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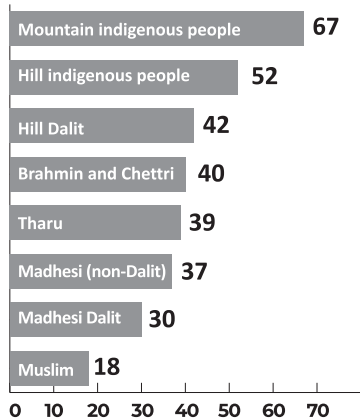
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NEPALI TIMES ARCHIVE

## POWER TO PEOPLE



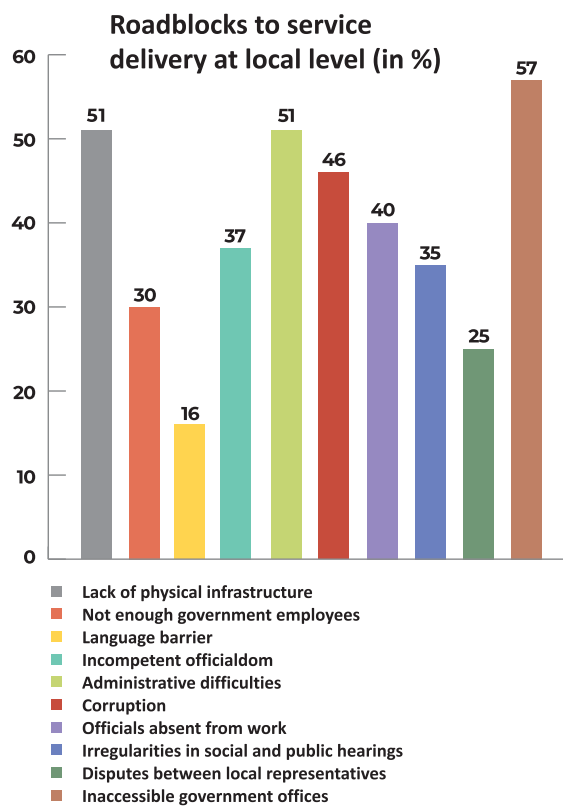
Involvement  
of women and  
indigenous groups  
in local government  
programs (in %)



Male  
52%



Female  
34%



ADAPTED FROM: DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY, TU

### Rabin Giri

The preamble to Nepal's 2015 Constitution reads, '... resolving to build an egalitarian society based on the principles of proportional inclusion and representation to ensure economic equality, prosperity and social justice by assimilating the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious, multi-cultural and geographically diverse characteristics...'

Next month, it will be five years since the first local governments were elected under the federal Constitution. On 13 May, Nepalis will vote for the second time in local polls.

How successful have local governments been in 'establishing prosperity with social justice by addressing the diverse features of Nepali society'? How much has service delivery improved? Is it equitable, and is there better governance? What worked, what

did not? The lessons learnt during the past five years can be a guide for the next crop of local leaders.

If we are to believe the political class and commentators in Kathmandu, federalism has already failed Nepal. They argue that it has just decentralised corruption, and sowed the seeds of social division.

Some of this is obviously true, but local governments have performed above expectations. According to a recent report card, most municipalities scored more

than 50 points out of 100. The three local governments that scored above 75 points were all rural municipalities.

The constitutional provision that women should mandatorily be either mayor or deputy in municipalities and that the Dalit community should be represented has changed the dynamics of how many municipalities are governed.

Local governments are ahead of federal and provincial governments in their ability to disburse development budgets. While the centre was embroiled in a power struggle that paralysed provincial governments, the municipal and ward levels were quietly carrying out their duties (see page 10-11).

Perhaps the best example of this is how local governments handled the Covid-19 pandemic. While the federal government was engulfed by international procurement scandals, it was the local leadership that stepped in to provide immediate relief.

This is not to say the local government were without faults which they cannot just blame on the lack of necessary laws, intervening agencies and the bureaucracy. Many elected officials have also been accused of being self-serving, inefficient and working as party cadres and not as people's representatives.

Learning from this, the federal government with its centralised mindset, meddling provincial officials and non-cooperation from the bureaucracy must change radically. Local governments with their new leadership must also solve past problems.

In their first terms, local governments focused on laying the foundations for development. Now, they have to create jobs, raise living standards, develop human resources and conserve heritage.

The first order of business is to increase the capacity and awareness of the people to question elected representatives so that local levels are sufficiently empowered. The local unit of government is not just the cornerstone of federalism, but also a representation of participatory democracy that connects the state with the people. ■

Feudalism to  
Federalism  
EDITORIAL  
PAGE 2

Local governments  
by the people, for the  
people, of the people  
PAGE 10-11

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# Feudalism to Federalism

Over the past 30 years since the first People's Movement, we have seen that things start moving in Nepal when local governments are empowered. Devolution to village and district development councils in the 1990s forced local leaders to be accountable, especially in service delivery (*see report on page 10-11*).

In fact, everything that has worked well in Nepal till now has the word 'community' in it: community radio, community forests, community women's groups, community-managed schools and hospitals, community irrigation systems. Things got messed up when Kathmandu was involved.

Political intrigue, the Maoist conflict and a return to an authoritarian monarchy meant that there were no local government elections for 20 years till 2017. Their five year tenure is now ending, and the second local elections under the federal system are being held on 13 May in 460 rural municipalities, 260 municipalities, 11 sub-metropolitan cities and six metropolitan cities. Candidates are already on the campaign trail, and this is a chance to prove through performance that they deserve a second term.

The mayors and ward chairs were guinea pigs. They not only had to make up for lost time but also deal with a complex maze of new overlapping regulations and jurisdictions. There was confusion galore on budget, revenue, civil service appointments.

Despite having swept the 2017 elections, bitter political strife within the ruling Nepal Communist Party led to its fragmentation into the UML, Maoist Centre and Unified Socialists last year. The stranglehold of political parties over the federal structure also meant that corruption and infighting got decentralised as well.

All this gave the 'F' word such a bad name that the alternative Bibeksheel Sajha Party in its manifesto even calls for scrapping federalism altogether. Much of this negative public perception is fed by cynical Kathmandu-centric commentaries.

The reality is different. An evaluation by the National Natural Resource and Fiscal Commission (NNRFC) has given nearly all 753 municipalities above pass marks. In fact, the top three that scored more than 75 out of 100 points in the survey are all rural municipalities (*see page 1*). Public opinion polls have shown that most respondents are happy with the functioning of local

governments, especially in rural areas.

To be sure, many municipalities have been captured by corrupt contractors who got themselves elected in 2017. They rented out their own excavators to municipalities they led, awarded themselves road contracts.

This does not mean we should throw out the federalism baby with the bathwater. Kathmandu's Ward 14 is a model for how elected officials at the sub-municipal level should perform. Ward chair Sobha Sapkota transformed her constituency by sorting out traffic, upgrading roads, and ensuring equitable water distribution.

Sapkota noticed women waiting hours for water every morning and made improving supply a priority. She is proof why it is important to have women heading local governments.

In Bhaktapur, Mayor Sunil Prajapati set an example for other municipalities by serving his city's citizens. He set a firm priority on quality education from pre-school to university, and made basic health care affordable.

"Despite confusion and duplication we have seen that federalism has allowed true devolution of governance and service delivery," says Balananda Poudel, Chair of the NNRFC. "In 2017, local governments

had to start from zero and learnt as they went along."

The past five years have also thrown up design defects in the decentralisation project. Instead of devolution some places have faux-federalism.

It is not just Singha Darbar in Kathmandu that sets budgets and earmark outlays for local

governments, but a handful of men in the headquarters of political parties. These vestiges of feudalism co-exist with federalism.

Although we say there are three levels of government, there is actually a fourth: the district administration. Staffed by centrally-appointed bureaucrats, it is Kathmandu's ears to the ground. It controls vital services like citizenship and passport issuance, and other registrations – functions that can easily be done by municipalities or provinces.

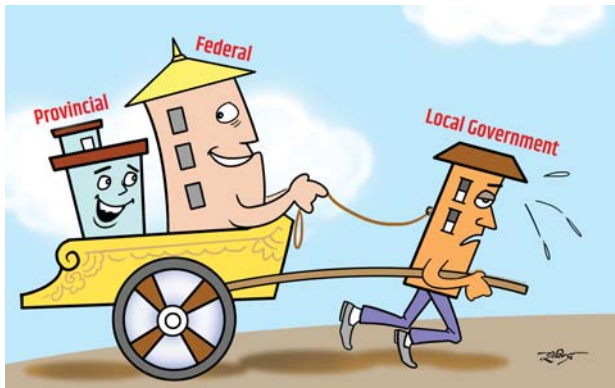
District demarcations, district administrations and CDOs are obsolete and redundant. They do not align with the values of devolution and could be done away with to free us of the centralised mindset of the past.

for an illegal-but relatively safe-abortion in the early stages of pregnancy at a private Kathmandu clinic. Young and poor rural women are forced into the hands of quacks whose dangerous treatments can perforate organs and cause haemorrhaging, gangrene and sterility.

A 1997 nationwide prison survey found nearly 100 women, one in five female prisoners, incarcerated for abortion. An FWLD study report, scheduled to be made public later this month, is damning about the unbending attitude of the court judges all over Nepal on women facing charges of infanticide and abortion.

Even if a woman miscarries – a common occurrence in Nepal because of women's poor health and inadequate antenatal care-she may suffer the same fate. During her fifth month of pregnancy, while she was working in the fields to support her four children, 30-year-old Kumari went into premature labour. Village elders accused her of killing her child and reported her to the police. She was charged with infanticide and sentenced to 20 years imprisonment. Kumari did not undergo a medical examination. She did not have a lawyer nor was she informed about her right to legal representation. When she pleaded with the judge that she had not killed her baby, he said: "If you didn't, who did?"

From archives material of *Nepali Times* of the past 20 years, site search: [www.nepalitimes.com](http://www.nepalitimes.com)



RABINDRA

**Districts are obsolete and redundant, doing away with them will save money and free Nepal of a centralised mindset**

## ONLINE PACKAGES



WATERWAYS

Considered one of the greatest technological achievements of the Kathmandu Valley civilisation, *hiti* are traditional stone water spouts built inside conduit basins below the ground level, where drinking water flowed non-stop. Centuries after they were built, these systems still support the urban populations of Kathmandu Valley and is the reason the cities continue to thrive. Watch this video and read the story on *pages 6-7*.



CHIVA AND HERITAGE

It is said that in the past, there were more *chiva* (*chaitya*) in Kathmandu than there were houses. Unlike temples and monuments that have been preserved and restored, the *chiva* is not recognised by people or the government as part of our heritage and hence are in despair. Read the story on *pages 6-7* and watch this video on what the shrines teach us about the Buddha's life and teachings.

### DIASPORA DIARIES

Dehydration is potentially a big problem for Nepalis in the Middle East ('The loneliness of a long-distance driver', *Diaspora Diaries 3*, #1102). I am certain that many of the sudden deaths of workers at night are due to dehydration. Widespread awareness about the dangers is key.

**Buddha Basnyat**

- *Diaspora Diaries* provide a vivid glimpse of the lives of Nepali migrants, unfiltered. The good, the bad and the ugly, in their own words, capture the reasons why people migrate and why it is a fraught decision.

**Aunohita Mojumdar**

- It was a heart-breaking story of an honest girl who worked as a slave for 12 years without getting a penny ('*Diaspora Diaries 4*', [www.nepalitimes.com](http://www.nepalitimes.com)). She needs justice. There must be international lawyers who could help her get her salary and punish the family.

**Sangeeta Lama**

- Oh, this breaks my heart! I have read so many times of Nepalis, both male and female, being lied to and ending up in horrible situations. I was in Nepal for a short time and found nothing but kindness from the people I met. I hope there is follow-up for her mental health as she undoubtedly has PTSD from such abuse for so long.

**Janis Randles**

- It is the failure of the system in both countries. It is hard to be poor in Nepal but it is harder to end up broke and emotionally broken elsewhere. What is the response of the Nepal Consulate and what are they doing to bring justice? If nothing, such cases will happen again and again.

**Geraldo Fernando Heng**

- Absolutely shocking! How come her employers are not locked up and have not paid the salary that is owed to her?

**Naran Klyphree**

- Important to somehow find legal mechanisms to help recover her salary for all those years.

**Bishow Parajuli**

A migrant's story.

What does it mean to be poor?  
What does it mean to be a migrant?  
What does it mean to be an economic migrant?  
What does it mean to have a family that depends on you?  
What does it mean to have an exploitative employer?  
What does it mean to have limited rights?  
What does it mean to have a life?  
What does it mean to be living?  
What does it mean to be destitute?  
What does it mean to be youthful?  
What does it mean to be hopeful?  
What does it mean to love your country?  
What does it mean to leave your country?  
What does it mean to yearn to see your family?  
What does it mean to languish?  
What does it mean to crumble?  
What does it mean to have a dream?  
When does reality remotely resemble dreams?  
When do dreams get shelved?  
When do you realise it was all in vain?  
How does it matter which country you were born in?  
How does it matter which womb you were born from?  
When does the time stop?

**Swadesh Subedi**

### SAFA TEMPO WOMEN

Really wonderful ('Women in the driving seat', Shristi Karki, #1101). But I hope they are not still expected to go home and do all the shopping, cooking, cleaning, and childcare.

**Wild Yak**

## Times.com

## WHAT'S TRENDING

### New Daraz MD seeks to make an impact in Nepal

by Shristi Karki

In January, Aanchal Kunwar became one of few women in leadership in Nepal's corporate sector, heading the operations of e-commerce platform Daraz. She was formerly with Amazon, for five-and-a-half years helping launch the platform in multiple countries. Read profile online.

**f Most reached and shared on Facebook**



### Himalayans on the frontlines

by Ang Tshering Sherpa

Much of Nepal's Himalayan region is poor and without proper social and physical infrastructure. Now, the double-barrel crisis of climate and Covid has hit Himalayan communities hard with its impact on livelihoods and the natural environment. Details on our website.

**t Most popular on Twitter**



### Diaspora Diaries 4

After being enslaved in Lebanon for 12 years, Sarita Lama finally returns to her home in Nepal with nothing but an Rs5 note that she had left with. This story received many comments from readers who passionately advocated against migrant exploitation and wage theft. Join the online discussion and read feedback.

**Most commented**

### Ukraine crisis hits Nepal economy hard

by Ramesh Kumar

The Russo-Ukrainian war has far-reaching consequences for the country's already shrinking economy. Consumers already have to pay more for all goods from food to gold, and everything in between. And with yet another hike in petroleum prices, Nepal's foreign exchange reserves is fast depleting. Visit [nepalitimes.com](http://nepalitimes.com) for the full story.

**Most visited online page**

## QUOTE TWEETS



**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**

Ukraine, Climate, and Nepal Experts say #Nepal should also use this opportunity to start phasing out fossil fuels, not just to meet its own net-zero commitment at the #Glasgow #COP26 last year, but to salvage its economy.



**Amit Aryal @KtmAktivist**

Being a huge supporter of net-zero pledge, I find it odd that my government signs these commitments with international bodies but rarely makes the same pledge with its own people. #COP26 #Waiting4UHC



**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**

"When I had first left Nepal in 2010, I had a 5 rupee note with me given to me by my sister-in-law. I kept that red bank note with me throughout my time in Lebanon. And that is all the money I brought home with me."



**Sanju Gurung @sanigurung**

Modern slavery continues to happen in some parts of the world. The Nepal government must stop this exploitive route of human trafficking.



**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**

The water supply network built by our forebears are a blueprint for sustainability Kathmandu's ancient water spouts still functioning | @aloktuladhar



**Aashish Mishra @AasMishra**

Our ancestors built systems to last a thousand years and we're destroying them without even giving a second thought. The ins and outs of hitis by the one and only @aloktuladhar dai.



**Suneeta @SuneetaTuladhar**

Please read when you get time. It's a short but powerful article by @aloktuladhar.

## 20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

### Abortion Blues



Up until early 2000s, termination of pregnancy was equated with infanticide, punishable by law -- even if it was a threat to the woman's life. Six

women used to die every day from unsafe abortions and those who were caught could be punished with life sentences. Unsafe abortion was one of the factors keeping Nepal's maternal mortality rate so high.

Abortion was legalised in 2002. It is now available up to 12 weeks' gestation on request, up to 18 weeks' gestation in cases of rape or incest, and at any time if the pregnancy poses a danger to the woman's life or physical or mental health, or if there is a fetal abnormality.

And yet, access to safe abortion is still difficult. Female feticide is widespread due to the proliferation of ultrasound clinics. This week, let us look back 20 years ago to an investigation published on *Nepali Times* in the issue #85 15-21 March 2002 on the subject:

Better-off urban women can afford to pay Rs7,000 to Rs10,000



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# Kathmandu's own 'Eataly'

JhameL's newest restaurant is introducing authentic Italian cuisine to the local palate

● **Sonia Awale**

It may not be part of the famous artisanal food and beverage marketplace chain, but a new JhameL restaurant comes closest to being Kathmandu's own version of Eataly.

L'Italiano opened its doors this week for Kathmanduites to indulge in Italian fine dining with authentic cuisine from Italy that ranks second only to Chinese in popularity worldwide.

One might think the Nepali palate is used to Italian food — after all, the ease of preparing pasta dishes have meant that it has started replacing *dal bhat tarkari* in many households, pizzas are favourites after momos in restaurants.

Thamel's Fire and Ice and Roadhouse pizzerias have been popular for decades in Kathmandu. Establishments specialising in Italian food are aplenty, perhaps only behind Indian and Chinese restaurants. So what does one new Italian restaurant add to Kathmandu's growing food culture?

Italian food has many avatars in Nepal. So much so that locally served pizza, pasta, risotto and lasagne do not taste anything like they are supposed to, says Italian chef Andrea Cannalire, a Michelin star chef based in Ostuni in Italy, close to Francavilla Fontana where he grew up.

While he was working in Phuket last year, he found out that a restaurant in Kathmandu was looking to rebrand itself.

Through a common friend, Cannalire agreed to visit Nepal and was here for over a month training Nepali chefs before the grand opening of L'Italiano this week.

"Italian cooking that has evolved in Kathmandu has gone through some major transformation. It has reached a point where I'm having to introduce the traditional way of doing Italian cooking," says Cannalire, who has over a decade-



Chef Andrea Cannalire was in Nepal for a month training Nepali chefs on Italian cuisine.

ALL PHOTOS: L'ITALIANO



long experience in gourmet cooking. "Chef as well as the clientele, have to be educated on what authentic Italian is."

During his month touring various restaurants in Kathmandu and Pokhara, Cannalire got to like the Nepali *Thali* and *Phaparko Dhido*. However, he noticed that many eateries overdo spices so that it is difficult to savour the true flavour of food, for example in preparing mutton curry. This is why he has taken special care to train Nepali chefs in L'Italiano to use

spices in moderation.

A big part of the mutated taste of Italian food in Nepal is the lack of genuine ingredients. Kathmandu markets do not have anything close to the real mozzarella, and the prosciutto is not the genuine ham from Parma.

Similarly, lasagne is traditionally made with ragu that has beef mince in it, which means most restaurants would have modified it.

"Nepalis seem to love chicken topping in pizza, but you would never do that in Italy," quips

Cannalire, who got interested in cooking from a young age.

"Every time I went to restaurants with my family when I was a boy, I used to wonder what went on behind the doors that lead to the kitchen," recalls Cannalire. "This extended even to the games we played as a child, I used to be fascinated even with a play kitchen my cousin had."

Cannalire first worked in restaurants around his hometown, but he started exploring and interning at different places,

improving his culinary skills. Before long, he found his calling in gourmet cooking and returned home to southern Italy to work in a hotel restaurant nearby.

The newly launched L'Italiano is housed in the same space and is owned by some of the same people behind The Vesper House. The establishment itself has gone through several alterations in both décor and food over the years.

Vesper Café and Restaurant had carved a niche in Patan's JhameL restaurant neighbourhood. After its quaint red mud-brick house was damaged in the 2015 earthquake, it reopened almost immediately next door to continue to cater to wine and cheese lovers.

Post-pandemic, it has reinvented itself into a fine-dining Italian restaurant with new décor, and, with inputs from Cannalire, will specialise in pasta dishes, hand-cooked and in genuine Italian *al dente* style, so that the pasta has a little bite to it.

Ashank SJB Rana of L'Italiano realises the challenge of maintaining the high-quality set by the Italian chef, and plans to bring Cannalire back every year for refresher training for his chefs.

"To have good quality food, you don't always need to import ingredients, you should know how to play with locally sourced produce as well," says Rana who studied wine management at Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

The Vesper House suffered much like any other establishment during the initial days of the pandemic. But as the impact of the Covid-19 declined, people started dining out, its usual expatriate clientele was largely replaced by Nepalis.

The Vesper House is one of the biggest importers of fine wine in Nepal, where Merlot and Chardonnay remains popular. Its extensive wine cellar with large collection from Australia, Spain, Germany, Italy and France will continue to be a part of the new establishment. 🇳🇵

## prabhu BANK

### Istanbul stopover offer

Turkish Airlines has resumed its Istanbul stopover offer for passengers from Nepal and other countries who have lengthy transfer times. Halted during the pandemic, the carrier is re-starting the service with 1-night stay in a 4-Star hotel for Economy Class and 2-nights stay in a 5-Star hotel for Business Class. Passengers also have the option to stay at partner hotels at as low as \$49 per night.



Turkish Airlines General Manager Bilal Ekşi says: "Passengers can also increase the length of their initial free-of-charge accommodations at contracted hotels and discover even more of Istanbul."

### Helping hands

Indian Embassy and Nepal-India Women Friendship Society have signed an agreement to distribute 3,000 LPG gas stoves and cylinders to under-served households in Sarlahi, Rautahat and Saptari districts, and Rs20.49 million in financial assistance. Meanwhile, the ground breaking ceremony of the India-funded Rs317 million seismic-resistant Tribhuvan University Central Library was also held recently.



### Himalaya turns 7

For its seventh anniversary, Himalaya Airlines has started a photo competition "Click and Share with H9" to mark its 7th anniversary. One person has a chance to win a round trip ticket to any H9 sector except China.

### Samsung Galaxy22

Following record high pre-orders, Samsung Electronics has launched the Galaxy S22 series in Nepal. The S22, S22+ and S22 Ultra come with one year breakage insurance, 0% EMI and exchange facility up to Rs4,000.

### Top golfers

Bhuvan Nagarkoti and Sanjay Lama have advanced to the finals of the Surya Nepal NPGA Match Play organised by Nepal PGA, which carries prizes worth Rs200,000.

### Docsumo fund

Docsumo, a document AI startup, has raised \$3.5 million in seed capital to expand in Nepal and India, as well as client base in North America. The company employs data scientists and engineers to help businesses by converting financial documents into actionable data for decision-making.

### VW in Biratnagar

Pooja International organised a meet and greet in Biratnagar where customers got to test drive its Taigun model and were also offered free servicing for 4 years, introductory prices on car models, and 1 time replacement on wear and tear items.

### Golchha EV

Golchha Group has provided financial support to Team Sireto, students from Thapathali Campus, to build an electric vehicle. The team competed in the International Competition Shell-Eco Marathon in October 2020 and has built 'Maicha' which can achieve 150+ km range from 1KWh battery charge.



### Global Gas

Global IME bank and Gas Dealers Federation Nepal have agreed to provide a payment method and QR code for buying or selling gas. The payments will be done through Global IME's Smart Choice Technologies or Fonepay.

### Exchange Camp

Syakar Trading will organise an exchange camp for bikes and scooters in Kathmandu till 31 March. Customers can exchange two-wheelers of any brand for a Honda and receive Rs7,000 exchange bonus.

### Fibernet's 100,000

DishHomeFibernet, a subsidiary of DTH company Dish Home has reached 100,000 users in two years of its operation.

### Michelin Tyre

Michelin has been recognised as the world's most valuable tyre brand by Brand Finance, receiving a score of 85.8 out of 100. It is distributed and imported by Sipradi Auto Parts in Nepal.

### Hyundai scheme

Laxmi intercontinental has launched the Hyundai Best Buy Scheme on the purchase of every Hyundai vehicle valid until 2 April. Customers can receive bonus up to Rs50,000, free comprehensive insurance and road tax for a year, exchange bonus up to Rs30,000, and cash discount of Rs40,000.



### Ncell sports field

Ncell has completed the reconstruction of Lainchaur Ground featuring a football field, basketball court, and children's play area. The telecom company will maintain the ground for the next 2 years.



# Another baby saved

Dedicated birthing attendants are at the frontlines, conducting safe deliveries under difficult circumstances

● Naresh Newar

Puspa Pandhak was just finishing her duty at a rural hospital in Tehrathum district last week when a 19-year-old woman was brought in on a stretcher, writhing in pain.

As a birth attendant nurse, Pandhak had performed more than 100 safe deliveries in the past five years, but this case was the first breech she was having to deal with.

“As soon as I saw the position of the baby, we decided not to take the risk and take her to Tehrathum Hospital,” Pandhak says.

But, as is often the case in rural Nepal, they could not get an ambulance. The condition of the mother and baby was deteriorating, and every second counted.

Luckily, a four-wheeler jeep just happened to pass by and gave them a lift. Pandhak and fellow nurse Sumnima Khapung got on with their patient. The road was bumpy and dangerous, made worse by the pitch black night and rain. It was already 9:30PM, and they were nowhere near their destination.

“It was a rough ride, and we

were being thrown about inside the car, but I tried to reassure the young expecting mother since this would be her first baby,” Pandhak recalls.

In the front seat, the patient’s mother and husband were panicking, and that was not helping at all. Then driver Dinesh Bhattarai also started getting unnerved, and that was not a good sign.

It was now nearly 11PM, and it did not look like they would get to the district hospital in time. Pandhak made the tough decision to stop the journey in the small bazaar of Tukre.

“The trip was becoming too long due to the poor road condition and I knew we would never reach the hospital where an emergency doctor and midwife team were on standby to receive us,” Pandhak recounts. “I was very nervous, but knew that the mother was in a bad shape and I needed to help somehow.”

The two nurses then decided the safest course was to deliver the baby inside the car. In a breech case, the baby’s body is upside down, which means the head is stuck. Pandhak and Khapung tried to help the mother push the baby, while aware that this could injure her.



DINESH BHATTARAI

**HOME DELIVERY:** Nurses Puspa Pandhak and Sumnima Khapung delivering the baby inside a jeep late at night on 3 March, after concluding that they could not reach the Tehrathum district hospital in time because of the bad road.

Puspa Pandhak doing an ultrasound on an expecting mother at her rural birthing centre in a remote village in eastern Nepal (below, left).



Finally, the nurses managed to carefully pull the baby out, without the mother suffering a serious tear.

“I cannot describe the elation and relief that we felt, and I am sure the mother and her relatives

were much happier than we were,” Pandhak told us.

After the *en route* delivery, the jeep with one extra person on board, continued the journey to Tehrathum District Hospital. When they got there just past midnight, the emergency team could not believe what they saw.

Says Pandhak, “They were so proud of us as they took charge of mother and baby at the birthing facility. It was a nerve-wracking experience, but it all ended well.”

Pandhak and Khapung are on the frontlines of Nepal’s efforts to reduce maternal and infant mortality. Thirty years ago, 10 in 10,000 women in Nepal used to die in childbirth. That number has come down to 2 in 10,000. But progress has now flat-lined, and 1,500 mothers still die during delivery

every year in the country.

Even though such individual acts of heroism never make it to the news, it is the work of Female Community Health Volunteers, dedicated Skilled Birth Attendants (SBAs) like Puspa Pandhak and Sumnima Khapung, and local governments that are helping save lives every day across Nepal.

In this case, it was also the support for renovating and equipping the birthing centre and the midwife training provided by the One Heart Worldwide (OHW) to Menchhhyayem Rural Municipality that helped the two nurses.

“I still feel so relieved and excited that we saved the lives of the mother and the baby, and it was also a life-changing moment for me,” Pandhak says. “This is the greatest reward for a nurse.”

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# Kathmandu's ancient water s

The water supply network built by our ancestors are a blueprint for sustainability

● Alok Siddhi Tuladhar

Many great cities and civilisations in world history have collapsed when their water systems ran dry, forcing their populations to relocate. But in Kathmandu Valley, the cenuroes-old *hiti* water supply systems were so robust that its cities never suffered a shortage. In the 6th century CE, Kathmandu was the only city in the world that had mastered the technology to sustainably provide drinking water to its inhabitants deep in core residential areas. Free flowing, safe drinking water was available in the city round the clock, throughout the year.

Generations of rulers, merchants and community leaders built a network of ponds, canals, underground filtration systems and artistic *hiti* conduits as a public service. Since ancient times, kings to common citizens regarded water as a public utility.

Making water accessible to all living beings, humans, plants and animals, was considered a social and religious duty. Many mandatorily offered water to the gods as part of the daily ritual worship.

Kathmandu Valley, surrounded by a densely forested rim of



An ornate bronze hiti in Patan that has gone dry.

LIEW YU WEI/NEPALI TIMES ARCHIVE

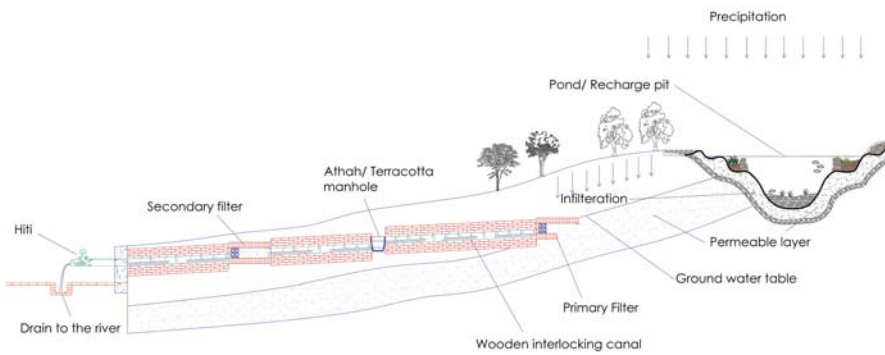
mountains, provides the ideal geographical condition for natural flow of water downwards from the vast rainwater catchment zones.

The *hiti* system taps into the natural subsurface aquifer deposits, and channels that water to the end-point conduit. The system takes advantage of elevation differences for natural purification and a controlled flow of water based on gravitational force alone.

“Considering that 70% of the terrain in Nepal is mountainous, the geography of the hills and valleys

is naturally suitable for a water supply technology that depends on gravity alone, not requiring the input of any form of external energy,” explains civil engineer and researcher Hrishav Raj Joshi. “This was leveraged to its fullest when our ancestors designed the *hiti* system more than 1,500 years ago.”

This indigenous technology reached its peak during the Lichhavi period (ca. 200-879 CE). The Mallas (1200-1769 CE) largely expanded the *hiti* system. One of



Hiti cross section.

ILLUSTRATION: HRISHAV RAJ JOSHI

It is not just the Valley's main temples that need to be protected, but also the small neighbourhood stupa

● Sahina Shrestha

Kathmandu's skyline used to be outlined by slanting tile roofs and gilded temple spires, and the towns were surrounded by gold and green terrace fields.

All this is now a thing of the past. The Valley is a vast concrete maze of apartment blocks and haphazard highrises under a perpetual miasma of pollution.

There was an age when the very name 'Kathmandu' evoked a tranquil townscape trapped in time, nestled in an emerald valley amidst a backdrop of icy Himalayan peaks shining against an azure sky. How different from the chaotic, noisy and dirty Kathmandu of today.

Amidst the Valley's famous temples and monasteries were lesser known *chiva* shrines that dotted just about every neighbourhood of the towns. Also known as *chaitya*, these small sacred stupa were also an important part of the Kathmandu Valley civilisation.

While most of the temples and

monuments have been preserved and restored, the *chiva* have slowly disappeared — devoured by relentless urban expansion, road widening projects, privatisation of communal land, as well as human greed and neglect.

Now a group of heritage conservationist is making an inventory of these votive structures that were once so ubiquitous in the semi-public and public spaces of the Valley so that they can be restored and protected from further destruction.

“One of the problems is that people and the government do not recognise the *chiva* as part of our heritage,” explains Amar Tuladhar of the Chiva Chaitya Organisation. “If a temple is damaged, it will be restored, but a *chiva* most likely will not. These votive structures are an integral part of our identity.”

Call them *chiva*, *chaitya* or stupa, they all represent Buddhist altars that serve as a network of shrines that were indispensable features of Kathmandu's ancient courtyards. The shrines are still worshipped everyday and are the focal point of many rituals.

Sumati Bajracharya, Buddhist scholar and author of the book *Stupa ra Chaitya (The Origin of Buddhist Art and Architecture)*, explains that during the time of Buddha, a place of rest or meditation was referred to as *chaitya*. Later they became memorials for deceased family members.

“Before Buddha achieved *nirvana*, he instructed his corporal relics to be buried in stupa or earthen mounds,” she says. “Buddhist scriptures also mention that



The chiva in Bare Chuka was missing its finial and was in a poor condition. Last September, Chiva Chaitya Organisation restored the stupa raising

building a *chaitya* accrues merit to donors. So people built them wherever they migrated.”

*Chaitya* are not exclusively funerary monuments, but represent *dharmakaya*, the transcendental form, and hence are the focus of public worship. “*Chaitya* can be built



anywhere, whether a private, a semi-public or a public space, but it has to be accessible so that people can circumambulate them,” says Bajracharya.

Growing up in Bhindyo at the historic heart of Kathmandu, Aprila Sthapit had heard



# Spouts still function



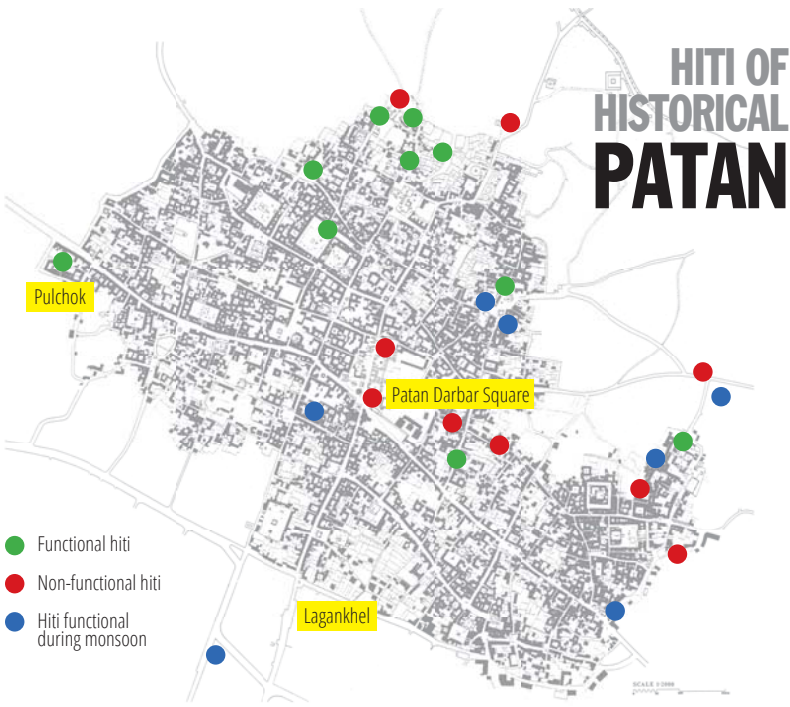
Locals queue up at a hiti in Thamel to fetch water for household use.

ALOK SIDDHI TULADHAR



The dilapidated Tindhara Hiti in Kathmandu.

BIKRAM RAI / NEPALI TIMES ARCHIVE



the oldest documented *hiti*, Mani Hiti in Mangal Bazar, built in 570 CE by an influential Bharavi, is still functioning today with very little maintenance and human intervention.

Sushil Shrestha, who has two decades of experience in restoring *hiti* and ponds, explains why the system lasts many centuries, with minimal cleaning and minor periodic maintenance requirements.

He says, “All components of the *hiti* system were built using locally available skill and materials like soil, wood, bricks and stone. This ensured self-sufficiency, sustainability and longevity.”

The builders applied an ingenious biological intervention to keep the channels and spouts running sustainably over centuries. The drainage, when blocked, was cleaned with live frogs, and snakes were sent down the narrow drains, and their wriggling motion as they forced their way out of the lower end of the drain would clear up the obstruction.

Public open spaces played an important socio-cultural role in Kathmandu’s urban fabric. The

classic Nepal Bhasa song *Rajamati Kumati*, mentions three different *hiti* in Kathmandu. The beautiful Rajmati slips and falls while fetching water from one of these stone spouts.

Adding beautiful images of different gods to the *hiti* made it aesthetically pleasing as well as religiously significant. This protected the structure from intentional harm.

Most *hiti* had an intangible support system called *guthi* – an association of individuals and families from a community created to undertake the specific social and cultural activities – that took care of its annual cleaning and maintenance of the water supply network.

The *Guthi* usually had a large endowment of agricultural land, the returns from which paid for its activities adequately. Unfortunately, most *Guthi* have died away, also leading to the disappearance of many *hiti*.

The uncontrolled and unplanned urbanisation of Kathmandu in the last few decades is threatening the existence of

this age-old system. Most public open spaces in and around the Valley that functioned as the rainwater catchment areas are now encroached upon or heavily concretised. The underground structures for piping in and filtering the water have mostly been destroyed by haphazard construction.

This has led to the rapid deterioration and dysfunction of the stone spouts, resulting in an acute water shortage in neighbourhoods. This is further underscored by the recent natural disaster in the headworks of the Melamchi drinking water supply mega project, construction of which began about 20 years ago at a cost of \$464 million.

Supriya Shrestha, the current Miss Nepal Earth, has been working on the restoration of an ancient *hiti* in Dhobi Chaur in Kathmandu in collaboration with the local government. The numerous spouts there were a source of livelihood for the Dhobi community, whose traditional occupation is laundry.

Says Shrestha, “Reviving a few *hiti* in Dhobi Chaur can lead to a massive movement across Kathmandu Valley so communities rehabilitate *hiti* in their own areas. This can eventually lead to a shift in public opinion to preserve the remaining spouts, restore the ones that have dried up, and build new ones as a sustainable, cost-effective solution to Kathmandu’s worsening drinking water problem. Reviving the *hiti* can supplement the city’s modern water supply system, which has heavily fallen short of the demand for a long time.” 🇳🇵

**Alok Tuladhar** is a conservation activist. He can be reached at [aloktuladhar@gmail.com](mailto:aloktuladhar@gmail.com).



Considered one of the greatest technological achievements of the Kathmandu Valley civilisation, *hiti* are traditional stone water spouts built inside conduit basins below the ground level, where drinking water flowed non-stop. Centuries after they were built, these systems still support the urban populations of Kathmandu Valley.

# Save their shrines



Raising it to an appropriate height.



CHIVA CHAITYA ORGANISATION

that her ancestors had built a *chiva* near their neighbourhood Bhimsen temple. When her father was still alive, he maintained the stupa. But over time, it has fallen into disrepair.

As the city expanded, the *chiva* somehow

ended up next to a road. Careless drivers often bumped into it, chipping away bits of the structure. Like other residents of the area, Sthapit would offer prayers every morning at the shrine but did not think much about repairing it.

Last month, Chiva Chaitya offered to restore the stupa. “When they approached us, we did not think they would actually restore it,” says Sthapit. “But they did all the work and did not even ask for money.”

It was while they were on a walk one day that Pramodh Kasaa, Prabin Shakya and Amar Tuladhar stumbled upon a *chaitya* at the Shobha Bhagwati neighbourhood that was missing a finial. Something had to be done, so they decided to form Chiva Chaitya and began first by conducting a stupa census, counting the shrines, and even recording details like who built it and when.

For the next few years along with two other team members, Suban Tuladhar and Ashish Manandhar, they dedicated their holidays and free time photographing *chaitya* in different parts of the Valley. They also tried to make locals aware of the value of these structures.

Soon, they started receiving requests to restore damaged stupa. In December 2020, Chiva Chaitya completed the first restoration in Swayambhu. To date, they have completed minor and major restorations on 25 *chiva*, and have drawn up an inventory of over 1,200 stupa which they are geolocating on an interactive online map.

In the initial days, team members put their own money into this important work. Then they started crowdfunding. Now, as their work has become better known, local communities pitch in. In 2020, the group got support from the World Monument Fund which also included the *chiva* and *chaitya* of Kathmandu on its 2020 watchlist.

“We noticed that even when people were aware of the importance of *chiva* and wanted to repair it, they did not have the budget or did not know whom to approach, so we simplified the process for them. We did not

want the work to stop because of money,” says Prabin Shakya of Chiva Chaitya.

When Ishwar Man Dangol of Pyapha wanted to restore the *chiva* in his *chuka*, he realised that the local ward office did not have a dedicated fund allocated for it, he did not even know where to find the right artisans to work on it.

The family which built the *chaitya* had long since moved away, and the property surrounding the courtyard was inherited by eight others. After he found out about Chiva Chaitya through a friend, he got in touch with them. The team surveyed the site, held a meeting with the locals and restored it.

“We were worried about the cost but they did not even bring it up. After the restoration, we locals felt that we needed to do something to support them so we talked to the ward office to compensate them,” says Dangol. But it has not been easy for the team. Some projects had to be abandoned because of lack of local support.

“Engaging the community is very important to us,” says Amar Tuladhar. “In the long run, it is imperative that they understand the importance of *chiva* in their locality and work to conserve it. We want to pass the baton to local groups eventually.”

In future, the team wants to work on a visitor’s centre dedicated to *chiva*, where children and adults alike can learn more about these stone structures, their meaning, history and cultural relevance.

Says Tuladhar, “Kathmandu Valley is still a museum where you can not only see but touch and worship centuries old artefacts. They are a part of our identity and we need to look after them for the coming generation.” 🇳🇵



EVENTS

Nagdaha Cleanup

Nagdaha Cleanup campaign this weekend will be collecting waste from the cultural, religious, and tourist sites. Be the part of the campaign and make a difference.

19 March, 8am-10pm, Nagdaha, 9851041260



Autism Awareness

Participate in this Autism Awareness workshop by AutismCare Nepal and find out more about the condition that afflicts one in every 160 children.

19 March, 11am-2pm, AutismCare Nepal, Harisiddhi

Bungamati Toribari Hike

Be one with the nature with yellow mustard fields in breezy swathes combined with Newa culture of Khokana and Chobar towns. Bonus: gorgeous views of Kathmandu's skyline. Vonkathmandu.com has details.

26 March, Rs3,000, Rs500 for kids, +977 984-3376717 (whatsApp)



Beekeeping

For every thing you need to know about bees, honey and starting a small business, join the 5-day beekeeping workshop led by Charlie Baba and Sitaram Acharya. Message for more details.

21-25 March, Rs20,000, Panauti, Kavre

Himalayan Hydro Expo

Meet workers, engineers and innovators leading Nepal's hydropower sector at the Himalayan Hydro Expo.

1-3 April, 9am-5pm, Bhrikuti Mandap, Kathmandu, 9808350109

DINING



Taza Treats

Visit for the best Syrian treats and delicacies. Don't miss out on the baklavas.

10am-6pm, Bakhundol, 9801114002

ONLINE ARCHIVES



Forest 404

A nine-part environmental thriller podcast set 200 years into the future where forests do not exist anymore. Each episode is followed by an expert discussing the theme of the episode. Available on Apple podcasts, Spotify, and Google podcasts.

Boardgame Arena

Brush up board game skills or learn new ones with the thousand choices available at <https://en.boardgamearena.com/>, the top platform for online board games.

Aji's Podcast

Listen to inspiring and extraordinary life stories from Nepal's elderly. Find Aji's Podcasts on YouTube, Apple Podcasts, or Stitcher.

TED-Ed

Find hundreds of animated lessons on topics ranging from visual arts to mathematics. Go to the website for details, or directly to TED-Ed's YouTube channel and start watching.



Tasty

If there was one app that was made for millennial chefs, it's Tasty. The Tasty website and the mobile app has hundreds of recipes to choose from, and quick and easy how-to videos. Broaden your culinary horizons

GETAWAY

Peacock Guest House

Housed in a World Heritage Site, the 3-storied Newa-style building offeres splendid views of the Dattatreya Square and the Bhimsenthana temple. Food and accommodation are top-notch too.

Bhaktapur, (01) 6611829



Hotel Barahi

Located just beyond the banks of Phewa Lake, Hotel Barahi offers stunning views and luxury rooms decorated in earthy tones.

Lakeside, Pokhara, (61)460617

Bandipur Kaushi Inn

A small, rustic place to stay in the idyllic village of Bandipur, complete with cultural diversity and traditional architecture.

Bandipur, Tanahu, (065) 520083



Kasara Resort

Immerse yourself into the lush greenery of Chitwan or partake in a wide range of activities the resort offers from cycling to wildlife viewing. A perfect getaway with one's family.

Patihani, Chitwan National Park, (01)4437571

Mystic Mountain

Take a break from hectic schedule and book a stay amid the forest of Nagarkot in this resort exquisitely built using ultra modern designs to provide world-class comfort.

Nagarkot, (01) 6200646

Dhaba Festival

Get your fill of Punjabi food both vegetarian and non-vegetarian prepared with varied traditional culinary styles, particularly the tandoori style.

7AM-10:45PM, till 3 April, The Soaltee Kathmandu, 9801067222

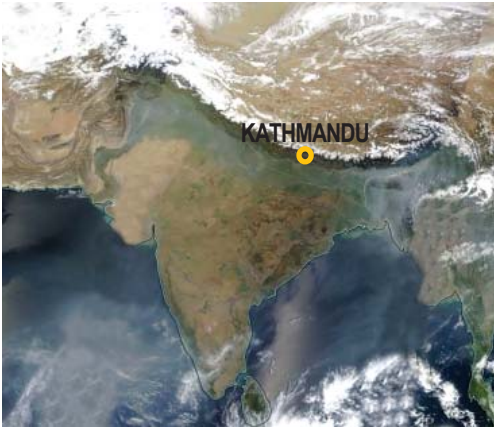


Achaar Ghar

Don't want to make lunch? Head to Achaar Ghar that has the best assortment of pickles prepared from recipes handed down from generations.

10.30am-9.30pm, Jhamsikhel, Pulchok (01) 5541952

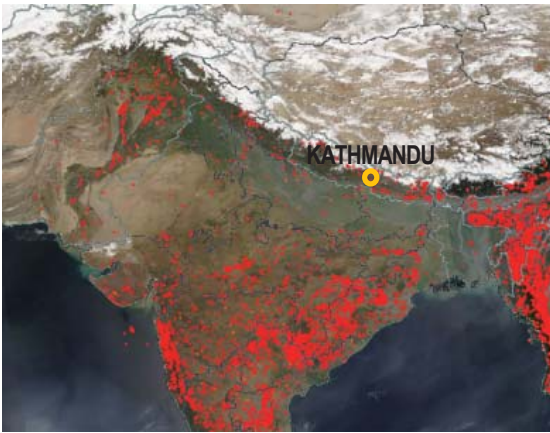
WEEKEND WEATHER



We are looking at a hot-hot-hot weekend in Kathmandu with the maximum temperature soaring to 31 Celsius. And this is only March. For comparison, the maximum temperature in Dhangadi in the western Tarai will only be three degrees higher. The reason is heat wave conditions over western India, and southerly winds blowing that up directly to us. Since this is dry air, there is not much water vapour in it to turn into cloud as it rises and cools over the Himalaya. Some intermittent cloud cover and desert dust in the atmosphere will filter the sunlight somewhat and bring daytime temperature down a notch next week.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
31° 16°	31° 16°	29° 16°

AIR QUALITY INDEX



As seen in this infrared satellite fire map from NASA's Fire Information for Resource Management System (FIRMS) taken on Wednesday morning, the wildfire season has started in earnest over eastern India. It is an annual phenomenon and we can expect bush fires to spread into western Nepal, where the forest undergrowth is dry. However, we do not expect wildfires to be as bad as last year since there have been several episodes of heavy winter precipitation. Even so, it will blow soot particulates into Kathmandu Valley and combined with the city's vehicular emissions will keep the Air Quality Index (AQI) in the hazardous zone. For live hourly AQI readings measured at Phora Darbar, go to [www.nepaltimes.com](http://www.nepaltimes.com)

OUR PICK

Set in Toronto, *Turning Red* is a heartwarming, funny and culturally expansive story about growing up and generational trauma. It follows 13-year-old Chinese-Canadian student Mei Mei as she tries to navigate teenage crushes on boys, personal interests and growing up under her strict, protective mother Ming Lee. Who has not been there, right? But here is a twist: Mei Mei wakes up one morning to find she has turned into a giant red panda herself – a transformation triggered by strong emotions. She is the descendent of the fearless Sun Yee who was granted the ability to transform into a red panda in order to protect her daughters, and every female member of the family since has inherited the ability when they come of age. How is Mei Mei now going to juggle school, this giant red turning point, her mother's expectations? And her favourite boy band 4\*Town is coming to town! Stars Rosalie Chiang, Sandra Oh, Ava Morse, Hyein Park, Maitreyi Ramakrishnan, with Wai Ching Ho and James Wong.



### 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 ।





# Atlas of art in a world in motion

Kathmandu Triennale exhibition reimagines landscapes through diverse expressions of cartography

● Ashish Dhakal

At one of the five Kathmandu Triennale 2022 venues, artists from all over the world have converged with diverse expressions of cartography.

Curated by the team of Sheelasha Rajbhandari, Hit Man Gurung and Cosmin Costinas, this show of map art ranges from the cosmic to the subconscious, literary to abstract, and ties together the themes of roots, kinship, freedom and exploration.

On entering the Bahadur Shah Baithak in Patan, the first display is Liu Kuo-Sung's ink, acrylic and collage on paper, titled *The Ring B*. A section of the world spreads across the bottom half of the frame, over which a rising circle is flanked on both sides by crescent moons. And at the top, like on a banner, is Planet Earth against a black field.

In 1972, the crew of Apollo 17 took the famous Blue Marble image of the Earth, which inspired Liu to create *The Ring B* a year later. This painting juxtaposes the earth shaped by the millennia of human imagination with a photograph taken from 29,000km away in space. Human traditions, myths and history approach the actual image for a cosmic rendezvous.

Meanwhile on the wall opposite sits *Untitled* by Mary Dhapalany, from Ramingining, Northern Territory in Australia. A weaver and an actress, Dhapalany's work is rooted in the Yolŋu's traditional nganiyal (woven mats) that have deep ritual, ceremonial and practical significance.

*Untitled* is an iridescent pandanus mat with five spiralling circles. On the wall, these look like eyes, or waves, upon which travel knowledge and stories from one generation to another, intricately weaving the complex threads of family, relations, territories and bodies. And as each loop joins and encloses another, nothing and no one is left behind.

Then comes Urgen Dorje Sherpa's *100 Peaceful and Wrathful Mahayoga Deities Mandala*, a large *thangka* on the right that is the visual representation of the Bardo –



Köken Ergun and Tashi Lama, Nepali Power, canvas stitched on textile.

SUJAN BIR BAJRACHARYA

'liminal state of existence between death and rebirth'.

The *mandala* rises laterally instead of the usual circular structure, as seen from above, and depicts the *tantra* concerning life and death.

This is a guide for departed souls to a swift and positive rebirth – another 'map' that transcends to show us a geography beyond what is tangible. Together, the three artworks set the tone for the rest of the exhibition, punctuated only by changing landscape and styles.

We are invited to look beyond the contemporary worldview of maps as the affirmation or rejection of people's expansionist ambitions. Cartography is borne of the desire for exploration and discovery – turning the pages of an atlas, poring over the colours, running fingers along lines and the words to travel to previously remote and unknown places.

At the exhibition, these places fly out of the pages of books and draw attention to the un- and re-learning to understand one's own culture and contours of geography.

One such piece is *Silata*, an instrument for divination used in Himalayan astrological practices. The various quadrants are

examined to read and calculate an individual's past, present and future.

The practice may now feel obsolete, yet it is strikingly familiar to many Nepalis who most likely had a *cheena* drawn at birth depicting the dimensions of the universe and their place in it.

*Silata* is among the several pieces in the exhibition that remind us that maps are not limited to the ground beneath our feet. Another is *Untitled (WTEIA2)* by Daniel Boyd which refers to the stick-charts of the Marshall Islands used by Indigenous communities for seafaring.

These depicted the positions of islands, but were never taken on voyages. Instead, they were memorised, creating a vastly different form of knowledge transmission.

On a similarly abstract side, Wing Poso's *Interior* is a powdered herbs, Styrofoam and steel installation depicting the interconnectedness of the microscopic and macroscopic world, of physics and philosophy, individual lives and the universe.

*Nepali Power* by Köken Ergun and Tashi Lama is a collaboration between Istanbul, Kathmandu and Bhaktapur, inspired by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) set forth by China in 2013 to build



John Pule, *Prototype - Site of Old Myths*, and *Mercy*, Oil on unstretched canvas.

ASHISH DHAKAL

global connectivity. The vibrant triptych hangs gloriously in the middle of the room, depicting rich possibilities and precautions.

On one panel, water flows from the Himalaya, replenishing South- and Southeast Asia. Another references the environmental and political consequences, with scales running along in loops like snares. In the middle hangs 'Nepali Power': whether an authentic slogan or heavy propaganda, it is left to interpretation.

On the floor below in a room that feels like a railway carriage or a caravan, is Nyima Dorjee Bhotia's *Where the Fox Settles*. The collection of photographs, archival materials, travel documents, a transistor and an abacus, and other artefacts create a real cabinet of collective history.

This archaeological exploration recounts Himalayan stories in a global context – set next to the figurative map of the French Army's losses in the Russian campaign 1812-13, 1869, and *The Man of Commerce* by AF McKay. The latter quite literally transposes the human anatomy as a 'cartographic metaphor' to describe railway lines and economic exchange across America and to Europe.

The theme of decolonisation and anti-imperialism runs deep in the exhibition, re-evaluating the misinterpreted evolutionary principle of the 'survival of the fittest' that justifies genocides

throughout history.

The European worldview that led to enslavement and exploitation, erasing traditions, generations of history and practices is carefully dissected rather than mechanically reiterated. It mirrors Nepal's own exclusion of Indigenous communities.

The language of map-making has seen many transformations throughout history, moving from a limited, flat point of view to spherical and colour-coded, with mathematical and imaginary lines criss-crossing.

But what is a map, really? How can the limitless expanse of our imagination and experience be bound? And how can fences and walls supersede nature's rivers and mountains?

This exhibition is an expression of a borderless globe, where unique and diverse ideas find companions. Visitors are made startlingly aware that Nepal is no longer isolated, no longer insular. The artistic voices here are part of the true *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* – 'Theatre of the Orb of the World.' 🇳🇵

Kathmandu Triennale 2022  
Until 31 March 2022  
All venues open 7 days a week except Sundari Chok in Patan (closes at 2:30PM on Mondays, closed on Tuesdays)  
Bahadur Shah Baithak, 10AM – 6PM  
Patan Museum, 10:30AM – 4:30PM  
Nepal Art Council, 10AM – 6PM  
Siddhartha Art Gallery, 11AM – 5PM  
Taragon Museum, 10AM – 6PM  
Please wear masks.



## अब मासिक हिमाल १ चैतदेखि बजारमा ।

### हिमाल खबरपत्रिका

### नपढी सुखै छैन !



हिमालमिडिया प्रा. लि.  
पाटनढोका, ललितपुर



# Local governments by the people,

Local elections in May give Nepalis a chance to vote in capable leaders based on performance

● Ramesh Kumar

In the five years since Nepal adopted the federal system, local governments have garnered much more trust among voters than provincial and federal units.

The 2017 local elections were the first in two decades, and elected representatives had a lot of catching up to do, large gaps to fill. And some performed better than others, mostly rural municipalities.

A 2021 survey by Sharecast Initiative Nepal showed half the respondents nationwide were satisfied with the performance of grassroots leaders. In comparison, only a third of the respondents said they were happy with provincial and federal governments.

A similar poll by the Asia Foundation and Kathmandu University in 2020 was even more revealing: 70% of respondents were satisfied with local governments. More than 85% of them said they trusted their local representatives.

Indeed, Nepal's local bodies and elected officials have consistently ranked above average in performance evaluations and institutional self-assessments in the last five years.

"The work and conduct of leadership at our federal level in these five years does not inspire confidence at all," says former finance secretary Rameshore Khanal. "Nepal's future will be driven by the local governments."

Joint Secretary of the Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration Gopi Krishna Khanal agrees that Nepal has successfully adapted to the federal system in a relatively short period mainly due to grassroots leaders.

"Local governments have ensured that schools and health posts no longer have leaky roofs, roads have improved, markets are decentralised from district headquarters," he says.

Local governments were more effective in responding to the impact of the pandemic, often leading from the front to set up tracing, testing, quarantine and isolation centres, tightening security measures, and distributing relief materials — with some elected officials personally stepping up to transport the sick to hospitals.

"While our unstable federal government was embroiled in controversy and provincial governments struggled to adjust, local governments that started from scratch have given Nepalis a sense of how governments should

function," says self-governance expert Shyam Krishna Bhurtel.

Former prime minister K P Oli, whose opposition UML party has dominated local governments in the past two elections, publicly thanked local leaders in Parliament recently, saying: "The role of locally elected representatives in times of crisis has never been clearer than it is now, as these officials worked tirelessly to prevent the spread of the virus and to provide relief to families in their communities."

While the federal government bungled, and was embroiled in allegations of corruption in the import of testing kits and could not ensure adequate oxygen supply to hospitals, local governments were quick off the mark and saved countless lives.

Indeed, the report of the Auditor General shows that much of the relief provided to those affected by poverty and unemployment, as well as to the victims of natural disasters have come from Nepal's local governments.

Elected mayors and ward council members for the past five years have been reaching their constituents with improved access to health care, providing citizenship certificates and other essential documents, government allowances, agricultural resources and information, and many other services previously limited to bureaucrats at district headquarters.

"Access to essential government services at the community level have ensured that Nepalis can reach out to elected officials about any problems," says Kabita Dhungana, deputy chief of Nuwakot's Belkotgadi Municipality.

Local governments have also been granted the power to make and implement acts, directives, and legal procedures within their jurisdiction under the Local Government Operation Act 2018.

Rajendra Prasad Pyakurel, executive director of the National Federation of Village Municipalities of Nepal, says that while citizens have valid criticisms regarding local governments, that censure does not extend to the access to and delivery of essential services.

Sanju Kumari Chaudhary, deputy chief of Banke's Kohalpur Municipality, agrees. "Officials are aware that inefficient work equals lost votes," she says. "Such concern about their political future ensures services are prompt."



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Local institutions have also made it easy for Nepalis to access and exercise their judicial rights. Constitutionally mandated three-member Judicial Committees headed by the Deputy Chiefs of local governments take complaints regarding domestic, community, agricultural and other local infrastructural disputes, facilitating hearings and reconciliation — often administering justice before issues have to be taken to court.

“Judicial Committees have taken a lot of pressure off Nepal’s district courts,” says Kabita Dhungana.

Local self-assessments have consistently identified judicial performance as one of the most effective functions of local government. Indeed, judicial committees have been key to settling land and agricultural disputes. In Banke, reconciliation centres have been set up in every ward for dispute resolution.

The 2021 Sharecast survey identified three main tasks of the government prioritised by respondents: job creation, poverty alleviation and road construction. Road connectivity is also the priority for many local governments, as evidenced by their budget allocation.

Morang’s Kanepokhari Rural Municipality, where local politicians campaigned for new roads in 2017 has upgraded 118 km of roads and asphalted 29 km. Similarly, Jhapa’s Kankai and Syangja’s Waling municipalities have blacktopped most roads.

In 2020, local governments expended 44% of their budgets on social services, 27% on infrastructure, and 17% on administration. Collectively they spent 64% of the Rs2.44 billion budget allocated to them.

Their performance shows that drinking water, electricity, agriculture and irrigation, education and health are priority areas. Some local governments have invested in fire engines and ambulances and advanced clean energy.

Dang’s Ghorahi has begun producing bio-gas, with plans to deliver it to households. Palpa’s Nisdi village distributes wind-powered electricity to 150 households, while 300 homes in Surkhet’s Chowkune village have solar electricity.

Elected leaders in Rawaveshi village of Khotang have provided water supply to 256 households, while in Bateshwor village of Dhanusha 14 wells have been drilled to provide irrigation water.

Many local governments have

also pushed socio-cultural aspects. Humla’s Namkha Municipality introduced textbooks to preserve its Homlu Bhote-Lama language.

Ilam’s Rong Rural Municipality has added Lepcha curriculum in its primary schools, while Ramnagar village in Sarlahi developed a local syllabus for the preservation of its endangered Bajji language.

Rautahat’s Durga Bhagwati Municipality provides housing to under-served Dom families, while Manahari of Makwanpur built homes for Bote families.

Many local governments have prioritised economic development and income generation, facilitating agriculture and small businesses. In Dhankuta Municipality, known as Nepal’s ‘Avocado Capital’, farmers have been given subsidies.

Gulmi’s Isma village provides cash incentives to dairy and meat farmers to increase production, while villagers in Gulmi’s Dhurkot get support for bringing barren land under cultivation.

Tatopani village of Jumla mobilises mothers’ groups and children’s clubs to remove *chhaupadi* cowsheds where women are banished during menstruation. Budhinanda municipality of Bajura deprives houses with such menstrual sheds of services.

Such successes of local governments are in large part due to the new Constitution’s affirmative action policies, which have ensured that communities are represented by a diverse variety of voices and experiences, facilitating inclusion and leadership development.

Of the 35,041 elected officials in the 2017 local elections, 40% were women, and 93% of the elected women became deputy chiefs of their local governments.

As many as 29 elected officials across the country belong to the Dalit community. Self-governance expert Bhurtel believes that the very women and Dalits who were elected as deputies can now contest for mayoral positions.

“Previously elected local representatives from underserved and minority communities have been empowered enough by their experience to run for top leadership this time around,” says Bhurtel. 🇳🇵

## The Centre Still Holds

For all of its achievements, the conduct of Nepal’s local government has not been without flaws. Municipalities and wards, in particular, have been pulled up for budget discrepancies.

The 58th report of the Auditor General Office showed that Rs40.83 billion of the Rs814 billion allocated to local governments was unaccounted for during 2020-21. Metropolises were most mismanaged.

This has been attributed to corruption at the local levels, but there is also insufficient training in financial management of budgets.

“Discrepancies might have occurred due to improper book-keeping, and a lack of accounting knowledge on the part of local officials,” says former finance secretary Rameshore Khanal. “This will improve as local governments become aware of accounting practices.”

Corruption is indeed rife at all three levels of government, be it irregularities in job recruitment, commission for government services, favouritism and nepotism, as well as bribery to circumvent government-mandated policies.

Resources and Finance Commission, agrees: “Citizens find it difficult to find out what national or provincial leaders are up to. But at the grassroots people have close access to local representatives to hold them responsible for political and personal extravagance.”

More than two-thirds of the total spending of local governments comes from financial transfers by provincial and federal levels. In the 2021 fiscal year, Rs259 billion out of Rs391 billion spent by local governments came through grants from provincial and federal governments, with local governments generating only a small part of their own revenue.

National Assembly member Khim Lal Devkota says that although there are plenty of opportunities for Nepal’s local governments to earn more revenue through taxes, they have not been able to make use of them. However, there are some municipalities like Chandranagar of Sarlahi district, which have contracted land for fish farming, earning up to Rs16.5 million annually in tax revenue.

The performance of Nepal’s local governments has exceeded expectations, considering the confusion and limited guidelines for them to operate under the new federal system.

Experts blame the inability of Nepal’s local governments to function at maximum capacity to a lack of cooperation and support from Kathmandu. Absence of legislation means the local level has not been able to access funds.

Staff shortages mean that 200 local governments have acting administrative heads. Most ward offices are still without secretaries. Development work has stalled because of the lack of personnel.

Mayor Ashok Banju adds that the federal government has still not been able to do away with its centralised mindset, leading to duplication of projects.

Even village and municipal councils that have authority have not been able to legislate.

“Local governments have not been able to exercise power,” says Rajendra Pyakurel of the National Federation of Rural Municipalities. “We should not be waiting for the go-ahead from any other authority because we are the authority.”

As the country approaches its second local government elections on 13 May, experts stress the need for capable and committed elected leadership across Nepal’s local communities. But filling leadership positions alone will not be enough.

Says Gopi Krishna Khanal, joint secretary at the Ministry of Federal Affairs. “The power of the local government cannot be reduced. The more grassroots our government becomes, the stronger democracy and system of governance will be.”

Bhogendra Jha of the Madhes Planning Commission says: “At present, personal gain, not public welfare, prevails at all levels of government. Only when we change that thought process will we be able to deliver on our promises of good governance.” 🇳🇵



DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY, TU

Nearly 30% of complaints lodged at the Commission for Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA) since municipal elections in 2017 pertain to local institutions and officials. However, experts say this does not mean that local bodies are more or less corrupt than other government bodies, since complaints lodged at the CIAA are not limited to corruption.

Dhulikhel mayor and Nepal Municipal Association chair Ashok Banju disagrees that local governments are more graft-ridden, citing transparency in the local political mechanism.

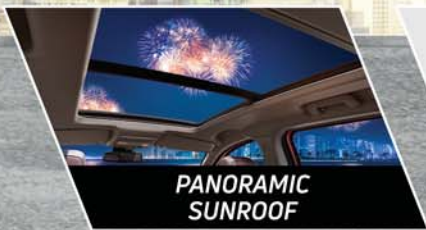
“Details of our spending and decision-making are subject to public scrutiny,” says Banju. “This has strengthened local democracy.”

Balananda Poudel of the National Natural

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## 7 ways to save Nepal

The Ukraine War has sent the price of fuel soaring, forcing Nepalis to play Russian roulette at the petrol pumps. Inflation has hit the roof, and the country is going belly-up.

The Ass feels it is its duty to come to the rescue with innovative suggestions to narrow Nepal's trade gap. (You can thank me later.)

1. Legalise gold smuggling. Nepal's economy has been forever dependent on importing gold and sneaking it into India for a hefty profit. The grovelment foolishly banned this thriving trade. Allowing gold re-export would help pay for our burgeoning imports.
2. Sadly, Nepal has turned from a rice exporter to nett importer. This is unsustainable. Nepalis need to switch from rice to eating Made in Nepal WiFi Instant Noodles, and this would save us precious foreign exchange.
3. The price of petrol is now so high that it is cheaper to use the friendly neighbourhood liquor store as a gas station, and fill up the car tank with Euro 5 high octane Vodka.
4. Nepal's rivers run low during pre-monsoon months, reducing electricity generation at peak hour. We have to import electricity from India to meet the shortfall, widening our trade deficit even more. What to do? How about if all of Nepal's 30 million people emptied their bladders on the banks of our rivers, thus augmenting the dry season flow of the rivers, and increasing electricity output. My back of the envelope calculation shows that if an average human passes 10 litres of urine daily, this would mean an extra 300 million litres flowing down our
5. Remove the price parity between diesel and kerosene to resume fuel adulteration. This would reduce Nepal's diesel import, and save us wads of cash.
6. Petrol is more expensive in India than in Nepal, and this opens up new avenues for the country to reduce the country's trade gap. If Nepal imported more fuel from India, we could smuggle more of it back across the border and help narrow the balance of payments deficit.
7. Bihar is dry, and Nepal's economy is now self-sufficient in alcohol production. Exporting surplus liquor can save the country from bankruptcy. The way to do it is to extend the Raxaul-Amlekhganj petroleum pipeline to Kathmandu for the exchange of bodily fluids between the two countries. Use the same pipeline that pumps petrol to Nepal in daytime to export bootleg moonshine to India at night, and earn hard currency. We don't even have to pump it, just let gravity do the trick.

Nepal and India can even designate certain days of the week for various drinks. Rum on Tues and Thurs. Gin on Mon and Weds. Beer the rest of the week. If Bihar is on the wagon, we will be on the bandwagon. India gets its booze, Nepal gets its gas.



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