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Why Kolkata?

What does Calcutta have besides the Victoria Memorial? Lots of Marists.

22-28 MARCH 2002 #86

The murderous middle-ground

The Maoist insurgency has now been reduced to a deadly contest. But behind every death is the loss of a loved one, a loss in society, and a family torn.

Not your usual Golf Course...

22-28 MARCH 2002 #86

NEPALI Times together THE FASHION STORE

The Delhi run

Deuba's 72-member entourage settles down for a leisurely four-day visit

10-16 SEPTEMBER 2004 #213

Welcome Onboard...

NEPALI Times

Deuba, Delhi and Doklam

25-31 AUGUST 2017 #873

Deuba's Delhi Déjà vu

● Kunda Dixit

Sheer Bahadur Deuba became Nepal's prime minister for the first time when he was just 49. A few months later, on 4 February 1996, he ignored a Maoist ultimatum and flew off to India on a state visit.

The Maoists did not even wait for an answer on their 40 demands. By the time Deuba returned, Nepal was already embroiled in a war that was to last another 10 years.

In New Delhi, Deuba signed the Mahakali Treaty on the border river that was such a political hot potato that his Nepali Congress (NC) coalition fell within a year. Deuba went on to be prime minister 4 more times since then — through the war, palace massacre, the royal military coup, and the peace process.

Now, aged 75, he is embarking on another ritual visit to New Delhi.

In the 36 years since his first visit, Deuba has been greeted in New Delhi by four Indian prime ministers: P V Narasimha Rao, Atal Behari Vajpayee, Manmohan Singh and Narendra Modi. Visits to the Delhi Darbar have become mandatory rites of passage for every Nepali prime minister.

No one expects any substantial outcome from this trip, coming as it does during an election year in Nepal in which the NC is in a coalition with its former arch enemy, the Maoists.

But the timing of the visit does carry geopolitical significance — it is happening two months after Nepal ratified the US-funded Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) project, and barely a week after a visit by China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Kathmandu.

Deuba strongly backed the MCC, which the Chinese lobbied quite openly with Nepal's Communists to try to block. New Delhi stayed out of this row that had polarised Nepal's politics for years, but it was wary of Chinese inroads into Nepal if the MCC did not go through.

Deuba's main goal in New Delhi this time will be to restore Nepal-India relations to a more even keel. The high point in bilateral ties was Narendra Modi's visit to Nepal soon after his election in 2014, during which he addressed Parliament in Nepali, and was warmly welcomed.

But the five-month Indian Blockade in 2015 undid the bonhomie, and rival territorial claims over Kalapani in 2020 kept relations strained. Jingoistic talking heads on Indian TV channels throughout this period did not help matters.

India's traditional micro-management of Kathmandu politics was replaced by more overt Chinese meddling in the past five years. Nepal-India bilateral relations have therefore calmed down a bit.

But there are still recurring

irritants: lack of agreement on two-way air routes, conditions on export of surplus hydropower, border embankments that flood the Tarai.

Despite this, there is more that binds Nepal and India than divides. Nepali citizens are enlisted in the Indian Army, there are an estimated 3 million Nepali workers in India, and Nepal is the seventh largest source of remittances for India's own migrant workers.


Deuba leads a 48-member delegation to New Delhi on Friday, and will make a quick side pilgrimage to Banaras. Just as Wang Yi handed over Pokhara Airport to Nepal earlier this week, Modi and Deuba will virtually inaugurate the mothballed 35km Kurtha-Jayanagar border railway.

The visit is largely ceremonial. Deuba has been getting sympathetic coverage in the Indian press, supposedly for standing up to China. Commentators there want Modi and Deuba to get over 'temporary setbacks' and 'reboot' bilateral ties.

Some Indian experts have urged Deuba to carry on where he left off in 1996 to 'pick the low-hanging fruit' of the Mahakali Treaty. India has long proposed this grandiose scheme to build a cascade of dams on the border river for inter-basin transfer of water to the Yamuna, and on to Gujarat, in exchange for electricity for Nepal. Deuba will

try to avoid this sensitive topic since his party faces three levels of elections this year.

Nearly four decades later, Prime Minister Deuba will have come a full circle on this trip to India. His Nepali Congress was in power for most of the Maoist insurgency from 1996-2006.

Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal (on whose head Deuba had placed a dead-or-alive ransom) spent most of those war years in a safe house in New Delhi, and is now principal partner in his governing coalition. 



Reward performance
EDITORIAL
PAGE 2

Deputies drive development in rural Nepal
PAGE 5

Periphery within the periphery

Grassroots democracy promotes good health
PAGE 10-11

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HYUNDAI

Reward performance

“We are always proud about the fact that Nepal has a female President and Speaker, but do you think Bidya Devi Bhandari, Onsari Gharti Magar or MPs and deputy mayors would have been appointed if it wasn’t mandated by the 2015 Constitution?”

This was one of many questions raised at a recent workshop on the role of Nepali women in politics. The participants, made up of young politicians, journalists, law students and other members of civil society, did not take long to answer: Of course not. If it was not for affirmative action in the Constitution, they would never have held office.

Nepal’s Constitution mandates that the country’s President and Vice-president, Speaker and deputy-Speaker of Parliament have to be of different genders and communities.

Similarly, the Local Government Election Act 2017 introduced after Nepal became federal also requires at least one female candidate between mayor and deputy mayor, as well as between chair and deputy chair of rural municipalities. Two of four elected ward council members have to be women, one of whom must be from the Dalit community.

This reservation system has ensured the largest participation of Nepali women in politics in the country’s history, with 14,329 female leaders being elected into local governments after the 2017 election.

The political participation of women was initially a response against the patriarchy, says Bagmati Provincial Assembly member Rachana Khadka. But Nepal’s political parties predictably favoured men for the top leadership at all levels of government.

This means that even though 93% of the deputy positions went to women, men made up 98% of mayors and municipal chairs. Of the 718 women elected to the 753 local structures, only seven were appointed mayors, and 11 chairs of rural municipalities. Meanwhile, 276 women were elected deputy mayors and 424 were elected deputy chairs.

Even so, Nepal’s female deputies have outperformed male mayors in driving grassroots development, delivering maternal and reproductive health services, combating social ills like *chhaupadi* menstrual sheds and provide prompt Covid-19 response (*pages 5, 10-11*).

Rachana Khadka put it eloquently: “Men are leaders by virtue of their position, women earn leadership through performance.”

Many women deputies are now eager to contest for mayoral and

chair positions in local elections on 13 May. A survey shows that 80% of female elected officials holding deputy positions want to run for top leadership positions this time – even though their hopes may be dashed because male leaders of the ruling coalition government have decided to divide up tickets based on patronage.

Prabha Baral, the elected mayor of Chitwan’s Rapti Municipality explains that although the presence of women in top positions is still negligible, Nepal’s political parties are trying to increase the presence of female candidates in this year’s election.

Baral’s constituency along with Syangja’s Putalibazar led by Mayor Sima Kumari Chettri were among seven local governments classified as ‘Excellent’ in a report card by the Municipal Association of Nepal. Their role in Judicial Committees in mediating local disputes has been exemplary.

Despite the optimism, there are challenges. Of the 13,311 female officials who joined municipal assemblies across the country as ward members, 6,569 were from the Dalit community. Yet, Dalit women are almost completely absent from the executive and decision-making positions. Their presence in local governments has been reduced to formality and tokenism.

Women are also less likely to secure adequate election funding than male candidates, one of the reasons being that many Nepali women still do not have independent control over financial resources.

Many women who ran for office at the provincial and national levels in 2017 say they have not even been able to pay off their election debts, or may not run for office a second time, as they struggle to finance their campaigns while men are backed by contractors and the wealthy.

Additionally, now more than ever, women incumbents and candidates must navigate the upcoming election on social media platforms as political parties use the internet to campaign. The social web is also rampant with misogynistic expression and hate speech, online trolling and threats of sexual violence. Women in positions of power are judged more harshly, undermining their achievements and authority.

Still, analysts are hopeful that more women will join the executive ranks after this May’s local elections. And hopefully there will be many more than the seven mayors and 11 chairs at present who are female. If voters cast ballots on the basis of performance, there certainly would be more women leaders.

Shristi Karki



RABINDRA

Nepal’s female deputies have overtaken male municipal chiefs to drive grassroots development



20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Another Delhi run



Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba is going to New Delhi this weekend for the mandatory India visit. This is the fifth time he is going to Delhi in as many times as prime minister. Deuba and Narendra Modi are expected to revisit Nepal-India

cooperation in connectivity, energy, power and health care.

20 years ago this week, Deuba had just returned from another one of this Delhi visit in 2002. The conflict was in full swing. Gyanendra was king and he would soon sack Deuba.

In that time, Nepal-India relations have been a roller coaster. The 2015 Blockade was the turning point. With the rise of China and India as major global players, Nepal’s strategic location between the giant neighbours has also given it greater geopolitical significance.

Excerpts from the editorial on Deuba’s Delhi visit 20 years ago this week on issue #87 29 March-4 April 2002:

As prime ministerial trips go, Sher Bahadur Deuba’s travel to New Delhi and Calcutta last week can be classed as a low-intensity visit.

There was nothing he and his entourage did there that couldn’t have been accomplished in one of those quick-turnarounds European prime ministers regularly make to a neighbouring country for business lunches with their counterparts.

Deuba’s most important achievement was to get Indian federal and state officialdom to finally acknowledge that:

- Nepal has a serious Maoist problem;
- its leaders have safe haven in Indian territory;
- the growth of a Maoist revolt in Nepal has crossborder implications for Indian states in an arc of instability from West Bengal to Andhra Pradesh.

Lest this sudden spurt of Indian interest in our own dirty little war raise eyebrows back home, Deuba told just about everyone that there was absolutely no need for the Indian Army to spring to our aid. However, he did accept an offer for unspecified hardware, training as well as an imminent visit by Indian Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani. And he tried to placate the Indians about the presence here of western counter-terrorism advisers, and the purchase of non-Indian military gear. With India now firmly in the US global war on terror saddle, this shouldn’t have been as sensitive as it would have even a year ago.

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

ONLINE PACKAGES



Kathmandu has been listed as one of the most polluted cities in the world once again. The Valley’s dirty air is reducing life expectancy by four years and myriad of other health impacts ranging from hindering mental development to cancers, and yet there is little to show for corrective actions. Only public pressure on politicians will clean up Kathmandu’s hazardous air pollution. Watch video on our YouTube channel.



Every day, at least three mothers die while giving birth all over Nepal. The President’s Program for Women was launched in 2018, and has made air medevac of hundreds of women who may not have survived had they not received urgent hospital treatment. Patients in remote districts can apply for rescue. Watch this video from our archives.

NEPAL-CHINA TIES

I guess the toughest call is the simplest one for both China and Nepal (‘Fixing the broken parts in Nepal-China ties’, Kanak Mani Dixit, #1104). They need to see each other one-to-one, apart from the perceptions and interests of other players who play spoilsport in the neighbours coming together.

Ajay Thakur

- Have a balanced and neutral relationship with both. We cannot afford to take sides, otherwise we will end up like Ukraine.

Eemā Budhā

- Nepal need not fear the northern neighbour for its power only but also see her as a long awaited opportunity to develop.

Tamang大駝

- Nepal must try to remain a buffer state or it will be swallowed up like Tibet.

Sigmund Stengel

- An extremely useful appraisal and basis for foreign policy formulation. A must read.

Gaurav Rana

- Comprehensive analysis with billboards and laundry lists for China-Nepal relations as Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s presence in Kathmandu leads to more explanatory notes than a Wishlist.

Navita Srikant

- China is omnipresent when one travels in Nepal, and increasingly so after the earthquake. Thank you for this useful analysis.

Charulatha Banerjee

- Both China and India must learn to treat Nepal with equality and respect. Brilliantly researched piece.

Sudheendra Kulkarni

SACRED OBJECTS

I have mixed feelings about the return of stolen objects (‘Remembering Nepal’s lost and the found’, Ashish Dhakal, #1104). It’s wonderful on one hand but on another the objects were well kept and guarded by their former museum housings in pristine condition, climate controlled, secure. My best friend’s Nepali mom would place a tika on my Ganesh, all the while I’m trying to bring it back to its pristine condition which is labor intensive.

Karen Yeom

MOUNTAIN TEA

Would love to get Nepali tea, but very difficult to find (‘Getting high on High Mountain Tea’, Sonia Awale, #1104)

John A Nesbit

FUEL PRICES

The electric car demand was never considered seriously (‘Sky-high fuel price hits Nepal’s tourism, aviation’, *Nepali Times*, #1104)

Manu Kirati

BUREAUCRACY

While the representation in bureaucracy is becoming inclusive, why is the service delivery to the public still the same (‘Including the excluded in bureaucracy’, Laxmi Basnet, www.nepalitimes.com)?

Saroj S. Sapkota

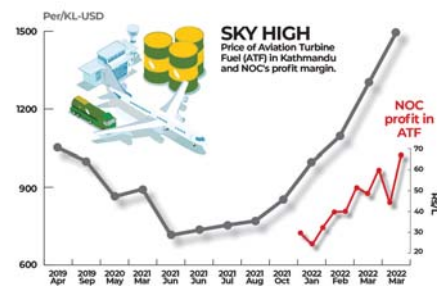
NATURE

There needs to be as much afforestation as possible for their existence to continue (‘Kathmandu’s silent spring’, Sonia Awale, www.archive.nepalitimes.com).

Smita

Times.com

WHAT’S TRENDING



Sky-high fuel price hits Nepal’s tourism, aviation

by *Nepali Times*

One month after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the fallout of the war on global fuel prices threatens to derail Nepal’s aviation and tourism sector, just as the tourists had started returning after two years of Covid closures. Details in the story online.

f Most reached and shared on Facebook



Getting high on High Himalayan Tea

by *Sonia Awale*

Nepali tea is often mistaken for the more popular Darjeeling variety because of similar taste and production methods. But Nepali growers are now carving a unique Asian identity for tea from Nepal with refined taste. Full story and video on nepalitimes.com

t Most popular on Twitter

Fixing the broken parts in Nepal-China ties

by *Kanak Mani Dixit*

Ahead of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s Nepal visit from 25-27 December, this Longread analysed Beijing’s policy in Nepal, just as the world adapts to a China that is evolving as a global powerhouse. Join the online discussion.

“” Most commented

Remembering Nepal’s lost and the found

by *Ashish Dhakal*

A new temporary exhibition at the National Museum in Chhauni features 40 repatriated sacred objects, some of which had been returned to Nepal from abroad as far back as 1986. Read review on our website.

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
What #Nepal’s Voters Most Want in Elections
Health, education, jobs and the environment top issues that concern young voters in local elections on 13 May.



Shirley Blair @himlayanchildrn
The kids are alright



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Speciality teas of the High Mountain have been quietly gaining a loyal international following, proving to be a premium export from Nepal.



Adv. Prajwal Raj Gyawali @Adv_PGyawali
Can’t wait for the tea shop to open!



~:मुकुम~ @mukum3
Was lucky enough to have this very tantalising experience on tea tasting. Thanks to the Director of Jun Chiyabari, Mr. Lochan Gyawali.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Pandemic eclipses Nepal’s TB epidemic
#Tuberculosis kills many more Nepalis than #Covid19, but prevention, early diagnosis and treatment will save lives, write @_KritikaDixit and @RajanPaudel_.
#WorldTuberculosisDay



Star Aryal @stararyal
Moving beyond anti-TB drugs! Bringing back economic and productive life of people living with TB is deemed imperative along with access to quality TB care. Dedicated people, please go through the paper from @_KritikaDixit @RajanPaudel_



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
#20YearsAgoThisWeek There is a great divide between public and private #healthcare in #Nepal. But some model hospitals are providing exemplary medical care to the neediest even in the remotest corners of the country at a minimal cost.



Ramesh Shrestha @RameshShrestha1
It is possible and will be on public interest but only if there are oversight from regulatory agencies on cost control.

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Fallout of Wang Yi's visit in Chinese media

Beijing's delayed and toned down reaction to Foreign Minister Wang Yi's trip to Nepal

● Aneka Rebecca Rajbhandari

A day after Chinese State Councilor and Foreign minister Wang Yi's visit to Nepal was announced, my Chinese professor cited a Nepali news source which he received from a foreign colleague to inform the class about the trip to Kathmandu.

Chinese netizens are dependent on the official press and social media for news, and had been largely unaware of Wang Yi's 'Journey To the West' until he was already in Nepal on 25 March.

'Journey to the West' is a proper noun in Mandarin and derived from an extended account of the Tang dynasty Buddhist monk Xuanzang, who travelled to the 'Western regions' of South Asia in the 7th century to obtain sacred texts.

Compared to delays in reporting Wang Yi's Pakistan, Afghanistan and India visits, news on Weibo that he was in Kathmandu on the second day was relatively more timely. The late media reports and posts could have been deliberate to make the news stale, and not create a big fuss.

Although *Global Times*, Xinhua and other state media published articles on the visit, it was not shared on their Weibo pages because it could have likely created undesired discussions. Moreover, the visit coincided with the tragic crash on 21 March of a China Eastern Boeing 737-800 that diverted the attention of netizens.

Similar low-key reporting was observed when *Global Times* and other state-owned media took more than a day to react to the ratification of the American MCC grant by Nepal's Parliament on 27 February.

At that time, Chinese cybersphere was rife with reference of other international websites and curiosity about why the MCC news was not trending on Weibo yet. Whether this was intentional or not, it successfully suppressed the hashtag 'Nepal approved US aid



BYE: China's ambassador to Nepal Hou Yanqi (in blue, centre) and other diplomats pose for a photograph after seeing off Foreign Minister Wang Yi's plane at Kathmandu airport on 27 March. Screenshot of Xue Xiarong's post on Weibo about Nepal (right).

PHOTO: RSS

deal' (尼泊尔通过美援助协议) which reached the Top 11 on Weibo as soon as the state media reported about it.

It is most likely that the uproar over the MCC ratification on Weibo was toned down to welcome Wang Yi's visit to Nepal. Besides the nine agreements signed between Nepal and China during his visit this week, a bigger takeaway was Wang Yi's talks about China's 'Three Supports' for Nepal:

1. Supporting Nepal in pursuing a development path suited to its national condition
2. Supporting Nepal in pursuing independent domestic and foreign policies
3. Supporting Nepal in participating in the Belt and Road cooperation to a greater extent

One article in the Chinese media noted that the second and third 'supports' in particular were a clear reminder to Nepal that it should remain independent in its relations with China, and take the long-term bilateral relations into consideration.

Moreover, Nepal 'should not be easily deceived by the US investment' and '\$500 million is not worth the sacrifice of Nepal's sovereignty'.

In a recent interview with the China's state-media, Wang Yi admitted that his visit to South Asia came at a time of the spreading spillover effect of the Ukraine crisis and threats to world peace. He confirmed that China's neighborhood holds a top position in Beijing's overall diplomacy, saying it was "better to be a close neighbour than a distant relative" to South Asian countries.

While Nepal's own mainstream press focussed on the nine agreements inked during Wang Yi's visit and photo-ops with Nepal's leaders, Chinese media and cybersphere were fixated on Nepal's reiteration of the One China Policy and commitment towards 'never allowing any forces to use

the Nepali territory to engage in any anti-China activities'.

Prof Xue Xiaorong (pictured above) of the School of Marxism at Fudan University, who has over 170k followers on Weibo, posted that the 'explanatory notes' on MCC ratification was Nepal's way of expressing goodwill to China, and the reason behind Nepal's firm commitment to Minister Wang was to reassure China that it has not sold out its sovereignty to the Americans.

This was met with sarcastic comments by some Chinese social media users who urged China not to trust a 'sold country'. A WeChat page reporting on Nepal, Xin Niboer

(新尼泊尔), dug out a relatively obscure news item of a small protest on Sunday in Janakpur against the 9-point agreement between Nepal and China.

Besides the expected meetings with President Bidya Devi Bhandari, Prime Minister Deuba, Foreign Minister Narayan Khadka, Wang Yi also met two Communist leaders Pushpa Kamal Dahal of the Maoist Centre and K P Oli of the UML.

While Wang Yi's talk with Dahal were reported with predictable remarks from both sides thanking each other for their effort and support, the meeting with Oli was cited in the Chinese media with greater sentiment.

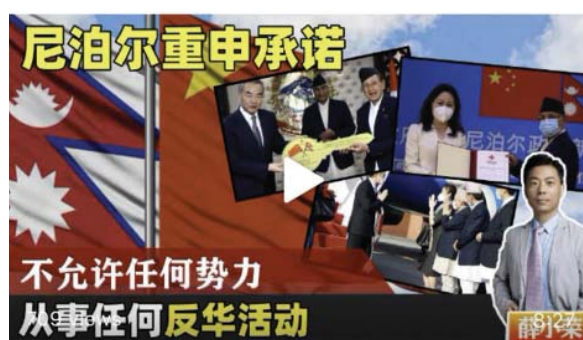
"You are an old friend to the Chinese people," Wang Yi is reported to have told Oli, reminding him that it was when he was prime minister in 2019 that Chinese President Xi Jinping paid a historic visit to Nepal which 'achieved important outcomes and brought bilateral relations to a new level'.

This reporting could signal that the tables may have turned on Dahal's positive impression in China as a 'Maoist' leader. Some comments on Chinese social media remarked that 'this was not the same Prachanda' as the one in 2006. Others joked that Prachanda was the rabbit in the race with the turtle and had underestimated the 'intensity of the struggle' back then.

Another comment called Wang Yi's meetings with Nepal's two top Communist leaders as sending a message to the Americans that 'if they can interfere in Nepal's internal affairs then so will China'.

It was not lost on many that Wang Yi's visit to Nepal came just over a month after Nepal's Parliament approved the MCC. This undoubtedly is a factor that has made Beijing rethink its Nepal policy as extension to the region. 🇨🇳

Aneka Rebecca Rajbhandari is a Masters student of Chinese Politics at Renmin University of China.



prabhu BANK

57th ITEC

Indian Embassy on 29 March marked the 57th Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Day in Kathmandu with ambassador Vinay Mohan Kwatra



welcoming the alumni who did their higher education or training in various reputed institutes of India. Thousands of Nepalis have been trained under tailor-made ITEC courses designed to meet the specific requirements of Nepal during the last 15 years.

Art competition

Urmila Thapa from Kathmandu Model College is the winner of the onsite art competition 'Flying with Turkish Airlines: My Dream Destination' organised by the carrier in collaboration with Glocal Pvt Ltd. The competition aims to



promote reflective and critical thinking among students from a visual art perspective. Thapa received a Turkish Airlines roundtrip ticket to Germany.

Tigor wins big

Indian Auto Media-Car & Bike has awarded Tata Motors's Tigor EV with the Viewer's Choice EV of the year 2022. Tigor EV was also the recipient of the 2022 Car and Brand award.



Fuse + Daayitwa

Fusemachine and Daayitwa have entered an agreement to advance youth-government relations and policymaking. Fusemachine will be sponsoring one Daayitwa fellow under the Daayitwa Nepal Public Policy Fellowship for 3-6 months.



NIU handover

Eco Infinity, the sole distributor of NIU electric scooters in Nepal has launched the NIU Gova G5. The scooter will be available across all NIU showrooms in Nepal.

X3 Moto Fest

White Hat Events and Photography is organising the X3 Moto Fest at Chaya Center where visitors can view bikes of different brands, accessories and gears. Tickets will soon be available through X3's Instagram and Facebook pages and other platforms.



Nabil-TEWAN

Nabil Bank and Tourism Entrepreneurs Women Association of Nepal (TEWAN) have partnered to promote QR codes and digital products to women and youth. Nabil Bank with UN Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) has carried out such programs in all seven provinces.

Force Gurkha

Force Motors Nepal this week launched the Gurkha 4x4x4 in Nepal. The car has a 2.6 litre turbocharged diesel engine, 500 litre boot space and comes in five colors with a 3-year warranty and 4 years of free services.



Service Camp

IME Motors has started the Ashok Leyland 2022 Mega Service Camp where people with Ashok Leyland can get 50% off on motor parts, 12% on lubricants, 30% on labour charge and have 42 points for free checkup.

Worldlink Fest 2.0

The Worldlink fest was held in Chitwan and Kathmandu last week with mountaineer Nirmal Purja who is also the brand ambassador of WorldLink Communications. The event also showcased Purja's documentary 14 Peaks.

Everest new branches

Everest Bank opened three branches this week in Kathmandu Valley in Jamal, Maharajganj and Jarankhu.



Jagdamba export

Jagdamba Steels has launched the Galva Plus and Super Shine in the Nepali market. The aluminum-zinc coated sheet and is also being exported to Romania, UAE, South Africa, North America, Italy and Myanmar.

Sanima offer

Customers of Sanima Bank can now get discounts of up to 20% at Radisson, Everest, Akama, and Aloft hotels with their visa card and QR scan using Sanima Sajilo eBanking.

Women deputies drive rural development

Nepal's female deputy mayors and chairs vie for top local government positions in May's local election

● Laxmi Basnet

Gita Adhikari, the deputy mayor of Damak, quit her job as assistant campus chief when she was nominated by the UML to run in the 2017 local elections. Adhikari says she will complete the reform work that she initiated by running for mayor. "I am running for mayor this election," says Adhikari flatly, "there is no Plan B."

In Nepalganj, deputy mayor Uma Thapa Magar founded and has led a collective of deputy mayors and chairs from eight municipalities across Banke that meets regularly to facilitate district-wide cooperation. "My five year term gives me the experience to run for mayor this time," says Magar, who was a journalist before entering politics.

Vice-chair Ekmaya BK, of Banke's Khajura village is banking on voters to reward her performance in the last five years to elect her to the leadership position. "I am confident that my constituents who have closely followed my work will make the right decision at the polls," says BK.

Sarala Bolkhe of Bakaiya village in Makwanpur was elected vice-chair, and is positive that she will be voted in as chairperson this time. Meanwhile, Parvati Sunuwar, the vice-chairperson of Sindhuli's Fikal Rural Municipality who oversaw progress in maternal health as well as women's participation in her village, is confident she will be voted as chair.

A recent survey conducted by the Tarangini Foundation, a women's rights training center, found that 80% of the 200 women holding deputy mayor and deputy chair positions want to run for the top job in elections in May. Although women deputies have been encouraged by the success of local government projects under their leadership, a lot will depend on whether they get tickets -- especially if they are from the governing coalition which has decided on an electoral alliance.

Most of them feel they have done well to address the empowerment of women in their communities, as well as the inclusion of the underserved and excluded in local development. In Jhapa's Thalara Rural Municipality, community schools are being adapted for female students and persons with disabilities. Women have been trained in manufacturing dhaka fabric, while the local government help find a market.

Such work has been made easier because deputies are in charge of the local government's budget committees. "A third of our budget is for vulnerable groups, and we spend 22% of earmarked funds for socio-economic empowerment and awareness of women," says deputy mayor Adhikari. In Bajhang's Thalara Rural Municipality, vice-chair Gangadevi Khadayat formed women's groups as soon as she was elected. "I personally attend the meetings so I have firsthand account of the



PRO-ACTIVE LEADERS: Bishu Budha, vice-chair of Jumla's Tila Rural Municipality addressing a crowd on locally-available nutritious food.



Parvati Sunuwar, vice-chair of Fikal Rural Municipality, Sindhuli



Gulabdevi Chaudhari, vice-chair of Naraha Rural Municipality, Siraha



Anju Acharya, vice-chair of Dupcheshwor Rural Municipality, Nuwakot



Gita Adhikari, deputy mayor of Damak giving away sewing machines to women from the Muslim community.

problems women face," she says.

Residents of her municipality belonging to the Gandharva and Badi communities had been involved in sex work, and several of them had been reduced to begging. Under Khadayat's leadership, more than 400 men from these communities are now daily wage earners, while women operate small businesses. *Chhaupadi* sheds where women were traditionally banished during menstruation have all been demolished.

In Nuwakot's Dupcheshwor village, vice-chair Anju Acharya formed women's groups as soon as she was elected, conducting skill-based training to counter unemployment in her constituency. "We have begun to identify and involve the community in alternative employment," says Acharya. "The work may not be tangible as bigger infrastructure projects, but the income and self-reliance this has afforded our community is tremendous."

Jumla's Tila Rural

Municipality has focused on maternal and child health, collecting data on pregnant women and children.

Tila vice-chair Bishnu Budha, runs a program providing nutritious food to pregnant women and winter clothes for children, and a 'nutrition message' program.

Her municipality provides incentives to families that have undergone sterilisation after having one child, which has directly contributed to decreasing the number of children with malnutrition in the village.

"We were also able to end the practice of *chhaupadi* after many awareness and discussion programs with male family members, as well as other local leaders and healers in the community," explains Buda.

One of the more significant achievements of local governments in Nepal has been constitutionally mandated three-member Judicial Committees which have granted the power to local deputies to resolve 13 types of civil and 11

types of minor disputes through mediation and reconciliation, so cases do not end up in expensive court battles.

In Dhangadi, Deputy Mayor Sushila Mishra Bhatt played a role in introducing the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Policy 2020 even before the federal government issued a similar nation-wide policy.

Bhatta has focused on mobilising her Judicial Committee to serve those who have been not able to access Nepal's judicial mechanism.

"Social and legal awareness and mobilisation are our top priority," says Bhatta. "We have spoken to many victims of domestic violence for hours. The hotline calls often go on late into the night."

These women-led Judicial Committees have been able to settle land and financial disputes in Siraha to reconciling families on the verge of divorce through counselling services in Bardia. They have also prevented child marriage in Panchthar and addressed domestic violence in Doti. Bhatta, the deputy mayor of Dhangadi, handles disputes in her Judicial Committee, monitors ongoing community projects every fiscal year, meets with dozens of other sub-committees, all the while participating in various provincial-level programs.

"Although they have had to juggle many responsibilities under the federal system, from solving disputes as heads of the judicial committees, Nepal's women deputy mayors and chiefs have done an incredible job so far," says Prabha Baral of the Nepal Municipal Association and mayor of Chitwan's Rapti Municipality.

Most women deputies are now sufficiently trained and equipped to lead their villages and municipalities. In 2017, majority of women were relegated to being deputies because political parties

were only looking to fulfill the requirement to nominate token women in local governments.

But this time, following their performance in the last five years, many women deputies command the attention of both the political parties and voters in the lead up to the second local elections under the federal government on 13 May.

Says National Assembly member Bimala Rai Paudyal: "Had our Constitution not made it mandatory for women to be involved in local governments, such impactful development would have been limited to mere words on paper."

Janmakanya Khatri, who was elected the vice-chair of Jumla's Sinja Rural Municipality in 2017, is one of many locally-elected deputies without formal education.

"Girls were not sent to school when I was a child," says Khatri, who travels across her village to spread awareness about educating women. "I would be respected more had I been able to read and write."

Sinja is among eight rural municipalities in Jumla. Along with Khatri, three other deputy chairs in the Kankasundari, Guthichaur and Patrasi deputy chairs have not received any formal education.

Khatri says her inability to read and write has severely hampered her ability to do her job. "There have been many laws and policies made for the local level, but to me, those words on paper are indecipherable," she adds.

What worries her most is making decisions and signing documents based on second-hand information dictated by others. Khatri is constantly worried over whether she has made sound decisions.

Still, she is adamant that educated women from Nepal's rural communities be given the opportunity to run for political leadership in May.

In constituencies across Karnali and Madhes Provinces, there are example of women leaders who are unable to read and write being hoodwinked. Advocate Indu Tuladhar, who has been working for the rights of Nepal's locally elected officials, identifies illiteracy as the major reason that prevents elected officials from doing their jobs.

"There has long been debate about whether academic qualification should be a criteria for those who decide to run for office," says Tuladhar. "Nepal's political parties require a deeper understanding of the role education plays in local governance." ■

Nunuta Rai and Krishnamaya Upadhyaya contributed to this report.



The Andes and Himalaya join hands

A Colombian and Nepali go on a trek and realise we need to rethink tourism

● Text and photos by **Lorena Gómez Ramírez** and **Bibek Raj Shrestha**

We hiked up a few hundred metres above Gatlang to Parvati Kunda, a pilgrimage site originally known by its Tibetan name Amachodingmo (mother of deep lakes). After ringing the entrance bell, we came upon the water body lined with trees, prayer flags and scattered vermilion, evidence of how it is regarded as holy by both faiths.

Amachodingmo is also home to some 40 bird species, and a source of drinking water for the villages below. But like many other misguided attempts at modernisation, the natural ambience has been soiled by a cemented wall. This modern 'development' has undermined the lake's vital ecological function.

Even so, the place was serene with rays of the December sun slanting down through the forest canopy. Two iridescent dragonflies flitted above the water, while we meditated on its shore. In different cultures dragonflies symbolise transformation, and we felt Amachodingmo is imbued with spiritual energy.

The neighbouring monastery and cheese factory were closed. But the caretaker Dai and Didi, our homestay host, were most welcoming by opening their kitchens to us. Dai offered Tibetan bread soup, and we savoured it, sitting around the fire.

Among the Indigenous people in Colombia's Amazon rainforest, ownership of ancestral roots is essential for survival. They have recovered their land, sacred sites and the right to live according to their traditions.

In Nepal's highlands, the cultural and spiritual beliefs of the Tamangs are similarly preserved. Dai finally identified himself as a Tamang, a Tibetan, a Buddhist, a Hindu and a Nepali. This layered identity meant he was free to choose who he wanted to be. Before sunset we insisted that Didi join us for dinner. She shyly proposed to have *sisnu* nettle dish with *dhindo* corn porridge and *kodo* wine made from millet. With tongs inside a basket we headed to the backyard to gather some nettles and very quickly learnt a new Nepali phrase: *नमो वन्दे*, but the stinging hands did not take anything away from the pleasure of cooking the meal, singing, and the conversation by the kitchen fire.

Food is always a conversation starter during the trek. And meeting Dai and Didi, as well as the drangonflies and birds, turned our visit into an unforgettable experience.

After almost getting lost, we followed the electricity poles in our hike from Chilime (1,891m), the site of a hydropower plant, to Nagthali (3,150m), spending one day on the way. Surrounded by the observant snowy ridges of the Ganesh range, we only heard our own breath, reaching the top with the sun warning our backs. That afternoon we set off to Thuman, missing the trail again. It was then that we remembered scary stories of other lost tourists who do not always make it because they misread the signs. Trail signs can indeed save lives, and hiring local guides is essential. We reached Pemba's guesthouse before sunset.

Pemba runs her homestay with a 6-year-old daughter who is constantly calling out to her "Ama, Ama!" Like many Nepali village women whose husbands and grown-up kids are either abroad or in cities, she raises her child, looks after the crops, does household chores and runs a small ecotourism business. She is like a multi-armed goddess. Her leadership, resilience, managerial and cooking skills are impressive. Pemba says she feels lonely, and is happy every time friendly guests talk to her.

The local government is investing in a view tower at Nagthali. This is completely unnecessary, and the money could instead be used to train local trekking guides, put up trail signage in English, or design the Tamang heritage experiences. "Tourism development" is not just about infrastructure but protecting human and natural resources.

We descended to Syabru Besi on the other side of the Bhote Kosi River for the steep hike up to the holy lakes of Gosainkunda. Roads are being built aggressively here, and have reached Thulo Syabru. Tall cemented guest houses displayed beer, Red Bull and Coca Cola signs. After Nagthali, this felt like a city. We stayed away from the town at Karma Guest House.

After waking up to purple sunrise views the next morning, we pushed upwards on the final stretch to Gosainkunda. We ran out of personal things to talk about, so the subject turned to politics. We compared the histories of Nepal and Colombia. Both countries not only have mountains but also violent pasts.

The same mountains we love, the Himalaya and the Andes, have also witnessed the cruelty of civil wars. Decades of wounds, scars, stories of courage and sacrifice are still alive among our peoples.

Nepal went through a 10-year war between the

Colombia has faced 60 years of armed conflict between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), other smaller paramilitary groups, and the political elite which have been fighting over land, power and drug trafficking routes. Colombia signed a peace agreement in 2016 with FARC that brought relative stability.

But remote areas strategic for the cocaine trade continue to be unstable. The white powder is stained with blood.

Our childhoods in Nepal and Colombia were similar – both of us grew up with daily news of bombings, kidnappings and murders of civilians and social leaders along highways, mountains and forests. For Nepalis and Colombians, traveling this freely was impossible during the conflict – this trek was a gift of history. We hoped our mountains can witness healing conversations and reconciliation among peoples.

We had lunch in Cholangpati, and because it was the winter off-season we were the only guests. After devouring *dal bhat* we continued our ascent to Laurebina (3,920m) and looked down at a carpet of clouds to the west. It was another two hours to the still waters of Gosainkunda, with a full moon rising over the ridge.

We spent two nights by the lake at 4,380m in guest houses that took turns to open. They were packed with Nepali and foreign trekkers sitting around the central fireplace. Two friendly Nepali tour guides asked us to join them for a cup of Khukri Rum in the kitchen. They were surprised to hear that one of us was a tour guide back in Colombia.

Next morning, the serene atmosphere was disrupted by a noisy helicopter. Passengers hopped off, quickly ran to the edge of the lake, washed their faces with the holy water, posed for a few selfies, and headed back to the chopper. They spent barely 30 minutes before taking off again for Kathmandu.

The locals gathered around to watch — just another bunch of pilgrim tourists invading their space. That may be one of the reasons why some local lodge-owners do not seem interested in knowing their guests. The feeling of being clients and vendors was clear. Still, we managed to make a local woman laugh in a clumsy attempt to wash our own clothes.

The following morning we crossed Suryakunda Pass (4,610m) surrounded by the crackling sound of the sun melting the ice crust on the lake's surface. Then across the cliff at Ghopte, walking across slippery ice on rocks through cloud forests. The

“Namaste” dissolves unfamiliarity when served with a genuine smile. This unique hospitality towards guests is deeply rooted in Nepali cultural upbringing. Nonetheless, that same “Namaste” is being monetised.

Although Nepalis complain about low-spending tourists, seeing them only as cash dispensers tarnishes the motto ‘अतिथि देवो भवः’ (guest is god) the motto Nepal boasts about. We ask ourselves how porters, guides and guesthouse owners like Pemba and Didi would prefer to feel at work: what kind of guests would they like us to be? What can be done to create better connection between locals and visitors? This is also important as many Nepalis travel to discover their country.

Throughout the trek we witnessed how tourism transforms places and communities for both good and bad. For instance, realising Tamang homestay menus were standardised, we suggested that owners added local ingredients, cuisine and drinks as options, thus reinforcing Himalayan traditions and a sense of identity.

The Colombian experience shows that tour guides are key to the mutual understanding between travelers and locals. Guides should be more appreciated and supported for their contribution as translators of our national reality to the world. The more multilingual, knowledgeable, reliable and kind tour guides become, the more memorable experiences will become in already welcoming countries like Nepal and Colombia.

The main purpose of ecotourism can then shift from visiting the romanticised ‘untouched’ landscapes to discovering nature with people in it. Intertwined as they are, both deserve the same respect. Notably, treks in Nepal can also teach us about farming, cooking and other skills required to sustain life in remote areas. Such activities increase interaction and opportunities for local entrepreneurs.

Traveling would be more fun, more meaningful and productive for everyone if we make it humane. If we remember to see the god that lives in guests as well as within us.

Tourism is finally picking up again after the virus, and we should re-imagine the industry saying “Namaste” with a smile, and also add “नमो वन्दे”, the Sanskrit phrase from the scriptures which means “The world is one family.” 🙏



Lorena Gómez Ramírez (right) is a Georgetown University Latin America Leadership Program alumni and designs indigenous travel destinations in Colombia.

Bibek Raj Shrestha (left) is an Erasmus Mundus Scholar and

EVENTS



Film Festival
Good news for film geeks: the Nepal International Film Festival is back. Attend screenings of films from over 38 countries and interactive workshops. Book tickets now. *31 March-4 April, 11am-6pm, Rastriya Sabhagriha, Pradarshani Marg*

Food Tasting
Your chance to taste a wide range of West African, Vietnamese, Turkish, Caribbean and Norwegian cuisines. Book your ticket for the Academy of Culinary Arts and Hospitality Management's food tasting. *2 April, 10am-4pm, Rs400, 9801969997*

Blood donation
Leo Club of Kathmandu Shree Machhapokhari is organising blood donation program. Join the event and help save a life. *2 April, 10am-2pm, Gumba, Macchapokhari, 9865363746*

Phulchoki Circuit Hike
Be one with the nature. Participate in the 8-hour Phulchoki circuit hike organised by Hike for Nepal this weekend. Call for more details. *2 April, Rs600, 9846190957*



Drum Jatra 2022
Nepal's newest music festival is back featuring artists including Eduardo Mendonsa, Navin Chettri, Mangal Man Maharjan and Candeza Collective. Visit drumjatra.com for venue and timing. *11-17 April, Rs700-1,250*

DINING



Everest Arirang
Satisfy your hankering for Korean dishes from Teok-bokki to Gimbab to Samgyeopsal at Everest Arirang. *Jhamsikhel, (01) 5438548*

ONLINE ARCHIVES



Ridiculous History
History is beautiful, brutal and, often ridiculous. Episodes of Ridiculous History dive into some of the weirdest stories from the human civilisation. Find on Stitcher.

Poem-a-Day
Poetry lover? Subscribe to the daily digital poetry series featuring unpublished works of talented poets today.



Van Gogh Museum
See the works of the renowned artist up close through a virtual tour of the Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam, home to the largest collection of his artwork. The collection includes over 200 paintings, 500 drawings, and more than 750 personal letters.

Veritasium
From experiments and demonstrations to expert interviews and vox pop, all on science and engineering, in one channel. Check out the playlist on YouTube and find what appeals.

Sam's One Tree Cafe
An exciting place to meet and greet with mouthwatering appetisers, cozy ambience and a big tree like the name suggests. Their sizzlers are a must-have. *Darbar Marg, (01) 4222636*



Trisara
Enjoy great snacks and dishes from Trisara. Don't miss out on their salt and pepper corn. Also check out baked goods right next door. *Lazimpat, 9818353523*

GETAWAY



Bandipur Safari Lodge
Explore the rich cultural heritage and wildlife Bandipur has to offer with a stay at this lodge. *Bandipur, 9449597880*

Hotel Annapurna View
Situating at 1,600m atop Sarangkot, this boutique hotel offers breathtaking views of the snow-capped mountains and Phewa Lake. *Pokhara, (01) 443566*

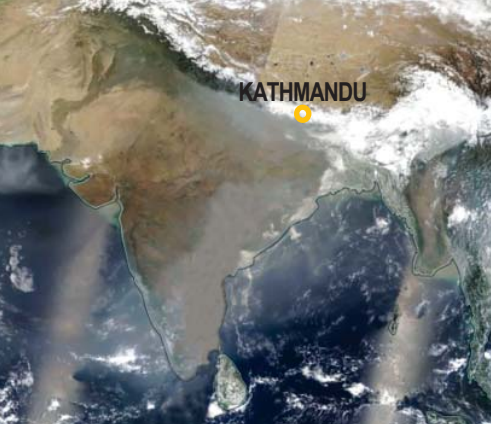
Milla Guesthouse
Perfect for those who admire a mix of old and new, with a dash of serene, quiet space. Not too far from the city, yet worlds apart. *Bhaktapur, 9851024137*

Evergreen Eco-Lodge
Unwind in one of the wooden tree-house cabins with thatched straw roofs and enjoy the tranquility of the surrounding dense forest. *Sauraha, 9845693879*






Dhulikhel Mountain Resort
Culture and comfort blend seamlessly with well-designed bungalows and Newa accents visible in this resort. *Dhulikhel, (01) 4420774*

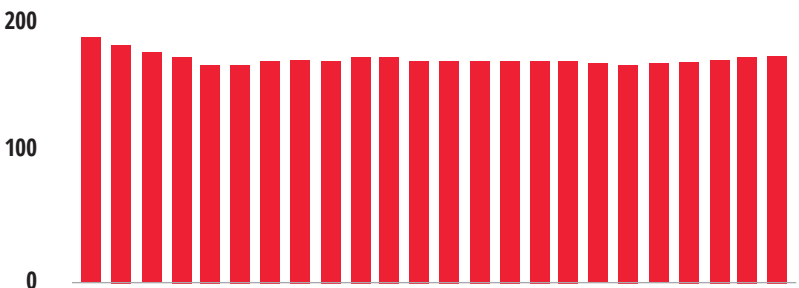
WEEKEND WEATHER



A low pressure area is bringing cloud cover and some wet weather over Central and Eastern Nepal from Friday into the weekend. The rain is much needed for the newly-planted maize crop, but it will not be copious. There is only a 20-25% chance of rain towards later afternoon on Saturday and Sunday, and even this will be fairly scattered. The rain has not extended down to the Tarai, and this means the wildfires burning in the Chure will continue to smoulder. The smoke and clouds will combine to depress the maximum temperature to the mid-20s, a considerable relief from the usually hot period in mid-March.


FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
 26° 16°	 26° 16°	 24° 16°

AIR QUALITY INDEX



Kathmandu AQI from 12PM 30 March - 10AM 31 March measured at US Embassy Phora Darbar
The only good news we can impart is that Kathmandu's Air Quality Index is not as bad as last year this time when the whole country was on fire. The bad news is that the Valley's AQI is bad enough for it to be on the hazardous Red Zone for most of this week. Forest fires in the Chure and parts of the central mountains is blowing smoke and soot over Kathmandu, and combined with vehicular emission this has made the Valley's air live up to IQAir ranking as the sixth most polluted capital city in the world. Keep masks on, and avoid strenuous outdoor exercise for the time being. Live AQI measurements at Phora Darbar on www.nepaltimes.com

OUR PICK



What is the responsibility of a medical professional? And what can we do about that?, asks *This is Going to Hurt*, a seven-part British medical dramedy which focuses on the lives of a group of junior doctors working in an obstetrics and gynaecology ward in a National Health Service hospital. The show closely follows their personal and professional lives in and out of the hospital, and centres on the effects of a stressful work environment on their emotional and physical health. Based on the best-selling memoir of the same name by Adam Kay, this frank and shockingly eye-opening portrayal of the NHS highlights the lack of support for its workers and the sheer level of exhaustion in the chaos – which can be relatable no matter where in the world you are. The writing is sharp, hilarious and downright haunting, brought to life by Ben Whishaw, Ambika Mod, Alex Jennings, Michele Austin, Rory Fleck Byrne, Ashley McGuire, Kadiif Kirwan and Harriet Walter.

कोमिड-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 कुकिछिपी बेच्न राखिएका खोपहरु नक्कली हुन सक्छन् ।




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Still Rising Nepal

Nothing is more symbolic of the Still Rising Nepal than the ongoing view tower construction spree. It is concrete proof that Nepal stands tall, and is destined for a future of ever-bigger erectile dysfunctions.

This April Fool's Day, patriotic Nepalīs should leave no brick unturned in support of our national edifice complex.

However, at this rate we may soon run out of peaks to put towers on, so we must strive for more creative new erections:

Sagarmatha View Tower

In order to maintain the supremacy of Mt Everest, it is in Nepal's strategic interest to build a 50m view tower with revolving restaurant on the summit, so visitors get a panoramic view



from 8896.84m. For easy access, there will be a cable car up the Khumbu Icefall, an escalator from the Wesern Cwm to the South Col, and easy stone steps up the SE Ridge to the top. Descent will be via zipline. This project will be financed with a loan from China's ExIm Bank.



The Oli Folly

Why should only the old Dhararara be known internationally as Bhimsen's Folly? The fatter tower inaugurated by Prime Minister Oli in 2020 shall henceforth be named after him. As it sways, the structure will also serve as an early warning of impending earthquakes.



Republican Tower

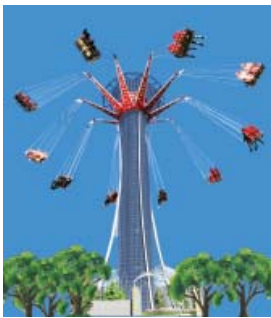
One sure sign that Nepal is rising from the asses is the Republican Tower under construction in Thankot since 2008. This architectural

marvel is deliberately made to look like a nuclear-tipped ICBM on the launch pad, so as to fool enemy spy satellites.



Pillar of the Constitution

For the uninitiated this may look like the BICC water tower, but it is actually the thinly disguised Constitution Pillar (also known as Pushpa 'Column' Dahal). The monument is purposely made to look like a phallus so that Nepal's secular politicians get divine blessings during upcoming elections.



Federalism Obelisk

Many of you may be wondering what that steel structure coming up in Kamaladi is. It can finally be revealed that it is the Federalism Obelisk-cum-Amusement Park to remind us that Nepal is a Fun-filled Secular Democratic Republic.



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Periphery within

● Kunda Dixit in Achham

As Nepal prepares for local elections in May, here in the far-western mountains, there is anticipation and hope that grassroots leaders will be more efficient and accountable. This is in stark contrast to Kathmandu, where apathy and cynicism about national politics is rife.

When Nepal had its first local elections in 20 years in 2017, the tiny settlement of Chaurpati had no electricity, no roads, and there was no doctor in the health post. Most men were migrant workers in India, and many of those who stayed behind would spend the days gambling and drinking.

“Our main focus in the past five years was to improve the infrastructure neglected for decades,” says Harka Bahadur Saud, the elected chair of Chaurpati Rural Municipality. “The pandemic delayed things, but everyone can see that things have changed for the better.”

This bucolic village clings to a mountain side surrounded by rhododendron forests in full bloom, and a 360 degree panorama. It now has a brand new 15-bed hospital, motorable roads, an upgraded school, and a football field sized pond to store monsoon rains that recharges ground water to replenish springs that have gone dry.

Saud is from the Unified Socialist party after it split from the UML, and is confident that his constituents have seen the progress and will reward him with another five-year term as Chair.

“There is so much left to do, we need roads, cash crops and create jobs so people do not have to migrate,” says Saud, who has leased terraces abandoned by migrating farmers for banana plantations.

Saud’s deputy is Maya Kunwar, and although she is from the Nepali Congress (NC), the two complement each other. They work as a team to upgrade roads and buildings, removing discrimination, exclusion, and tackling social injustice. Kunwar is active in the village Judicial Committee that mediates in local disputes.

She is not one of those token women that

parties selected as candidates to fulfil the female quota for deputy chair. Before standing for election in 2017, Kunwar campaigned to end the practice of menstrual banishment called *chhaupadi*, reduce domestic violence and curb alcoholism.

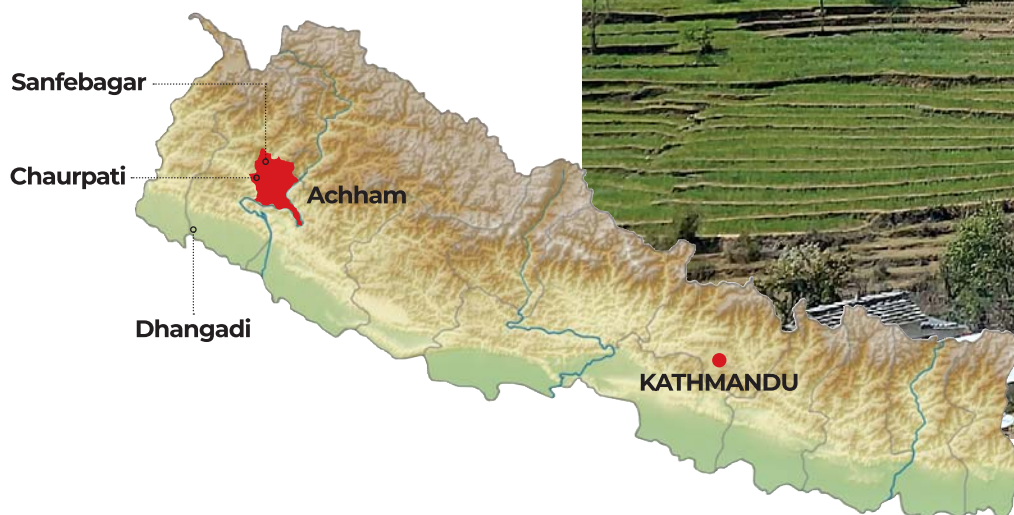
“You do not see any drunks on the streets anymore because we have banned the sale of alcohol sachets, and increased police patrols,” she says. Kunwar says political career would not have been possible without a supportive husband and her in-laws. She would like to stand again, this time for the chair, but with elections only a little more than a month away, she has not got a ticket yet.

A lot will depend on how parties in the governing coalition divide up candidates for municipal and ward constituencies.

Here in rural Nepal, the notion of centre and periphery is blurred. Seen from Kathmandu, Far-west Province is remote, but Achham district is distant by the standards of this isolated region. And even within Achham, the village of Chaurpati is in the back of beyond.

Blow-by-blow news of political power struggles in Kathmandu could not be more removed from everyday reality of these mountain settlements. Here, it does not matter which party a candidate for ward or municipal council belongs to. All that matters is whether they can deliver what matters.

And what matters most to voters here are livelihood, jobs, safer roads, a market



Grassroots democracy

Expensive medical care is making Nepalis poorer, but there are examples of local governments trying to change that

● Sagar Budhathoki

Nepal’s medical system continues to suffer from lack of access, affordability and equity. Government hospitals are under-funded, under-staffed and under-motivated. Private clinics are too costly for most Nepalis.

In the absence of an efficient nationwide insurance system, families are forced to sell land, take expensive loans for prolonged treatment of relatives. A recent WHO report states that nearly half-a-million Nepalis are pushed below the poverty line every year because of high medical expenses.

Despite this, there are shining examples of hospitals that offer quality health care at low cost.

One of them is in Tikapur of Kailali district where elected local leaders provide affordable care despite limited resources. In nine wards, there are two health posts, seven health centres and a hospital.

“It is a question of priorities, citizens need health care they

can afford and trust,” explains Bal Bahadur Kunwar of Tikapur Municipality, one of the few that allocate 10% of the budget for health services.

The result has been dramatic: in the past five years since the mayor and municipal council were elected to office, the district’s high maternity and infant mortality rates have gone down. Patients do not have to travel to nearby cities like Nepalganj or Dhangadi seeking expensive treatment.

Demand has grown so much that Tikapur municipality has had to add gynaecologists, paediatricians, two staff nurses and two vaccine administrators to its 50-bed hospital which is also supported by the Far-west Province.

It is not just health care that is free of cost, the deputy mayor’s office also provides food and allowances to pregnant women and new mothers through its ‘Aama sanga Upamayor’ program to pay for transport and other costs. This means the rate of institutional delivery has gone up, despite the pandemic lockdowns.

Another forward-looking initiative is Tikapur’s ‘Hamri Chhori, Pyari Chhori’ with which parents can open a bank account in the name of newborn girls with a Rs1,000 deposit every year, which she can withdraw when she grows up — as long as she does not get married before age 20.

Rapti Municipality of Dang



the periphery

A remote village in far-west Nepal readies to vote in local elections with anticipation and hope



PHOTOS: KUNDA DIXIT



LOOKING AFTER HEALTH: Maya Kunwar, the deputy chair of Chaurpati Rural Municipality (*above*) explains her emphasis on health care during her five-year tenure. View of Chaurpati from the new 15-bed hospital in the village (*left*).

for produce. They need affordable and accessible healthcare so they do not have to borrow money to take sick family members to hospital. Health is a primary concern of local people, and candidates standing for elections know this. Even a minor injury can bankrupt a family because of lack of access to affordable health care.

“In politics we have to compete, but in providing service to the people we have to work together,” says Saud. “Politics at the local level is all about meeting expectations, we cannot let our people down.”

Kunwar nods in agreement, “It is not important who wins the election. If it is not me it will be someone else. Whoever it is, the problems here will be the same.”

Sanfegabgar Rural Municipality, a two-hour drive down the mountain, is better off than Chaurpati. It has an airfield with daily flights, its market is thriving because of the construction of the 20MW Budiganga hydroelectric project upstream.

Sanfegabgar also has Bayalpata Hosptial which provides free medical care to more than 100,000 patients every year from Achham and

surrounding districts. Managed by the non-profit Nyaya Health Nepal (NHN), the hospital is an example of a partnership with local government which are now investing in affordable and accessible healthcare.

“Bayalpata Hospital is what health care in the rest of Nepal should be,” says the mayor of Sanfegabgar Rural Municipality Kul Bahadur Kunwar, who supports the hospital through his municipality budget.

The hospital has included surrounding rural municipalities like Chaurpati in its community health program, helping with equipment and medical staff at its new hospital, training community health volunteers to go house-to-house to provide free basic care.

Deputy Mayor of Sanfegabgar Birmala Budathapa says being elected a people’s representative is not for the faint-hearted. “It has been five years, my phone is ringing constantly with people who need help. There is a lot of pressure to deliver on our promises.”

During the pandemic Budathapa herself had to take patients who could not afford transport to hospital for treatment.

She says, “Bayalpata has been god-send. It is a model for free, high-quality medical care that should be spread all over Nepal.”

<https://www.nyayahealthnepal.org/>

promotes good health



district has 7% of its budget for health, and was awarded by the District Public Health Office last year for exemplary service. All its nine wards now have health posts. Community volunteers get incentives to make home visits to check up on the elderly, pregnant women and newborn babies.

“Providing basic health care is not rocket science, it just needs a modest budget, good management and a commitment to the people,” says Rapti Municipality’s health section chief, Narayan Raut. Rapti is putting up another 15-bed hospital just for maternity cases.

In Athbiskot Rural Municipality of West Rukum, high up in the mountains of Karnali Province, there used to be just five understaffed basic health posts.

Now, there is a well-equipped municipal hospital, four health posts, nine basic health care centres and eight urban health units.

From 21 healthcare workers, staff has grown to 94 with recruitment of MDGPs, public health inspectors, radiologists, and staff nurses. All this is paid for by the municipality, which sets aside 10% of its budget for health care.

“There is an immediate impact on saving lives,” says Athbiskot’s health section chief Prem Prakash Rokaya. “Besides, families do not have to take sick relatives all the way to Kohalpur or Nepalganj for expensive treatment.”

This progress in equitable healthcare in rural Nepal is not just because it is enshrined in the Constitution, but a direct result of

local governments being answerable to people for whom health care is an over-riding priority.

Despite its relative accessibility, Ichakamana Rural Municipality in Chitwan district did not have a resident MBBS doctor in its hospital. But elected municipal officials responded to public demand during the pandemic, and the hospital now has a resident doctor, it provides maternity care, has a functioning laboratory and video x-ray equipment.

In its 10 health centres across seven wards, Ichakamana now has four birthing centres. Says municipality chair Gita Kumari Gurung: “We don’t have to rush to Bharatpur, Kathmandu or Pokhara for medical treatment. It is all here.”

Ironically, it is the government hospitals in big cities where medical care is not of high enough quality. Hospital staff often moonlight in private clinics, or get cuts from pharmacies which sell medicines they prescribe to patients. Families are therefore forced to admit relatives in expensive private hospitals in the cities, or go to India.

Nepalganj Municipality built an urban health promotion centre and laboratory with Rs9.8 million from the Ministry of Health three years ago, but it is understaffed because of insufficient budget.

In Ghorahi of Dang, the health centre was upgraded with a medical doctor. An electrocardiogram and

video x-ray were also added. But with no specialists, the equipment is in storage.

Local health facilities are now supposed to be managed by municipalities themselves, but even while the budget from the centre has been cut, they have not been given the authority to raise enough local taxes to pay for these services.

“The central government still controls the budget, which makes it difficult to meet local needs,” admits Baburam Marasini, the former chief of the Epidemiology and Disease Control Division. “This means most local governments do not have the wherewithal to make the necessary policies, budgets, plans, and implement them.”

Before 2017, it was the district health office that made all health related plans and policies under direction from the national government. With federalism, there is confusion about budget and jurisdiction that has not been cleared up in the last five years.

“There is no consistency in policy and implementation,” laments former health secretary Senendra Raj Uprety. “Most local officials do not possess the qualifications or experience to draw up proper budgets.”

Nepal set aside Rs141 billion for healthcare last year of which the largest chunk (74%) was for the federal level, only 5.16% for provinces, and 20.93% for municipalities.

Local government budgets are not enough to address needs at the grassroots. Health specialist Kedar Baral says the pressure on central hospitals can only be lessened by decentralising quality health care and making it more affordable.

“If we do not improve the primary service, not only does access to health become more expensive, but the entire system can collapse,” he adds.

Aside from municipalities that have prioritised health, other local governments have wasted money on unnecessary infrastructure, buildings, or view towers.

The reason local officials are not too interested in investing in health is because it takes up to two decades for returns on investment, remarks Guna Raj Awasthi of the Far-West Health directorate.

WHO recommends that low-income countries must invest \$83 per person per year in the health sector. In Nepal, this figure is a woeful \$17.3 per person.

According to the Nepal Health Sector Strategy 2015-2020, 31% of people are forced to travel to city hospitals, to pay above their means for essential services that should have been provided free locally.

Says Marasini: “The increase in the number of admissions at hospitals in Kathmandu means that local health centres have failed. Otherwise, why would anyone spend five times as much for treatment in Kathmandu?”



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