

The deal-breaker

- **Sonia Awale**

The date for local elections is now set in stone: 13 May to be held at once all over the country. But the path to voting booths is a political minefield.

The five-party governing coalition is split right down the middle between the supporters and opponents of the American-funded Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) project. Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba's Nepali Congress (NC) and the JSP are for it, while the Maoist Centre and the Unified Socialists are against.

But neither side has the numbers if the MCC's ratification is put to the vote in Parliament. They would both need the UML, which has been playing coy in the opposition even though its leader K P Oli had backed it when he was prime minister. The MCC looks set to be either a deal-maker or deal-breaker.

There are no permanent foes and permanent friends in politics, and this is most evident at election time. And

the MCC is now all mixed up with domestic election politics, and geo-strategic rivalry between the United States and China.

Maaoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Madhav Nepal of the Unified Socialists, are both splinters of the erstwhile Nepal Communist Party and are unsure of their electoral prospects if the coalition breaks. But if it does they can whip up the MCC as an election issue against Deuba and Oli.

The NC is divided about an electoral alliance with coalition partners. Prime Minister Deuba wants to pass the MCC and hold the coalition together, but powerful NC figures want to contest elections on their own. The opposition UML has a strong local base, but will not be opposed to an alliance if it can garner more seats.

The Americans are piling on the

pressure, saying they will wait till the 28 February cutoff date for House ratification, failing which they will pull out. Dahal and Nepal on the other hand, seem to be under Beijing's spell and believe the MCC as a US strategic response to their own Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and would lead to a loss of sovereignty.



January
RIAL
2

The media leak this week of a letter to the MCC in September co-signed by Deuba and Dahal has put the Maoist leader in hot water. Dahal was assuring Washington that he would work for a consensus in the coalition, all the while opposing the MCC at home.


Parliament needs to sit for a ratification vote, but Speaker Agni Sapkota, probably at the behest of his Maoist boss, once more pushed back a Parliament session scheduled for 9 February.

This gives Deuba more time to cobble together numbers in the House

for ratification before the American deadline. If Dahal and Nepal do not go along, he will have to get the UML on board – and that means the collapse of the coalition.

The MCC has therefore now become a bargaining chip for both the UML and the Maoist-Unified Socialists to use against Deuba. But the prime minister knows that Dahal and Nepal need an electoral alliance with him more than he needs them. The Maoists are said not to even have enough candidates to field in local government elections in May.

The \$500 million MCC will be used primarily to upgrade transmission lines to distribute electricity from existing and new hydropower plants, and also connect to a high-capacity line to Gorakhpur so Nepal can sell surplus monsoon electricity to India.

Even without the MCC, Nepal needs the transmission lines since there is a danger that much of the grid capacity of 5,000MW by 2025 could go to waste if there is no network to evacuate the power. 

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13 February

This weekend it will be 26 years since the Maoists took up arms against the state, and 16 years since the war ended. Sher Bahadur Deuba was prime minister in 1996, just as he is now in an uneasy coalition with his erstwhile Maoist enemies.

The war lasted ten years, leaving 17,000 dead. Unlike previous years, preparations for 'People's War Day' on 13 February are muted. This is to be expected -- the warring sides are now not just the state, but are members of the same governing alliance.

Today, both Deuba and his Maoist coalition partner Pushpa Kamal Dahal want to brush the dirty business of war under the carpet. Two commissions set up to investigate war crimes are as good as defunct. Neither side wants to rake up the past, hoping time will help erase memories of atrocities.

Maoist ideologue Baburam Bhattarai presented Deuba with a 40-point ultimatum a day before Valentine's on 13 February 1996. But even before the deadline ran out, guerrillas led by Nanda Kishore Pun and Barsha Man Pun attacked a police post in Rolpa district.

Nanda Kishore Pun is now Nepal's vice-president, Barsha Man Pun has been minister several times. Agni Sapkota may have been involved in war crimes, but he is House Speaker, doing his boss' bidding. Guerrilla commander Janardan Sharma is current Finance Minister.

In 1996, Deuba was too busy extinguishing a rebellion within his Nepali Congress (sound familiar?) to respond to the Maoist insurgency. When he did react, it was with such excess that the Maoists had no trouble with recruitment.

Despite the 1990 transition to constitutional monarchy and the short-lived euphoria, the Maoists felt parliamentary democracy would not end feudalism. It was only possible to end the 'structural violence' of the state by taking up arms against it, and they faithfully followed Mao's 'protracted armed struggle' tactic.

They launched their first attacks in remote Nepal where state neglect, inequity and social injustice were entrenched. But objective conditions for revolt were so ripe, and the state's response so ham-handed, that the insurgency spread like wildfire.

The Maoists wanted to topple parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy, and were backed by forces inside and outside Nepal who shared those goals. Emboldened by early gains, they used the

momentum of the royal palace massacre of 1 June 2001 to take on the Royal Nepal Army a year later. The violence and casualties escalated -- an average of 35 Nepalis were being killed daily by fellow-Nepalis.

King Gyanendra's ill-advised coup of 2005 backfired, and people soon came out on to the streets. They wanted peace and democracy, in that order. A military stalemate on the ground, war weariness, and lobbying by external peacemakers led to a ceasefire.

In the 16 years since, Nepal has gone from war to peace, from monarchy to republic, from Hindu state to secularism, but not much else has changed. Despite a more progressive Constitution, exclusion and injustice prevail, there is chronic instability, impunity, lack of accountability and governance failure.

Those who suffered the horrors of war feel their sacrifices were squandered. Nepal is back to where it was in 1996 -- and even the political protagonists are the same people. In an election year, there is a move to rollback

federalism, secularism and even the republic. History is once more repeating itself as a farce.

Ever since the Shaktikhor tapes in which he boasted on candid camera to have hoodwinked the United Nations by inflating his party's militia strength so he could pocket more compensation from the state, Pushpa Kamal Dahal has been known for playing to the gallery.

He is still up to his old tricks. He co-signed (with Deuba) a letter to the MCC secretariat in Washington DC promising to build a consensus within the coalition for ratification by Parliament. But he lied about it.

The political fallout has been damaging for PKD. Cartoonists (*page 1*) and social media are having a field-day lampooning him. Dahal has built up so much public opinion against the project that he cannot back down. He is now portraying himself as a staunch nationalist who stood up to America.

Dahal had two chances to serve as prime minister, and Bhattarai once. The two have fallen out long since, with Bhattarai now also threatening to split off from the Janata Samajbadi Party (JSP) because he cannot get along with another former Maoist Upendra Yadav.

Twenty-six years after launching his war, PKD's Maoist party is now a shadow of its former self. Most of Prachanda's staunchest comrades have abandoned him. Many may not even remember 13 February.

don't move. Why?...

...Suffering and fighting for democracy, it seems, aren't credentials enough to turn freedom-fighters into visionary rulers. Decades of incarceration, torture and exile don't guarantee that leaders become better managers or more accountable politicians. We had in the past ten years begun to see a glimmer of the qualities we look for in the commitment and responsibility of elected leaders at the grassroots. But many of them are being systematically eliminated, or hounded out of their home villages by the Maoists.

At the national level, governance isn't just about the conduct of the state. Politics isn't just the operational strategy of the day-to-day survival of the powerful. Politics can't just be about clinging to the table under which deals are made. In any country with our level of human deprivation, politics must be more than that. Politics is the competitive process to choose the best and most honest managers so that they can improve peoples' lives.

If they wanted to govern well, our elected leaders would have made the people who elected them a part of the political process that could make their lives better. They would have tried harder to redress the skewed balance of social justice by giving a voice (beyond just lip service) to the voiceless. They would have done all this honestly and efficiently.

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



PRASIIT SHAPIT

On the 26th anniversary of the start of the Maoist insurgency, history repeats itself as a farce.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Local election is the key



Following paragraphs from an editorial published 20 years ago this week in *Nepali Times* might as well have been written today. The problem of poverty, health crises and centralised development persists due to successive leadership failures. That was the case in 2002, and it is in 2020.

But the solutions remain the same, one of which is grassroots

devolution through locally elected representatives who are accountable and know their place and people the best. Now that local election date has been finally set for 13 May, we might make some headway after all. Excerpts from #80 edition 8-14 February 2002:

There is awareness at the highest levels of Nepal's government and bureaucracy about the fundamental reasons for our persistent poverty and chronic deprivation. There is a proven formula for setting things right. There are signs that, despite past inefficiencies, bad governance and lack of transparency, some things have worked and Nepal's development parameters show steady improvement. Yet, things

ONLINE PACKAGES



HIGH ACHIEVER

Watch video of Um Hong-gil and how he has shifted his goal from mountaineering after climbing all the world's 16 highest mountains, to helping Nepali children get an education. Given an honorary Nepali citizenship, the Korean climber says Nepalis are family and this is his second home. Story on *pages 4-5*, video online.



THE LIVING OF JOGIMARA

Watch the 2002 award-winning documentary about the Kotbada massacre of 35 innocent labourers whom the Army mistook for Maoists. Director Mohan Mainali discusses how the military at the time tried to censor the film at KIMFF 2002 in Kathmandu. Read his op-ed on *page 10-11*.

REAL ESTATE

Like all bubbles, real estate prices will pop ('Kathmandu's unreal real estate prices', Ramesh Kumar, #1097). But of course, the top politicians and bankers and officials will have already made billions by then.

Roger Ray

- Do you not think inflation has anything to do with this price increase?

Saroj Bhattarai

- Land in Kathmandu has always been overpriced. I remember being shown a plot in Budhanilkantha which was comparable to real estate prices in London.

Marianne Heredige

- People could buy more luxurious houses and land in Europe for those prices.

Sangita Thapa Magar

- This is a terrific article. The collections of small remittances ultimately become source of large deposits in the hands of the banks and such deposits are used in a sort of Ponzi scheme to fund the price escalation of real estate. This has discouraged investments in the productive sectors and development of entrepreneurship.

Pratyush Kumar

SAND MINING

We have a gang of dacoits, in cahoots with the mafia, at the helm of power ('Hiding their head in the sand', Ramu Sapkota, #1096).

Lal Bahadur

- We need to look who are the politician responsible, they need to answer some important questions.

Alan Roadnight

NEPALI ART

This is great and will go a long way in promoting Nepali art ('Nepali art debut in Venice', *pages 6-7*). Thank you Ang Tsherin and team for all the effort you are putting to focus the floodlights on Nepali art and Nepali artists

Santosh

SNOWBOUND

I'm from Norway, and used to snow ('Snow show in Nagarkot', Amit Machamasi, nepalitimes.com). But after five years in Nepal, I always feel sad to see it snowing there. My thoughts always go to the less fortunate Nepalis who are cold and freezing.

Ben Erik-Ness

- Nagarkot looks so beautiful covered in snow. My time there was pure magic.

World Citizen

MICROCHIPPING DOGS

I do not want to sound pessimistic but a proper guideline needs to be in place before we pursue dog registration ('Microchipping Nepal's dogs', Aria Parasai, nepalitimes.com). We know the reality of 'Open Defecation Free Zone' campaign, we do not want to experience another 'cart before the horse' situation.

Khageshwar Sharma Bhattarai

- This is an insightful piece. Good going.

Kripa Joshi Shrestha

COVID-SUICIDE

Sadly this seems to be the pattern everywhere, not just Nepal ('Suicides: a pandemic within a pandemic', Sonia Awale, nepalitimes.com).

Christine MacDonald

SUBARNA BAIDYA

It is quite remarkable how the body can heal itself, regardless of what medicines or treatment we give it ('The healer of Pashupati', Anita Bhetwal, nepalitimes.com).

Sigmund Stengel

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



Kathmandu's unreal real estate prices

by Ramesh Kumar

Did you know that Kathmandu has one of the highest real estate values in the world? But the urban property value bubble is artificial, and could spell an economic crisis if it bursts. Read this investigative report on nepalitimes.com, and join the online discussion.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

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10 reasons to leave Nepal

by The Ass

The government is making it impossible for illegal sand miners, limestone quarry contractors, and willful defaulters to earn a decent living and flaunt our wealth. How can we live in a country that does not allows us to take someone else's money and run? Check out Ass' reasons to get the hell out of the country.

Most popular on Twitter



Cementing Nepal's future, but at what cost

by Ramesh Kumar

Nepal is now self-sufficient in cement and the construction industry is booming. But as companies exploit natural resources for profit, the environment and people lose out. Visit our website to access full story.

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

The real estate bubble is so lucrative that many companies that have gone bankrupt have managed to stay afloat because of the increased value of the property they own. Ramesh Kumar (@Raw_Ku) investigates the unrealistic prices of land in Kathmandu Valley.



Santosh Pokharel, CFA@asantoshpokharel

Another way to approach this is to ask how can govt, cities and municipalities take advantage of real estate assets (and other assets), monetise and build better infrastructure. Maybe wishful thinking but Dag Detter has been making a case for this for long time.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

#Kathmandu's Unreal Real Estate Prices
The urban property value bubble is artificial, and could spell an economic crisis if it bursts. Ramesh Kumar (@Raw_Ku) reports:



Dr. Kranti Revolutionary @9whochill8

Good Primer about the sky-high and further rocketing prices of real-estate in Nepal. Maybe due to editorial constraints the author has not included a historic analysis of genesis of private ownership of land and its effects but it does help provide perspective to this phenomenon.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

When he turned 50, my father came back and passed on the foreign employment baton to me. His experience in #SaudiArabia ensured that our family had enough to eat and our basic needs were met. My Kuwait experience elevated my family even more. Read on:



Besaraj @joshi_sushma

Interesting story in which this young man says he can't come back to Nepal from Kuwait because he can't deal with the corruption necessary to run any business.



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Um Hong-gil's Project Impossible

Famous Korean climber's next goal after summiting the world's 16 highest peaks is to build schools across Nepal

● Sonia Awale

MONIKA DEUPALA

At 7,300m on the perpendicular south face of Lhotse Shar, considered among the world's most dangerous climbs, Um Hong-gil suddenly saw his Nepali climbing companion slip and fall down the mountain.

A fall at that height and on that rock face would be impossible to survive, but miraculously his Sherpa partner sustained only a leg injury.

It was at that moment that the famous Korean mountaineer remembered his previous failed attempts to climb the 8,383m peak, during which two team mates were killed. He also recalled the 15 peaks he had taken more than two decades to climb.

On his first attempt of Lhotse Shar in 2001, Um Hong-gil was forced to turn back at 7,600m due to bad weather. In 2003, just 150m below the summit at 8,250m, the team lost two members in an

avalanche and the expedition was abandoned. At 8,200m in 2006, the team retreated once again due to avalanche risk.

As he clung to the granite face below Lhotse Shar, he remembered all his narrow escapes with death, and made a solemn promise to the mountain gods: "If I survive this climb, I will use rest of my life to serve the people of Nepal."

That day, on 31 May 2007, Um Hong-gil set a new world record. He finally became the first mountaineer to climb all the world's 16 highest peaks. Unlike Nirmal (Nims) Purja and 44 other climbers who have summited 14 eight-thousanders, Um Hong-gil says Yalung Kang at 8,505m and Lhotse Shar at 8,383m also deserve the status of independent peaks.

No one else has climbed all 16 peaks since, but this feat came at an enormous cost to the Korean. He has lost 10 team members, six Koreans



PHOTOS: UM HONG GIL HUMAN FOUNDATION

and four Nepalis, during his climbs. His ankle was shattered during a descent from Annapurna, and several toes amputated.

It took 38 attempts in 22 years,

14 of which were dedicated to summiting the 14 highest peaks, unlike Nirmal Purja who achieved the same success in a mere six months.

After conquering the 16 highest peaks in 2007, Um Hong-gil kept his promise to the mountain gods and has dedicated his life to humanitarian causes through his Um Hong Gil Human Foundation.

Initially, he did not know where to begin. After a lifetime looking up at peaks, for the first time he turned his gaze to those living below them.

"I realised the reason for inter-generational poverty was lack of quality education," says the mountaineer turned philanthropist who calls Nepal his second home.

Besides his world record, Um Hong-gil also has the unfortunate distinction of being one of the most accident-prone climbers. Yet his love for the mountain and climbing never wavered.

In fact, having survived all those near-death experiences, Um Hong-gil is convinced the gods saved him for a reason: to give back to the people of the mountains.



Turkish-Zach King production

Turkish Airlines has launched a new short film produced with filmmaker and illusionist Zach King. *First to the Gate*, is a fast-paced four minute clip featuring King competing with his co-star, JJ Carroll, for a window seat on their flight. Directed by Jadon Gauthier of WonderBox Entertainment and King himself, it took four days of filming at Istanbul airport with a crew of 90 people.

"We are passionate about providing a platform to showcase and support the work of forward-thinking creators like Zach King," says Turkish Airlines Chairman Ahmet Bolat. "This partnership is a nod to our spirit of collaboration, and an exciting asset that captures the grandeur of our beautiful hub, Istanbul Airport and the essence of the Turkish Airlines brand, in a creative and entertaining way."

With the dynamic camera movement, creative and visual effects, and a dose of comedy, the film captures Istanbul's ultramodern airport facilities, architecture, and the carrier's expansive business lounge offerings. With its smooth cinematic style, the film is the second collaborative project between Turkish Airlines and King, the first being a safety video for the carrier in 2016.

Charmed by Istanbul's uniqueness, the meeting point of East and West, the mix of historic and cosmopolitan, King chose the filming location like his previous projects. King's love for filmmaking began at an early age, and he quickly rose to fame after publishing some short videos featuring 'digital magic' through YouTube in the early 2000s.

Watch film: www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYd0oPnFbA8

prabhu BANK



Tata Nexon

Tata Nexon is the second-highest selling SUV in Nepal for the second consecutive month, behind KIA with 13,816 units sold. Nexon is popular also in India for its sleek design, technology and advanced features is a 1.2-litre turbo engine, and also has an electric variant.

Charging Hyundai

With the growing market for Hyundai's electric vehicles, Laxmi Intercontinental has started installing multiple charging stations across Nepal to add to its 40 current ones across six provinces.



Jagadamba exports

Jagadamba Steel has initiated the third country export for the first time from Nepal following high demand for its colour coated coils and sheets in Southeast and West Asian countries, as well as South Africa.

Buses for CTEVT

The European Union funded 'Dakchyata' project managed by the British Council has provided nine buses to the Council for Technical Education and



Vocational Training (CTEVT) schools which will be used to provide transport to students and instructors, increasing the accessibility of technical and vocational education across Nepal.

NIBL Fixed Deposit

Nepal Investment Bank is introducing Gajjab Cha Fixed Deposit Account to mark its 36th anniversary. Customers can deposit Rs10,000-5,000,000 and the amount will multiply by six in 20 years. Customers can open multiple Gajjab Cha accounts and have a waiver on the issuance charge on credit cards. Loans can also be extended up to 90% of the cumulative balance of the fixed deposit account.



For the native of a country where the highest peak is less than 2,000m, Um Hong-gil says he never set out to climb all the world's highest peaks. But growing up among Korea's mountains was his inspiration.

Born in South Gyeongsang in 1960, at the age of three, his parents took him to Uijeongbu in Gyeonggi Province where they set up a small shop at the entrance of Mangweol Temple at Mt Dobong.

From an early age, he was a natural-born hiker, walking up and down every day to get to his school which was one hour away. He watched weekend hikers climbing Mt Dobong, and this sparked an early interest in mountaineering.

The fact that there was a crag only 10 minutes away from home added to his growing fascination with rock climbing. By 14, he had started training professionally on rock, ice and mixed climbing.

"I was practically raised by the mountains, maybe that is why I have always felt at ease among them," says the climber, who looks much younger than his 61 years.

During his mandatory Korean military service, Um Hong-gil trained with an underwater demolition team in the Navy. The physical and mental strength

required to dive deep for long periods was useful for his future mountaineering career.

By the time he was 25, Um Hong-gil turned his eyes to the Himalaya – not just the range, but Mt Everest. Without any experience at high altitude, he admits it was a foolhardy thing to try to climb the difficult southwest face of Everest in winter as his very first Himalayan climb. Predictably, this 1985 attempt failed.

Um Hong-gil retreated, but was undeterred. He returned the next year with a better understanding (and more respect) for the Himalaya. But once again, he had to abort the expedition when his guide Sirdip Dorje was killed.

It was only in his third attempt in 1988 that he summited Mt Everest via the South Pillar. He made it to the top two more times, from both the North and South sides.

There would be many more failed expeditions and tragedies before Um Hong-gil could achieve his own record in 2007.

He attempted Annapurna I five times before he finally reached the summit in 1999. It is a testimony to the tenacity of the man that he kept his eyes on the prize despite so many failures. During his third

expedition in the spring of 1997, a Nepali guide fell into a crevasse and died right before his eyes.

A year later on his fourth attempt on Annapurna, at 7,600m, his Nepali climbing partner slipped. Um Hong-gil quickly arrested his fall, but his rope wrapped around his right ankle, twisting it. He fainted, and on regaining consciousness found his toes pointing backward.

It took the injured climber three days to descend to Base Camp. He got metal implants for his right foot, and the surgeon told him his mountaineering career was over.

But within 10 months, he was back on the Annapurna to finish the job with the metal implant making a sound everytime he moved.

We ask Um Hong-gil if he would have got more recognition if he was a Westerner, a sentiment echoed by Nirmal Purja in his 2021 Netflix documentary *14 Peaks*.

"I never climbed for fame or recognition," he replied modestly at a meet-up with *Nepali Times* last week. He also does not want to compare his feat with Nims Purja's ascent of the world's 14 highest peaks in six months.

"What we used to do was analog

climbing, there was more chance of things going wrong," he says. "These days it is digital climbing, with better equipment, more accurate weather forecasting, helicopters. More chance of success."

As promised to the mountain gods and with a mind made up about building schools in remote Nepal, he visited Pangboche, the home of Surdip Dorje, his Sherpa companion who died on Everest in 1986. This was the first of the 16 schools he was building to commemorate his 16 climbs.

Since then he has built 17 'Human Schools' and is working on his 18th and 19th in Taplejung and Rasuwa. It has been one school a year, and in the beginning they were concentrated in the mountains.

But with advice from the Nepal government, he has now spread out to other parts of the country to benefit nearly 5,500 students.

When asked why it was Nepal he chose to focus his humanitarian work, given his global experience, Um Hong-gil says: "This is where I gained the most but also where I lost a lot. I want to give back to Nepal as much as I can."

The Foundation does not only construct school buildings, but also supports staff with training,


NEW HEIGHTS: (left to right)
Korean climber Um Hong-gil after
reaching the top of Lhotse in 2001. A
year later, at the top of Everest.

science laboratories, computers and libraries. The schools also focus on developing a reading culture among students, and have extracurriculars including art and exchange programs to provide exposure to the young minds.

After the 2015 earthquake, the Korean alpinist led a Red Cross Korea team to Nepal for rescue and relief. And a year later, the foundation set up a fully equipped hospital in Khumbu.

It is also taking care of four Sherpa families who lost their sole breadwinners in an avalanche that struck a Korean expedition on Gurja Himal in 2019, as well as 30 children of Nepali porters and guides who have died on mountains.

In 2019, Um Hong-gil was granted honorary Nepali citizenship for his dedication to the country, and contribution to educating children here.

He says: "I will contribute to the education of Nepali children for the rest of my time. I have just begun, I'm not stopping anytime soon." 



Watch video of Um Hong-gil and how he has shifted his goal from mountaineering after climbing all the world's 16 highest mountains, to helping Nepali children get an education. Given an honorary Nepali citizenship, the Korean climber says Nepalis are family and this is his second home.

Kathmandu Triennale 2022

Nepal's biggest art festival returns with focus on inclusivity, diversity and local identity



Shraddha Shrestha's Samundra Manthan, 2016

● Ashish Dhakal

After being delayed by the pandemic, Nepal's largest festival of contemporary art is finally being held from 11 February-31 March in venues across Kathmandu Valley. The Kathmandu Triennale 2022 will be held in three historical clusters of Patan, Kathmandu and Boudha with over 300 artworks by national and international

artists, collectives and groups from over 40 other nations, including the Philippines, Haiti, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Burma and France. Initially slated for 2020, this will be the fourth edition of the Kathmandu International Art Festival, as it was known previously, and second in the Triennale format. It is curated by Artistic Director Cosmin Costinas and co-curators Sheelasha Rajbhandari and Hit Man Gurung, and led by its founder Sangeeta Thapa and director Sharereh Bajracharya.

The artists will display a diverse range of media from photography, paintings to installations, and the themes include displacement, migration, the Maoist conflict, tantrik practices and identity. The curatorial concept of the Triennale is rooted in acknowledging the local and indigenous multiplicity of Nepal, moving away from an Eurocentric canon of art history and appreciation. The name of the event, Kathmandu Triennale 2022 is itself a significant shift. "Originally we had planned to call it Kathmandu Triennale 2020, but then the pandemic

hit," explains Sheelasha Shrestha. "That called for a reorientation and rebranding. We risked confusing people outside the country, but it was a step towards reclaiming our place in the art world." The Gregorian year 2020 is 2077 in the Bikram Sambat calendar that is officially used in Nepal. It is also a little playful, since 2077 is still half a century off in the future in the Gregorian calendar. "That was intentional," Shrestha says. "It adds a futuristic element to the show. We wanted to consider time not just as a linear concept." Hit Man Gurung adds that the Triennale is not just an exhibition, but also a research project with long and detailed behind-the-scenes preparation which began in 2019. So, even though the Triennale is taking place in 2022, the number 2077 more closely symbolises the confluence of past, present and future that has shaped it. "It was a strategic decision," Gurung adds. "Referring also to the real beginning of the preparation has helped create a unique identity of the Kathmandu Triennale." Founder Sangeeta Thapa who also established Siddhartha Art Gallery describes the two years of pandemic that re-routed the Triennale as "a wrinkle in time".

"Time stood still, the Triennale stood still. It was important to acknowledge the stillness, the global suffering," she says. So the title stayed. In addition to looking back, the curators also continued the inclusive and diverse practices that have shaped the Triennale since its beginnings in 2009. Nepal and Nepali artists, especially those who hail from indigenous communities, are often left out of the global discourse. The Triennale aims to celebrate the diverse backgrounds, explore interconnectivity between communities, while rejecting colonial-inspired exoticisation of the Himalaya as a mythical utopia. The Triennale will have bilingual curatorial cards, and reach out to schools and people from different disciplines. Workshops, discussions, talks and tours are integral components of the Triennale, and it will blend virtual and physical events. Online programs will take place from 11-28 February before the physical venues open on 1 March 2022.

"The online programs will be very discursive and will focus on contextualising the exhibitions, sharing narratives, presenting publications and thoughts by contributors who have worked on the Triennale," says Bajracharya. The first three days of March will feature programs at Patan Museum, the Bahadur Shah Baithak, Nepal Art Council, Taragaon Museum and Siddhartha Art Gallery. "We will try to go live on social media so that more people can join," she adds, "but we do want to maintain the physical exhibition. There will nonetheless also be a 3D documentation of the exhibitions." Kathmandu Triennale 2022 promises to foster a healthy art ecology and is a non-commercial, non-profit exhibition which is free of charge and open to all. The Triennale is presented by Siddhartha Arts Foundation and Nepal's Ministry of Culture, Tourism, and Civil Aviation, and supported by its partner institution Para Site in Hong Kong, where the precursory exhibition Garden of Six Seasons was presented in 2020.

The Kathmandu Triennale 2022 is also taking place at a time when Nepal is preparing to inaugurate its pavilion at La Biennale di Venezia in April (see opposite). A selection will also travel to Savvy Contemporary in Berlin in June. "We had planned to make a travel exhibition before the pandemic, partnering with institutions all over the world," Gurung recalls. "It is very lucky and encouraging that Berlin is happening now."

Kathmandu Triennale 2022
11 February-31 March
<https://www.kathmandutriennale.org>

Divinity the Samundra Man Singh Shrestha as an artist spanning

As visitors walk down the steps to the Museum of Nepali Art (MoNA), little by little, as though a curtain were being slowly raised, a frame opens to reveal a richly detailed painting of the Buddha and Bodhisatva Vajrapani. The Buddha dressed in golden robes sits with his left hand outstretched. Star-like dots emanate from his palm and reach for the kneeling figure of the blue-skinned Bodhisatva, around whom fiery shapes dance as he receives the sermon. Seen from the right angle, the deities on the wall of the sacred room look like they too are huddling together to receive the teaching. Completed in 2020, this 178cm x 132cm painting *Namasangiti* Teaching of Buddha, is representative of artist Samundra Man Singh Shrestha's neo-traditional body of work currently on exhibition at MoNA. Shrestha's clever, confident brushstrokes add unique aesthetic expression to established iconography of familiar figures from the Hindu-Buddhist tradition without erasing their history and significance.

For instance, the painting of *Saptalochani*, or White Tara, shows the deity surrounded by green wisps that cover her body. Traditionally, the full figure of the goddess is drawn, but Shrestha's rendition gives new meaning to the calming waves of quietude inspired by the goddess. Here, the ancient teachings and depictions are communicated to a newer generation, while retaining their levels of intimacy and intensity. "I did not consciously decide that I would only paint deities," Shrestha explains, smiling widely as his eyes dart to Manjushree on a lotus. "I have always been a believer and it subconsciously took an

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Through art

Shrestha's elevation nning 30 years

artistic direction. When I am finished with the painting, I feel like the god has taken form before me.”

The current exhibition is Shrestha's second solo show, and each painting is paired with its starting study. This encourages the viewer to imagine the steps the painting took from start to finish.

Shrestha's earliest artworks are also on display, adding another layer to the exhibition's focus on journey. These are watercolours of Swyambhunath, and his simple coloured depiction of Laxmi – both dated 1991.

Similarly, the drawing of an Indian superhero Dhruva, the 'Super-Commando', provides a perfect antithesis to his later depictions of Bhairab, Kumari, Vajrapani and Mahakala. Imitation has given way to Shrestha's self-assured style which captures the dynamism of his subjects, revealing an inspired composition of colours and symbolism.

The best example of symbolism in his works is perhaps the *Trikula Nath* (Earthquake series) painted in 2018. The triptych depicts the figures of Sadaksari Lokeshvara, Manjushree and Vajrapani painted across a cracked wall of a monastery. The dangers of destruction loom over beliefs of eternity and compassion, reflecting the contemporary state of cultural heritage in Nepal.

“Art takes time,” Shrestha says. “Many current young artists want immediate results from their work, they want perfection from the first piece they make. But it isn't like that. If I had felt disheartened by my early work, I would not be here today.” 🇳🇵
Ashish Dhakal

*Solo Exhibition
By Samundra Man Singh Shrestha
Museum of Nepali Art, KGH Courtyard, Thamel
10AM-7PM (Limited visitors in the gallery)
Till 19 February 2022.*

Nepal art debut in Venice



Country's inaugural pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2022 aims to take ownership of Nepal's own voice and identity

Nepal is set to make its debut at the 59th International Art Exhibition (La Biennale di Venezia) with a pavilion titled 'Tales of Muted Spirits – Dispersed Threads – Twisted Shangri-La'.

Curated by Hit Man Gurung and Sheelasha Rajbhandari, it will feature the work of Ang Tserin Sherpa. The project is co-commissioned by Nepal's Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, the Nepal Academy of Fine Arts and the Siddhartha Arts Foundation, with support from the Rubin Museum of Art in New York.

“There is a lot of projection onto Nepal internationally, and often our own voices are not taken into account,” Sherpa told *Nepali Times* last week. “The Nepal Pavilion will take ownership of our own voice and identity.”

The pavilion will focus on the contradictory conceptualisation of Nepal and the Himalayan region brought about by the 'fetishisation of a spiritual highland'.

The multimedia installation will feature Sherpa in collaboration with Nepali artists to expose the shared experiences of loss and displacement beneath the Shangri-La of bliss and longevity.

“International understanding of Nepali art remains plagued by a Western conceptualisation of the Himalayan region,” Sherpa says. ‘A pervasive, romanticised vision that frames Nepal as static, pure and untouched by time and modernity. We need to create a space to reflect and re-evaluate these biases.’

The Himalaya is often portrayed in exotic mysticism that masks its complexities and diversity. Nepal's communities are portrayed as wise but primitive, poor but rich in

spiritual wisdom.

“While it has been encouraging and inspiring to see the art scene thrive in Nepal at present,” says co-curator Rajbhandari, “there is still a disconnect in dynamics between the global art world and Nepal. Venice can be a platform to mediate that lack of communication.”

Ang Tserin Sherpa was born in Kathmandu and trained in Thangka painting by his father Master Urgen Dorje. Influenced by his own experience in the Himalayan diaspora and the nomadic history of its peoples, Sherpa's oeuvre has grown to feature a rich vocabulary of Buddhist iconography paired

our history when we ourselves overlook and forget them.”

To renegotiate and reexamine this trend is a larger theme with Sherpa's work at the Biennale.

The application process for Nepal's pavilion at the Biennale began in June 2021, and was pushed forward by seed money from the Rubin Museum in New York. But it was not until November that the work finally began.

“In Nepal there is no proper support system for artists to get international exposure,” Sherpa adds. “But this is not a one-time thing. Funding is still an issue but hopefully this initiative can inspire

DREAM TEAM: The curators of the Nepal Pavilion set to make its Venice debut in April (from left) Hit Man Gurung and Sheelasha Rajbhandari with the exhibiting artist Ang Tserin Sherpa.

Pavilion at the Venice Biennale is a historical moment for the contemporary art of the region,” said Fabio Rossi of Rossi & Rossi who represent Ang Tserin Sherpa. “Though Tserin will be the focus of the pavilion, it will also be a collaborative effort which will bring greater visibility to the diverse artistic and curatorial expressions that can be found in Nepal.”

Jorrit Britschgi of the Rubin Museum of Art, believes that the pavilion will help to raise the Nepali profile as a vibrant country for contemporary art.

“The Nepal Pavilion will provide artists with an invaluable international platform to showcase their work whilst positioning the country to contribute to a broader narrative on contemporary art that moves away from a Eurocentric art history and discourse,” he said

First founded in 1895, La Biennale di Venezia is one of the most visited art exhibitions in the world. The Nepal Pavilion will be presented at Sant'Anna Project Space One, located on Fondamenta S. Anna in the area between the Arsenale and Giardini – the two main venues of the Biennale, which will run from 2 April-27 November.

“It is not that there are fewer artists in Nepal or less production of art, but that there are fewer avenues,” says Sherpa. “Venice is a first and I believe this can inspire to be an even more organic event, bringing together communities, artists and institutions in future.” 🇳🇵



The Nepal Pavilion in progress.

ALL PHOTOS: CHHIRING DORJE GURUNG

with pop-culture references, to reflect the interplay and tension between what is sacred and secular, traditional and contemporary.

This is related also to the increasing commodification of traditional art whereby works are being reappropriated as mere objects to be marketed and showcased.

“These are our heritage,” says Sherpa. “We cannot rely on others to uphold and preserve our culture,

artists, communities and corporate bodies to be involved together.”

This resonates with the burgeoning push for the global visibility of Nepal's contemporary art scene in the international arena, as was seen at the Nepal Art Now exhibition at the Weltmuseum Wien in 2019 and the ongoing Kathmandu Triennale 2077 set to begin on 11 February (see overleaf). “The inaugural Nepal

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EVENTS



Kathmandu Triennale
Attend the online launch of the fourth Kathmandu International Art Festival and view various contemporary art works and listen to artists. The event can be viewed live on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/kathmandu.triennale> and read preview on pages 6-7.
11 February, 5pm onwards

TEDxJamal
Participate in the TED event on the theme 'Explore & Extract' and listen to inspiring speakers share their views and visions.
12 February, 11am-2pm, Russian House



Hiking
Take part in the six-hour hike organised by Let's Clean Up Nepal from Suryabinayak to Bhaktapur this weekend and help pick up waste for recycling.
12 February, Rs200, 9808270315

Fundraising Event
Join 'An Open Heart Heals' charity fundraising event for the Thokarpa Primary Health Care hospital organised by Ek Ek Paila. Call to register.
12 February, 7:45am onwards, (01) 4101066

Sanskrit class
Join a trial class and learn Sanskrit. Register at <https://sanskritwin2022trial.eventbrite.com/>
14-20 February



Momotarou Restaurant
Enjoy a scrumptious Japanese meal at Momotarou. Don't miss out on the soft tofu, pork cutlets and the mouthwatering bento box.
Sanepa Chok, Lalitpur (01) 5537385

ONLINE ARCHIVES

NHDP Virtual Tour
Learn about historic heritage sites through the Nepal Heritage Documentation Project's records of the most endangered historic and cultural monuments. Go to <https://danam.cats.uni-heidelberg.de/>.

Nepal Picture Library
Browse through archived photographs of different stages of Nepal's history on the Nepal Picture Library at <https://www.nepalpicturelibrary.org/>.



Netflix on YouTube
Watch documentaries Netflix has released for free on YouTube for educational purposes. We The People or the award-winning documentary Our Planet might be a good place to start.

Boardgame Arena
At this top platform to play board games online, brush up old skills or learn new ones with the thousand choices available at <https://en.boardgamearena.com/>.



Bookclub
Bookclub takes reading beyond the page and connects readers to talks of authors where they speak about their work. The BBC Radio 4 podcast can be found on Stitcher.

Bungalow Bar and Kitchen
Bungalow Bar and Kitchen is a kid-friendly restaurant offering Thai and other Asian cuisines. The Pad Koa Pao or fusion dishes like fried Calamari are a must.
Naxal Bhatbhateni, 9801068630

Valentine's Day Menu
1905 Suites and Restaurant is a heritage boutique suites with garden dining. It offers a special Valentine's Day menu customised to enjoy a cosy meal celebrating love.
Naxal, 9803396545



GETAWAY



Shangri-La
Head to the idyllic Shangri-La Village Resort, nestled in the heart of Pokhara, and relax with the outdoor Yoga Pergola, massage in Phewa Spa and beautiful Sanctuary Garden.
Gharipatan, Pokhara (061) 462222

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



Hotel Country Villa
The hotel offers the best view of the hills, and mountain range while serving flavourful Indian and international delights.
Naldum Road, Nagarkot (01) 6680127

The Old Inn
Located in picturesque Bandipur, The Old Inn offers a panoramic view of Annapurna range from each one of its room. Book for your stay at the cozy bed and breakfast now.
Bandipur (065) 520110

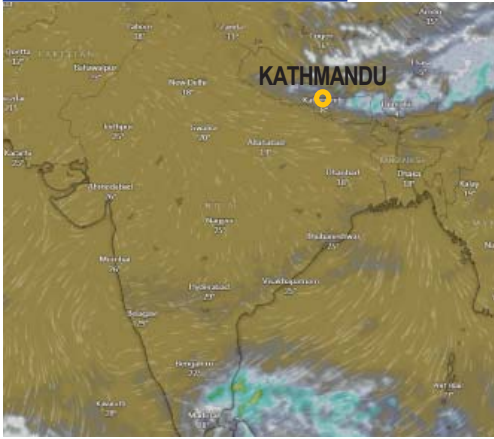
Tiger Palace
Tiger Palace Resort offers wide range of recreational facilities, six different restaurants and an International Casino for entertainment. A must visit place for those venturing south.
Bhairawa (071) 512000



Anatolia
Anatolia's Indian and Turkish dishes are packed with an assortment of spices and flavours. From mutton curry to the Baklava, the dishes will leave you wanting for more.
Thamel (01) 4258757

Mezze by Roadhouse
Mezze's menu boasts of a wide array of International cuisine, a great view of the palace museum and a perfect atmosphere to enjoy food with loved ones.
Mercantile Plaza, Darbar Marg (01) 4223087

WEEKEND WEATHER




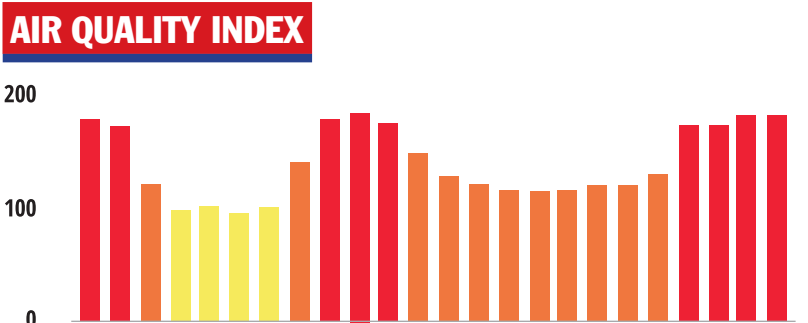
Yet another westerly system is dumping mountain snow and rain on western Nepal on Friday, but the front is moving off into the Tibetan Plateau and will only graze Kathmandu Valley. There is only 15% chance of rain on Friday, and the sun will come out thereafter. The wind direction also means that the maximum temperature will climb to 19°C on the weekend. Saturday promises to be sunny and bright, and things will start to warm up even more from next week.

FRIDAY

SATURDAY


SUNDAY





AQI in Kathmandu from 10am 9 February - 10am 10 February measured at Phora Darbar.
The government has lifted the odd-even rule for vehicles, and immediately we see a spike in the concentration of suspended particulates smaller than 2.5microns in Kathmandu Valley's air. Thankfully, it is getting warmer and there will be a stiff afternoon breeze, which means the winter inversion that trapped air pollution will dissipate. However, the wind is now from the south and that will suck Indo-Gangetic smog into the mountains worsening the Air Quality Index (AQI).


OUR PICK



Flee follows the life of a gay Afghan man in Copenhagen Amin Nawabi, as he shares his hidden past for the first time, about his childhood in Soviet-controlled Afghanistan in the 1980s, and his family's escape after the 1989 withdrawal, first to Russia and then to Western Europe. A moving and engrossing story, this Danish animated docudrama pushes the boundaries of documentary filmmaking, depicting the refugee experience through vivid animation interspersed with live-action footage.

Directed by Jonas Poher Rasmussen and produced by Riz Ahmed and Nikolaj Coster-Waldau, the film has been acclaimed for its thematic content, animation, and LGBTQ representation, with three Oscar nods this year for Best International, Documentary and Animated Features.


कोभिड-१९ विरुद्धको खोप सरकारले निःशुल्क लगाइरहेको छ ।




अबैध रुपमा खोप बेच्ने र किनेर लगाउने दुवैलाई प्रचलित कानुन बमोजिम कडा कारवाही हुनेछ ।


कोरोना विरुद्धको खोप बेचबिखन भएको थाहा पाउने जो कोहीले स्थानीय प्रशासन, प्रहरी कार्यालय, पालिका वा स्वास्थ्य कार्यालयमा यथार्थ जानकारी गराउनु हुन अनुरोध छ ।

बजारमा लुकिछिपी बेच्न राखिएका खोपहरु नक्कली हुन सक्छन् ।






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PRATIBHA TULADHAR

Last month, a small group of people sat in a hall at the Indian Embassy, listening to two women in conversation around a book by former minister Hisila Yami. What was interesting about this conversation was



SUBURBAN TALES
Pratibha Tuladhar

that it was happening between two women who had been on opposite sides during Nepal's Maoist conflict. Hisila Yami, was a former Maoist leader and Ila Sharma, a former election commissioner whose husband was killed by the Maoists.

When snail-mails arrived at my hostel in a hill-town in India in 1996, a friend wrote saying a Maoist insurgency had begun in Nepal. Then, while watching the news in the hall one evening, Ms Chakraborty said: You have a Naxalite movement in Nepal, it seems.

I had little knowledge of what was going on in Nepal. But every time I came home on vacation, meal time conversations spilled with news about the Maoists. My mornings at home began with parents focusing on the *Kantipur* daily spread before them, reading bits of news aloud — much of it about people being killed across Nepal.

Vignettes from war

Two women on opposite sides of Nepal's Maoist insurgency draw on memories of conflict

I received an offer to work at the Indian Embassy's Press and Information and Culture section. My job was to transcribe news, a lot of which was on Army-Maoist clashes. The work took a toll on me and I quit to go back to studies — I had become tired of recording death, not knowing then that there was going to be more.

As a broadcaster, I spent endless hours writing and reading news about bombings and ambushes. I would only meet Maoist cadres much later at the Gokarna Resort, when covering the Government-Maoist peace talks. (Future rounds would happen in Baluwatar, and reporters would all wait through chilly nights, shivering.) When sharing common space, the mystery and romanticism the 'insurgents' had become shrouded in, based on third-hand information, gradually faded away.

A conversation to mark Women's Day: On the dias at Nepal Tourism Board are Shahana Pradan, Kalpana Dhamala and other women leaders. I am a trainee reporter, who ends up filing about how women representing different sides of politics were able to share a platform that day.

On a foggy December morning, I sat at the Shaktikhor Camp talking to Maoist deputy commander Uday Bahadur Chalaune. I wrote about how Maoist rebels were languishing in the camps, while their leaders who had shed so much blood on their way to power, reigned in newfound glory. Eventually, Chalaune and his relatives would choose the golden handshake instead of integration. Was he disillusioned with the long wait? I have often wanted to meet him again and ask him.

In her one-roomed home in Bhaktapur, Sunita Regmi 'Yojana', a former Maoist warrior, offers me tea. She wears a prosthetic after losing a leg during an attack of an army barrack. During our conversation, she tells me she wants their daughter to grow up to have

nothing to do with politics. It makes a good quote to end my story with. I have never met the family again, but have hoped that they have been able to educate the child as Yojana had hoped to.

Jelbang is sunny but cold. Everywhere you turn, you meet someone who lost a loved one to the war. In Thabang, a strange coldness seems to have settled over conversations with outsiders. Who do you trust? Something about the neatness of the place makes me want to stay longer. Sadness looms in the air.

Over the years, Kiran Chaudhary has become the closest subject to my heart. She awaits justice, years since her rape-in-custody by the APF during the war. She comes to Kathmandu once a year to see doctors who are still treating her violated body. Her time in Kathmandu is spent shuttling between hospital and the National Human Rights Commission.

Years on, I have never been able to come to terms with the violence that unfolded during the war. Attending the conversation at the Indian Embassy between women who are a privileged minority — women like me, who went to schools in India and can read and write English text — made me wonder what Nepal's endless political wrangling has really done to propel women into politics.

Sharma, the father of whose children was among the first casualties of the war, said during the conversation that the way forward to a peaceful politics is to make use of the right to vote. She asks Yami how she now feels about the war to which so many people on both sides were lost. Yami pauses, sighs, expresses regret and then says history is evidence that revolution demands sacrifices.

I have become stuck in her pause. Watching Ila Sharma and Hisila Yami was to watch a repeat of the reconciliation process. But it made me wonder: is reconciliation even a thing after what has passed? 🇳🇵

Suburban Tales is a monthly column in Nepali Times.

Nepal's unpunished war crimes

Twenty-years since the murder of Muktinath Adhikari by the Maoists, his daughter pleads for justice

● Sabita Adhikari

My father Muktinath Adhikari was a science and math teacher at the Panini Sanskrit Secondary School in Duradanda in Lamjung district. I had just got into Grade 8 when my mother became ill.

We had to take her to hospital, carrying her in a *doko*. My father was so dedicated to his school that he did not come with us.

Both my brothers were studying with me in Kathmandu at the time. One was in college and the other was preparing for his SLC exam. I had gone home to Lamjung for winter holidays with one of them.

My mother had to go through two operations, and I pushed back my return to Kathmandu till 18 January 2002. My sister had also come home for the Maghe Sankranti festival.

We were all home on 17 January when my grandfather



GULIGO JIA

and his brother came hurriedly to tell us that our father had been taken away by the Maoists for "interrogation".

He had been teaching his Grade 10 science class when gun-wielding militia tied a rope around his leg and led him off.

We did not know what to do. On the one hand, we reasoned, our father had not done anything wrong, had not harmed anyone, so they would let him go. But we had also heard about Maoist executions and feared the worst.

He had told his colleagues

THEN AND NOW: Suman Adhikari, Sabita's brother, is photographed with an old picture of their father Muktinath Adhikari, himself and his other brother. From Chinese photographer Guligo Jia's exhibition 'Reunions' in 2019.

as was led away: "You see the situation. Whatever happens to me, manage the school well, do not damage the future of the students."

We had no news till evening. I followed my brother to look for our Dad. When we reached near the school, someone told us the news was not good, and there was

no point looking for him. I had an inkling that something terrible had happened, and I returned home.

My brother came back at 7PM, and told us that our father had been killed. They had taken him from the school, past our house, tied his neck to a tree with his muffler, and killed him.

When he got home, the whole family went to the site of the crime. My mother, sister and I could not bear to look. I tried to force myself to at least catch a glimpse, but I could not.

The photograph of my father's lifeless body still tied to a tree was on the cover of *Himal* magazine that week. Even after 20 years, I get the chills if I see that cover photograph. I cannot describe what my family went through.

Our father was the sole source of support for the family. Despite his meagre earnings, he used to help others in the village who were in need. But when it was his family that needed support, no one stepped forward to help.

Before the murder, my aunt had told my father he should not put himself in danger. My father had replied: "I have never stolen one paisa from anyone, I have never wished anyone any harm, if I leave the school what will become of the future of my students?"

It later emerged that the Maoists had asked all teachers to

donate 25% of their salary to the revolution. My father refused.

We could not even remove the body, or observe funeral rites because of the fear of Maoists. My brothers conducted some rituals at home and returned to Kathmandu.

There are two Commissions to provide justice to the families of the victims of conflict like us, we even went to the National Human Rights Commission. But even after two decades, there has been no justice. The perpetrators were never caught.

And we hear that they want a blanket amnesty for all war crimes by both sides in the conflict. Still, they address political rallies and blatantly boast that they killed 5,000 people and those who were responsible for conflict-era crimes are walking openly in broad daylight.

We lost our father. Nothing will bring him back. If his murderers are not caught there is a danger there will be another conflict, and there will be other orphans like us.

I just hope no one in Nepal in future has to bear the kind of physical and mental torture that we did as a family.

Twenty years later, my father appears to me in my dreams sometimes. I am so happy to see him alive. But then I wake up, and weep. I wish my dream would never end. 🇳🇵



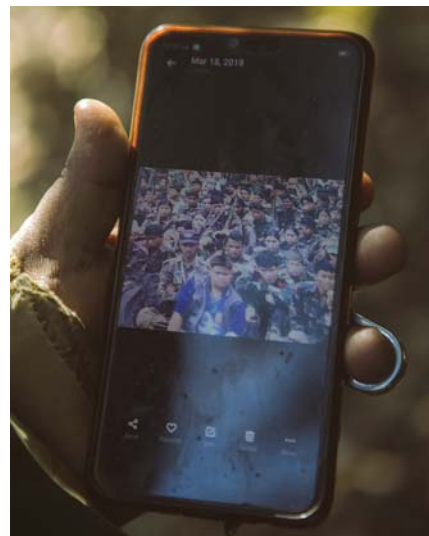
Rhododendrons in Rolpa are starting to bloom in the 26th spring after the war started

Red

● Text and photographs by
Prasiit Sthapit

"You fought valiantly, comrade, sacrificing yourself for the country. Your blood, now, paints the spring red."
Hot Blooded Vengeance
by Junmaya Nepali

"तिमि लडेका थियौ
यस देशमा आफ्नो अमूल्य जीवनको बलिदान दिएर
कमरेड
तिम्रो त्यो रातो रगतले यो बसन्त ऋतुको छाती
रंगायो ।"
तातो रगतको बदला,
जुनमाया नेपाली



Forbidden to remember the

Film-maker recalls the military's attempt to censor documentary on the 2001 killings in Kalikot

● **Mohan Mainali**

It was 8 December 2002, and my documentary जोगीमाराका ज्युँदाहरु (The Living of Jogimara) was being screened at the Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival (KIMFF 2002).

The hall at the Russian Cultural Centre in Kathmandu was packed, and the audience had overflowed into the aisles. As director, I should have been sitting on the front row. But I had another job that day: to stand next to the projectionist and at exactly 10 minutes 47 seconds, mute the film for 20 seconds.

As directed by the military censors, this was to prevent the audience from hearing the narration: 'A few days after the Mangalsen attack, the army arrived at the airfield and opened fire. Thirty-five people were shot dead. Among them were two children, labourers from other parts of Nepal, including 17 young men from Jogimara.'

As a film-maker I had never been trained to mute the sound track during a public screening. My eyes were glued not on the screen but on the digital time counter on the VHS player.

A year earlier, the Maoists had broken off peace talks and conducted simultaneous raids on army bases across the country. The government declared an emergency, and for the first time mobilised the Royal Nepal Army against the Maoists. Till then it was the police that was fighting the rebels.

Today, we know from many countries that crackdowns on the free press in elected democracies can be more draconian than in authoritarian regimes. Twenty years ago, I faced proof of it in that dark auditorium.

I was then with the Centre for Investigative Journalism Nepal (CIJ). Freed from day-to-day journalism, the job allowed me to look at the conflict in perspective, put the daily death tolls into context, and examine the human side of the war, and its impact on ordinary people.

I was following the Kotbada massacre in Kalikot. News reports were sketchy and contradictory. State media said 'many terrorists' had been killed at the under-construction airfield. Another news item buried in the inside pages said that among the 'terrorists' were 17 men from Jogimara in Dhading district. An RSS report quoted MPs Prem Bahadur Singh from Kalikot and



Rajendra Pandey from Dhading as informing the house that the dead were labourers constructing the airfield.

My journalist antennae perked up. I heard from reporter Bhupraj Khadka that a family in Jogimara had conducted a funeral of one of the dead even though it had not received his body from the Army.

As a film-maker, I felt this could be a way to portray the cruelty and senselessness of war. But there was an insurgency going on, and filming would be difficult and costly. I approached renowned documentary maker Dhruva Basnet, who had made the film रक्ताम्मे गराहरु (Blood-soaked Terraces) and we had worked together in many parts of Nepal.

Rajendra Dahal, editor at *Himal Khabarpatrika*, offered to publish the story. In Jogimara, I met 15 of the 17 families who had lost their men in a massacre 500km at the other end of Nepal in Kotbada. The story came out

in *Himal*, and *Nepali Times* translated it in the issue #106 of 9-15 August 2002 (screenshots, left and above). This was a rare exposé of a



is the colour of spring

For most of my childhood, an old photograph hung on the wall of my grandparents' living room in Kathmandu. It was of our great grandfather, at least that's what we were told.

It was only after it was taken down that I found out that the man in it was Joseph Stalin. My grandfather, a staunch Communist in those days, had idolised Stalin because he believed that Communism was the path to a just society.

The discovery that it had been Stalin staring down at us all these years coincided neatly with my own political awakening. For most of the early days of the war,

and living in Kathmandu, I had been shielded from it all.

There had been only whispers back then: two police officers killed in an ambush, seven villagers suspected of being Maoists shot dead. After 2001, the conflict exploded into everyone's consciousness, including mine, with more frequent, unavoidable news of attacks, higher death tolls, and crackdowns on rights.

A stronghold of the Maoists, Rolpa and Rukum were at the epicentre of the war. Between 1996-2006, it witnessed some of the most brutal crackdowns by state forces. That just made it easier for the Maoists to recruit people.

There were many who were

forcibly enlisted, but others wholeheartedly supported the cause believing that 'a system that hinges on the barrel of a gun can only be smashed by the gun itself'.

"They shook hands before heading into battle, telling each other that they would meet in the next life if they were martyred," recalls former guerrilla and journalist Mausam Roka. "I still wonder what kind of ideology made people face death so readily."

For many, the decision to join either side was triggered by a sense of revenge. Nim Bahadur Pun joined the police after the Maoists had murdered his father. Ganesh Khadka enlisted because he

wanted to avenge his father's death at the hands of the police.

Junmaya Nepali was a member of a Maoist-affiliated Dalit organisation from Rolpa. She recalls wandering through the forests with her children for almost a month, hiding from the Army. There were times she had to split a corn cob in two, and give to her children, going hungry herself.

After ten years, 17,000 deaths, more than 1,350 disappearances, thousands disabled and millions displaced, the conflict finally ended in 2006. The Maoists entered mainstream politics and two years later, Nepal became a Federal Republic. The Maoists have been in power four times since then, and

the country has gone through some historic political changes.

History of war is written by the victors. But what do you call a war that neither side won, and the people lost? A People's War? A civil war? An armed revolution? An insurrection? Armed conflict? Or an insurgency?

In Rolpa and Rukum, I met people who fought and suffered on both sides. But what does all this mean today, 26 years after the conflict began, when the enemies are friends?

What of the people who bore the brunt of a conflict fought in their name? Many who willingly sacrificed their lives believed that they were doing it for a just, egalitarian society.

Comrade Lal, once a loyal party member, today repents: "If the war that was so close to being won can be dismantled, of what use is a revolution?"

Assisted by Roshan Maharjan

e Kotbada massacre



conflict-era crime.

We started working on the video footage, and were convinced it would be an important documentation of the tragedy. We had to do it on a shoe-string budget, and the film finally premiered at KIMFF 2002.

There was pin-drop silence during the screening. From time to time, I could hear sobbing in the dark. But I had to concentrate on the approaching 10:47 on the VHS digital clock. At exactly 47 seconds, projectionist Sudarshan Karki muted the sound.

The audience had been quiet till then, but I heard murmurs: "They're censoring." I

had to have a ready answer in the remaining 32 minutes of the film, because the viewers were sure to have questions afterwards.

King Gyanendra had just sacked elected Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba two months prior, and had appointed Lokendra Bahadur Chand as prime minister. The emergency had been lifted, but now the palace and army were in charge.

The Royal Nepal Army had got the district administration and Police Inspector Sukhdev Neupane of Kamal Pokhari station to stop the screening. Neupane called to say his bosses wanted to see the film. I replied

that it was shot in a new format, and it would take time to convert. He said the police had state-of-the-art equipment in its tv studio and that wouldn't be a problem.

The police were not just trying to stop my film, but were putting pressure on KIMFF organisers Basanta Thapa and Kanak Mani Dixit to cancel the entire festival. They finally agreed on a compromise: show the film, but mute the parts the military found objectionable.

When the screening started, I noticed soldiers in camouflage fatigues enter the hall. They had walkie talkies. When the film ended, there was stunned silence, then applause. The lights went up. I strode to the stage to answer audience questions, and the inevitable one: "Why was the film muted in the middle?"

I had prepared my answer, but I saw the soldiers glaring at me from offstage. "The system was working, but it went off for a while," I said, but could not muster the courage for the rest of my prepared answer: "But don't ask me whether it was the sound system that was broken, or the country's system."

I stepped off the stage, telling myself that when confronted with a formidable enemy, it is foolish to wage frontal warfare. It is better to outflank the adversary and go into insurgency mode. The censors had forced me to become a

guerilla film-maker.

The 38-minute documentary went on to be a hit, with two additional screenings during the festival. Many wept openly. Basanta Thapa wrote later in *Himalk*: "By trying to censor the film, have we been deprived even of the right to cry for our own country?"

After KIMFF 2002, the Ministry of Communications imposed a censorship rule on all film festival screenings. Since then, there have been many governments that have come and gone in Nepal. But the state has not been able to resist its temptation from time to time to curb the freedom of expression.

Mohan Mainali is an author and documentary film-maker.



Watch the 2002 award-winning documentary about the Kotbada massacre of 35 innocent labourers whom the Army mistook for Maoists. Director Mohan Mainali discusses how the military at the time tried to censor the film at the KIMFF 2002 in Kathmandu.



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Another Ballantine’s

Come to think of it, it was quite a masterstroke that the Baddies launched their armed struggle in 1996 just a day before Valentine’s Day. They drove home the message: ‘Make love ... and war’. And even: ‘All is fair in love and war.’

Because of this glorious revolutionary history, Valentine’s Day is now affixed on the Nepali calendar as yet another of the thousands of festivals and carnivore carnivals that this country celebrates every year, also ceremonially inducting St Valentine into the Hindu pantheon of 33 million gods. This year, we will mark International Day of Lust with the same oomph and pomp that we reserve for other festivals – by going bar hopping in Jhamel.

(This week’s Backside column is proudly sponsored by a liquor category which has recruited yours truly Brand Amb-ass-ador because the grabberment has decided not to allow alcohol advertising in print media anymore. Statutory Health Warning: reading this column out loud while under the influence may be illegal in some provinces. Hic.)

Ballantine’s Day is a timely reminder to Nepalis of this country’s abiding obsession with sowing wild oats, and tolerance of every possible carnal permutation and combination thereof. Our ancestors, without whose seminal contribution we would not be here to pen these lines today, left ample evidence of their fertile imaginations on x-rated temples as proof of the outstanding and upright people we once were.

Which is why it is a serious lapse for Nepal not to cash in

on the exotica and erotica depicted on monuments and other erections in our midst to promote tourism. Nepal Tourism Year 2020 was a flop because of the pandemic, but we could still meet the target of 2 million visitors in 2023 if we promoted sex tourism. Not like the Thais do it, of course, but by highlighting all the hanky panky painstakingly portrayed by our forebears on temple struts as a labour of love.

This Ballantine’s Day on Monday let us honour far-sighted Tan-trick masters of yore who were not bashful about putting up 3-D porn on their sites. They didn’t hem and haw when it came to depicting the birds and bees, they went hee-haw. They didn’t waste time beating about the bush, they were in flagrante delicto.

And all this can be seen in the ornithological and apiarian depictions on the exterior roof struts of the Valley’s three Darbar Squares. Tourists should be told that a pair of powerful binoculars is all they need to unlock the secrets of Nepal’s holy edifices (From Sanskrit: ‘edi’ = dirty, and ‘fices’ = stuff).

Recent census results show a worrying decline in the number of Nepalis, which is why encouraging copulation is a way to multiply the population. And it is good to see that the Baddies still have a love-hate relationship with their promiscuous coalition partners, and all this pre-election political knoodling is a start.



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