variant, it will still provide significant immunity to fight off new infections. And given that antibodies wane over time, Nepal’s frontline workers and the elderly should be prioritised for boosters, if possible with vaccines known to

have higher efficacy.”

There are also concerns that despite registering only mild symptoms Omicron could affect vulnerable populations much later as younger people spread the virus.

Most of the initial Omicron infections are said to be mild and among young and vaccinated people, which means Nepal could be ripe for another surge.

“Don’t be surprised if we do,” says Sushil Koirala, a Nepali public health expert based in Bangkok. “We have all the necessary fuel to start the wildfire: low vaccination coverage, poor adherence to public health measures, lackluster preparedness, and questionable surveillance,” Koirala warns.

But the moral dilemma over

booster remains when over 60% of Nepal’s targeted population is yet to even receive the first dose.

“In an ideal world, universal coverage is the way to go but the government hasn’t been able to vaccinate the majority of Nepalis, so we cannot wait forever for boosters either,” adds Subedee.

With the rapid spread of Omicron in the region, the Nepal government has announced that it will vaccinate at least 200,000 people a day and the Health Minister Birodh Khatiwada has asked people who have inoculated with two doses of vaccine to also receive the third dose to prevent the risk of the third wave.

Khatiwada was quoted as saying that the government had a stock of

20 million doses of different jabs and it will start administering the booster from mid-December with 16,000 vaccination centres across the country.

So far Nepal has received 25,658,630 doses of Covid vaccines of which 660,000 doses are still in stock. In the next three months, a total of 34,594,460 doses of different jabs are arriving in Nepal: 9,403,000 doses of AstraZeneca, 3,000,000 Coronavax, 2,386,800 VeroCell (one vial, one dose), 2,174,400 J&J and 1,965,600 Moderna.

But the government’s focal person for vaccine Shyam Raj Upreti told *Nepali Times* health authorities are authorised to administer only an additional dose, not a booster, and only for immunocompromised people and individuals above 60 who had received VeroCell, as recommended by the WHO.

“Our priority is still to vaccinate the targeted population and hence those who are still not vaccinated,” adds Upreti. “And for this, we are focusing on activities to convince more people to inoculate, add vaccination booths to increase access and where required administer the doses door to door.”

At present, 29% of Nepal’s population has been fully inoculated while 33.9% have been vaccinated partially. Experts say better communication about vaccination schedules a few days before the campaign in local language and on platforms most consumed is crucial in further increasing the uptake.

Speaking on his social platform, Sameer Dixit of the Centre for Molecular Dynamics Nepal recommended patience over panic: “Let’s wait and watch until we have more concrete findings on Omicron. Until then mask up and vaccinate as soon as it is available. As for boosters, those in vulnerable groups should get it.” 🇳🇵

prabhu BANK

Democracy Summit

The US Embassy in Nepal hosted a Summit for Democracy on the eve of a Summit to be convened by President Joe Biden on Human Rights Day. Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba will represent Nepal at the Summit that will focus on fighting corruption, countering authoritarianism, and promoting human rights. “In many ways, Nepal serves as a model for the region and the world. Within the last 15 years, Nepal has progressed through a violent Maoist conflict, subsequent peace process, the return of democratic governance, and the ratification of a constitution that defined Nepal as a secular, democratic, and federal government,” said ambassador Randy Berry at the event.

Turkish CEO awarded

Turkish Airlines chair Ilker Ayci has received the CEO Lifetime Achievement Award at the 2021 APEX/IFSA Expo in Los Angeles, California. The Airlines was also recognised with APEX World Class Award, a Five Star



Global Official Airline Ratings™ for the fifth consecutive year and the Diamond APEX Health Safety Award. “I am incredibly honoured and must give appreciation to our entire team for joining me on this journey. I thank our amazing employees, valued stakeholders and partners for their dedication to Turkish Airlines and inspiring us all to constantly innovate,” said Ayci.

New oxygen plants

New oxygen generation plants financed by the World Bank have come into operation in Lumbini and Janakpur Provincial Hospital to ensure an uninterrupted supply of high-quality medical oxygen that can also be used to fill at least twenty-four 46.7l cylinders for emergency back-up and supply to peripheral hospitals or ambulances.



Similar plants will also be made operational in the remaining five provinces by 20 December.

Ncell & Viber

Ncell has collaborated with Rakuten Viber to offer a data pack with Viber messaging as an add-on.



These latest data packages are available to both prepaid and postpaid subscribers across four top-performing data plans, Hero Packs, Nonstop YouTube, Triple Majja and SMS Packs with no added charge. Additionally, subscribers receive a free sticker pack and the paid sticker packs on Viber will be free exclusively for Ncell users to download.

Fire Moon

Gorkha Brewery has launched Fire Moon, the first-ever winter-warmer beer in Nepal. Apart from hops, malt and yeast, the beer includes four natural body-heating spices: cloves, cardamom, cinnamon and ginger. Unlike other traditional beers, Fire Moon can be enjoyed at room temperature and does not need to be chilled. With an ABV of 5%, Fire Moon is available in a 330ml bottle with a pull-off cap at Rs180.



Samsung winners



winning products are posted on Samsung’s Facebook page.

Samsung has announced 21 winners of its *Khusiyali Afhai Jhalkinchha, Jaba Haat Maa Sikka Talkinchha* campaign, each winner will receive a five gram gold coin. All customers who had purchased a Samsung product between 20-26 November were considered for the lucky draw. The serial numbers of

Satellite Teleport

Dish Home has established a new satellite teleport in Lalitpur’s Dukuchhap to ensure uninterrupted service even in the event of a technical or natural disturbance. Dish Home already has one station at Charikot with the capacity to link with the second satellite teleport in Dukuchhap through fiber cables. All television signals can effectively be transmitted via the uplink to the new station.

Digital December

Laxmi Bank is introducing a month-long #DigitalDecember campaign wherein customers can make QR payments and businesses to enroll as a QR Merchant, three of whom can win Rs5,000 each week via lucky draw and five existing users can win 50% cashback up to Rs500 each day. 500 new Mobile Money users that spend over Rs1000 can win Rs500 cashback.



Kona redesigned

Hyundai has launched the redesigned Hyundai KONA in Nepal. The new electric car features include the Smart Sense safety suite, regenerative braking paddle shifters, shift by wire system and climate pre-settings. On the exterior, the front now comes with a new grille and daytime running lights and a wider set of tail lights. The 39.2KWh lithium-ion polymer battery delivers an improved driving range of 305km on a single charge.

Nepal Life

Nepal Life Insurance has launched the 'Nepal Life Sammunat Jiwan' scheme targeting individuals in professions prone to accidents, permanent disabilities and deaths. People between 18-60 years can apply and family members will receive three times the amount of insurance and acquired bonus in the event of their death. The insurance period lasts from 5-30 years, and packages from Rs50,000 to Rs10 million can be chosen, maturing at age 65.

Made in Nepal peanut butter in Japan

A Japanese social entrepreneur brings skills and income to Khotang’s peanut farmers by finding export market

● Sonia Awale

The highest quality tea is synonymous with Darjeeling. Outstanding beer is produced in Pilsen. Camembert cheese gets its name from a town in France. In future, could Khotang become the name for the world’s purest peanut butter?

An up-and-coming business venture led by a Japanese social entrepreneur is set to put this outlying Himalayan district in eastern Nepal on the world map for its premium natural peanut butter.

Kotobuki Naka’s plans to turn Darchim of Halesi Municipality in Khotang district into the world’s peanut butter capital is picking up again after being stalled by the Covid crisis. She is now back to get the farmers she trained and the factory she set up and running.

Naka used to work with a Japanese IoT (Internet of Things) company that used to support charity work among children in Khotang. On her first visit, she undertook the tumultuous 15-hour drive from Kathmandu to Khotang along rough mountain roads to meet farmers.

She found that peanut was the main cash crop in southern Khotang, but drier than usual weather was forcing men to migrate to India and the Gulf for work.

“I was trying to find a more sustainable way to improve the lives of children, and concluded that the best way to go about that was to make their parents more economically capable, rather than just giving handouts,” says Naka.

Three years ago, she met a farmer who told her he did not want to migrate but continue farming if there was a way to make a living from it. This had a profound effect on Naka, who went on to establish Sanchai Inc to train local farmers in organic farming and making peanut butter, so they did not have to migrate.

During their extensive research, Naka with her colleague Sabita Maharjan of Bipana Inc learned that Khotang locals grew two types of peanuts: the smaller, tastier local variety for their own consumption, and a larger hybrid peanut to be sold to middlemen at low rates. What was left, they fed to livestock.

“Till that point, I knew nothing about making peanut butter, but I had to convince my boss in Japan,” Naka recalls, “I told him it was for people, not to earn a profit.”

She then visited peanut experts in Japan and got a famous Japanese recipe before her next visit to Khotang with basic equipment to test-make a peanut butter sample. Everyone back in Japan agreed that the smaller local peanut variety gave the best peanut butter they had ever tasted.



BREAD AND BUTTER:
(clockwise from above, left)
Women sort raw peanuts at the Sanchai factory in Darchim of Khotang district.
One of the many farmers who sells local organic peanuts to the factory.
One of the ten women trained in making peanut butter in Khotang.
Japanese social entrepreneur Kotobuki Naka, who helped establish the Sanchai brand.



ALL PHOTO: SANCHAI INC



“We were amazed how good it was. I was convinced we could train local people to make it and set up a company,” adds Naka, who had to first get used to a place without electricity. Luckily, the village got power just before the factory opened.

“As a Japanese, it took me time to get used to the lack of punctuality here,” laughs Naka.

The farmers who showed up were all women because most of the men had migrated. Unintentionally, the peanut enterprise also became a tool for women empowerment.

Naka and her team trained 60 households to produce organically-

grown peanuts which the company bought for a higher price than middlemen, benefiting 300 farmers.

“Our whole idea was to raise living standards sustainably, by providing skills and not handing out money,” explains Naka.

Next, they trained their staff of 10 women to make peanut butter in a few crucial steps:

- Select undamaged peanuts manually
- Remove outer shell of selected peanuts
- Carefully roast the peanuts
- Clean and break each peanut into two halves
- Peanuts go through another round of selection
- Peanuts go for mixing

Quality control is paramount for the export market, and this is meticulously maintained with superior raw material and processing that retains the unique taste and texture of the butter from Khotang peanuts as well as a protein level of 1.3% -- higher than any

other similar product. Naka, 43, grew up in Fukuoka, learning the basics of business from her father who owned a chain of beauty salons. She moved to Tokyo as a researcher for the IoT company. After three years, Naka opened Sanchai Inc in December 2017, and export of Khotang peanut butter started a year later.

Distribution within Nepal at Le Sherpa Farmers’ Market, Local Project Nepal, Himgiri Organic Farm have resumed after the pandemic. Japan now accounts for 90% of sales, and there is also budding interest from companies for the Singapore, Europe and the United States markets. “When I tell people the story behind the product, they get excited and are even more interested in buying it. I try to inspire in them the feeling of giving and helping others,” says Naka.

“Ours was one small effort but it gave women in Khotang a platform to perform, their families’ living standard rose, and they have now become leaders.” 🇳🇵

It's peanuts

Where in Nepal to find Sanchai natural peanut butter



Rs700 for 180gm bottle, sugar-free also available.

KATHMANDU

Le Sherpa Farmers Market
The Local Project Nepal
Himgiri Organic Hub
Hotel Ambassador
7spices
Ananda Tree House
Farmshop Nepal
Greenlan Organic Farm
Kairos Cafe
Fuji Bakery
Ninas & Hager Grocer

POKHARA

AM PM Cafe
Fishtail Organic Garden

EXCEEDING EXPECTATION

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LOST LOC CHA

Nepal's coins tell the
falling value means t
with collectors

● Ashish



Shri Mananka, circa 5th Century AD.
The obverse shows a lion while the
reverse a seated goddess.
PHOTO: OLD COIN STAMP NOTE

On the walkway leading to the Pashupati Temple, vendors sit on cold stone slabs with stacks of glittering red and yellow coins before them. Some devotees stop by to buy bunches of the Re1 or Rs2 coins for a little more than their value to offer to gods inside.

The transaction happens quickly. One side produces paper cash and the other hands over the metal coins in exchange. Chances are, some of the coins will find their way back to the vendors again, to be 'recycled'.

With lower currency denominations nearly worthless, one of the few places in Nepal where coins are still used are temples like Pashupati. One does not pay in coins anymore, but *for* coins — the medium of exchange is the object of trade itself.

Bibash Shrestha, a shopkeeper in Kirtipur, cannot recall the last time he handled a coin in his store. "There is rarely any loose change to return," he remarks. "Before we used to give out candies to make up for the difference, now even they

Numismatics Museum in Chhauni, these coins are originally from what is now India, and have various symbols 'punched' on them. They prove that trade had already moved beyond the barter system in the region at the time.

Historian Satyamohan Joshi in his book नेपाली राष्ट्रिय मुद्रा (*National Currencies of Nepal*) divides Nepal's coin heritage into three eras starting in the 5th century AD during the Lichhavi, Malla and Shah dynasties in the Valley.

The earliest coins found in Kathmandu were issued by the first Lichhavi king, Mandev (*pictured above, left*). Minted during his reign from 464AD to 505AD, the obverse has a lion with its paw raised and 'Sri Mananka' written above it, while the reverse shows a figure of a goddess seated on lotus with 'Bhogini' inscribed on it. The script used is Brahmi, the forerunner of almost all writing systems found in South Asia. The current Devnagari script, is a descendant of Brahmi.

The figure of the goddess recalls influence of the ancient Indo-Greek kingdom from the 1st century BCE. All Lichhavi coins are made of copper and have on them the king's name, the figure of a god or goddess, with flowers, *vajra*, *trisul*, *kalas*, the sun, the moon, or animals such as the bull, lion, cow and elephant. There is consistency in their shapes and sizes, and are handmade, but there is no date inscribed on them.

Lichhav kings Gunakamdev and Anshuvarma have similar coins to their predecessors, while coins issued by King Jisnugupta (635 – ?) show a bull on one side, and a *vajra* or a *trisul* on the reverse. Satyamohan Joshi takes this as proof of the king's devotion to both Shiva and the Buddha.

Suman Basnet, an avid collector of Nepali coins for the past 20 years, says that in addition to the metal used, symbols and depictions are in themselves records of history and the attitudes of people.

"These coins are concrete evidence of how people lived in those specific times and places," he explains. "I wanted to delve deep into our history through something as concrete and ubiquitous as coins. These coins could have been handled by farmers, merchants, kings, men women and children in the past."

Indeed, the pre-Lichhavi period and the 800 years between Lichhavi and Malla rule in the Valley's history are less well-known largely because there are no records from those eras, and no coins to guide scholarship. After the Lichhavi period, the oldest coins and Nepal's first ever silver ones, were issued by King Indra Dev of Dolakha in 1545AD.

Then in 1566 King Mahendra Malla, who built Kathmandu's Taleju Temple two years previously, issued silver coins in the Valley. Various historical sources mention that he presented a swan and a hawk to the Mughal Emperor Akbar in Delhi (some say it was Humayun) who in turn granted Mahendra Malla permission to mint silver coins of 6 *masa* (~5.8 grams) in his

name. These coins are also known as *Mahendra mali* and according to historian Balchandra Sharma, the practice of calling silver coins *Mohar* began with them.

While both the Lichhavi and the Malla coins show cross-cultural influences — Indo-Greek, Mughal and Tibetan, among others — the designs of the Malla coins are much more elaborate, with tantric and *Vajrayani* motifs, and do not depict figures of deities. The coins are either square or circular.

Even animals (other than the lion) are absent, and more importantly, the name of the ruler with the year is inscribed legibly, written in Ranjana, Persian or Arabic alphabets.

Several stamped clay and leather 'tokens' with illegible writings on them have been discovered from these times as well, but not enough research has been done regarding their purpose and use as media of exchange, and historians are cautious to call them 'coins' literally. In fact, while coins have been metallic historically, some of the earliest-known tokens of exchange were *kaudis* (*pictured above, right*), essentially small shells used as circulation currency in Ancient India before metallurgy



became widespread.

Malla coins contain a confluence of Hindu and Buddhist symbols. Geometry is prominent and each coin is decorated with various artifacts (*kalas*, *vajra*, *trisul*, clubs and *astamanga*) in triangles, squares, hexagons and octagons. The kings and the queens used the symbols and letters to represent their and their family members' names. They also etched on the metal their interests, their lofty



Early coins minted in the name
of Prithvi Narayan Shah.
PHOTO: NUMISBIDS

are worth more than Re1 or Rs2."

Coins are still integral in Hindu and Buddhist *puja*, marriages and other rituals. During the Hindu *chaurasi puja*, for instance, bundles of gold coins are handed out to attendees at the end. When building a house, coins need to be ceremonially placed on the foundation as an offering.

But the real value of coins is that they bear clues to Nepal's historical and economic past, and carry great anthropological significance. Archaeologist Govinda Neupane says that in today's digital era, coins are the new forms of intangible heritage.

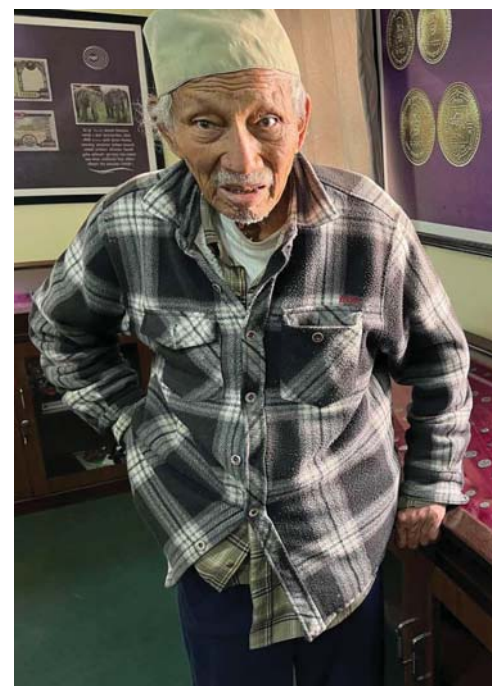
He says: "Coins are the witnesses that justify our history, they have archaeological and historical value. They provide a window to understanding our past and present, and function as markers to specific historical periods."

Indeed, letters and markings on coins inform us about the king or queen at the time of their minting. The alloys of copper, silver or gold used tell us about the state of the economy of that time and place. The figures on the coin reveal the religious beliefs and influences of the period.

The oldest metal coins excavated in Nepal are punch-marked coins from the 5th century BCE from Kapilvastu in Lumbini. Currently in display at the National



Fragmented coins from Prapat Singh Shah's reign,
circa 18th Century AD.



Coins provide an invaluable window into our past and history. His
PHOTO: SATYAMOHAN JOSHI

SING OSE ANGE

the country's history, but
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aspirations, with their various
epithets.

Satyamohan Joshi writes
that these aesthetic choices were
intended to attract the public's
imagination, their devotion towards
the rulers and their families
through creative and unusual
sensibilities. The smallest silver
coin in the world is in fact a Malla
coin — called *Jawa* in Newa, or
Fukkadam — minted during the
reign of Jaya Prakash Malla, the last
king of Kathmandu, and weighing
0.004 grams (*pictured below, left*).

The Malla period ended with
Prithvi Narayan Shah's annexation
of the three kingdoms of the Valley.
Historian Dinesh Raj Panta says
that before Prithvi Narayan, there
is hardly any concrete evidence of
Shah coins. But after his conquest
of the Valley, unified Nepal's first
king began to issue silver *mohar* in

his own name.

The earliest coin with Prithvi
Narayan Shah's name inscribed
on it has a *trisul* on the obverse
surrounded by 'Sri Sri Prithvi
Narayan Shahdev' written within
gaps made by a *swastik* on a
square. The sun and the moon
sit on each top corner and at the
bottom is inscribed the date in the
Saka calendar: 1692 (1770AD).

On the reverse is a wheel at the
centre divided in three sections, on
which is written 'Sri Sri Bhawani'.
There is a *khadga* at the centre of
this wheel decorated by dots in
a bell-like arrangement. Around
the edge are letters श्री, श्री, श्री, गो, र,
५, ऋ and ञ (Sri Sri Sri Gorakhnath)
after the patron deity of the Shah
dynasty.

The Shah coinage also saw
rise in the use of gold, which
had begun sporadically in the
middle-Malla period. Despite
the rare metal, each Shah king or
queen has issued at least a couple
Nisar gold coins (named after the
commemorative medallions the
Mughal emperor Shah Jahan issued
at his court in the 17th century) in
their name, although for special
occasions only.

As Nepal had no silver mines,
the metal had to be imported
from Tibet. As per the 1556 treaty
Mahendra Malla signed with Tibet,
the coins minted in Nepal would
be used there as well, allowing
Kathmandu Valley's trade, art and
culture to spread and flourish.

The full value of Nepali
coins in Tibet was set at a single
denomination of 15 *karma*. But
when people needed smaller
denominations, the coin could
be cut into two-third, half and
one-third along its petalled design
(*pictured, far left*). These were
called *chotang* in Tibet, meaning
'cut Mohar' and some dating to
the time of Jaya Prakash Malla and
Pratap Singh Shah can be found at

the National Numismatic Museum.

Jaya Prakash Malla had hoped
to alleviate the crisis brought by
Prithvi Narayan's blockade of the
Valley by minting low quality
coins mixed with copper to export
to Tibet.

When the Shah king wanted to
revert to using pure silver coins,
the Tibetans asked to have all older
coins replaced as well. The war of
annexation had just ended and this
would have added financial burden
to the new ruler in Kathmandu.

The dispute went unresolved,
which was in turn inherited by
Prithvi Narayan's descendants after
his death. Tibet by then had begun
to send low quality rock salt to
Nepal in retaliation.

The Nepali delegation sent to
Tibet to resolve these trade issues
was rejected, giving the Gorkhali
kingdom a pretext to raid rich
monasteries north of the border,
and in 1788 to invade Tibet itself.

The first invasion ended with
Gorkhali victory, and Lhasa agreed
to pay reparations to Kathmandu
and Rs50,001 in annual tribute. But
after the first year, Tibet stopped
paying it, and the war continued.

During the second invasion,
China's Qing emperor came
to the aid of Tibet and chased
the Gorkhali forces back over
the mountains as far south as
Nuwakot, only 30km northwest
of Kathmandu. The Sino-Nepal
war ended in 1792 with Gorkhali
defeat. A treaty was signed at
Betrawati near Nuwakot Palace,
and Nepal paid tributes to China in
1792, 1794, 1795, 1823, 1842 and
1865.

Following the war, Nepal was
no longer able to export its coins
to Tibet and the number of coins
minted in the country steadily
declined. A mint was established
in Lhasa itself, which affected the
amount of silver coming to Nepal.
The Gorkhali were also waging a
costly war against the East India
Company in newly-conquered
areas of Garhwal and Kumaon.

After the Anglo-Gorkha war,
rulers in Kathmandu tried to
compensate for the shortage of
silver coins by prohibiting the
import of British coins and turning
the East India Company coins into
Nepali ones, but even then the
supply was not enough.

In fact, 'Company' coins
became so valuable that elderly
women in remote parts of Nepal
can still be found wearing garlands
made of East India Company silver
coins (*pictured above, right*).

Later in early 19th century,
the second Rana prime minister,
Ranoddip Singh brought water
wheel-powered machines to help
craftsmen mint consistent-looking
coins more efficiently. These
machines would flatten the metal
and etch designs on both sides.

Ranoddip's nephew and
successor Bhim Shamsher then
brought coal-powered machines
to mint coins. This gift of
industrialisation would mint
around 12,000 alloy coins daily
in Dharara Taksar in Kathmandu.
Today, the mint has shifted to
Baber Mahal and only makes
commemorative coins.

The designs of Shah coins
have been more or less the same



After the end of Rana rule in 1951, coins minted
in King Tribhuvan's name showed him wearing a
dhakal topi, not a crown.
PHOTO: NUMISTA



since 1770, with similar symbols
and motifs. However, with the end
of Rana rule in 1951, silver-alloy
coins were issued that showed King
Tribhuvan wearing a Dhaka *topi* as
opposed to a crown against a five-
pointed star (*below*).

'This design, in light of the
end of the Rana rule, was meant
to signify that the king was no
different from a commoner,'
Satyamohan Joshi explains in
his book. Tribhuvan's successors
Mahendra, Birendra and Gyanendra
have also been similarly depicted.

When monarchy was formally
abolished by the Constituent
Assembly in 2008, the figures of

Garlands made of English 'Company' coins
are still worn as ornaments by Nepali
women in remote parts of the country.
PHOTO: NATIONAL NUMISMATIC MUSEUM



Mohar from Pratap Malla's reign.
PHOTO: NUMISTA

the kings were replaced by the
डाँके (Impeyan pheasant) and the
cow. Only Re1 and Rs2 were in
circulation, and even those are now
falling out of use.

"In the digital age where all our
transactions are invisible and done
via the internet, it is important
that focus be given to the cultural,
religious, social and political
significance of coins," says Suman
Basnet.

He compares this changing
attitude towards physical money
and especially coins to postage
stamps: "Perhaps this is what
progress looks like, but as we move
to a cash-less society, there is a
possibility that we lose connection
with our heritage and history. Now
more than ever it is important that
we retain and remember our past."

The Nepal Numismatic Society
holds meetings regularly in
Thapathali, and there are more and
more younger attendees, meaning
that coin-collecting is still popular.
"Traditionally, it had been
the elderly and the tourists who
collected coins," says Basnet. "But
there are a young hobbyists who
show great promise."

Says Govinda Neupane: "Coins
bring several different avenues
of our society together. We can
study economics, language, history
through coins, and we should
preserve them for our future
generations to look back and
develop their own analyses and
understanding." 🇳🇵



ry. Historian Satyamohan Joshi with his invaluable coin collection.

EVENTS



TFN Fellowship 2022

Apply for the Teach for Nepal Fellowship 2022. The intensive leadership training program is designed to tackle pressing issues like education inequality and quality of education in Nepal. Applicants must complete and submit an online application at <https://www.teachfornepal.org>.

Flash Fiction

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



Art Exhibition

Siddhartha Art Gallery's latest exhibition 'The Cycles of Time' will be a continuation of acclaimed Mithila artist SC Suman's anthology 'Mithila Cosmos'.
10 December- 15 January, Baber Mahal Revisited

AFK Christmas Market

Discover and shop for local handicrafts, drink some 'vin chaud' and enjoy delicious Christmas 'sablés' under the Christmas lights at Alliance Française Kathmandu's Christmas Market.
11 December, 10am-4pm, Alliance Française Kathmandu



Machchhegaun Hike

Spend this Saturday with nature by hiking through Machchhegaun, Bhasmasur Danda, and Chhapdanda. Go to Hike for Nepal's Facebook page for details.
11 December, 6:40am from Bhrikutimandap, Fee: Rs600

KIMFF 2021



The 19th Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival will spotlight stories that reflect the realities of mountain communities in sustaining and protecting the natural environment.
Until 13 December (physical)

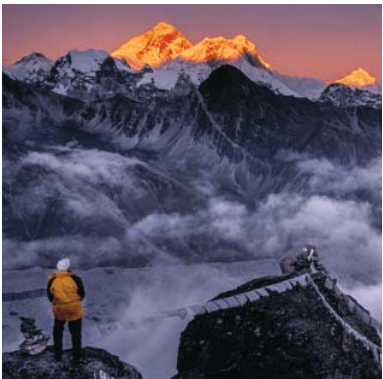
Here are some films to watch out for:

Living with Snow Leopards

This film by WWF-Nepal documents how Mustang villagers struggle to manage the increasing conflict with wildlife.
10 December, 3:30pm

The Wall of Shadows

Eliza Kubarska's Sciana Cieni (The Wall of Shadows) is a joint production between Poland, Germany, and Switzerland, and follows a Sherpa family that breaks a taboo to participate in an expedition on a holy mountain.
11-17 December



Sustainable Summits

Co-Presented by the British Council and Sustainable Summits, Sustainable Summits – Climate solutions from the top of the world directed by Smriti Basnet and Shashank Shrestha will bring attention to the climate change impacts in the Hindu Kush Himalaya. Find more at <https://sustainablesummits2020.org>
13 December, 12:30pm

The Icefall Doctor

The Icefall Doctor, directed by Sean Burch, is a 2021 Nepali film that will present a kaleidoscopic and meditative view on the life of icefall doctor Angnima Sherpa.
12-18 December

GETAWAY



Riverside Springs Resort

Riverside Springs Resort, away from the bustle of the city, offers a vast swimming pool, cosy rooms and attentive service, and exciting activities like horseback riding and rafting.
Kurintar, 9801801336

Chhaimale Village Resort

Adorned with pear trees, Chhaimale Village Resort is an ideal destination for anyone seeking to escape the madness of Kathmandu.
Chhaimale, 9860676495



The Soaltee Kathmandu

Spend a relaxing day at the outdoor restaurant or at the indoor Garden Terrace at The Soaltee Kathmandu. Get details on the staycation package online.
Tahachal Marg (01) 4273999

Green Valley Resort

Located 5.5km away from Budhanilkantha Temple, the resort is a perfect getaway for the weekend. As the first ray of sun warms up, take a stroll around the Tamang Valley for a complete experience.
Shivapuri National Park (01) 5248091



Mystic Mountain

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

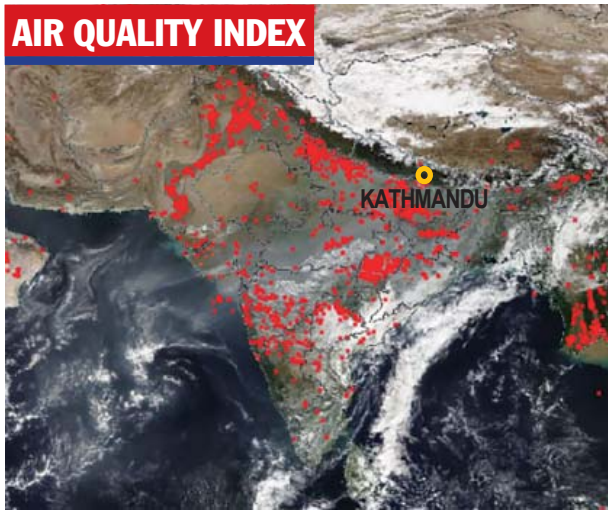
WEEKEND WEATHER



We are looking at a wintry weekend with misty mornings and daytime sunshine. No westerly disturbances on the horizon, and the low pressure region is safely confined to southern India. The minimum temperature in Kathmandu Valley will drop to 4°C on the outskirts (slightly more at the city centre because of the urban heat bubble) and the maximum will likely not rise above 19°C for the next few days. In the Trisuli, Gandaki valleys of central Nepal, the precipitation on Monday combined with colder water in the rivers will mean thick fog blanketing most of the Prithvi Highway between Kathmandu and Pokhara, as well as Chitwan Valley, well into mid-morning.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
19° 5°	19° 4°	19° 4°

AIR QUALITY INDEX



The Indo-Gangetic Plain is mostly free of the extremely high air pollution levels that covered the area for the past two months. This is because the crop residue fires have subsided, and the westerly front this week dumped rain over the plains washing down the particulates. The wind from the northwest has also blown north India's industrial pollution away from Nepal towards the south. The blue haze seen in the satellite thermal heat map (*left*) is now concentrated over central and western India, and blowing into the Arabian Sea. AQI in Kathmandu Valley will be in the Dangerous Red Zone in the mornings and night, while afternoon breeze will blow some of it away.

OUR PICK



Jane Campion's 2021 western *The Power of the Dog*, based on the 1967 novel by Thomas Savage is a dark and emotional exploration of toxic masculinity and power in 1925's Montana, with a queer subtext. Phil and George are two brothers who own a ranch while Rose and her son Peter are trying to survive nearby running a restaurant for boisterous men. What appears at first as the classic clash of archetypes -- macho man versus effete boy -- the film exposes the many layers of its principal players, exploring power struggles and sensual tensions, while making the film utterly gripping and effective. Stars Kodi Smit-McPhee, Benedict Cumberbatch, Kirsten Dunst and Jesse Plemons.

DINING



The Workshop Eatery

Choose from The Workshop Eatery's selection of yummy doughnuts and bagels. Try the burrito bowl and Workshop BBQ chicken sandwich, or get the assorted box of doughnuts.
Kupondole, 9860431504

Chez Caroline

Chez Caroline is the go-to for authentic French and continental cuisine in Nepal. Try the Profiteroles au Chocolat and Choux pastry filled with vanilla ice cream and hot chocolate sauce.
Baber Mahal Revisited (01) 4263070



Belgian Waffles

Get mouth-watering waffles from Belgian Waffles Nepal. Order the classic Belgian Chocolate Waffle, or try the Kiki And Cream Waffle, Maple Waffle and more.
Darbar Marg, 9849636013



Achaar Ghar

Enjoy home-cooked meals along with various choices of pickles prepared using recipes passed down from generations. Try the lunch box or the khaja set.
Jhamsikhel (01) 5541952

Erma Restaurant

Hotel Shambala's Erma Restaurant offers an upscale fine dining experience with chef-curated continental dishes. Try the cream of beetroot soup, vegetable shashlik, and the Erma house burger.
Bansbari, 9803867240



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To vax or not to vax

In Nepal or the US, having an option to vaccinate or not is a matter of privilege

I knew I wanted to get vaccinated as soon as the Covid-19 jabs were made available to the general public in the US, and that when it was my turn I would have access to it.



LIFE TIME

Anjana Rajbhandary

It was not the same for people in Nepal, and I remember family and friends back home telling me how hard it was to get a vaccine earlier this year. And a lot of it depended on whether you had the right connections.

People in Nepal were struggling to find their first doses, whereas in the US people did not want to get vaccinated against Covid-19 despite a raging pandemic. Those without access to jabs were confused with those who did not want to get vaccinated. With the Omicron variant, the debate is murkier.

All international students in the US must provide proof of immunisations against MMR (Measles, Mumps and Rubella), Varicella Tdap (Tetanus, Diphtheria, Pertussis) and Meningitis.

I completely understand the reasoning behind requiring those vaccinations: it is to keep people safe, and it never entered my mind to argue the logic.

Did I ever feel like my freedoms were being curtailed because I needed to show proof of those inoculations? No. Did I feel like someone was infringing on my choice? No. Did I have a problem getting the necessary vaccine for the greater good? No.

So why is it different with the Covid vaccine? The main reason to be vaccinated was so that I do not spread the infection further, as well as to protect myself. The sooner we all got vaccinated, the sooner we would be post-pandemic.

Which is why it surprised me that, unlike Nepal, where the vaccine acceptance rate is 97%, many in the US were choosing to not to get jabbed because it curtailed their freedom of choice. The anti-vaxxers were also anti-maskers — and the puzzling thing was that they would however not protest against wearing seat belts to abide by laws against drinking and driving.

They say Pfizer and Moderna have side effects. Of course they do, every modern medicine has some side effect. Even junk food has horrible side effects, but that has not stopped people from eating fries and burgers.

And while anti-vaxxers are worried about their health, they have not taken the time to consider

the health of millions of others they directly or indirectly interact with.

I had spent most of my life in the US in liberal and progressive cities, so when I was met with the comparatively conservative crowd, I felt it was pointless to argue the subject because they had made up their minds and were not open to other opinions.

Nothing has brought out the gap between haves and have-nots than the Covid-19 pandemic. The global gap between the jabbed and jabbed-nots is growing, increasing the chances of mutant strains rapidly evolving.

In Nepal, we are not privileged enough to choose whether or not we get a vaccine for a disease that has killed millions. We cannot even choose which vaccine we want: AZ-Covishield, VeroCell, or J&J. We take whatever is available.

For most Nepalis, if there is a disease and there is a way to protect yourself from it, you just do it. There are no what-ifs.

The fact that you even have the option to decide if you want to get inoculated against the virus in a country which has the highest national total of fatalities from Covid-19 shows how privileged people are in the US.

When you are a daily wage worker responsible for feeding and clothing your family, and when your government does not give you a weekly unemployment allowance for staying at home, unable to go to work, you want to return to your job as soon as possible. The only way to do that at the moment is to vaccinate and make it safer for everyone to be out again.

I would respect the choice of the anti-vaxers not to get vaccinated if they stayed home and did not interact with the public. But they are out and about (and without masks) claiming that it is their fundamental right to do so.

Being a citizen means having a sense of responsibility towards oneself and others, and not using selfish excuses in the name of freedom to do whatever you want.

It is a sensitive topic, and those who are most vocal and against the vaccine seem to be also the least informed about masks, the climate emergency, guns, abortion and politics. They live in social media echo-chambers where algorithms expose them to ever more radical posts. Recently, I asked a friend in the US if he had been vaccinated. Later, I was told that it is impolite to ask such questions. But if someone is out in public, mingling and exhaling, they need to be responsible about the health of those around them.

The boundary of an individual's freedom is when it infringes on someone else's freedom.

The decision not to be vaccinated is a matter of life or death for those not fortunate enough to have access to doses. While Americans are refusing to take booster third shots, 60% of Nepalis have not even got their first doses. The next time I see a person drinking a beer while smoking a cigarette trying to rationalise their choice to not vaccinate — you know how that conversation will go.

I can already tell you that my Christmas in the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave will be a lot of fun. 🇺🇸

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

Open Defection-free Zone

It warms our cockles in these bleak times that the General Conventions of Nepal's main parties have been declared Open Defection-Free Zones. But even more noteworthy than politically promiscuous cadre is the fact that delegates have thrown inhibitions aside to take calls while attending to calls of nature in the wild open spaces.

One could even say, without putting too much of a scatological point on it, that one gets the sense of a nation that is going down the tubes. However, this trend of going back to nature is a welcome move to reverse the Municipality's misguided construction of fancy touch-free state-of-the-ar-se public toilets at strategic intersections when we have a glorious tradition of doing our morning business in the wild yonder in focus groups of three or four.

Such communal bonding helps build partnerships and encourages teamwork, giving citizens a sense of national purpose. Waking each other up at the crack of dawn, filling tin cans with water and, treading carefully through the minefield of previously laid booby traps, finding a scenic spot to participate in joint exercises -- it all helps social mobilisation.

By suffering irritating bowel syndrome in unison as a community, rather than individually, we show that we stand by each other through thick and thin. We can exchange notes and carry out a free and frank exchange of views as we prepare ourselves for the challenges of a brand new day. A sense of solidarity is thus built with fellow men and women, demonstrating that we will always be there when we need each other.

Not only is this a great way

to fertilise the radish patch by restoring valuable nutrients to the soil, but it also saves vital water resources. Think about this: an average flush uses 8 litres of water. Now, multiply that by 30 million. It is the same as adding a new Melamchi Project every day.

But (and this is a big butt) with the advent of the modern water closet, these extended pre-dawn conclaves are in danger of becoming extinct. Were that to happen, we will be erasing oral testimony from the annals of our folk tradition.

Instead of collective action, we become self-centred and egocentric by locking ourselves up in cubicles and going solo, selfishly eschewing the myriad benefits of kinship that have knit our social fabric together for aeons.

What a wasted opportunity, what a loss to the national development process that we callously fritter away the chance that nature gives us daily to bring back people's participation and capacity building at the grassroots. Sadly, it is now every man for himself or herself.

Solitary confinement also deprives the nation of downstream benefits such as the multiplier effect on ancillary industries, and makes Nepal more dependent on imported chemical fertilisers.

That is 480 words. The Ass has another 50 words to go before I duck behind the bush at the party convention at Bhrikuti Mandap to attend to an abdominal emergency. Join me if you want. Ten more words to go. Five, four, three, two, one.



The Ass

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The business of politics

● Ramesh Kumar

During the 2017 elections, Baburam Bhattarai's Naya Shakti Party propped up the Nepali Congress (NC) elsewhere across the country while seeking support in Gorkha, where Bhattarai himself would run, and Rasuwa where his party's Prem Tamang was contesting.

But when it came time to register, Tamang withdrew his candidacy and chose to run for the state assembly instead, putting his support behind billionaire businessman Mohan Acharya, the bankroller of the NC.

Acharya had registered his candidacy after convincing party chair and prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, presumably with money secretly exchanged, to let him run for office.

The construction contractor who spent a lot more money while campaigning, would go on to win Rasuwa. A year later in an interview, Bhattarai accused his party colleague Tamang of selling out his candidacy to Acharya.

Acharya's opponent was Janardhan Dhakal, another construction businessman who had the UML ticket. The race in Rasuwa was therefore a battle between who could spend more money. Both candidates hosted lavish parties, had extravagant motorcades, and distributed cash to buy vote banks.

What happened in Rasuwa in 2017 is a reflection of Nepal's

current electoral system — competent candidates have no chance against powerful tycoons who have bought election tickets from party bosses.

Even as they spend extraordinary money to woo voters, political parties are not transparent about funding in official reports.

Donations from businesses are the primary source of funding for all political parties, and that is where the rot sets in.

However, the amount of financial support received from well-wishers, supporters and businesses are not broken down in the accounts of any of the parties. In fact, they are not mentioned at all.

The fact that all financial assistance is provided in cash and not through the banking system makes it easy for parties to circumvent institutions that oversee election management, even though

The Political Parties Act 2017 stipulates that any transactions above Rs25,000 should go through the banking system along with the details of donors.

There is a similar lack of transparency when it comes to details about any fixed assets in the parties' audit report. In many cases, private donors pick up the tabs for the renovation of party offices just to be above the board, like what the NC's Umesh Shrestha did to get himself appointed state minister of health by Prime Minister Deuba.

Nepal's politico-business nexus began during the post-Panchayat era after the multiparty system

Funding from business tycoons lubricates Nepal's democracy, and undermines it

encouraged collusion and quid pro quo. This co-dependency between business and politics became more embedded in subsequent elections.

"When political parties have to spend money to win elections, they start cultivating businessmen and then it is you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours," explains economist Keshav Acharya.

Over the years, watching from the sidelines was not enough, and Nepal's rich directly entered politics as the country began its transition into a federal republic following the end of the Maoist conflict.

Former Finance Secretary Rameshore Khanal resigned in 2011 after Finance Minister Bharat Mohan Adhikari sought the counsel of industrialist Binod Chaudhary during the budget formulation process.

He says Nepal's political parties are at present governed not by institutional systems, but the will of individual leaders who mobilise money by helping businessmen launder theirs.

"This practice was introduced by Girija Prasad Koirala in the NC and has been continued by both UML Chair K P Oli and Maoist Chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal," says Khanal.



Democracy too costly for women politicians

Heavy election expenses deter women candidates from running for office in the 2023 elections

● Laxmi Basnet

Grima Shah was a candidate from the UML party twice in the 2008 and 2017 elections. She lost both times but was elected to the House through the Proportional Representation (PR) system in the 2013 polls.

She entered the political arena as a student leader in the post-Panchayat period, but in 2009 she had to sell her private school to pay off the piling election debt. Today she is Far-Western Province in-charge for the breakaway CPN (Unified Socialists).

But even as Nepal's political parties and leaders hit the campaign trail ahead of the next election in 2023, Shah has been living with the financial consequences of her two unsuccessful runs for office.

"We have to think twice even if we were allowed to run for office this time around, with the burden of election expenses," says Shah. "Securing election funding is a struggle for women leaders across the country."

Costly elections have had a direct impact on women campaigning for office. Indeed, the number of women elected to office has steadily declined during each of Nepal's three post-conflict Constituent Assembly elections: from 197 in 2008 to 176 in 2013.

Similarly, 90 women were elected to office in 2017, only six of whom were selected through the first past the post system.

While direct elections are for Nepal's male politicians, it seems women are only able to get into the legislature through the proportional representation quota.

"Money is the main reason why parties do not trust us women in elections, which means capable women are unlikely to come forward and run," says a UML leader who did not want to be named.

Former Minister Kamala Roka of the Maoist Centre was elected to Parliament from East Rukum in 2017, but the debt she



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WOMEN WHO MATTER: Kantika Sejuwal (left), mayor of Jumla's Chandannath Municipality from the Nepali Congress. Salma Khatun, deputy mayor of Pokhariya municipality of Parsa district, now from the Samajbadi Party.



SURESH BIDARINEPALI/TIMES

incurred during her election campaign is a constant source of worry.

"My expenses were relatively low compared to the others, but I still have not been able to pay off the money we spent to feed and accommodate staff," she says.

Roka realised that minorities including women, Dalits and Nepal's low-income communities would face an uphill battle in elections because the environment is not conducive to people from those communities who might decide to run for office.

"If our electoral system continues to operate this way, only the rich and powerful, political contractors and brokers can afford to run and win elections in Nepal," she adds.

Women MPs are so heavily in debt that they cannot afford to stay in Kathmandu even with the allowance for legislators.

"A good chunk of money goes towards rent, travelling to my constituency, paying a levy to the party, supporting various causes and organisations — which my salary and

allowances are not able to cover," adds Roka.

Asha Kumari BK is an MP from Bajhang, and says that her monthly expenses including travel back and forth from Kathmandu and contributions to the party average Rs85,000 every month against her MOP allowance of Rs640,000.

"Running for elections is impossible for Nepali women, except few, in the current climate," she says. "If this continues, no honest politician can afford to stand for office."

MP Tham Maya Thapa was elected from Myagdi in Nepal's first election under the multi-party system in 1991. "In those days, we would be fed by the families we met along the campaign trail, and if there was nothing else, there was always roasted corn and beans that we would bring with us," recalls Thapa.

Despite that, she defeated her opponent by 5,000 votes. Thapa says there is no way she can afford to campaign these days.

Salma Khatun, a former journalist who is now the deputy chief of Pokhariya Municipality of Parsa, has also taken out loans to pay for expenses after being elected to office.

"Campaigning in 2023 is going to cost a million rupees at the least," says Khatun, considered by many to be the mayoral or state parliamentary contender to watch in the upcoming election. "I had financial support from my family in the last election, but how long am I going to ask them to shoulder such a burden?"

Khatun and Asha Kumari BK agree that there is no place for integrity in Nepali politics given the financial constraints faced by many elected and hopeful leaders.

"I have seen many capable women decide not to run for office once they realise how costly it is," says Khatun. "Parties pick candidates based on their electability determined by how much money they have and are willing to spend. Leaders who are actually willing to put in the work are not considered at all."

Minister for Women, Children and Senior Citizens Uma Regmi has run for office multiple times, and the Nepali Congress leader says that even after elections are fought and won, women leaders have to keep paying back loans for a long time.

She has been advocating a fully proportional electoral system and adds that elections have become a hotbed for corruption, concluding that the first past the post system is actually undermining democracy.

Kamala Roka is also a proponent of a fully proportional electoral system. The leader from the Maoist Centre party says: "If we want to elect dedicated leaders who have made great sacrifices to serve the people then all of Nepal's political parties must actively work on an alternative to Nepal's current electoral system." 🇳🇵



BHANU BHATTARAI/NEPALI TIMES

Indeed, public sector enterprises like Harisidhi Brick and Bhrikuti Paper factories were privatised under the first elected government led by Girija Prasad Koirala, and turned into prime real estate.

The Ministry of Finance refunded value-added tax (VAT) to entrepreneurs on consumer goods for almost a decade after 2008, essentially putting VAT paid by Nepali citizens into the pocket of businesses, prompting questions of policy irregularities by the IMF.

Similarly, other NC leaders like former finance minister Ram Sharan Mahat formed the Tax Commission in 2014 which gave tax cuts worth Rs21 billion to big businesses, the case related to which is still pending in the courts.

More recently, Finance Minister Janardan Sharma is alleged to have made policy changes to benefit special interests, like the Shanker Group, through a bill to replace the budget brought by the Oli government.

Of late, businesses have also been actively involved in the infighting within parties that has characterised recent Nepali politics.

The photo of NCP co-chairs K P Oli and Dahal having lunch with red rice at the home of business tycoon Durga Prasai to discuss party unity went viral and prompted widespread ridicule.

The two leaders also held several discussions at the residence of construction contractor Sharada Prasad Adhikari who was untouchable because of his proximity to Dahal, as well as at homes of businessmen like Niraj Govind Shrestha and Ajeya Raj Sumargi. Sumargi often

acts as a frontman for Dahal's business dealings.

Businessmen like Capt Ramesh Thapa and Moti Dugar were actively involved in negotiations related to party unification between UML leaders K P Sharma Oli and Madhav Kumar Nepal, who often met at their private residences.

Similarly, Oli's name has been linked to the Yeti Group, and the death of its founder Ang Tsering Sherpa in a helicopter crash in 2019 was a big blow to the former Prime Minister who had close personal dealings with him. Sherpa served as Oli's fixer, and was rewarded with coveted real estate and other deals for his conglomerate.

Entrepreneurs who transition into politics do so with the intention of influencing the state machinery to get business-related benefits. Moreover, interactions between business and politics are not limited to Nepali figures, as evidenced by the audiotape of Krishna Bahadur Mahara asking a Chinese businessman for Rs500 million on behalf of the Maoists during Constituent Assembly elections in 2013.

To be sure, politicians have always been making licensing and policies easier at the behest of banking, insurance, medical education, telecommunication sectors, as well as in the stock market, allowing a select few to take advantage of the resulting decrease in competition.

Congress leader and former vice-chairman of the National Planning Commission Govinda Raj Pokharel notes that money has become the lubricant in Nepali politics. In fact, voters themselves seem to seek out

leaders who can take care of their financial interests.

"Unless we clean up our democratic system, our democracy is headed to the edge of a cliff," he says.

Former Election Commissioner chief Bhojraj Pokharel, in his recent article 'Political Finance Management: Opportunities for Electoral Reform' has proposed ideas for electoral reform, including the provision of grants to political parties to manage election-related expenses.

This proposal is not a new concept. Past governments have discussed this and former Finance Minister Prakash Chandra Lohani even made a related proposal in the 2004 budget.

UML leader Surendra Pandey argues that if political financing is to be made transparent, the government should provide financial support based on the votes received by each party.

Former Finance Secretary Ramesh Kharel argues that political parties should seek donations from Nepali citizens, which would consequently make them more accountable to the public.

Achyut Wagle, a professor of economics at Kathmandu University, notes that while government funding for parties is a viable option in an ideal democracy, it is questionable whether a country like Nepal can do it honestly.

Says Wagle: "It is more important to have transparency in political financing. Selling political positions for money has become the norm, and we need to ensure a democracy where businessmen cannot buy their way to power." ■

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