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The sizzling.
The new TUCSON is here.
Volatile mix: politics and religion

The Election Commission has slated local elections for July 22, nearly 20 years after the last polls. The move has met with mixed reactions. In November 2017, Nepal held sub-municipal elections after 20 years. The results of the sub-municipal and provincial elections were announced without any incident. The election was hailed as a success and the country could be turned into a forward-looking, progressive and peaceful nation and the people of Nepal could live in peace.

News reports about the political situation in Nepal have been characterized as unprecedented. The political scene is complex and dynamic, with both positive and negative elements. The election will be a test of the government’s ability to manage the political situation and ensure a smooth transition to a democratic system.
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Who looted Nepal’s gods?

Focus on antiquities in museums in the West detracts from role of Nepalis who stole and sold them

Nepal’s Puttawar 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 materialized before him, their faces fully concealed. One of the men grabbed Puttawar’s throat and pushed him against the wall.

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

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

Then silence.

Later, Puttawar slowly walked out to the temple yard. The man had left, but the grilled gate of the shrine was open. 160 years inside the Akash Bhairav was gone.

There were two Bhairav sculptures at the temple: Hemchok near Kathmandu, one of which was 200 years old and the other was made in 2013 and installed over the original. Both were stolen on September 2019—a nightmare comes true for Narsayu Puttawar, who has served as a priest of the temple for 33 years.

The robbery made it to the media on the week that Nepal was celebrating the reopening of its temples. The 800-year-old Laxmi Narayan statue in Pashupati Temple, which was stolen in 1984 and repatriated by the Dallas Museum of Art in 2021, is Nepal’s only religious antiquities being returned by collectors and museums in the West. There has been a slew of thefts from other religious objects from in and around Kathmandu.

A Bandhara Bhairav statue stolen from the Siddheswar Mahadev Temple in Godawari on 6 December, but was discovered later lying in a nearby forest. Meanwhile, two suspects were arrested on 1 January from Lalitpur with a stone Buddha they had stolen, also from Godawari. 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 seeing more thefts is that there is increasing awareness among the public and media of the loss of cultural heritage and identifies these thefts similarly,” says public librarian and cultural activist Sanjey Ashkurti.

Subhadra Bhairav at the Department of Archaeology says there are reports of thefts of cultural and historical artifacts every year, but this stone 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 Bhaktapur temple in Hanuman Dhoka. Plundered in the 1660s, the Nepal army started to open its borders to the outside world.

Limited security and sculptures left unguarded in temple premises and community squares forced art smugglers to Nepal. Further, Nepal Police says it does not have the manpower to guard each temple and cultural site in the country.

“We have increased security in the Valley and mobilized our force to conduct night-time patrols in civilian clothes,” says Dinesh Rai, Nepal Police’s “But our personnel is limited.”

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

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

Says Sanjey Ashkurti: “It starts with someone, we cannot protect...lightning in a bottle...rain...lightning...we cannot protect...lightning in a bottle...rain...lightning...we cannot protect...lightning in a bottle...rain...lightning...we cannot...lightning in a bottle...rain...lightning...we cannot...lightning in a bottle...rain...lightning...we cannot...
PLUNDER: The original statue was a door in Mullick’s Patan Durbar Square in early 17th Century.

Shirnadi statues stolen on 3 December 2021 from Mullick (Or Ar) The empty hall after the theft.

Cultural and historical artefacts are needed, and the department had begun drawing up a list in 2015. “But there are just too many smaller shirnadi statues, 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 1979, 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 laws and regulations that have been in place for six decades, the inability of local governments to come up with a list has fostered an environment where theft and illicit trade of Nepal’s cultural assets thrive. The National Penal Code 2017 in fact designates both the theft and those responsible for protecting the artefacts culpable when a religious object is stolen.

Sukhad Khatri: “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 third who wreathes 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 Nepal’s 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 hid 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 whether these heavy objects could be smuggled out of the country through Kathmandu airport without the knowledge of the security forces, the palace and the government.

Accomplished 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 1979 (picture overleaf).

The necklace had been moved with other treasures in 1976 from the Taleju Temple to the nearby Hogwarts 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 it is possible that such a sacred item could be stolen from such a highly secure place?” Uddhav Karmacharya, the eight-generation high priest of the Taleju Temple told 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 which 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 artefacts. Some of these have actually been stolen from the same shrine: like the Five 600-year-old gilded copper-bronze images of Netrayunth, Mahalaxmi, Chamunda, Shiva Gana (Shiva) and Punchmukhi Hanuman (Hanuman Bhairab) that were wrenched out of a 16th-century facade of the Taleju Bhawani Temple in Laliyar (picture, above, left).

Among other artefacts being selected for return are statues of Tara from the Yale University Art Gallery, the Idols of Uma Maheswari and Suryabai Vinatam from the Musee 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 Halchowk, Narayan Punwar is hopeful. “We pray that the Falkir comes back. Perhaps it will be the person who stole the god who will return it.”
Cone May, Kathmandu’s streets will be alloc with Jasours and bougainvillea. The street below Grafton accountant will turn purple and pink, and the iconic images will make it to everything’s feed. But few passersby will stop to look at the crumbling Rana-era building behind the tree that was once the country’s pioneering institution for higher studies. Since the 2015 earthquake, Tri-Chandra Multiple Campus (TCC) 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 sometimes can’t see these dilapidated structures — ironically studying about Himalayan geology. 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 Sarasija. The students have aptly named their building ‘Aabto bangal’ — a haunted house. Between classes, the corridor is eerily empty, with missing bricks on the sides, crevices on ceilings and walls, and the plaster peeling off the roof. It resembles a building, but it is falling apart,” says Sushma Sarasija, a fourth-year student at TCC. “When it rains in the monsoon, we get wet at our desks with water dripping from the ceiling.” Inside the classrooms in the south wing of the building that is accessible through a dark corridor, past a dusty room resembling a storeroom more than a museum, it is meant to be the high ceilings have cracks, and the walls are muddy. 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 Jasour has been abandoned. The plaster has fallen off the facade, and there are deep fissures on the wall. A tree grows out of the bare exposed brick on the second story. In the corner of the ground floor, bricks dating back over a hundred years and inscribed with “1” 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 thesis section of rock, mineral, soil used for analysis,” says student Ashwini Dwivedi. “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 even have classes there,” says Dwivedi. 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 Sunit Adhikary, looking out of his office window at Darbar High School across Rani Pokhari that was recently rebuilt with Rs80 million Chinese aid. The two institutions, the oldest school in Nepal and the oldest college, are run by Rani Pokhari, which has also been restored to its former glory after the earthquake. Adhikary himself in a former student of TCC, 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 class 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 what 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 Reconstruction Authority (RRA) unveiled the Greater Twinshelk 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 Durbar, St. Joseph’s will be turned into open spaces, and within it the Tri-Chandra campus will also be fully restored. Except for Saraswati Sedan 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 critics. The RRA had consulted Tribhuvan University and Tri-Chandra college while designing the master plan and the third had come to an understanding to also use the land in Jamal formerly owned by TU Examination Controller’s Office, to construct a building for Tri-Chandra. The renovation and construction was to be financed by a Rs3.5 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 Harmu Bhawan to Jamal. The decision was later put on hold after the NRA proposed the Greater Twinshelk 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 Gyawali, who was the CMD 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
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.

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CRUMBLING TRI-CHANDRA

2024 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, Kumaon Patna University before finally being come under Tribhuvan University in 1955. Classes took place in Millia Gaur near Darbar High School with eight students enrolled in the first cohort while a new building for the institution was at works near the Chitwan and Bir Library. The building with its Rana-Victorian style was completed within 14 months in 1916 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 Bikesh 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 Chitwan Arms 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, it is 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 forever lose a significant part of its history."

In its heyday, Tri-Chandra was once one of the most sought-after educational institutions in Nepal. It wasn't only me who thought of 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 Khagmeharumiko Samaya, a chapter in the souvenir book Tri-Chandra Saya Bards, 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 glowing 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 be 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 Sandesh Khadka 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. They may have to wear their tattered glasses and take a good 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 Bhusal 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 of Sanskrit 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 background 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."

COURTESY TRIBHUWAN
**EVENTS**

**Chinese Cultural Workshop**
Don that hat and get your hands on experience with monsoon making, paper cutting, and painting Chinese opera masks. A journey from Deng Liang to William Shakespeare. Held at the Hotel Dharamsala (01) 4522510.

**Cleaning Campaign**
Take part in the Nagarkot hill cleaning campaign organized by Parimal Foundation. The program will include a two-hour hike and a night at the Nagarkot community homestay. 7-8 January, 8:00 AM, Nagarkot, Bagmati, 966107545.

**The Mithila Gaze**
Join painter Srijan Kumarad N army, C K Lal, Subhrajit Dutta and Mithila artist A.S. Sunam for The Mithila, a talk program that will shed light on Mithila art. Deendila Thumchil will moderate the session. 7 January, 3pm, Siddharta Art Gallery, Bakerwol, Near West End.

**Comedy Show**
Get ready to laugh heartily with Ayush Sharma and Bhawna Arora. A dialogue during their long-term solo performance. Call for tickets. 7 January, 6:30pm, Tikal Café, Bagmati, 4897794.

**Boudha Farmers market**
Think global and shop local at the Saturday Boudha Farmers market where you can buy fresh farm.From. boudha, bread, and sweets. Saturday, Boudha, Upho Café, Boudha, 9811010783.

**MUSIC**

**Live Music**
Enjoy Nepali tunes with Namaste Live every Tuesday at Makalu. Tuesday, 5pm onwards, Makalu, Gyan Mandala (01) 5499225

**Album pre-listening**
Listen to the album Kavikroti album before its release with an opening set from Alpah Omega. Have free munchies with local with good beats. 7 January, 5pm onwards, Bee’s N Cheer, Sikkim, (01) 5747118.

**Mellow Indices**
Head to bars & clubs to enjoy mellow wine and hear Mellow Indices perform with special guests Project 90. 8 January, 5pm onwards, Bee’s N Cheer, Sikkim.

**Paheni Bath Muni**
Live up the weekend with Paheni Bath Muni, who will be performing live this weekend at Makalu. 8 January, 5pm onwards, Makalu.

**GETAWAY**

**Kathmandu Guest House**
Kathmandu Guest House is the place for trekkers for a rejuvenating stay, that offers hospitable, comfortable accommodation, and clear paths walk away from Kathmandu Durbar Square. (01) 400632.

**Barahi Jungle Lodge**
Stay in the indulgence of two-hour private villas, as you rest in the eco-jungle lodge, and revel in the beauty of the surrounding Chitwan National Park, Mugu, Chand (01) 440820.

**Dhukulhel Mountain Resort**
From sunrises with honey influences, serene gardens – and mountain stairs, the resort is a perfect getaway from Kathmandu. Ask after body massage and spa services, evening cultural dance programs, and appetizing multi-cuisine food.

**Sapana Village Resort**
Wake up with elephants through the forests, and stay amongst the Tharu and Chepang cultures in the heart of Sapana. Surathali, Chitwan (01) 362066

**Namo Buddha Resort**
The traditional new year villa on a hill with a majestic view of the Himalayan range. The peaceful, tranquil environment is also perfect for short hikes.

**DINING**

**Bricks Café**
Try out the signature wood-fired pizzas, and enjoy a variety of other dishes in warm and pleasant surroundings. Kopan, 9801769231.

**Dan Ran Restaurant**
Enjoy a Japanese meal at Dan Ran, don’t miss out on the soft rolls, pork cutlets and don don varieties. Phuket Road (01) 5720577.

**Turkish Kebabs**
Head to Turkish Kebabs and Flava Hub and try some authentic Turkish cuisine. Order the kebabs, or try Turkish street food Düvazum. Dharan (01) 5499722.

**Hermann’s**
Resh in a wide range of pastries, cookies, donuts and cakes. Take advantage of Hermann’s with a mug of hot chocolate this winter.

**Tulche Thalai Kitchen**
Having a hard time deciding what to make for lunch? Head to Tulche and get a taste of Thai food with the Nepali appetite. Don’t forget to check out the menu! (01) 4411912.

**WEATHER**

A new cold front moving in means weather naggl will be well below freezing. Snow is expected on the higher altitudes, and it will be mostly overcast in the most far south, but the temperature at Wamagadi and Koltan shows that the chill will be more pronounced in the higher mountains. With this turn in the weather, be sure to keep up with the forecast and wear appropriate clothing. The week is expected to see more snowfall in the higher mountains, and weather conditions will be cold.

**AIR QUALITY INDEX**

PM 2.5: 5 January to 11 January measured at S1 Embassy, Phewa Butler.

**OUR PICK**

High on the list of some icons shows, it might be a good time to revisit the iconic film. The story of the King has been completed 50 years since its release. The movie was released in 1974 and is set in the historic world of Mithila and its ruler, the blind man. The story follows the journey of the One Ring and its maker, the dark lord Saruman. Directed by Peter Jackson, the film is now available for streaming. Don’t miss out on this iconic film.

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Omicron is coming, be prepared

"Failing to prepare is preparing to fail."

- Ramu Kharel and Ben Ayers

It is by naivety, 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 misallocation and gross lack of preparation cost thousands of lives and set so many Nepalis back several years. 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 were so caught up 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, we will 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 every few months, not just a few months before the 2015 earthquake.

The current number of Omicron cases in Nepal are not yet going to last. Repealing our mistakes of under-preparedness and apathy has the potential to kill thousands of more Nepalis in the coming months.

A preliminary data shows that the Omicron variant is less likely to hospitalize infected individuals than Delta, we need to take into account that this is an emerging variant and not just a faster rate. The belief we may feel from a smaller percentage of Covid patients necessitates that we are more careful about 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 to take steps to mitigate the critical current situation.

- Vaccination Aggressively: There are varying statistics on the percentage of Nepal 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.

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 risk 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 prioritizing 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 desk 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 variant (and our knowledge about them) evolves, 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 10-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, vaccinate, and, to play a frontline role in enforcing community guidelines to reduce 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 mobilizing 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 systems. We commend recent steps taken by the health department in test Nepalis returning from India, and to establish quarantine centres along the border. On 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 wave has passed. 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. Double 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 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 are not at a loss for things to do — now is a great time to use your connections and network 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 have no one else to turn to but this.

The Delta wave, like the 2015 earthquake, 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 pandemic offered us an opportunity to harness this grit and compassion, when it is needed most — before the disaster strikes.

Ramu Kharel is an emergency physician at BLC Hospital in Kathmandu and Ben Ayers is an American clinician based in Nepal for over 20 years.
Clean up elections to clean up politics

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

Shriki 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 electorate seats amongst themselves, and appointed their nominees — making it certain that they will win.

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

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 the kind after the country reverted to federalism. The year also marked the first time sub-national elections were held in 20 years. There were 15.2 million ballots cast during local elections in May 2017. However, the number jumped to 16.6 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 votes after former Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli dissolved Parliament and announced early elections. The registration process resumed after the Supreme Court reinstated the houses 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 nationalist and religious fervour. This has been true for surprising political partnerships, with the Hindutva party 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 the rhetoric to rally 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 promises of performance. But in Nepal, the voting system itself lacks transparency — right from election funding. But electoral reform measures like re-diminishing the constituencies based on population, polling systems and voting rights of diaspora Nepalis who cannot cast votes in person, remain neglected.

There has been much talk and forth about the demarcation of election constituencies. While Article 328 (5) of Nepal’s Constitution states that the delimitation should be done on the basis of population and geography, Muslim-backed activists have pressed for constituencies to be divided on the basis of 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 Sah unhappily, the professor of political 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 delimitation’... it can have a far-reaching implication in the geo-politics of Nepal.

Subedi, who was an advisor to the Commission, contends: ‘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 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 unregistered 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 haven for corruption by businesses, thus undermining democracy, say election experts.

Prominent leaders from across the political aisle, particularly women elected into office like Minister for Women and Children Affairs 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 already 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, Manoj 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 80 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 absentees voting has gained much traction among the Nepali diaspora in recent years. An estimated 4 million Nepalis work, study and reside in 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 electronic 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 post will be predominantly anti-incumbent.

The Sweden-based International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) says 115 of 216 countries in 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 recent national election before the Covid outbreak.

Nepal’s Upper House Chief Election Commissioner, Sushil Koirala, believes there are two options to eliminate election irregularities.

Firstly, there must be an improvement from within — parties and candidates such that undermining practices are turned into the competition during elections.

That once it is not easy to achieve, that the second option is to radically change our current electoral system, and it would be useless to delay in choosing which of the two is more convenient and effective,’ warned in a recent op-ed in Himal magazine.

Ideally also noted that in the end, election irregularities do not matter as much as the people involved in the elections.

‘Elections cannot and must not be held fairly regardless of the electoral system of political parties who propose candidates, are candidates, and there is a guarantee of good governance,’ he wrote. ‘Indeed, elections can only be successful if the majority of voters make informed choices about the parties and candidates instead of only being interested in whose seat they want to show up to vote.’
Things are looking up

After watching Don’t Look Up, on a booting 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 Kathmandu 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 Dassrat Kangchetha.

In fact, if you believe in reincarnation like some of us do, then global warming will cause 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. Breath spartly. 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 Himalayas 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 hangovers 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 hyperventilated grabment has already thought of that.

5. All sodas contain dissolved carbon dioxide, so as happy hour this evening, guzz your double whiskey next.


7. There is an estimated 11 million flatulent cattle in Nepal, and if all of them fell free to pass wind at will, our glaciers do not stand a chance. And we are not even counting pigs 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.
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