



Volatile mix: politics and religion

The Election Commission has slated local elections for April, with federal polls early next year. Given heated debates about federalism and secularism, the election will be a referendum on those two issues.

In 2017, Nepal held sub-national elections after 20 years. Those ward, municipal and provincial representatives were in uncharted territory. The hope was that locally-elected leaders would demonstrate more accountability than national counterparts.

Indeed, some ward and municipal chairs have performed exceptionally well. But many mayors are contractors involved in blatant malfeasance. Political devolution has decentralised corruption as well.

News reports about the bloated ministries in Bagmati Province as well as the provincial governments being mere reflections of the power balance in Kathmandu have given federalism a bad name. Which is why some political leaders want federalism scrapped.

The local election is a chance to set things right. All politics is local – or should be. And we have seen since 1990 in Nepal that decentralised political decision-making is best for governance.



However, there are indications that the polls will be a dirty political game where politicians devoid of ideology stoke religious fervour to get votes. This is dangerous, and will polarise and destabilise Nepali society.

Vigilant voters must vet candidates, and support those more likely to address their most urgent needs like health, education, jobs and a streamlined administration – and not fall for extremist slogans.

People at the grassroots, especially those excluded till now in decision-making, must benefit the most from federalism. Given Nepal's ethnic and religious diversity, a prosperous and democratic society is not possible without the stability that secularism guarantees.

Going by the conventions of major parties over the past months, it looks like secularism, restoration of the monarchy and federalism will dominate the upcoming polls.

Rajendra Lingden's resounding win over Kamal Thapa as the leader of the RPP means that the party will be even more aggressive in promoting the royal-Hindu line. Even self-proclaimed democratic and progressive

parties that stood for alternative politics like Bibeksheel Sajha are falling back on religion and monarchy to gain popular votes.

Republicanism, federalism and secularism became the main pillars of the Constitution drafted after two Constituent Assembly elections following the People's Movement of 2006. Remove any one of these three pillars and the country could be pushed back into turmoil.

Some of the very leaders who once played a key role in writing that Constitution are now leaning in favour of a Hindu state. The main opposition UML's K P Oli has himself been dabbling in religion.

An eager gathering of former prime ministers at a recent reception for Indian guru Baba Ramdev in Kathmandu in November (pictured below) also showed that leaders across the spectrum recognise the power of religion in vote mobilisation.

Much of this is due to the gravitational pull that India exerts on Nepal. Narendra Modi's BJP has actively used Hindu nationalism to stay in power, and Modi himself has made no secret of his desire for Nepal to revert being a Hindu state.

In Nepal, some leaders are deliberately bending the definition of 'secularism' to mean 'anti-faith' to disrupt Nepal's long-standing religious harmony and tap the majoritarian vote bank.

In her article *Shaping Secularism in Nepal for European Bulletin of Himalayan Research*, Chiara Letizia says secularism will be determined by how the Hindu majority is addressed: 'Nepal is a post-secular laboratory, where the state's policy must walk a tightrope, upholding 'absolute' secular values such as equal citizenship, and yet balancing the Hindu majority tradition, Hindu fears, and the claims of minorities for social, political and religious recognition.'

Rajeev Bhargava, a political theorist who has studied India's secularism, suggests a principled distance for secularism in countries like India and Nepal where the state should give equal respect to all religions.

The test of a true democracy is how well minorities are treated. Following secularism in letter and spirit makes such tolerance possible, but having it enshrined in the Constitution is not enough. It should be followed in practice.

To prevent Nepal from falling into the same trap as India, and to keep our democracy vibrant and inclusive, we must use the upcoming elections to eschew parties that espouse majoritarianism, exclusion and division.

At the very least Nepal's political leaders must adhere to values enshrined in the Constitution as their true 'religion'.
Rabin Giri

Local elections this year will be a kind of referendum on federalism and secularism.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Good News



Let's start the New Year with good news.

Despite the decade-long Maoist war, a major earthquake, an economic blockade and state apathy, Nepal has made some dramatic strides in the last decades. And if you look closely, everything that has worked in Nepal has worked because of community involvement and ownership.

Nepal's community forestry program helped double the country's tree cover in 25 years. Wildlife successes like the increase in tigers and zero poaching of rhinos are largely due to the efforts of indigenous peoples. Similarly, female community health volunteers are credited for high childhood immunisation rates as well as the declining maternal and infant mortality.

Now the bad news, much of these progress have since plateaued off because of political apathy and neglect.

2022 is the campaigning year but Nepalis have long since stopped expecting accountability from the leaders. Excerpt from a report from #75 4-10 January 2002, 20 years ago this week:

Nepal has lurched from one crisis to another since the restoration of democracy in 1990. The latest is the declaration of a state of national

emergency. But however bleak things may look, Nepal has forged ahead in many areas with innovative development initiatives, and pioneering rural development schemes that have sustained themselves over the years.

- Despite headlines about deforestation, the Himalayan midhills have seen a dramatic return of forest cover in the past 15 years.
- Democracy may be in crisis in the capital, but local self-governance and the revolutionary Decentralisation Act have boosted grassroots development giving rural Nepalis the power to make the decisions that affect their daily lives.
- Until the emergency was declared, the Nepali media was perhaps the most free in South Asia. Nepal was the first country in the region to allow community FM stations and private broadcasters.
- The deregulation of Nepal's hydropower to foreign investors was also a South Asian first, it has allowed a slew of medium-scale projects to come on stream and ended chronic electricity shortage.
- Domestic aviation took a great leap forward with privatisation, improving services, reducing prices and providing valuable service to the tourism industry.
- More than a quarter of Nepal's land area is made up of national parks and protected areas.

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

ONLINE PACKAGES



CRUMBLING TRI CHANDRA

The country's oldest college is falling apart, an apt symbol of neglect and apathy, even as many of the earthquake-destroyed institutions get rebuilt. Watch this video and listen to students talk about how Tri-Chandra's run down state is a microcosm of Nepal. Subscribe to our YouTube channel for original videos. Story: *pages 6-7*.

NEPAL MOUNTAINEERING

This is an amazing read! Truly satisfying to read Kunda Dixit's in depth writing into the evolution of mountaineering ('Nepalis are no longer support staff', Kunda Dixit, #1092). I will be expecting more of these wonderful reads on climbing and the Himalaya. I respect Mr Messner for the purist he is, he seems like a great guy supporting Nepali climbers. Similarly, thank you for this amazing revisit to the 1921 Everest expedition, George Mallory, and associated events, delivered by a rare genius of our era ('1921 Rendezvous: Mallory, Pumori and Everest', Kanak Mani Dixit, #1092). If you miss this read, you will miss a lot. The accompanying video is also a must-watch. I am pursuing mountaineering studies and this presentation of yours shall be my academic resource and an inspiration to explore the literature further.

Anish Dahal

- Messner must now convey to Nepalis/Gurkhas/Sherpas that Nepal's future lies within the country and not overseas.

Ajay Goyal

- So glad *Nepali Times* uploaded this interview with Reinhold Messner. Such great wisdom and humility. So happy the world is recognising the Nepali might in mountaineering. I wish I was there to meet him, my favourite person in my favourite hotel in my favourite country. Love from India.

Vendeep Group

- Thank you Kanak Mani Dixit for presenting the article on Pumori so artfully with facts and arguments.

Khimlal Gautam

- Some people say Pumori means 'Knee Mountain', not 'daughter' or 'girl', because of the shape.

Jamyang Wangmo

- Engaging reportage on Mallory full of wonderful retro photos! *Spoločnosť Slovensko-Nepálskeho priateľstva*

- An interesting read and a quality controversy regarding the name Pumori and Mallory's role.

Peter Uhlík

- Few countries receive so much free relevant positive marketing as Nepal — deservedly so ('Peak performance', Sahina Shrestha, #1092). Let's hope the government sees and appreciates the value and tries to help the tourism industry.

David Durkan

- 14 peaks was so good! As an American married to a Nepali we enjoyed seeing a Nepali climber get the recognition he deserves. Nepal is a beautiful country with the happiest/friendliest people you will ever meet in your life! It's sad that until recently only other climbers from other countries were ever truly recognised and they would just say "thanks to my Sherpa" etc but never say their name.

Anna Awal

- Mountaineering has always exclusively been a colonial enterprise. This is changing with climbers like Nims Dai and must continue to change.

Eemā Budhā

NEPALI PEANUT BUTTER

Thanks for discovering and sharing a good researched article on Khotang peanut butter. ('Made in Nepal peanut butter in Japan', Sonia Awale, #1089).

Hari Chalise

- I hope this venture succeeds and would love to see peanut butter from Nepal in the shops in Europe.

Glynis Jones

CAR VS PEOPLE

We are getting prosperous, as the politicians proclaim, given the number of cars that grow by the day, and the roads are getting widened at the cost of footpaths. Many footpath vestiges that remain are so narrow it is impossible for a single person to walk, let alone those needing assisted walking. Zebra crossings are being eliminated in favour of four-storey high pedestrian bridges that many elderly have a hard time climbing. We also have no traffic rules anymore.

Lal Bahadur

- As someone who regularly uses public transport, I am appalled at how the number of public buses, tempos etc seem to be decreasing. Kathmandu's mayor in particular seems completely out of his depth.

Aastha Dahal

AIR POLLUTION

Air pollution is leading to the premature death of Kathmandu's citizens ('Breathing can kill you', Sonia Awale, #1092). It has a huge impact on the economy. The solution is political, and elected officials need to respond to the crisis.

Kathmandu Urban Conversation

TRI-CHANDRA

It is not only the building of Tri-Chandra which is in this sad state, but the entirety of our education system is in ruins ('Tri-Chandra's run downstate is a microcosm of Nepal', Sahina Shrestha, *pages 6-7*).

Malvika Rai

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



“Nepalis are no longer support staff”

by Kunda Dixit

In his most recent Nepal visit, mountaineering legend Reinhold Messner says he is glad Gurkhas and Sherpas are now able to organise expeditions for themselves. Also, watch the video where the legendary climber looks back at living on the edge of life and death. Click nepalitimes.com

Most reached and shared on Facebook

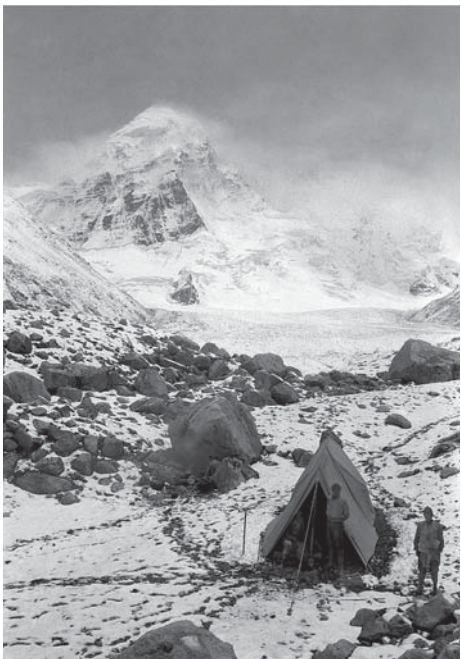
Most visited online page

Breathing can kill you

by Sonia Awale

Public awareness about air quality is at an all-time high, and the average life expectancy of Kathmandu's residents is reduced by at least four years. Kathmandu's worsening air pollution increases with vehicle numbers, so that is where the solution lies. Read the full report on our website.

Most popular on Twitter



Mallory, Pumori and Everest

by Kanak Mani Dixit

Did the Sherpas of Khumbu and Tibetans from adjacent northern valleys have their own name for Pumori before George Mallory gave it his own in 1921? How did the peak get its name? Find out in this longread and join the online discussion.

Most commented

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Politicians bogged down in power struggles are too distracted to address #pandemic and #pollution crises, both of which affect the human respiratory system. There needs to be public pressure to make #AirPollution an #election issue. @SoniaAwale reports:



Grgngk @grngk
Thank you for this eye-opening photo and fact! This has to stop NOW. OMG everyone has become so selfish!



Bhushan Tuladhar @BhushanTuladhar
Love the cover of today's @NepaliTimes "HAPPY NEW AIR" First week of January is usually when Kathmandu's air is at its worst. With local elections happening in 2022, hopefully, we can elect leaders who will have the political will to act on #AirPollution & we can breathe #CleanAir



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
The Lost Nepal Translation of Harry Potter. Twenty-five years after the first book came out, Ashish Dhakal (@ashishvki) delves into how its short-lived Nepali translation came about.



Aashraf Pradhanang @AashrafP
May have helped my Nepali a smidge, had the project come to fruition. Would love to give it a try if someone could hook me up with a copy.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
#Democracy is expensive and funding political activities can be costly, which is why some local leaders in western #Nepal have taken to fruit farming to fund their campaigns for this year's #elections.



KYU Yeti @KyuYeti
Even fruits are not spared

● Ashish Dhakal

Narayan Putuwar was awakened by the sound of stones hitting the tin roof over his head. He turned, half-asleep, and checked the time: 12:30AM. He pulled himself up from bed, and slowly opened the door.

It was chilly out, and the night was pitch dark. Suddenly two figures materialised before him, their faces fully covered. One of them clutched Putuwar's throat and pushed him against the wall.

"Not a word, or we will kill you," he said in a whisper.

Putuwar was shaking with fear as he huddled in the corner, trying not to make a sound. Minutes turned into what seemed like hours. There were hushed voices outside with the shuffling of feet and chains breaking. Then silence.

Later, Putuwar slowly walked out to the temple yard. The men had left, but the grilled gate of the shrine was open. He peered inside: the Akash Bhairav was gone.

There were two Bhairav sculptures at the temple in Halchok near Kathmandu, one of which was 300 years old and the other was made in 2013 and installed over the original. Both were stolen on 7 December — a nightmare come true for Narayan Putuwar who has served as a priest of the temple for 13 years.

The robbery made it to the media on the week that Nepal was celebrating the restitution of the 800-year-old Laxmi-Narayan statue in Patko Tole of Lalitpur, stolen in 1984 and repatriated by the Dallas Museum of Art in 2021.

Even as Nepal's stolen religious antiquities are being returned by collectors and museums in the West, there has been a slew of thefts of other religious objects from in and around Kathmandu.



MANISH PAUDEL



STEALING HERITAGE: The 400-year-old gilt-copper necklace of the Taleju Bhawani goddess in Kathmandu stolen in 1976 is now at the Art Institute of Chicago. It used to be at the Taleju Temple (top) till 1970, when it was moved to the Hanuman Dhoka Museum.

A Basundhara statue was stolen from the Siddheshwar Mahadev Temple in Godavari on 6 December, but was discovered later lying in a nearby forest. Meanwhile, two suspects were arrested on 2 January from Lalitpur with a stone Buddha they had stolen, also from Godavari, on 30 December.

Nepal Police has registered at least 10 thefts of various religious, historical and cultural objects in the past year from Kathmandu Valley.

"Perhaps the reason we are now hearing more about these thefts is that there is increasing awareness among the public and media of the loss of cultural heritage and identities these thefts signify," says public litigator and cultural activist Sanjay Adhikari.

Subhadra Bhattarai at the Department of Archaeology says there are reports of thefts of cultural and historical artefacts every year, but this alone does not mean that there has been an increase.

The first historical account of a religious object stolen from Nepal was as far back as 1765, when the statue of Narayan disappeared from the Bhagwati temple in Hanuman Dhoka. Plunder peaked in the 1960s, as Nepal started to open its borders to the outside world.

Limited security and sculptures lying unguarded in temple premises and community squares lured art smugglers to Nepal. Further, Nepal Police says it does not at present have the manpower to guard each temple and cultural

site in the country.

"We have increased security in the Valley and mobilised our force to conduct night-time patrols in civilian clothes," says Dinesh Raj Mainali of Nepal Police. "But our personnel is limited."

Some temples have installed CCTV cameras. Yet, on 13 December, a statue of Narayan was wrenched out of the Bangalamukhi Temple in Lalitpur, just under the noses of policemen in a nearby post.

The thief was caught on 2 January and the statue has since been recovered, but it proved that police need to improve intelligence and get local communities involved in protecting their sacred objects.

Says Sanjay Adhikari: "It starts with inventory, we cannot protect

prabhu BANK

Paddy production

Nepal's paddy production this year at 4,130,000 tonnes is the lowest in the last five years, and is down by 8.74% compared to last year. Far Western and Lumbini provinces recorded the highest decline at 31.49% and 18.38% owing to heavy post-monsoon rains from 17-20



October when parts of western Nepal received over 100mm rain in 24 hours. Agriculture makes up one fourth of Nepal's GDP and paddy crops account for 15% of that. This year, rice was planted in an additional 4,000 hectares of land but production was lower at 3.47 tonnes per hectare.

Recycling batteries

Israel Embassy has started environmental campaign 'Stop Pollution: Used Battery Collection' with schools in Kathmandu. Students collect used alkaline, coin cell, and other non-reusable batteries and hand it over



to DOKO recyclers. Batteries cannot be disposed like regular household wastes but can be recycled while also reducing air, soil and water pollution caused by its chemical content.



Fertiliser shortage

Agriculture Ministry and Livestock Department have urged farmers to use organic manure because of the shortage of chemical fertilisers with a national stash of only about 12,200 tonnes which includes 10,500 tonnes of urea, 1,200 DAP and about 500 potash. Some 150,000 tonnes of fertilisers has been placed for import but due to fluctuations in the international market is yet to be supplied.



Global IME

Global IME Bank is providing discounts and cashbacks on card-based and digital transactions for a month starting 30 December 2021 on the occasion of its 15th anniversary. The bank is also offering free mobile banking, as well as debit and credit cards to customers. Global IME also organised nationwide health check-ups, blood donation program and sport activities for staff and clients.

StanChart Deputy CEO

Gorakh Rana has been appointed Deputy CEO of Standard Chartered bank. Rana who has been with the bank since 1994 was previously the head of global and commercial banking and will continue leading client coverage, corporate, commercial and institutional department.



Tata safety

Tata motor cars occupied six out of eight positions in the Global NCAP charts for vehicle safety. Tata's Altroz, Nexon and Punch received five star adult rating while Tiago, Tigor and Tigor EV received four. With recent NCAP's vehicular safety tests, protective features have become Tata's leading attraction for potential buyers.



Deposits and credits

Even as banks recorded an additional Rs15 billion in deposits, the credit amounted to only Rs11 billion, primarily due to Nepal Rastra Bank's tightening on imports. As of last week, the total deposits in banks across Nepal have reached Rs. 2.49 trillion and the credit flow is at Rs40.99 trillion.

Everest banking

Everest Bank's mobile banking service has been upgraded to the new 'Omni Channel', enabling customers to use the mobile banking platform in any device including smartphone, tablets, and PC. Everest CEO Sudesh Khaling and Biswas Dhakal, president-chairperson of Omni Channel's developer F1Soft Group, launched the upgraded service last week.



NMB with Himalaya

NMB bank has tied up with Himalaya Drishya Hotel allowing bank employees and account holders discounts worth 10% on food and 20% on accommodation at the Dhulikhel establishment. www.nmb.com.np.



Sanima offer

Sanima Bank has announced Sanima Sajilo e-Banking New Year Dhamaka offer per which customers will get the chance to win prizes including iPhone



13, couples' trip to Bali and Pokhara, as well as cashbacks on transactions made through e-Banking service. Customers will need to have made at least 15 transactions between 1 January-31 March 2022 to be eligible for the campaign.



ELFRIEDE MOELLER



NATENDRA LAL SHRESTHA



ASHISH DHAKAL

PLUNDER: The original *torana* over a door in Mulchok of Patan Darbar Square in early 70s (*above*).

Bhairav sculptures stolen on 7 December 2021 from Halchok (*far left*). The empty altar after the theft.

cultural and historical artefacts is needed, and the department had begun drawing up a list in 2015. “But there are just too many smaller shrines, details and objects all over the country, and the department alone cannot complete the task with limited resources,” she adds.

The 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, which Nepal ratified in 1976, calls for the up-to-date national inventory and educational awareness measures for the public about the value of cultural properties in their country.

Despite law and regulations that have been in place for six decades, the inability of local governments to come up with a list till today fosters an environment where theft and illicit trade of Nepal’s cultural assets thrive. The National Penal Code 2017 in fact designates both the thief and those responsible for protecting the artefacts culpable when a

religious object is stolen. Says Adhikari: “The law makes it clear that both the act and omission are crimes. The officers who have failed to work according to the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act and Rule are in fact equally liable as the thief who wrenches a statue from its shrine.”

While much of the focus in the media lately has been on the auction houses, collectors and museums in the West where Nepal’s stolen objects end up, there is not as much attention on Nepalis involved in the theft and smuggling of these artefacts.

A stolen statue changes hands many times before it ends up in a museum display shelf: the thieves on the ground, the smugglers who hired them, the security personnel and political figures who provide protection and facilitate the transport out of Nepal, and finally the collector and museum curators.

During peak smuggling periods in the 1960-70s, Nepal was an absolute monarchy. Heritage conservationists doubt if such heavy objects could be smuggled out of the country through Kathmandu airport without the knowledge of the security forces, the palace and the government.

Accomplices on the ground in Nepal must also have worked in tandem with international art dealers, criminal networks and collectors. For example, a 400-year-old gilt-copper necklace once worn by the Taleju Bhawani goddess in Kathmandu that is now at the Art Institute of Chicago in a museum was stolen in 1976 (*pictured overleaf*).

The necklace had been moved with other treasures in 1970 from the Taleju Temple to the nearby Hanuman Dhoka Museum which was guarded by the Royal Nepal Army.

“The government wanted to move the treasures for safe-keeping,

but it got stolen anyway. How was it possible that such a sacred item could be stolen from such a highly secure place?” Uddhab Karmacharya, the eighth generation high priest of the Taleju Temple told *Nepali Times* in June last year, after the necklace was located.

Work of groups like the Lost Arts of Nepal, international activists, local communities and citizen groups like the Nepal Heritage Recovery Campaign, have helped raise awareness about past thefts, and for the restitution of some of them to where the figures were stolen from.

At present, the Department of Archaeology has used diplomatic channels to write to Western museums and collectors for the return of 55 artifacts. Some of these have actually been stolen from the same shrine: like the five 600-year-old gilded copper-bronze images of Nrityanath, Mahalaxmi, Chamunda, Shiva Gana (Bhairab) and Panchmukhi Hanuman (Hanu Bhairab) that were wrenched out of a 16th century *torana* of the Taleju Bhavani Temple in Lalitpur (*pictured, above, left*).

Among other artefacts being selected for return are a statue of Tara from the Yale University Art Gallery, the idols of Uma Maheshwar and Shridhar Vishnu from the Musée Guimet in France, and 18 different artefacts from the Victoria and Albert Museum in the UK. Even as these sacred objects are returned to Nepal, activists stress that the country must strengthen its own surveillance and law enforcement to prevent further thefts. Better resources for law enforcement, inventory and information could make it more difficult for thieves.

Back in Halchok, Narayan Putuwar is hopeful: “We pray that the Bahirav comes back. Perhaps it will be the person who stole the god who will return it.” 🇳🇵

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FROM THE
TOP OF
THE WORLD

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● Sahina Shrestha

Come May, Kathmandu's streets will be abloom with jacaranda and bougainvillea. The street below Ghantaghar clocktower will turn purple and pink, and the iconic images will make it to everyone's feed.

But few passersby will stop to look at the crumbling Rana-era building behind the trees that was once the country's pioneering institution for higher studies.

Since the 2015 earthquake, Tri-Chandra Multiple Campus ('TC') has silently awaited restoration, even as schools around the country were rebuilt. Six years after the disaster, the century-old buildings are crumbling, with trees growing out of the walls.

Students of the Geology Department attend classes inside these dilapidated structures — ironically studying about Himalayan seismology. There are 150 students crammed inside this dark room that has a capacity for only 60.

"Looking around the condition of this building and our classroom, I often think of an earthquake and casualties if the next big one happens to be on a school day," says geology student Sanam Oli.

The students have aptly named their building '*bhoot banga*' — a haunted house. Between classes, the corridors are eerily empty, with missing bricks on the side, crevices on ceilings and walls, and the plaster peeling off the roof.

"It resembles a building, but it is falling apart," says Saurabh Koirala, a fourth-year student at TC. "When it rains in the monsoon, we get wet at our desks with water dripping from the ceiling."

Inside the classroom in the south wing of the building that is accessible through a dark corridor, past a dusty room resembling a storehouse more than the geology museum it is meant to be, the high ceilings have cracks, and the walls are mouldy.

The neo-classical Rana era building currently houses eight departments, including Geology, Psychology, Statistics, English and Nepali. Anywhere between 2,000-4,000 undergraduate and graduate students attend classes here in different shifts throughout the day.

While the north block of the building is still functioning despite the crumbling walls, the southern side adjoining the Jame Masjid has been completely abandoned.

The plaster has fallen off the façade, and there are deep fissures on the wall, a tree grows out of the bare exposed bricks on the second storey. In the corner of the ground floor, bricks dating back over a hundred years and inscribed with 'श्री ३' lie in a pile. Weeds, dust,

rubble and clutter cover what used to be a centre of learning.

"In all my four years here, I haven't prepared a single thin section of rock, mineral, soil used for analysis," says student Ashwin Duwadi. "For a geologist, it is important we learn how to make one, but I think I will graduate without having seen a thin section machine."

Tri-Chandra does have a thin section lab, but it is on the ground floor on the back of the damaged wing along with the two other practical labs. "But that section can collapse any time. There is no way we can have classes there," says Duwadi.

Inside the lab, as elsewhere in the building, there is structural damage — tables, chairs and other equipment are strewn around, and pigeons roost on the rafters. The staff has not been able to take the equipment out because it is too dangerous, and even if they could, they say there is nowhere to put the machinery. Buying new ones is out of the question due to the high cost.

"The government and donors fund other educational institutions, but not Tri-Chandra," says Campus Chief Sunil Adhikary, looking out of his office window at Darbar High School across Rani Pokhari that was recently rebuilt with Rs850 million Chinese aid.

The two institutions, the oldest school in Nepal and the oldest college, are separated by Rani Pokhari, which has also been restored to its former glory after the earthquake.

Adhikary himself is a former student of TC, having graduated in science from here. He then left for Japan to obtain his master's and PhD, then returned to Nepal and rejoined Tri-Chandra as a lecturer.

"I have taught in the same classes where I once sat as a student," he says pensively. "But things have changed since those days, it is sad to see it in this state."

The college offers a wide variety of subjects, and students from across the country have enrolled here because it is much less expensive than private colleges. A master's student only pays Rs7,000 a year, about a quarter of which goes to Tribhuvan University (TU). While this is an advantage for students, the college itself does not have enough money for its upkeep.

Even as the number of students and programs have grown, the physical infrastructure has remained largely the same for a century. In fact, like in many other public institutions housed in Rana-era buildings, things turned for the worse after the earthquake.

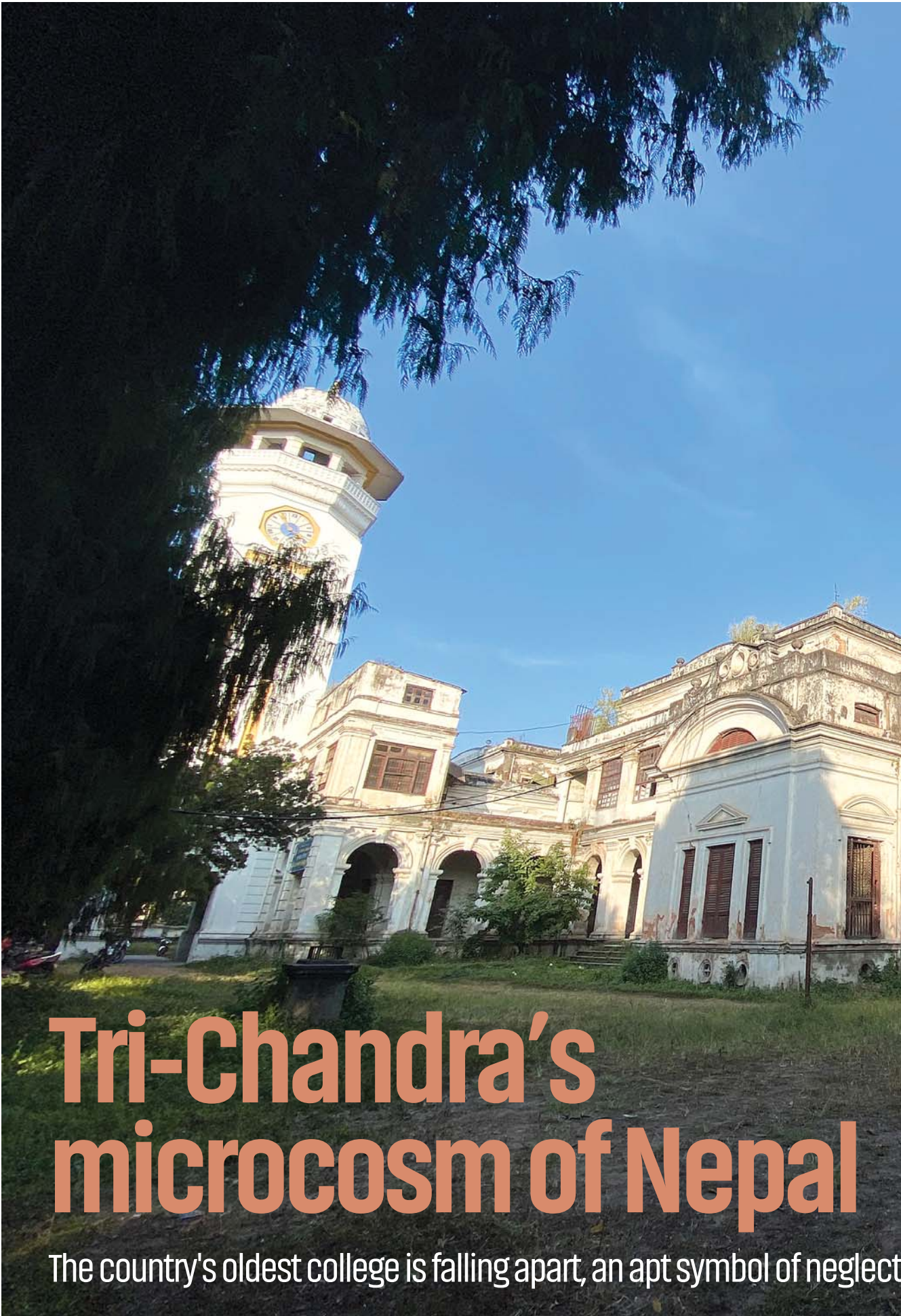
"Tri-Chandra has the potential to become a respected institution of higher learning again, but we need the support and resources," says Adhikary.

To be sure, on 25 April, when newly-reconstructed Dharara was inaugurated on the sixth anniversary of the earthquake, the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) unveiled the Greater Tundikhel Master Plan. The Finance Minister's budget has allocated money for this ambitious revival of Kathmandu's city centre.

Under this project, various sections from Narayanhiti Palace to Dasrath Stadium will be turned into open spaces, and within it the Tri-Chandra campus will also be fully restored.

Except for Saraswati Sadan that currently functions as the administrative block, all other structures on the Rani Pokhari side will be demolished. A four-storied structure complete with an underground parking area will come up behind the neo-classical building, which will be retrofitted and restored.

But the plan is not without roadblocks. The NRA had consulted Tribhuvan University and Tri-Chandra college while designing the master plan and the three had come to an understanding to also use the land in Jamal formerly used by TU Examination Controller's Office, to construct a building for Tri-Chandra. The renovation and



Tri-Chandra's microcosm of Nepal

The country's oldest college is falling apart, an apt symbol of neglect



construction was to be financed with a Rs2 billion loan from India's Exim Bank.

However, in 2018 the government had decided to shift the National Library, severely damaged during the earthquake, from Harihar Bhawan to Jamal. The decision was later put on hold after the NRA proposed the Greater Tundikhel plan. But in October this year, the

Cabinet again decided to resume the construction of the library in the same space, leaving Tri-Chandra hanging.

"There was some confusion, but things were getting back on track when the government changed. Then everything stalled," says Sushil Gyewali, who was the CEO of NRA.

The term for NRA officially

came to an end in December, before which it had already handed over the Tri-Chandra reconstruction project to the Ministry of Education. "We have laid the foundation for the project. Now it is up to them to complete it," he adds.

To run at optimum capacity, Tri-Chandra needs 20 additional classrooms, seven labs, two halls for the library, two research labs and a



ect and apathy

SAHINA SHRESTHA



ALL PHOTOS: MONIKA DEUPALA

seminar hall, according to campus chief Adhikary. “Presently, we do not have enough space to conduct classes and practicals for the 12,000 students who are currently enrolled here,” he says.

Established in 1918 by Prime Minister Chandra Shumsher Rana during the reign of King Tribhuvan, it was initially called Tribhuvan-Chandra College. In

1924 it was renamed to Tri-Chandra College and classes for bachelor's started the same year. The college was originally affiliated to the University of Calcutta, then to Patna University before finally being coming under Tribhuvan University in 1959.

Classes took place in Majlis Ghar next to Darbar High School with eight students enrolled in the

first cohort while a new building for the institution was at works near the Ghantaghar and Bir Library. The building with its Rana-Victorian style was completed within 14 months in 1919 at the cost of Rs70,000.

“What set this building apart from the other neoclassical buildings of the time is that unlike the private residences of the Ranas,



which were hidden behind tall walls, Tri-Chandra was very much an urban building,” says architect and educator Biresh Shah. “It was built for a specific educational purpose complete with classrooms and a theatre. Architecturally, it was very modern for its time.”

Tri-Chandra is also significant because it is one of the last remaining public buildings of the period. Janasewa Hall in New Road is long gone, the Charkhal Adda in Dilli Bazar is in ruins, and likely beyond repair while Darbar High School across the royal pond has been rebuilt from the ground up after the earthquake by China Aid.

After the 2015 disaster, many buildings from the Rana-era that were reconstructed lost their originality. In their stead are now structures with no specific character. But activists, students and educators say that Kathmandu should do everything in its power to hold onto Tri-Chandra.

“TC is an important part of Kathmandu, it holds the memories of the city, it bears witness to the way it has evolved. If we do not save it, a part of our heritage and history will be lost,” says Shah. “Tri-Chandra should be restored, and it should be done while the technique and skills required are still around. If we repair it now, it will have a long life.”

In its heyday, Tri-Chandra was once one of the most sought-after educational institutions in Nepal. ‘It wasn’t only me who thought Tri-Chandra to be the pinnacle of higher education, my contemporaries and those before me also agreed. From an early age Tri-Chandra for me was the top destination for higher studies,’ writes author Abhi Subedi, in *Ghantagharmuniko Samaya*, a chapter in the souvenir book *Tri-Chandra Saya Barsha*, published in 2018 to celebrate the college’s centennial.

In page after page of the commemorative volume, former students, and teachers (many of whom were former students themselves) sing glorious praises of Tri-Chandra College. But they also lament its current condition. ‘Sadly, Tri-Chandra could not maintain its standard and develop into a model institution,’ writes Subedi.

In its over 100-years of existence, Tri-Chandra has hosted thousands of students who have gone on to bear important positions and offices, including the current Prime Minister of Nepal Sher Bahadur Deuba. But none of them have looked back to help the institution that contributed to their standing.

Inside a dark derelict classroom, student Saurabh Koirala voices his frustration: “Many students who

once studied here run the country today. They pass by us daily on the road outside, but they don’t see us. Maybe they need to lower their tinted glasses and take a good hard look at the condition Tri-Chandra is in today due to their indifference.”

So why do the alumni not look back at the college? The former VC of Tribhuvan University Kedar Bhakta Mathema who himself studied and taught at TC, says it is a problem of lack of ownership.

“Tri-Chandra belongs to no one, no one thinks it belongs to them anymore,” Mathema says. “No one wants to take that responsibility, they just want to reap the benefits.” adds Mathema. “Maybe the reason is the politicisation of the educational sector. Political appointees run universities, and student unions don’t work for the students. Things will not get better as long as this remains the case.”

When the campus was first set up, it was independent, and staff and students alike felt they belonged. When the new education system plan was introduced during the Panchayat, the government took over schools and colleges, and that sense of ownership was lost.

When Tri-Chandra started, the curriculum was adapted from the Indian universities it was affiliated to. The students memorised Sanskrit texts and learned the principles, culture, history prescribed in the Indian curriculum. They did not learn about Nepal and did not develop a sense of autonomy.

Even today, students from all over Nepal study the same curriculum irrespective of their backgrounds or the needs of their community. Mathema suggests developing Tri-Chandra as an independent institution to restore a sense of pride, and help in its revival.

He says: “When a college is independent, it is responsible for its upkeep and maintenance. When it runs out of money, it will need to find ways to cover the differences. When the quality of education suffers, it will be forced to reform and improve.” 🇳🇵



The country's oldest college is falling apart, an apt symbol of neglect and apathy, even as many of the earthquake-destroyed institutions get rebuilt. Watch this video and listen to students talk about how Tri-Chandra's run down state is a microcosm of Nepal. Subscribe to our YouTube channel for original videos.

EVENTS

Chinese Cultural Workshop
Don that artist hat and get some hands-on experience with mooncake making, paper cutting and painting Chinese opera masks. *8 January, 9am-12pm, Hanyuan Chinese Culture Restaurant, Bakhundhole 9813283117*

Cleaning Campaign
Take part in the Nagarkot hill cleaning campaign organised by Harimai Foundation. The program will include a two-hour hike, and a night at the Nagarkot community homestay. *7-8 January, Rs1200-1500/person, Nagarkot, 9846307545*



The Mithila Gaze
Join panelists Dr Ramawatar Yadav, C.K. Lal, Sangeeta Thapa and Mithila artist S.C Suman for *The Mithila Gaze*, a talk program that will shed light on Mithila art. Devendra Thumkeli will moderate the session. *7 January, 3pm, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal Revisited*

Comedy Show
Get ready to laugh nonstop with Aayush Shrestha at Recess - A Bistro during his hour-long solo performance. Call for tickets. *7 January, 6:30pm, Tickets: Rs500, Recess - A Bistro, 9841794613*

Boudha Farmers market
Think global and shop local at the Saturday Boudha Farmer's market where you can buy local fresh harvest, baked goods, and meals. *Saturdays, 8am-5pm, Utpala Cafe, Boudha, 9810700763*

DINING

Bricks Café
Try out their signature wood-fired pizza, and enjoy a variety of other cuisines in warm and pleasant surroundings. *Kupondole, 9801179333*



DanRan Restaurant
Enjoy a Japanese meal at DanRan, don't miss out on the soft tofu, pork cutlets and don varieties offered. *Jhamsikhel Road (01) 5521027*

MUSIC



Live Music
Enjoy Nepali tunes with Nanashi live every Tuesday at Moksh. *Tuesdays, 7pm onwards, Moksh, Gyan Mandala (01) 5428362*

Album pre-listening
Listen to the album *Kaalpanik Bhramann* before its release with an opening act from Al-pha Omega. Have free mulled wine along with good beats. *7 January, 7pm onwards, Beers N' Cheers, Jhamsikhel (01) 5524860*

Mellow Indices
Head to Beers N Cheers to enjoy mulled wine and hear Mellow Indices perform with special guest Project 901. *9 January, 7pm onwards, Beers N' Cheers*

Pahenlo Batti Muni
Live up the weekend with Pahenlo Batti Muni, who will be performing live this weekend at Moksh. *8 January, 7pm onwards, Moksh*



Kristina Allen
Spend this Saturday night with Kristina Allen live and special guests Trees. Call for ticket details. *8 January, 7pm onwards, Beers N' Cheers*

GETAWAY

Kathmandu Guest House
Kathmandu Guest House is the place for trekkers for a rejuvenating stay, that offers hospitable, comfortable accommodation, serene gardens - and all a short walk away from Kathmandu Darbar Square. *Thamel (01) 4700632*



Barahi Jungle Lodge
Stay in the individual or two-in-one private villas, or guest room the eco-jungle lodge offers, and revel in the beauty of the surrounding Chitwan National Park. *Megauli, Chitwan (01) 4429820*



Dhulikhel Mountain Resort
From bungalows with Newa influences to views of majestic mountain ranges, the resort is a perfect getaway from Kathmandu. Also offers body massage and spa services, evening cultural dance programs, and appetising multi-cuisine food. *Dhulikhel (01) 4420774*

Sapana Village Resort
Wake up to witness elephants lumber through the forests, and stay amongst rich Tharu and Chepang culture in the heart of Sauraha. *Sauraha, Chitwan (56) 580308*

Namo Buddha Resort
The traditional Newa style resort is perched on a hilltop with a majestic view of the Himalayas. The peaceful, tranquil environment is also perfect for short hikes. *Namo Buddha, Phulbari, 9851106802*



Turkish Kebabs
Head to Turkish Kebabs and Pizza Hub and try some authentic Turkish cuisine. Order the kebabs, or try Turkish street food Dhurum. *Ekantakuna (01) 5439733*



Hermann Helmers
Relish in a wide range of pastries, cookies, biscuits and cake that Herman serves with a mug of hot chocolate this winter. *Jhamsikhel Road (01) 5424900*

Tukche Thakali Kitchen
Having a hard time deciding what to make for lunch? Head to Tukche and get a taste of Thakali food with the Nepali staple Dal-Bhat. *Darbar North Gate (01)4412462*

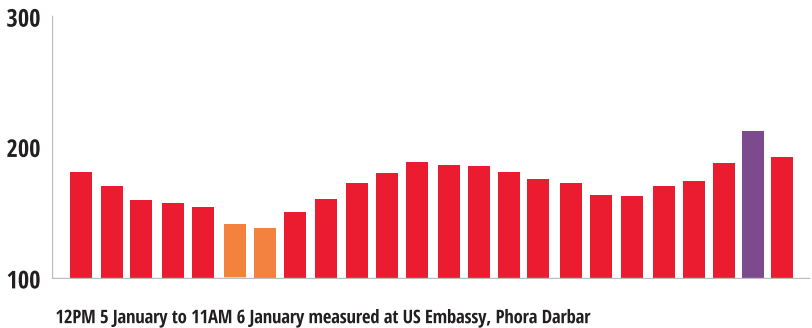
WEEKEND WEATHER



A new frontal system is moving into western Nepal and will dump more snow on the mid-mountain districts. Central Nepal will be mostly overcast in the next few days, but the Dept of Meteorology and Hydrology forecasts that the rain/snow will be restricted to the higher elevations. Without full sunshine, the maximum temperature in Kathmandu will take a dip, but the minimum will actually be 3-4°C higher than we have experienced these past weeks. These back-to-back winter westerlies are a complete antithesis of last winter, when there was a six-month drought from October to March which led to the unprecedented spring wildfires.

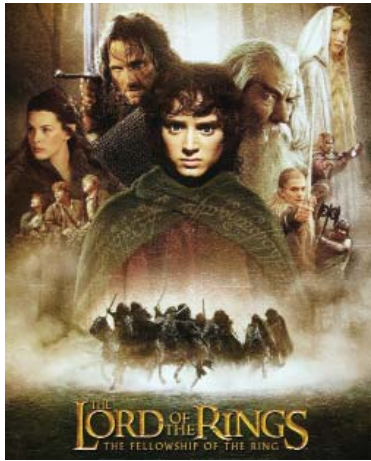
FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
18° 8°	18° 8°	19° 7°

AIR QUALITY INDEX



Mainly overcast skies over the next few days will mean that surface pollutants will be trapped at ground level in Kathmandu Valley due to winter inversion. This means poor AQI (Air Quality Index) since the suspended particulates that attach themselves to water droplets will not get a chance to be burnt off by the sun. Since not much rain is forecast for Kathmandu Valley, suspended particles from vehicle exhausts will not be washed down, making the air quality even worse (purple bar at 10am 6 January, above). Advise staying indoors especially in the morning and evening rush hours.

OUR PICK



High on the reunions of some iconic shows, it might be a good time to revisit *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy which has completed 20 years since the release of its first part. Based on the novel by J. R. R. Tolkien and directed by Peter Jackson, this 17 Academy award-winning epic fantasy series is set in the fictional world of Middle-earth and follows Frodo Baggins, a hobbit who with his friend Sam, the wizard Gandalf, heir of Gondor Aragorn and others embark on a quest to destroy the One Ring and its marker, the Dark Lord Sauron. Stars Elijah Wood, Ian McKellen, Viggo Mortensen, Liv Tyler, Sean Astin and Cate Blanchett.

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

संयुक्त संसदसभामा सहभागी भएका विभिन्न संस्थाहरूको संयुक्त पहलमा

नयाँ बजार

कोरोना नियन्त्रण

संयुक्त संसद

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Omicron is coming, be prepared

“Failing to prepare is preparing to fail.”

● Ramu Kharel and Ben Ayers

Be it by naïveté, misplaced optimism, or a great faith in the healing powers of the Himalayan air and turmeric, no one in Nepal had expected that we would be in the global epicentre of the Covid-19 surge fuelled by the Delta variant in the spring of 2021.

Our miscalculation and gross lack of preparation cost thousands of lives and left so many Nepalis bereaved during this Dasain and Tihar. Shortly after the Indian wave began in March, Nepal recorded the highest number of Covid cases per capita, and the worst viral transmission rates on the planet. While the world focused on India, Nepal’s health system was overwhelmed in a matter of days.

Remember how we desperately searched for oxygen cylinders, when every ICU bed was occupied and ventilators were in short supply? Remember rural communities where the situation was even worse, and so many Nepalis died without any medical attention? And there was the black market that forced many to pay exorbitant rates for life-saving oxygen, masks, and even paracetamol.

We cannot afford to forget these terrible and deadly months. If we do, and do not prepare for the next wave, we will be bound to repeat them. With the Omicron variant now spreading like wildfire across the globe, let us remind ourselves that Nepal experiences a surge in Covid cases a few months after the rest of the world. The Delta variant (which has been proven to be less transmissible than Omicron) took more lives in just a few months than the 2015 earthquakes.

The current low case numbers in Nepal are not going to last. Repeating our mistakes of under-preparedness and apathy has the potential to kill thousands of more Nepalis in the coming months.

While preliminary data shows that the Omicron variant is less likely to hospitalise infected individuals than Delta, we need to take into account that this new variant spreads at a much faster rate. The relief we may feel from a smaller percentage of Covid patients needing life-saving care is cancelled out by there being an exponentially higher number of total infections.

Our medical facilities will still be overwhelmed, leading to unnecessary loss of life on a large scale. In short, Omicron is not to be underestimated, especially for densely populated communities in Nepal.

We still have some time to prepare. Policy makers and individuals alike have important roles to play in the critical next weeks and months. We cannot squander this opportunity to save lives. National and local governments need time to act now on these critical areas:

■ **Vaccinate Aggressively:** There are varying statistics on the percentage of Nepalis vaccinated, but no more than 40% of the population have been fully vaccinated. Booster shots are now necessary to adequately protect a population, so we still have a very long way to go.



AMIT MACHAMASI

The good news is that even if we cannot fully vaccinate and provide boosters for the entire population, clinical experience shows that vaccinated individuals have less need for Covid-19 hospitalisations and are much less likely to die from the Omicron variant. Decision makers can make our limited vaccine supply go further by prioritising vaccines for densely populated cities and in areas where Delta infection was low, as people in these areas are less likely to have natural immunity.

■ **Border Control:** The devastating wave of the Delta variant in Nepal began a few weeks after it had taken hold in India. This was largely attributed to a spillage of the virus through the open southern border. We can support municipalities along the border to help contain the Omicron with strict health desks to screen individuals crossing the border. This will require increased funding and other resources.

■ **Isolation and Quarantine Centres:** Delta spread from India and urban areas into the countryside because we could not properly accommodate and care for infected patients in quarantine and isolation centres. There is time to re-establish these facilities before the next wave hits, and train frontline health workers and local governments based on guidelines that already exist. Again, as the variants (and our knowledge about

them) evolve, we need to remain agile and empower our managers and healthcare workers to address the changing ground situation.

■ **Oxygen Supply:** During and after the Delta wave last year, the Ministry of Health and Population made commendable efforts to expand oxygen plant availability in the country, with support from international aid groups. These new plants need to be brought online and tested in the coming months, and MoHP must accelerate its efforts to meet its own requirement of having an oxygen plant at every 100 bed-hospital in the country.

■ **Using Female Community Health Volunteers:** FCHVs have been a key for many of Nepal’s remarkable gains in public health, including reducing maternal mortality rates. This network of local health workers was not fully deployed during the last Covid wave. We can use FCHVs to disseminate public health information, vaccine knowledge, and to play a frontline role in enforcing community guidelines to reduce local transmission of the virus, and to care for the infected.

These volunteers and other community-based health workers need to be adequately compensated, and equipped with materials, protective equipment, and training.

Properly mobilising and empowering FCHVs is the fastest and most efficient way

to support rural communities that lack other options for advanced care. This will have a ripple effect across the national health system, and may be a key factor in avoiding another total collapse. All of these steps depend on implementation by the government and private healthcare system. We commend recent steps taken by the health department to test Nepalis returning from India, and to establish quarantine centres along the border.

As individuals, we must continue to take responsibility for protecting our loved ones by following public health guidelines for another few months at least. History shows we will not know for certain that Omicron has arrived in Nepal until after the variant is endemic in the population. These proactive measures can slow the spread, starting now:

- Mask up in all public places and when in close contact with members of at-risk populations. Doubling up on masks is a good idea, given the extremely contagious nature of Omicron.
- Avoid touching the face with fingers, and frequently wash hands – for at least 20 seconds with soap and water.
- Avoid all public gatherings. If not, maintain social distance of at least 1m.
- Support the local government by following protocols and encouraging elected officials to take proactive measures to protect the community. Volunteer to spread awareness or set up facilities if you can, and be ready to support your community when the next wave arrives. We Nepali are great at using ‘source-force’ to get things done – now is a great time to use your connections and networks to encourage people in positions of influence to take proactive steps to prepare for Omicron.

In the age of Covid, it is every country and every community for itself. Delta taught us in Nepal not to trust the promises of international aid to save us from the pandemic. We are on our own, and we only have each other to get through this.

The Delta wave, like the 2015 earthquakes, also taught us that when the going gets tough, Nepalis come together and achieve miracles. Remember the community groups that blossomed across the country to create isolation centres, distribute food and supplies, and invented improvised oxygen concentrators.

Remember the FCHVs and community members who risked their lives to travel into every corner of the country to deliver vaccines to the most vulnerable citizens. This time, we have an opportunity to harness this grit and compassion when it is needed most – before the disaster strikes. 🇳🇵

Ramu Kharel is an emergency medicine physician at Brown University and has worked extensively in the frontlines of Covid-19. He runs the non-profit HAPSA in Nepal that works on Covid response.

Ben Ayers is an American citizen based in Nepal for over 20 years.

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Clean up elections to clean up politics

In a democracy, elections force accountability but the voting process itself needs to be overhauled



ILLUSTRATION: SWORUP NHASIJU

● Shristi Karki

On 26 January, Nepal will elect 20 members to the National Assembly to replace those retiring from the Upper House following the end of their four-year terms, marking the beginning of the second series of elections under the federal system.

Leaders of the governing five-party coalition have already divided up the 19 electable seats amongst themselves, and appointed their nominees – making it certain they will win.

The general conventions of three of Nepal's biggest and most influential parties in the last months, which were mini elections unto themselves, marked the beginning of campaigning for local and federal elections in the coming year. All major parties including the Nepali Congress (MC), UML and the Maoist Centre (MC) retained their gerontocracies.

Preparations are now underway for local elections, which the Election Commission has recommended should be held on 27 April across the country.

Nepal conducted its first legislative assembly elections as a multiparty system in 1959. Since then, there have been 10 elections for the National Legislature, with the 2017 general elections being

the first of its kind after the country ushered in federalism. The year also marked the first time sub-national elections were held in 20 years.

There were 14.2 million ballots cast during local elections in May 2017. However, the number jumped to 15.4 million in provincial and parliamentary elections in November the same year.

In March 2021, the Election Commission stopped voter registration and published an updated list of 16.2 million voters after former Prime Minister K P Oli dissolved Parliament and announced early elections. The registration process resumed after the Supreme Court reinstated the house in July.

And right after the Election Commission announced the National Assembly polls in November, it also announced the beginning of a month-long special voter registration program during which an additional 600,000 Nepalis registered.

As elections approach, Nepal's political discourse is already dominated by parties stoking nationalistic and religious fervour. This has made for surprising political partnerships, with the Hindu-right and leadership from self-proclaimed 'alternative' parties uniting in their rejection of federalism, secularism and even republicanism.

And if their general conventions were any indication, the parties will use this rhetoric to vilify opponents and gain voters at the expense of issues most pertinent to the people, such as education, migration, healthcare, the economy and the pandemic.

In an ideal democracy, elections force public officials to be accountable. Candidates are elected based on promise of performance. But in Nepal, the polling system itself lacks transparency -- right from election funding. But electoral reform measures like re-demarcation of constituencies based on population, polling systems and voting rights of diaspora Nepalis who cannot cast votes in person, remain neglected.

There has been much back and forth about the demarcation of election constituencies. While Article 286 (5) of Nepal's Constitution states that the delineation should be done on the basis of population and geography, Madhes-based activists have pressed for constituencies to be divided on the basis of the population only.

The government formed a five-member Constituency Delimitation Commission to look into possible rearrangement of constituencies for the federal and provincial elections in July 2017. The commission demarcated constituencies

by giving 90% weightage to population size and 10% to geography.

Govind Subedi, a professor of population studies at Tribhuvan University, has argued that recent practices have gone in the 'wrong direction'. He writes in his book *Political Demography of Nepal*: 'The uneven distribution of representatives ... is likely to increase if we adopt a population-size only-method [of delineation] ... it can have a far-reaching implication in the geo-polity of Nepal.'

Subedi, who was an adviser to the Commission, continues: 'It is more likely that the sparsely populated districts in provinces which lie in the western mountains and the far western region will feel regional imbalances in sharing of political power in the national polity, which in turn may lead to provincial conflicts in the years to come.'

Furthermore, Nepal's election laws are lax enough that the wealthiest in the country who previously bankrolled parties in exchange for personal, professional and policy favours have entered politics themselves. The number of businessmen and contractors elected into leadership in 2017 proves that money, not political competency, decides who is ultimately elected to lead.

Indeed, the First Past the Post (FPTP) system has become a hotbed for corruption by businessmen, thus undermining democracy, say election experts.

Prominent leaders from across the political aisle, particularly women elected into office like Minister for Women, Children and Senior Citizens Uma Regmi, have spoken in support of an overhaul of Nepal's current election system into a fully proportional electoral system after having experienced firsthand how the current system benefits the rich, powerful and the establishment, while they are burdened with election debt long after they have left office.

Former Acting Chief Commissioner of the Election Commission Dolakh Bahadur Gurung says that the reform should be such that MPs are not allowed to become ministers, and term limits must be set so that the same people do not hold on to their seats until they are 90 years old.

'Our Constitution has been amended a fair number of times,' wrote Gurung in October, 'it is not impossible to reform our electoral system.'

Meanwhile, the debate about mailed ballots and absentee voting has gained much traction among the Nepali diaspora in recent years. An estimated 4 million Nepalis work, study and live in India, the Gulf, Malaysia, Japan, Korea, Europe and North America.

The Supreme Court issued a directive to facilitate voting for Nepali diaspora across the world in March 2018. However, successive governments have shown no interest in ensuring voting rights for millions of eligible voters living overseas.

And even as the government has begun to expand the reach of its archaic postal service by delivering items like passports to people's homes, it has not considered postal voting to keep the service relevant. The political establishment seems to fear that Nepalis in the Gulf and Malaysia are fed up with the government back home, and allowing them to vote by mail will be predominantly anti-incumbent.

The Sweden-based International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) says 151 of 216 countries around the world allow voters living abroad to cast ballots in some capacity. According to the Election Integrity Project, 40 countries used postal ballots in their most recent national election before the Covid outbreak.

Nilkantha Uprety, the former Chief Election Commissioner, believes there are two options to eliminate election irregularities. Firstly, there must be an improvement from within parties and candidates such that undemocratic practices are turned into fair competition during elections.

'But since it is not easy to achieve that, the second option is to radically change our current electoral system, and it would be unwise to delay in choosing which of the two options is more convenient and effective,' he warned in a recent op-ed in *Himal* magazine.

Uporety also noted that in the end, the electoral system does not matter as much as the people involved in the elections.

'Elections can be free and fair regardless of the electoral system if political parties are democratic, candidates are committed, and there is a guarantee of good governance,' he wrote. 'Ultimately, elections can only be successful if the majority of voters make informed choices about the parties and candidates instead of only being interested in when and where to show up to vote.' 🇳🇵

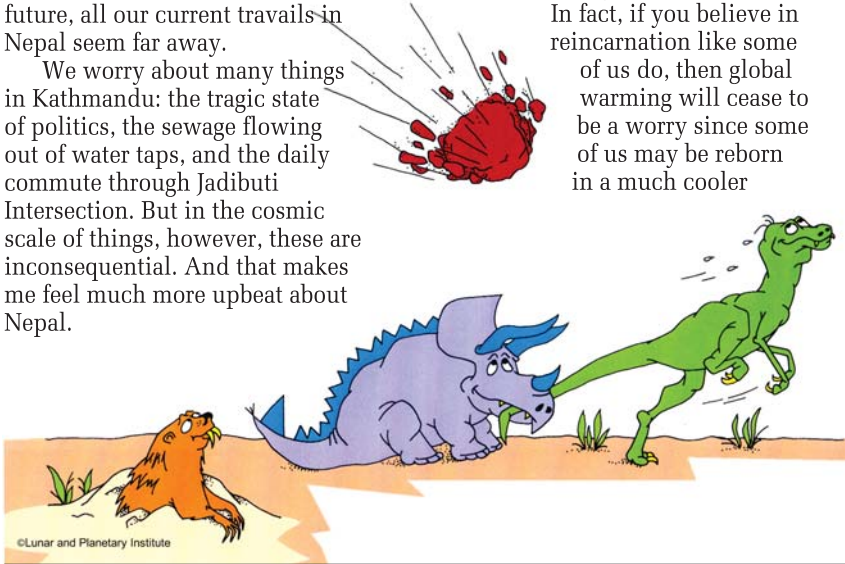
Things are looking up

After watching *Don't Look Up* on a bootleg channel this week, the Ass has come to the happy conclusion that compared to a direct hit with Planet Earth by a comet in the not too unforeseeable future, all our current travails in Nepal seem far away.

We worry about many things in Kathmandu: the tragic state of politics, the sewage flowing out of water taps, and the daily commute through Jadibuti Intersection. But in the cosmic scale of things, however, these are inconsequential. And that makes me feel much more upbeat about Nepal.

Even a global crisis like climate change pales into insignificance when we contemplate the impending impact with the planet of a heavenly body the size of Dasrath Rangashala.

In fact, if you believe in reincarnation like some of us do, then global warming will cease to be a worry since some of us may be reborn in a much cooler



place next time round.

So, the choice is between sitting idly by waiting for the world to end either with a bang, or a whimper. Or, as a poet once put it so eloquently, whether the earth will end in fire, or ice.

Don't know about you, but I would still rather work to reduce the impact of climate change so that the end is swift. For which we must:

1. Breathe sparingly. Every breath we take consumes precious atmospheric oxygen and gives off carbon dioxide, which is a greenhouse gas. Make every molecule count by being breathless.
2. The Himalaya will warm 0.7 degrees faster than the global average this year because of all the hot air generated during the party conventions. Nepal must immediately pledge to the UNFCCC a renewed Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) to limit all political harangues to less than 5 minutes.

3. Organise tantric rituals and make animal sacrifices to appease the gods. Oh, wait, can't do that. We're secular.
4. Create an artificial shortage of petrol, diesel and LPG, but I notice that our hyperactive grabberment has already thought of that.
5. All sodas contain dissolved carbon dioxide, so at happy hour this evening, quaff your double whiskey neat.
6. Burping releases greenhouse gases so burp in moderation.
7. There are an estimated 32 million flatulent cattle in Nepal, and if all of them felt free to pass wind at will, our glaciers do not stand a chance. And we are not even counting yaks and water buffaloes here, and we all know how embarrassing those two can be in polite company. The Ass is willing to make any sacrifice necessary to reduce its carbon footprint.



The Ass

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