



DIWAKAR CHETTRI

NEPAL VOTES

Local elections on 13 May amidst political and economic crises

● Shristi Karki

Campaigning for his daughter Renu Dahal in Bharatpur last week, Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal warned that if she did not win, Nepal would plunge into crisis.

Over in Dadeldhura, Arzu Rana, the wife of Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, told an election rally she would withhold the budget for any municipality that did not vote in a Nepali Congress mayor.

The fact that two powerful members of the ruling coalition in Nepal have taken to threatening voters is an indication of the frustration with their inability to ensure that the alliance fields common candidates for the 13 May local elections.

"If you vote for Renu Dahal, I will personally ensure that this coalition lasts for the next 20 years. If not, the country is headed to disaster," Dahal told the rally in Bharatpur on 5 May.

Renu Dahal is the coalition-backed candidate in Bharatpur, and her running mate is from the Nepali Congress (NC).

Chitwan is a NC stronghold, and many in the district directly suffered at the hands of the Maoists during the insurgency, including families who fled the conflict in the mountains. Now, relatives of those who were killed, disappeared, or injured in the war are being forced to vote for the party that perpetrated those crimes.

"The outcome of the local election can stir up the coalition," says political analyst Nilambar Acharya. "Parties will be drawing up their strategies for the next election based on the results of this election."

Prime Minister Deuba failed to convince his party's mayoral candidate Jagannath Poudel to step down and support Renu Dahal. Poudel has been expelled from the party and

is now running as an independent.

Dadeldhura also has a rebel mayoral candidate. The NC expelled Karna Bahadur Malla for refusing to make way for a coalition-backed common candidate and forming an alliance with the opposition UML.

Fear of political retribution seems to have influenced some NC candidates from running as independents against their own party.

Bimal Bahadur Karki in Pokhara withdrew his candidacy for mayor in support of the coalition's CPN Unified Socialist candidate Dhanraj Acharya, and his NC running mate Kopila Ranabhat.

Prime Minister Deuba's attempts to appease his coalition partners have widened the rift within the NC between him and senior leaders like Shekhar Koirala, who had

been against an electoral alliance, calling the expulsion of popular NC candidates as "political assassinations".

Maoist leader Dahal throwing his entire political weight behind his daughter's constituency in Bharatpur has also not sat well within his party.

In fact, the outcome of the mayoral races in Bharatpur, Pokhara and Dadeldhura will have far-reaching consequences for provincial and federal elections in November, and could even lead to the breakup of the coalition.

In Kathmandu, the UML's Keshav Sthapit is standing for mayor again despite multiple allegations of sexual harassment during his previous tenure. Ironically, his running mate is former Miss Newa Sunita Dangol, 29.

The coalition's common candidate in Kathmandu is Srijana Singh, the wife of NC leader Prakash Man Singh who is himself the scion of Congress stalwart Ganesh Man Singh.

The Bibeksheel Sajha Party is hoping to repeat its strong showing from 2017 before the two parties merged. Its candidate is lawyer Samikchya Baskota, but her chances could be affected by party chair Rabindra Mishra's pro-monarchy and anti-federalism stance.

Trying to cash in on disillusioned Bibeksheel Sajha supporters from 2017 is 30-year old engineer and rapper Balen Shah who is standing as an independent, and is expected to carry the youth swing vote. His campaign through social media has brought out young Nepalis into the streets in droves.

There were 14,074,424 registered voters in local elections in 2017, and turnout was 73.8%. This time, there are 17,733,726 voters, but turnout could be affected by complicated ballot papers.

Some 4 million Nepalis living and working abroad will not be allowed to cast absentee ballots despite a Supreme Court ruling in 2018.

Friday's turnout may also be affected by rain, and voters being required to travel to their home districts to cast ballots. Many young voters who live in cities but got their citizenship certificates from the districts may be unwilling to make the journey just to vote.

The future of Nepal's local governments, and even the survival of the ruling coalition, is in the hands of voters as they head to polling booths across the country on Friday.

Even then, parties are already eyeing provincial and federal elections. Says congress leader Minendra Rijal: "Local election is the springboard for November polls." 🇳🇵

Local poll,
national impact
EDITORIAL
PAGE 2

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Local poll, national impact

Nepalis across the country vote on Friday the 13th for municipal and ward councils, but its outcome may decide the fate of the governing coalition in Kathmandu.

Two mayoral races in Bharatpur and Pokhara are going to be especially crucial, and will test the durability of the 5-party syndicate that has been running the country since Prime Minister K P Oil of the UML was outvoted in Parliament last year.

The coalition is made up of strange bedfellows: the centre right Nepali Congress (NC) with the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist-Centre), Communist Party of Nepal Unified Socialists (US), as well as the Janata Samajbadi Party (JSP) and the smaller Rastriya Janamorchha.

Unity is fraying within this fragile coalition, and the need to field common candidates has not just widened the rift between partners, but also within the parties themselves.

Even though the coalition agreed not to compete against each other and divided up the country's 753 municipalities among themselves, in only one-third of them does it actually have common candidates.

Final results of local elections will take at least a week, but it is clear that the outcome will be a referendum on national and provincial elections in November, and even on whether the coalition will remain intact.

The future of the coalition seems to rest on voting results mainly in Bharatpur, Pokhara, Kathmandu, Biratnagar and Dadeldhura. Even among these, it will be Bharatpur and Pokhara that will be decisive.

In Bharatpur, Maoist chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal has staked all for the candidacy of his daughter, Renu, the incumbent mayor. The local mayoral aspirant Jagannath Poudel from the NC is up in arms — not so much against the Maoists, but against his own party that tried to force him to withdraw.

Poudel refused, the NC expelled him, and now he is standing as an independent. Last week, coalition leaders including Prime Minister Deuba and Dahal addressed a campaign rally in Bharatpur in which Dahal went as far as to say that the country was “headed towards disaster” if his daughter was not elected. In Pokhara, the common coalition candidate is the CPN-US's Dhanraj Acharya,

after Deuba managed to convince his party's Bimal Bahadur Karki to withdraw. But many NC supporters are campaigning against Acharya in favour of the UML candidate.

In Biratnagar, the coalition's candidate is JSP chair Upendra Yadav's son Amarendra Yadav, and this has got local NC supporters all worked up in a city that has always been their party's bastion.

Friday's elections have brought intense rivalries within and between coalition members out in the open, and this cannot be a pleasant sight for Deuba and Dahal.

In fact, Dahal has already been hinting that he will blame the Congress if Maoist common candidates lose in key constituencies like Bharatpur. If the coalition candidates lose in a majority of municipalities, it is conceivable that the alliance will split and the Communist parties may coalesce for the next phase of elections.

Watching the clash within the coalition rather gleefully from the sidelines is the UML. The opposition party would like nothing better than to exact revenge on the coalition by splitting it. The UML has also forged a partnership with the Hindu-right RPP and the Moonie-backed Family Party.

Despite the names of the political parties, this election is not an ideological contest between the left and right. It is not even about evaluating the performance of the party candidates for the last five years, and questioning the decentralisation of corruption

to local governments. In fact, it has become an exercise in selecting the best among the worst candidates.

For the UML, this election is not about furthering its electoral agenda but defeating Maoist and CPN-US candidates in as many municipalities as possible. And vice versa for the Maoists and CPN-US.

Rajendra Linden of the RPP is going all out to weaken Kamal Thapa's RPP Nepal, and the JSP would like nothing better than to oust Mahanta Thakur's LSP.

This local election is therefore more about defeating rivals within parties or those who have defected, than about issues like making Nepal's cities, towns and villages more liveable. And this makes a mockery of the electoral process in a democracy.

Santa Gaha Magar

Results of municipal elections in Bharatpur and Pokhara may decide the fate of the ruling coalition



20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

The Fabric of Democracy

Nepalis will be voting in local elections on 13 May for the second time under federal governance. But just five years later, there is already disillusionment with federalism and the lack of good governance.

As this editorial 20 years ago this week tells us, we need to strengthen democracy when it is threatened. If it did not work it was because it is misused.

Perhaps one prime example of this is how the top political leadership is openly threatening voters ahead of the 13 May polls. The mayoral showdown in Bharatpur, Pokhara and Dadeldhura will have a far-reaching consequence for Nepal's politics.

Excerpts from the editorial from issue #93 10-16 May 2002:

After the euphoria of democracy is over, will it mean that fighting for freedom is easier than making it work? Will people power fail its ultimate test of putting in people in office who will make the difference to the lives of citizens?

Things are bad, yes. And this leads many to the authoritarian temptation. Paradoxically, it is a temptation

that seems to strike not the rulers so much as the ruled. Citizens in many juvenile democracies have lost faith in their flighty leaders. As democracy falters, extremists move to fill the governance vacuum. Foreseeing conflict and anarchy, the people then regard a return to authoritarianism as a

lesser evil. It is a search for a saviour that is borne out of desperation and extreme disillusionment with those who have misused and wasted the popular mandate.

The giddiness with which we greeted the restoration of democracy has long given way to apathy and cynicism. But that means having an alert citizenry, a pro-active civil society, a media that flexes itself and takes freedom to its limit. But that takes hard work. It is much easier to point out what is wrong than to do something to set things right. It is a lot less effort to be cynical.

The antidote to a faltering democracy is its more sincere and honest application, and a citizenry that forces its elected leaders to display more accountability and commitment. At no point is this more important than when conflict threatens our freedoms.

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



ONLINE PACKAGES



The physical event might be over and we will be back next year with more wide-reaching dialogues but you can still watch the panel discussions, keynote speech by Ravish Kumar and Manoj Gajurel's comic relief all on our sister publication Himal Khabar's YouTube channel. Recap of the event: [page 9](#).

HIMAL MEDIA MELA

Ravish Kumar ji is a true human first and a journalist later. He was, is and will keep fighting for common people like us, throughout his life, no matter what. He always speaks the truth and stands by it, is never scared. It was a great experience listening to him on the platform of a neighbouring country. His wisdom remains unchanged regardless of where and when. Huge respect, admiration and adulation for him. He is an asset to India, one day people will realise.

Mitushi Agrawal

● Ravish Kumar is the best journalist in India.

Md Asjad Rain

● One of my favourite journalists: Ravish Kumar.

Prabin Joshi

● Print is still considered reliable, unlike the digitised version which is more prone to reporting fake and fraudulent news.

Bhumi Limbu

● Media also needs to realise that readers are now themselves the content creators too and it will increasingly move in that direction. This realisation can help everyone remain grounded and look for areas of collaboration. It is no longer a one-way traffic that it used to be.

Satish Pandey

BHAIRAWA AIRPORT

Pokhara International Airport should learn from the flaws of Bhairawa before it is too late ('Bhairawa's new airport already too small', [pages 10-11](#)).

Rajiv Giri

● Now that we find that Nepal's two new international airports - Pokhara and Lumbini - have major design flaws, who is responsible: Nepal government or foreign builders? Or both? If this is not a major corruption scandal, what is?

Akhilesh Upadhyay

● Finally, someone reported this reality! VNBW is not a feasible airport and it is just a stunt of Nepali leaders to show their work, yet without any estimation or planning. Future will show this harsh reality, till then just believe blindfolded what your leaders blabber about this project.

Δενισ Πουδψαλ

● Nepal is not especially talented in airport planning, engineering, construction or management. It is just the way it is going to be.

Stanley Bercovitz

● At last, people are telling the truth about this lemon of an airport, which is most likely to mostly receive 'redirected traffic from KTM due to bad weather'... I can hear the complaints already.

Robin Boustead

● Money in the pocket, there's a surprise.. hills in the way of the Pokhara new airport, cleared that with huge profit from the sale of sand/top soil, now they have a danger from too many birds because of a nearby land fill site. The Feasibility Company should be prosecuted!

Ian Wall

STOLEN IMAGES

Keep it there, it is safer there at the university ('Yale returns Tara to Nepal', [nepalitimes.com](#)). It is less safe if it is brought back to Nepal.

Takeshi Okawara

● It is true that the artefact is safer abroad. But if it is kept in a museum, it is just a statue. The 99% of the people who see it will have no understanding of what it means to the Nepali people. Nepalis need to find a way to keep it safe as well as worship it.

Dorjee Tsering

SONAM LAMA

Huge congratulations Sonam Lama ('Nepal conservationist wins Whitley Award', *Nepali Times*, [www.nepalitimes.com](#)). You are a source of pride and inspiration. Keep up your great work!

Lok Mani Sapkota

DIASPORA DIARIES

The government puts up hurdles to people wanting to go ('Mirage of migrants rights', Editorial, #1109), to people wanting to stay, to people wanting to come. It sees people only as a source of income, and thus charges taxes and fees at every opportunity.

Shirini Barakzai

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



Internet in everything

Editorial

Social media platforms will be useful dissemination tools, they will be even more entertainment-driven, and it will be the papers and their digital editions with credibility and exclusive content that will stay afloat. Read full article on our website.

f Most reached and shared on Facebook

Baby on her back, Dalit mother on campaign trail

by Anita Bhetwal

Nepalis are voting for their local representatives this Friday for the second time under the federal system. Just last week, 28-year-old Mina Biswakarama was on the campaign trail with a three-year-old son strapped to her back. Her story was widely shared on social media.

t Most popular on Twitter

Freedom of the wild ass

by Ass

Nepal's rankings in the World Press Freedom Index has improved to #76 from #106. But it is not clear if it is because all other countries did worse, or if it was because we have the same freedom as that enjoyed by the wild ass on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. Don't miss your weekly dose of satire on [nepalitimes.com](#)

“ ” Most commented



Himal Media Mela 2022

by *Nepali Times*

The first Himal Media Mela on 7 May saw media professors, researchers, and members of the press examine challenges faced by the industry in Nepal and South Asia. The event will be back in 2023 with more comprehensive wide-reaching dialogues. Read the recap on [page 9](#).

🔍 Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
#Nepal's press is so free that the Ministry of Disinformation and Newspeak does not believe in blaming the messenger anymore, it will try to jail them. Especially if they upload irreverent music videos on YouTube about corruption in high places.



Aayush L. @AyeCeeL
This is sad. People should be able to openly discuss and criticise the people in power to hold them accountable and responsible. I believe this is essential for a functioning democracy. #satire



Aleksandr Verkotsyn @xander_fero
The Truth often disguises itself as Satire. praj.jwol@praj.jwol Still a lot to improve on.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
On the third panel of @Ncell #HimalMediaMela @aroonkarki, @Madhu2067 and Sahina Shrestha with @ayusha98_ discuss the new tools needed to survive the brave #newmedia landscape in 'Tomorrow's #journalism'.



Ananda Nepali @anandanepali99
Great job! @aroonkarki and @ayusha98_ jee. One of the best and insightful session of the Himal Media Mela 2022.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
"Nepali media is one of the freer media today, and that comes with a responsibility to find methods to educate ourselves on how to be citizens. Voting is fundamental to democracy, but before we learn to vote, we must learn to be citizens." Ravish Kumar @ravishndtv #HimalMediaMela



Chun B. Gurung @Chun_Gurung
Enjoyed listening to @ravishndtv at Himal Media Mela 2022. Congratulations @Himal_Khabar @NepaliTimes @kundadixitdai, it was a great event.

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TURKISH AIRLINES

TÜRKİYE

Health insurance must be an election agenda

Nepal's health insurance program is due for urgent reform, or it risks being obsolete

● Gaj B Gurung

If Nepalis are to vote on issues rather than personalities in this year's elections, they should pay attention to the manifesto of the Nepali Congress (NC) which has put an emphasis on the 2017 National Health Insurance Act.

It was the NC's firebrand leader Gagan Thapa who pushed that legislation when he served as Health Minister. He is now the party's general secretary, and sees health insurance as a way to improve the access and affordability of quality health care in Nepal.

Even for a country like Nepal, universal health coverage does not have to be a distant dream if there is political will. Covid-19 has already showed that investing in health care and prevention is central to the well-being of the society.

Many countries in the region have health insurance for their citizens. An example is Thailand's Universal Health Coverage Scheme, lauded as the best model for a developing country.

The Nepal Health Insurance program was initiated to achieve universal health coverage, and was one of the key agendas in the 2017 election with widespread political support. It pays directly to the service providers on-behalf of insured members.

In a few years, the program has had scalable impact. Our 2020 study in Kaski district showed that in-patient expenses of insured families was less than that of non-insured ones. They were also better protected against catastrophic expenses than the non-insured.

Broadly, the program aimed to improve the health quality through provider and purchaser split, and by employing a strategic purchasing approach. Health insurance generates an additional health budget, as it is a pooling mechanism. The Ministry of Finance allocated the insurance budget without curtailing the current national health budget.

Unfortunately, the insurance scheme design and implementation



NEPALI TIMES ARCHIVE

have been drowned out by political rhetoric, operational ambiguity and erratic implementation. Without serious political will to strengthen the program, it is likely to come to grief before long.

Insured people are dissatisfied with service providers for their historically low-quality care. In fact, it has worsened in places after the insurance scheme was introduced, resulting in a high drop-out rate.

Service providers are also frustrated over the Health Insurance Board (HIB)'s sluggish reimbursement process and some have even stopped the service. The HIB does not have skilled human resources to speed up the reimbursement, nor has it formulated an efficient service purchase mechanism.

The Board has not been able to function as a prudent insurance manager because of the lack of basic organisational policies on human resources, finance, monitoring and evaluation, communication, etc.

There are also crucial design errors in the insurance program, such as reimbursement strategy, unequitable premiums, and provider/purchaser split, to name a few.

The current program primarily employs fee-for-service (FES) which is a traditional, retrospective and input-based approach with a cumbersome process to review and validate cost and payment.

The FES was selected in spite of other programs, including free health service and safer motherhood, implementing relatively efficient, output-based and prospective approaches such as capitation.

The HIB as a semi-autonomous body also does not have the influence or muscle to monitor and negotiate with service providers.

The premium amount and benefit package was fixed through very limited study which was a modest Rs2,500 and Rs50,000 respectively in the beginning, later increased to Rs3,500 and Rs100,000

but with no scientific basis.

This benefit package is quite small for a family of five. The amount gets smaller with increased cost for the high prevalence of non-communicable and chronic diseases in the general population.

Apart from the targeted groups (with premium subsidy), the flat premium amount of Rs3,500 for the rest is unbalanced. The richest 10% of Nepal's population has more than 26 times the wealth of the poorest 40%, so the Rs3,500 is peanuts for some households, while it could be a monthly food expense for others.

Despite this, the HIB claims that there is no clear provider and purchaser split between MoH and HIB. The ministry has influence over the board's organisational structure. As such, staffing decisions are pending approval from the the ministry for years.

The majority of the HIB staff are seconded from the Ministry of Health, none of them are health economists or have financial

Short to medium term recommendations:

- HIB needs to develop organisational guidelines to streamline reimbursement and equitable demand generation.
- The health service purchasing strategy must be reviewed, with human resources needed.
- Private health service providers will be integrated into the program, but they can put HIB in a weaker negotiating position.
- HIB should develop standards for hospital/PHCC preparedness, provide additional training and incentives for health workers.
- Integration with other social security funds and health programs will improve efficiency and help access data on populations and cross-share promising investment practices.
- HIB partners with research agencies and health economists for reform.

Long term recommendations:

- Premium-based pricing won't be fair or sustainable because of poverty and among high informal sector employees. HIB must look into fully tax-funded schemes.
- Provider and purchase split might go through lengthy technical and political discussion after HIB fulfils the majority of short and medium plans. Clear roles, responsibilities and trust needed between MoH and HIB.

background. Learning by doing is a costly, ineffective and inefficient approach for a high-priority national program.

Similarly, the HIB is incapable of coordinating with line ministries for the program's effective implementation. For example, the Act has delegated NIB members to standardise service providers' quality control. However, its board is dominated by MoH members.

This results in poor service quality, leading to dissatisfaction amongst insured populations and in the high dropout rate and under-utilisation of the services.

Nepal's health insurance program must undergo some urgent reforms (see box above). 🇳🇵



Gaj B Gurung is a public health practitioner currently based in Bangkok, Thailand. He has a PhD in public health from College of Public Health and Sciences, Chulalongkorn University.

prabhu BANK

Tiago sales

Tata's Tiago has become the first car to cross 400,000 cumulative sales since its launch in 2016. The car has a 1200cc



displacement, 1.2 litre petrol BS-VI compliant engine, dual airbags and a capacity of 242 litres. It has also received a four-star rating in the Global NCAP security test.

Election Data Offer

Ncell has launched a bonus data offer focusing on the local election where customers can get 50-500MB data as bonus when recharging through the Ncell app. Customers who recharge Rs50-99 get 50MB data valid for one day. Those recharging Rs99-199 get 200MB valid for 3 days and more than Rs199 get 500MB data. For customers who need both data and voice there is an option of the combo pack to buy 5GB data and 100 min all-net talk time for Rs168.

NMB Yoyo Zipline

NMB Bank has partnered with Yoyo zipline to promote domestic tourism. Bank customers can get 12% discount by paying through Visa card for services.

Alternate Energy

Global IME Bank and Alternative Energy Promotion Centre have signed a loan agreement to develop several solar mini-grid projects. The Centre will



provide the fund to the bank which in turn will give out the amount as a loan for constructing and distributing power from the solar mini grid project.

Nabil excellence

Nabil Bank received the National HR Excellence Award 2022 given out by Growth Sellers. The bank was awarded for its mobilisation of manpower, work culture and employee satisfaction.



In memory and honour of its late chairman, Shambhu Prasad Poudyal, Nabil has also launched the 'Shree Shambhu Prasad Poudyal Memorial Scholarship' for the children of its employees. Two male and two female students scoring the highest in +2 level can win scholarship of Rs50,000 each.

Nepal-Israel relations

The Israeli Embassy celebrated 62 years of diplomatic relations between Israel and with Nepal on 10 May in the presence of Vice President Nanda Bahadur Pun.



"Israel and Nepal share the same values of tolerance, democracy, community solidarity and respect for each other. Our nations are proud of our heritage and as small civilizations, face similar

challenges. This is what united us in the past and this will continue to keep bilateral relations good," said Israel's ambassador to Nepal Hanan Goder during the event, which also had a photo exhibition.

CG Midea

Chaudhary Group has launched a new consumer appliance brand, Midea in Nepal. Midea's domestic home appliances can be bought through distributors and CG outlets through the country.



NMB KUKL tie-up

NMB Bank and Kathmandu Upatyaka Khanepani Limited (KUKL) have agreed to provide drinking water payment services for bank customers through the Omni channel app.

USAID grant

USAID and Nepal's Finance ministry have signed a five-year development assistance worth \$659 million which will primarily support the latter's goal of graduating to a



middle-income country. In particular, the US assistance will advance the country's sustainable development through strengthened democratic governance, enterprise-driven economic growth and increased resilience for communities most at-risk of natural disasters and climate change.

IME AGM

IME Life Insurance Company held its 4th Annual General Meeting last week. The company viewed financial and operational report and committed to making insurance more accessible.



UNESCO

Michael Croft, UNESCO Representative to Nepal, spoke to *Nepali Times* ahead of Buddha Jayanti to discuss the development of Lumbini and other heritage sites in the country. Excerpts:

What is UNESCO's role in Nepal?

Nepal is almost a microcosm of the wider human community because it is intensely diverse. The many different languages, Indigenous groups, traditions and geography make it a complex functioning entity.

And in that mix, there are certain lessons that can be drawn on how people can get together, how people can get along, how people can live in peace. And with the diversity comes also a rich cultural and creative heritage in Nepal.

As a result, we came up with a strategy by focusing on three main issues. We ask ourselves: What are the priorities here? What do Nepal's really care about?

We work directly with the government, private sector, civil society, and we also work with international partners and other UN agencies. In Lumbini, UNESCO can bring everybody on the table where they can put their perspectives for all to see, understand and comment on.

Our resources are limited, our time is limited, and it would be really difficult for UNESCO to move the needle without support from the stakeholders. But if we can facilitate a partnership, a common understanding, things can perhaps move in the right way.

How about UNESCO's work in natural heritage preservation?

The brand of the world cultural heritage is so strong that it tends to overshadow everything else. But the true magic happens in the interesting space where culture meets nature. And UNESCO has a range of designations for natural sites: global geo-parks, biosphere reserves, and such.

Nepal has an outstanding natural heritage, with two designated sites: Sagarmatha and Chitwan. These sites provide an important leverage, especially since Sagarmatha is known worldwide. Showcasing these best practices makes them globally relevant and visible. This is the same for Lumbini although in a different context, and the two sites that can generate enormous soft power because they are known and valued by millions of people many of whom have never even seen them.

Given global climate change, there is a need for just as much energy and resource, if not more, to be put into promoting biodiversity. We have to protect these few remaining places so that we can learn more from them and draw lessons on how to restore the same in other parts of the world.

This also links to the role of Indigenous groups, who are 4% of the world population but control or manage 80% of the biodiversity.

If we don't have an ecosystem then it makes no sense to talk about cultural heritage anyway, because there is a complex codependency between the two.

What other steps can Nepal take in leveraging the soft power of Lumbini and Sagarmatha?

In Nepal, Lumbini and Sagarmatha are discussed a lot. But in the case of Lumbini, especially, the international dialogue is not yet what it could be. Because UNESCO is an inter-governmental organisation, it can play a part in providing international visibility and facilitating international interactions.

These can play a pivotal role in influencing international perceptions of Nepal. They provide a chance to exchange ideas and practices with other countries and global institutions with different experiences and expertise.

The visibility attained in this way allows for the Nepali story to reach other countries and communities, and people can have an appreciation for Nepal for what it really is, not what they think it is.

The key role of UNESCO is to promote peace and sustainable development through international collaboration, education, science and culture. The ground-level work has to be accompanied by the discourse that reminds us why Lumbini is important, what it stands for. UNESCO can assist the government to build a network with international partners.

Is Lumbini being overbuilt?

I wouldn't say that Lumbini is overbuilt. The issue is that Lumbini is an area where the greatest amount of resources have been focused on infrastructure, and to some extent some of the archaeological work, but not so much on other elements.

Perhaps the infrastructure has gone ahead of other aspects because the responsibility of expanding infrastructure falls on one key official actor, the Lumbini Development Trust (LDT). But there are many cogs and wheels moving in Lumbini and sometimes it is difficult to synchronise. Softer issues such as the local communities' ability to leverage the sites for their own sustainable development, and the quality of guides to interpret the sites have not received as much attention. It is important to come up with solutions because one cannot develop any particular course in Lumbini without referring to another, or else everything falls out of sync.

Lumbini must consider developing its soft power so that people can have a much deeper experience with the site, and more visitors come. This includes a proper visitor management plan and a focus on why people come to Lumbini and how long they stay.

The International Committee for Lumbini within the UN has been dormant, how can Nepal revive it?

If there is an interest from the government, there are many partners who would like to see this happen. I believe that there also needs to be a reaction from the UN and UNESCO because we were formed for this.

If the government say they need an international process, this is our *raison d'être*. We can call for the meeting of the member states, with the Nepal government as the host. The member states appreciate and value opportunities which allow them to come together at a site and address issues like the one Lumbini represents.

What is your assessment of rebuilding of monuments after the 2015 earthquake?

For us the main lesson was how key the involvement of the community is. This was the result of community response, interest and participation, directly influenced by the fact that these are not just relics or monuments, but rather part of a living culture and heritage, and part of their lives.

Having seen what I have seen, I was impressed by the reconstruction. The amount of work, knowing all the different priorities that the cities, towns, municipalities and the government had, to see the effort that has been put into the restoration of cultural heritage – it is really something.

The big lesson here for next time is to put the community front and centre immediately. We need to listen to the community for their ideas on that and support them, not make decisions on behalf of the community.

But could the reconstruction have been done differently, or better?

It is a bit difficult for me to comment on that as I wasn't here to see the process. But the things that reverberate the most from the process are generally positive.

I would say perfection is the enemy of the good. I am sure it could have been better in some ways, but it could have been worse as well. And from what I see, there are no major flaws.

The last time Kathmandu had a major

earthquake was in 1934, so there was no preparation or plan, and people just did what they thought they should. And our natural instinct where we do things first is not always the best.

But the important thing is, the process changed and lessons were learnt. It is very difficult to respond constantly with best practices in situations like this.

The elephant in the room is the haphazard urbanisation around seven protected sites in Kathmandu Valley. Are we at risk of being removed from the World Heritage Sites list?

It is not UNESCO but the World Heritage Committee with the member states of UNESCO who remove sites from the list, but only in very special circumstances. It is really a measure of last resort.

There is no imminent risk of Kathmandu being removed from that list. But this is not to say that the risk is not there at all, but there are opportunities also for doing better in Kathmandu.

What are some of UNESCO's current concerns in Nepal?

Everyone recognises that this is a difficult time. The government has to balance priorities and often situations do not allow for immediate investment in the heritage sector.

But as with any other rapidly developing urban centres around the world, there is a very practical risk not just to the sites but also to Kathmandu's urban architecture and the intangible cultural heritage.

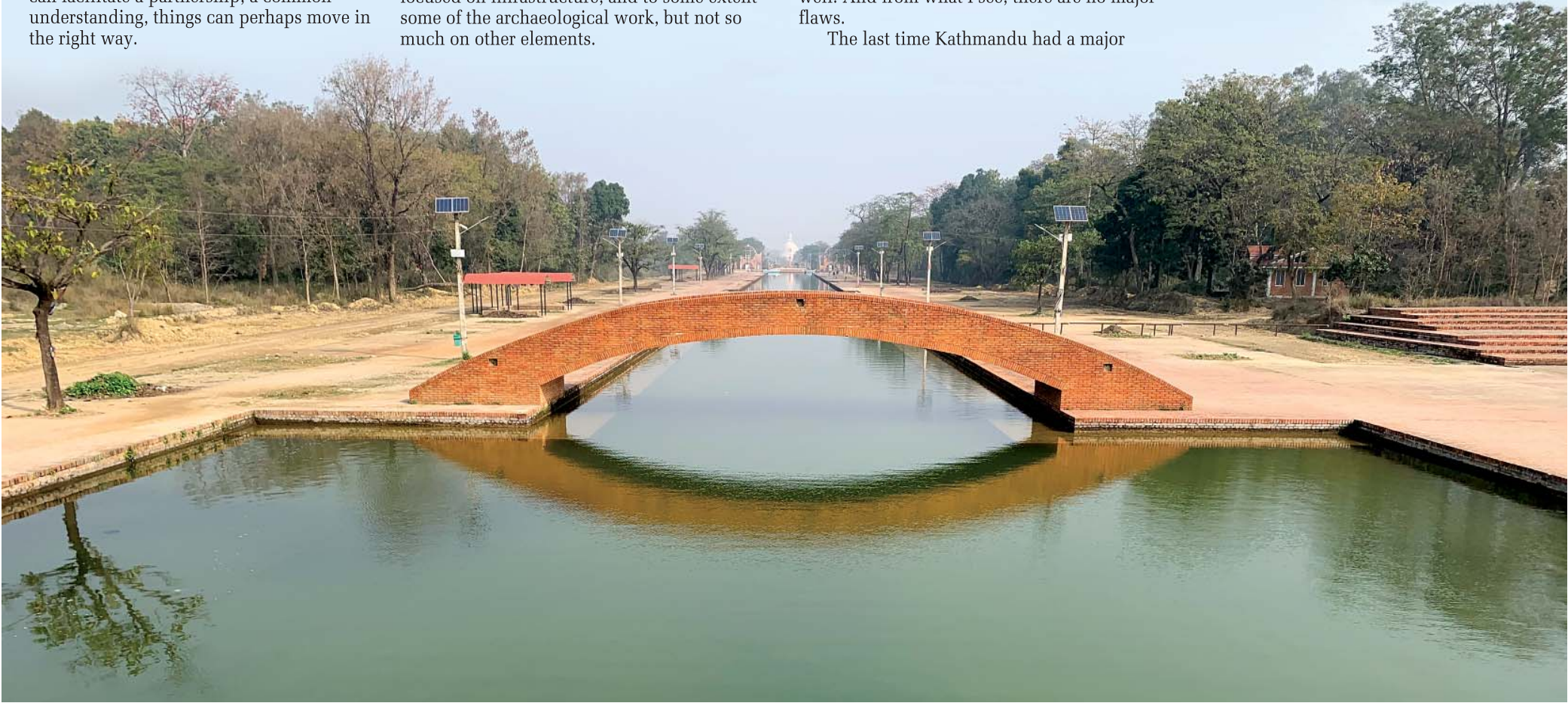
This is where the idea of creative cities comes in, and I think it is up to UNESCO to make an economic case for it.

There is an international network of creative cities created in 2004-2005, where the cities basically said 'We are going to use our creative industries, creative economies as a means to work for our sustainable development'. This really picked up after Agenda 2030, SDGs in 2015.

This will be very timely for Kathmandu, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur because this designation as creative cities serves as a narrative for them to promote the creative industry and economies, and move forward in the development.

This then attracts partners who want to support the development of Kathmandu, and starts to influence how investment is done. This puts the spotlight on the community and also gives the time, place and platform for them to collaborate.

I don't think it is practical for UNESCO to go around and yell louder about the importance of protecting culture and heritage. Where UNESCO can best put its effort is encouraging the stakeholders to look at development from a different perspective. We as people can't stop development, and we don't want to stop development. But what is the kind of development we want?



KUNDA DIXIT

Telling the story of Buddha's Lumbini

Nepal needs to learn how to sell the story of Siddhartha Gautam and focus on the holistic development of his birthplace



● **Sahina Shrestha** in Lumbini

The story goes that when the Buddha was approaching his *mahaparinirvana* at age 80, he advised his faithful disciple Ananda that there were four great places of pilgrimage associated with his life.

The locations of the Buddha's enlightenment, Bodh Gaya and Sarnath where he first taught the dharma were identified early on. But the mystery of where he passed away, Kushinagar, and where he was born and grew up, Kapilvastu and Lumbini, were not solved until the end of the 19th century.

Over the years, there was speculation about where the Shakyamuni Buddha was actually born – even though 2,600 years ago there were no modern nation state boundaries in the Subcontinent. But a finding from 3rd century BCE helped clear the doubt.

That was when Emperor Ashoka, following the devastating battle of Kalinga, set out on a pilgrimage to Lumbini with Upagupta. There he erected a sandstone pillar surmounted with a horse finial atop an inverted lotus, and an inscription in Pali to commemorate his visit in 249 BCE.

The two Ashokan inscriptions, one in Nigali Sagar near Tilaurakot referring to Konakamuni (a past Buddha) and another in Lumbini found in the 19th century showed



that in the Mauryan period, the place where the pillar stands was considered to be the birthplace of the Buddha.

Over the centuries, the site saw the pilgrimage by many Chinese monks, Faxian in the 5th century and Xuanzang in the 7th century being the two famous ones. Their accounts of the travels were later used by antiquarians in British India to locate the sites of the Buddha's birth and where he grew up.

But the popularity of the site waned until it was rediscovered in 1896, and excavations began. These days those visiting the Maya Devi temple in Lumbini, may not be aware of what they are seeing inside the complex.

Excavations in Lumbini have revealed many structures that were

built over the centuries, one of the most sacred being the Shakya tank, a pond where the Buddha's mother Queen Maya Devi is believed to have taken a bath before giving birth.

Maya Devi is believed to have given birth to Siddhartha Gautam in 623 BC, while she was on her way to her parents' home in Devdaha on a palanquin. She gave birth standing, while clutching to the branch of a sal tree. She died a week later, and the baby was raised by his aunt, Prajapati.

A 1,800-year-old stone sculpture, eroded by centuries of worship and a marker stone found in 1995 at the nativity site locate the exact spot in Lumbini's sacred garden where the Buddha was born. Archaeologists have also

uncovered ruins of monasteries dating from 3rd century BC to the 7th century AD, as well as of stupas, some built much more recently 600 years ago.

In 2011, an international team led by Robin Coningham of Durham University and Kosh Prasad Acharya, the former Director General of Nepal's Department of Archaeology uncovered remnants of a wooden structure beneath the pavement in the Maya Devi Temple.

When analysed, it looked like a tree shrine and was dated to around 550 BC, giving historians new evidence to consider as they attempt to reconstruct the Buddha's life.

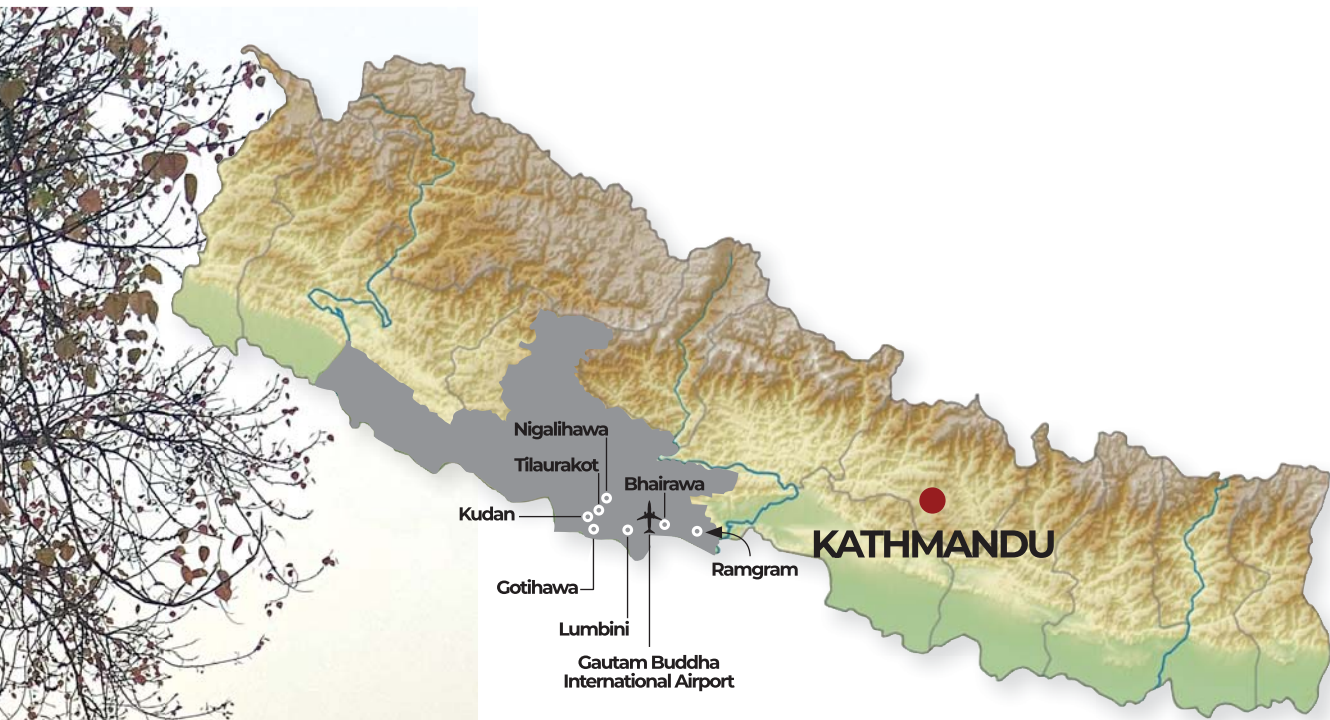
But the story of the Buddha is much more than just of Lumbini alone. If Nepal is to commemorate

more holistically the Buddha's life, it has to have an integrated approach and include other sites over the Greater Lumbini Area spanning Rupandehi, Nawalparasi and Kapilvastu, which have many archaeological sites, some of which are directly associated with the Buddha's life.

In Tilaurakot-Kapilvastu, the city where the Buddha is believed to have spent his first 29 years as Prince Siddhartha Gautam, and from where he left on his journey to spiritual enlightenment, archaeologists recently used ground penetrating radar to detect a palatial walled complex, street grid of a city, a brick wall tank and a monastic compound, and other historical objects.

In 249 BC, Emperor Ashoka





PHOTOS: SAHINA SHRESTHA

THE MASTERPLAN

The challenge Lumbini faces now is how to cope with the larger numbers of pilgrims and tourists visiting the holy site. Before the pandemic, while the number of visitors in Lumbini was high, they usually came in from India's Buddhist circuit and only spent a few hours before heading back.

The infrastructure was poor, there were not too many hotels with proper facilities. Lumbini was difficult to get to. Now, an international airport is being inaugurated just 10km to the east, and a new influx of visitors is expected. (*See page 17*)

Before the pandemic, 1.7 million pilgrims visited Lumbini by land in a year, of these 300,000 were from outside of Nepal and India. But on average, they spent less than an hour in Lumbini.

For centuries after Ashoka visited and commemorated the nativity site, Lumbini was retaken by the surrounding jungles. It was only in the 1890s that British explorers looking for hardwood timber for railway sleepers came upon the Ashokan pillar.

In 1967, the United Nations Secretary-General U Thant, a devout Buddhist from Burma, toured Lumbini on elephant-back,

and is reported to have wept on seeing the condition of the birthplace of the Buddha.

Back in New York, U Thant set up a UN committee to turn Lumbini into an international centre for peace. Noted Japanese architect Kenzō Tange, who had designed the Hiroshima Museum, was hired to draw up a master plan.

Nepal established the Lumbini Development Trust (LDT) which is implementing Kenzō Tange's master plan and includes a monastic zone, a library and Lumbini Village for visitors. A canal bisects the site with a museum and visitor centre on the north end and the Maya Devi Temple on the south.

The eastern monastic zone was set aside for Theravada Buddhism and the western for Mahayana Buddhism. The master plan is still being broadly followed and is nearing completion, but structures are already showing signs of disrepair.

Even the visitor's centre in Lumbini is in a sorry state, there are no information boards that tell the visitors about the site.

"Our expectations are high when it comes to Lumbini but the infrastructure is lacking," says Purushottam Aryal, an



MIKU DIXIT

entrepreneur who runs Buddhagram, a robotic museum outside of Lumbini gate. "We have guests who complain about the lack of restroom and having only one gate to purchase tickets."

Despite nearly 2 million annual visitors pre-pandemic, only about 2% of the pilgrims visited the other sacred sites from the Buddha's life like Nigalihawa, Gotihawa, Kudan and Ramagram (*see map*), either because they are unaware of them or because they are too difficult to get to.

Currently, most international visitors to Lumbini come from India as part of the Buddhist circuit that includes Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar, where facilities and connectivity are better. Pilgrims preferred travelling through India to Lumbini rather than flying to Kathmandu and then making their way to the sacred site.

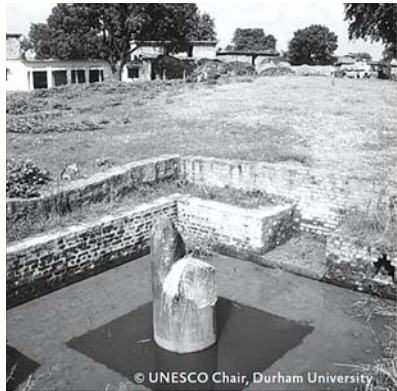
"Nepalis rarely hire guides. Indian tourists come in with their own guides from India, who narrate their own version of the story of Lumbini. If they hire local guides they can get authentic information. Why would anyone stay for long if all they do is go in and out?" asks Mahesh Pati Mishra, a local guide in Lumbini.

The upcoming Lumbini Museum will fill this gap. The existing museum is being upgraded and expanded to international standards, that tells the story of the Buddha, says the museum's Sumnima Udas.

Located at the entrance of the Sacred Garden, the Lumbini Museum aims to help transform the sacred place as a major spiritual and cultural centre while setting a standard for how art and heritage can be preserved, presented and promoted.

The museum has brought in talent from Nepal and around the world to make it a state-of-the art project to educate and promote the Buddha's message of compassion and peace, and re-imagine U Thant's original goal inside the cylindrical modules designed by Kenzō Tange.

Explains Udas: "There are different kinds of museums, this is not going to be a museum with just statues. It will be about the storytelling. And it doesn't have to be huge, it can just be a beautiful little gem where once you go in you leave with a better sense of what had happened in Lumbini, why the birth story matters, and what we as human beings can learn from it."



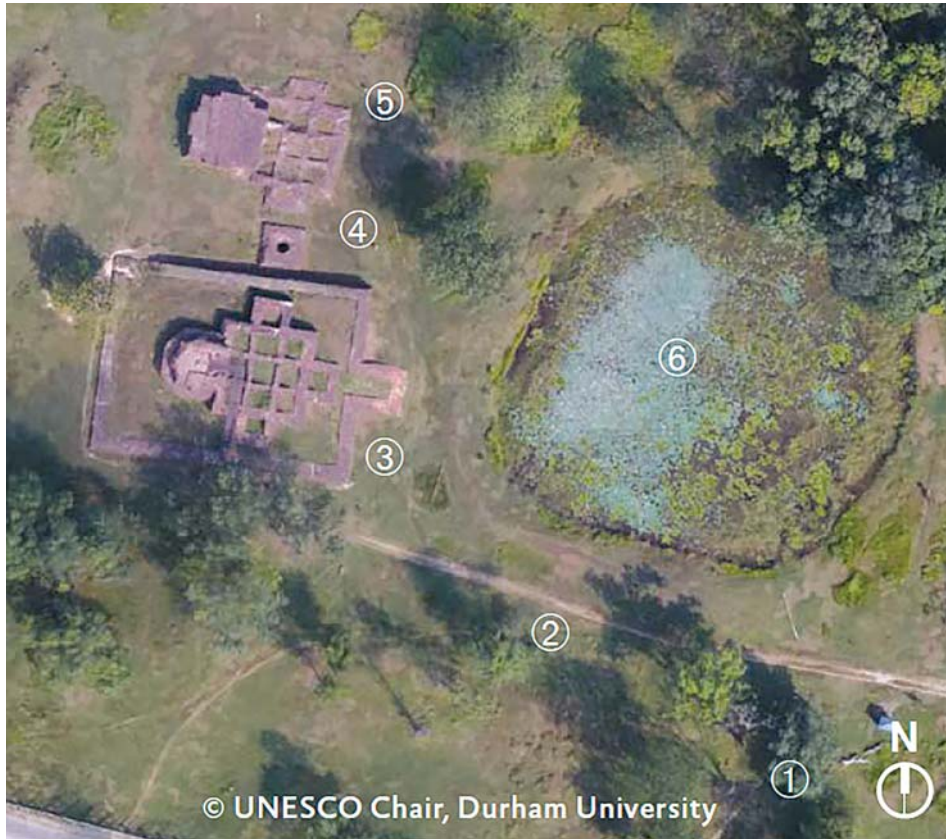
The Ashokan pillar photographed in 1990.



The excavated stupa by Giovanni Veradi, 2007.



Photographs of Ashoka's pillar when it was discovered in 1895 at the Niglisagar Pond (from Mitra 1972).



Aerial view of Kudan.

SACRED GARDEN OF LUMBINI/UNESCO

- 1 A 200-year-old octagonal Hindu temple which housed a much older shiva linga.
- 2 In 1962, when Debala Mitra from Archaeological Survey of India excavated this site, she found an unknown structure in the 'last stage of decay'.
- 3 Temple 1 just over the height of 4.5m.
- 4 A brick well.
- 5 Temple 2.
- 6 Experts believe the tank was created when clay from this area was extracted to make bricks

erected an inscribed pillar commemorating his veneration and expansion of the nirvana stupa of the Konakmuni Buddha. In 1895, two fragments of the pillar were discovered: the upper portion was half submerged in Nilgi Sagar pond and the lower part was buried. Since the plinth on which it once stood is missing, the original

location remains unknown, but some scholars believe that it was erected at the birthplace of the Konakmuni Buddha.

Kudan is another site of historical significance. Some scholars have suggested this may be the site of Nigrodharama, the banyan grove where Gautam Buddha met his father years after

his departure from Kapilvastu and where his son was ordained a monk. Gotihawa, is considered the birthplace of the Krakkuchanda Buddha, another one of the earlier Buddhas. It has a large brick stupa and a stump of an Ashokan pillar. Unfortunately, most of the pillar is gone, so it is not possible to know what was written.

The Ramagram stupa which is 10m high and 23.5m in diameter is on the tentative list for the World Heritage status, and is believed to be one of the original sites housing the mortal remains of the Buddha. According to ancient scripts, the seven other stupas were opened by Ashoka and the relics distributed – but the naga prevented Ashoka

from opening the stupa here.

There are other sites that have been identified in the three surrounding districts. Building a circuit with all the culturally and spiritually important places and telling the story correctly can help solve a problem (*see box above*) Lumbini has been facing for a long time. 🇳🇵

EVENTS



Kids Art Session

Take the kids out this weekend and exercise their creative muscles at RP's art corner in Café Cups & Mugs.
14 May, 11am-1pm, Mid Baneshwor

Buddha Jayanti

Buddha Jayanti commemorates the birth and enlightenment of the Buddha. The celebrations start at Lumbini with a procession in the morning and ends with devotees decorating the Maya Devi temple with lamps. Devotees will also throng Swayambhu and Baudhanath Stupa in Kathmandu.
16 May

Contemporary Improv Dance

Learn some new moves with Janice Laurence who is also an ambulatory wheelchair user. Join the online class at facebook.com/events/387652736563015
2:15-3:15 pm, 16 May

Language Exchange

Interact with people from all over the world and engage in lively conversations. Register to participate: chat.whatsapp.com/LKAsh8wy7hnEHFEQanPpZ
15 May, 8pm-11pm



Duluwas Hike

Be one with the nature and explore Shivapuri National Park, Nagi Gumba and other places in this hike organised by Duluwa Outdoors. Register now.
14 May, Rs650, 9841570412

DINING



Hankook Sarang

Craving the food in K-dramas? Head to Hankook Sarang and get your fill of a variety of Korean dishes including Kimchi pancakes, Samgyeopsal, Gimbap and Bibimbap, and more.
Tangal, (01) 4421711

MUSIC

Jindabaad

Join the Jindabaad gig and listen to their new release 'Ulto Chalachitra' with the opening act from Spit Strings. Buy tickets from ticketsansar.
14 May, 7pm-10pm, Tickets: Rs500, Beers N' Cheers



Kali Prasad Baskota

Mark the calendar for Kali Prasad Baskota's first live performance in Kathmandu after the pandemic. Call for ticket details.
4 June, 8pm onwards, Club Platinum, 9820109081



Hustle Hard

Catch the bands Shannon scam, Strangle, Nainsook, The Mid Life Drill and Void to exist perform at Ambience 365.
4 June, 1pm onwards, Pulchowk

Chorale Spring Concert

Attend the Kathmandu Chorale Spring Concert by Kathmandu Chorale and enjoy Vivaldi's Gloria and other choral works.
14 May, 6pm-7.30pm, Ideal Model School, Dhobighat

Honacha

Serving authentic Newa food since 1934, this family owned restaurant welcomes anyone hankering for the cuisine.
Mangal Bazar



Momotarou Restaurant

Enjoy a hearty Japanese meal at Momotarou restaurant. Don't miss out on the soft tofu, pork cutlets, don varieties and the mouthwatering bento box.
Sanepa Chowk, Lalitpur (01) 5537385

About Town

GETAWAY

Hotel Barahi

Located just beyond the banks of Phewa Lake, Hotel Barahi offers stunning views and luxury rooms decorated with rustic pieces and earthy tones that will leave one feeling relaxed.
Lakeside, Pokhara, (61) 460617

Himalaya Hotel Lodge

Away from the densely packed Ghandruk, Himalaya Hotel Lodge offers accommodations unlike any other. Guests can dine with the scenic mountains in the background, experience the quaint village life and relax by the fireplace in the evenings.
Ghandruk (01) 4435686

Bandipur Safari Lodge

Many may not know that the town of Bandipur is also known for its wildlife attractions, and Bandipur Safari Lodge is the optimal gateway for this jungle experience. Choose from wildlife safari, bird watching or nature walk.
Bandipur, 9449597880, 08229-233001

Tiger Palace Resort

Tiger Palace Resort offers a wide variety of entertainment, eateries and activities. From an international casino to six different places to eat within the resort, this getaway is a must visit for travellers venturing south of Kathmandu Valley.
Rupandehi, Bhairawa, (71)512000



Namo Buddha Resort

Constructed in traditional Newa style and surrounded by lush greenery, the resort is an oasis of peace and tranquility with spectacular views of the Himalayas on clear days.
Namo Buddha, Phulbari, 9851106802



Blenders

This new milkshake bar has exciting flavours in cute light-bulb shaped glass bottles. One sip and you will keep coming back for more.
City Centre, Kamal Pokhari, 9851219100

Ageno Bakery

Order from Ageno the best cakes, pastries and baked goods in town. Also, try out their mini tarts.
Dhobighat (01) 5438106

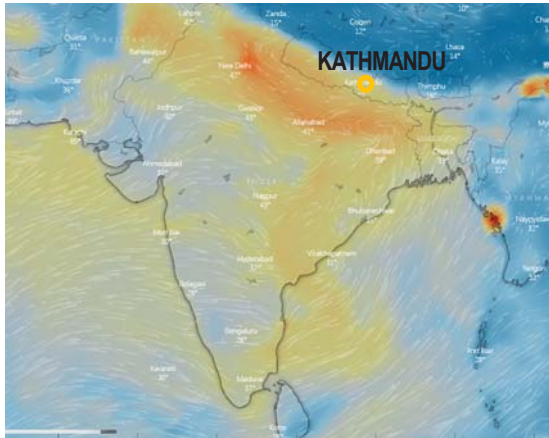
WEEKEND WEATHER



Even as northern India swelters through another punishing heat wave with temperatures hitting 48°Celsius in some parts, Cyclonic Storm Asani made landfall and has veered off again into the Bay of Bengal. The periphery of this system will inject some moisture in eastern Nepal into the weekend, while the rest of the country will continue to have pre-monsoon showers, falling mainly in the afternoon and night. The shift in wind direction and cloud cover will keep Kathmandu's maximum temperature in the mid-20s, which is below normal for this time of year. Intermittent light rain is expected on election day on Friday and into next week.



AIR QUALITY INDEX



Regular afternoon and night pre-monsoon showers have improved the Air Quality Index (AQI) in Kathmandu this past week, and this is likely to continue. But as the live AQI updates measured at Phora Darbar indicates, the AQI rapidly worsens as soon as the rains stop, as suspended particles from vehicular and industrial emissions build up. AQI is expected to improve dramatically on election day since most traffic will be off the roads and highways, and industries will close. Enjoy breathing the clean air while you can.

OUR PICK



Life at Truham Grammar has not been the same for Charlie Spring ever since he got outed last year. 'Hypothetically' he'd like to date someone with whom he can have a laugh and who would not be ashamed to be with him – but his secret relationship with Ben is stressful and borderline abusive and maybe he is aiming a bit too high (?) Enter Nick Nelson: star rugby player with the looks of a golden retriever, and ... well, Charlie may have a bit of a crush on him. Based on Alice Oseman's hit webtoon (which you can read on Tumblr, Webtoon or Tapas), this charming new show about queer love follows Charlie, Nick and friends as they navigate unexpected feelings, evolving friendships and a dash of Older Sister Magic. Colourful, subversive and with a soundtrack that hits different, *Heartstopper* is a heartwarming story about young people speaking out their truths – and is inspiring as it is inclusive, whether you are a teenager or an adult. Starring Joe Locke, Kit Connor, William Gao, Yasmin Finney, Corinna Brown, Kizzy Edgell, Tobie Donovan, Jenny Walsler, Fisayo Akinade, Chetna Pandya, Stephen Fry and Olivia Colman.

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 ।

कोभिड-१९ खोप

कोभिड-१९ खोप

कोभिड-१९ खोप



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Nepali media must be on alert

Indian journalist warns journalists to be en garde against demagogues using social media for populism at election time



ALL PHOTOS: AMIT MACHAMASI



● Shristi Karki

Ravish Kumar is group editor of NDTV, one of the few remaining free media voices in India. He had a word of advice for Nepali journalists participating in the media conclave on 7 May in Kathmandu: Don't follow India's example.

In his keynote address to the Himal Media Mela 2022 he said Nepal should not rest on its laurels, but be on guard against elected leaders who undermine democracy and freedom of expression.

"Nepal has one of the freer media in the region, and that comes with a responsibility to find ways to educate ourselves on how to be citizens," said the Magsaysay Award-winning journalist, speaking in Hindi. "The responsibility for media content lies not with the state or corporations, but squarely on citizens who bear the most consequences from it."

Birganj-based journalist Chandra Kishore who is also chair of the Centre for Investigative Journalism (CIJ) Nepal introduced Kumar, describing him as a beacon of journalism for people at the margins dominated by political and business interests.

Kumar underlined how advances in information technology had impacted media, and led to the evolution of a 'WhatsApp University' as a super-spreader of disinformation. And at the same time across the world the press is



being weakened in countries led by those who call themselves 'global leaders', and those who take pride as 'defenders of the free press'.

Titled *Connectivity in the Age of Disinformation*, the one-day conference addressed issues like fake news, media ethics and the future of print journalism.

The panel on Election, Fake News and Media Literacy included media educator Ramkrishna Regmi, AP1 tv anchor Sama Thapa, and fact checker Umesh Shrestha, who warned how fake news and disinformation can influence elections as Nepal counts down to the local polls on Friday.

"The tail is wagging the dog as social media determines mainstream media content," Regmi said. "Social media contains non-processed material, leading to the omission of important issues around events including elections, in turn devaluing the significance of local polls."

Added Sama Thapa: "Misinformation is not just

fabricated news, it is also wilful ignorance and disproportionate coverage, even half-news that centres only on certain people, communities and ethnicities."

The panel on Ethical and Responsible Journalism discussed the role of journalism in the age of unfiltered digital media.

"Democracy is a behaviour as well as a way of life. But Nepali politics lacks accountability and our media reflects it," said Yubaraj Ghimire of *Deshsanchar*.

Added Prateek Pradhan of *Baaharakhari*: "Unless political parties are responsible, how can we expect media to be? But, at the same time, this should not be an excuse for those of us in this profession."

Sona Khatik, who was station manager of Radio Kapilvastu for 12 years talked about the sustainability of rural radio in Nepal: "Radio is for those unable to read and understand newspapers or access it. It sustains grassroots democracy."

Madhu Acharya of Sharecast Initiative presented the latest

survey showing the prominence of digital platforms as Nepalis are more connected through mobile networks. More than 40% of Nepalis now get news via Facebook. Those relied on radio, tv and newspapers stood at 25%, 4% and 2% respectively.

"Readers believe other readers, and our newsrooms need to reflect that," explained co-panelist Sahina Shrestha, Editor Online of *Nepali Times*. "We need to involve the audience in content curation."

Arun Karki of the Centre for Data Journalism emphasised the role of data journalism in debunking fake news.

The panel on The Political Economy of Media brought together senior editors Ameet Dhakal of *Setopati*, Aarti Chataut of NTV and Sudheer Sharma, editor of *e-Kantipur*. Asked how many more years the print media has to live, Sharma replied: "Digital media does have mass readership, but print is still king since it sets the agenda among policymakers."

Chataut added: "There is an ongoing paradigm shift in media, the medium is changing and it is the message."

For Dhakal, digital media represented two-way traffic between content creators and readers. He said: "The internet has democratised the process of content creation. Now, no one media institution controls the narrative, and this has also kept the press in check." 🇳🇵



The physical event might be over and we will be back next year with more wide-reaching dialogues but you can still watch the panel discussions, keynote speech by Ravish Kumar and Manoj Gajurel's comic relief all on our sister publication Himal Khabar's YouTube channel.

TATA MOTORS
Connecting Aspirations

ALL-NEW H5

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PANORAMIC SUNROOF

6 SPEED AUTOMATIC TRANSMISSION

ESP TERRAIN RESPONSE MODES

BASED ON LAND ROVER'S LEGENDARY DB PLATFORM

TATA



Despite its environmental cost, Nepal’s politicians are united in supporting the big airport

● Aria Shree Parasai

As the date for a final Supreme Court ruling on the proposed new international airport in Nijgad approaches, uncertainty once more shrouds the \$3.5 billion project.

Supporters call the airport 60km south of Kathmandu as a necessary infrastructure investment for the country’s economic growth, while opponents say it is an expensive and an ecologically disastrous white elephant.

On 26 May, the Supreme Court is slated to give a final verdict on a public interest litigation citing irreversible environmental damage, since it will mean felling 40sq km of primary tropical forest.

A 2010 feasibility study by Korean consultants Landmark Worldwide proposed a 3-phase construction with a single 4,000m runway for 15 million passengers per year at a cost of \$650 million in the first phase to be completed in 4 years.

By the third phase, there would be four runways for 67 million passengers a year at a cost of \$6.7 billion. It will take another ten years for the final completion.

Successive governments, including those led by parties in the current coalition as well as the



KIRAN NEPAL/HIMAL ARCHIVE

Building Nijgad, come what may

opposition, have all enthusiastically backed Nijgad, saying it is important for Nepal’s future.

“Kathmandu airport was built for 9.2 million passengers a year, and it has already exceeded that,” says Pradeep Adhikari, Director General of the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN).

“Annual international passenger growth is 9-12% and domestic flights have grown by 33% in the past year. Tourism was growing at 10% a year pre-pandemic, and will revive,” he added.

With Kathmandu projected to handle 25 million passengers per year by 2040, Pokhara and Bhairawa just do not have the capacity to reduce that pressure.

“We have reached the limit of air space capacity, terminal capacity and runway capacity,” Adhikari explains.

However, it is not just environmentalists who question the rationale for Nijgad. They say the airport is designed for an obsolete ‘hub-and-spoke’ model, whereas global aviation has moved to point-to-point destinations with new generation of aircraft that can circumnavigate the globe with just one stop.

They also say that with the impact of the pandemic and spreading awareness about the climate crisis, there is already a slowdown in civil aviation growth in parts of the world, and that

the age of mega-airports is over. Besides, can Nepal afford the debt financing for such a mammoth undertaking?

The writ petition at the Supreme Court faults a 2018 Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for downplaying the impact on biodiversity and carbon sequestration potential of the Nijgad jungle – the last remnant of the once extensive *Char Kose Jhari* that stretched across the central Tarai.

Nepali Times received a copy of the EIA report, and found that it actually copy-pasted from a hydropower project in the mountains. It did not even delete technical references to ‘headwork’ and ‘powerhouse’.

It cites Nijgad as being the habitat of the ghoral, an antelope-like mammal found only in the Himalaya.

One of the other concerns is noise pollution from heavy jets on the nearby Parsa National Park, but the EIA misses the point. Saying instead that noise will be mitigated by using ‘less dynamite’. Again, this seems to be from an EIA of a hydropower project.

The EIA was prepared by the firm GEOCE Consultants, whose area of expertise is hydropower. The EIA also overestimates passenger handling capacity of 60 million per year, lacks environmental and ecological assessment of the proposed ‘aeropolis’, quarry



FLIGHTSIM.TO

Bhairawa’s new airport already too small

Design flaws and bad planning limit benefits of Nepal’s 2nd international airport

When Nepal’s Minister of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation Prem Ale took an entourage of nearly 300 passengers on a proving flight to the new Gautam Buddha International Airport on 28 April, he ended up exposing the airport’s many shortcomings.

The Nepal Airlines Airbus 330-234 on an ‘operational performance test flight’ carried a full load of passengers on a joy ride. After taking off from Kathmandu, the aircraft made a low pass over the runway at Bhairawa, turned and landed on runway 10.

However, as it stopped at the far end of the runway it could not backtrack because there was no turnaround bay at the 28 threshold. After much confusion and blame-throwing in the tower, a tow truck was finally sent to push the plane around so it could taxi

to the apron on its own power.

Although the end of runway 10 has a turnaround bay, 28 does not which makes this airport unusable for wide-bodies, and aviation experts say this is a design flaw and planning oversight.

The much-delayed \$70 million Gautam Buddha International Airport serving Lumbini is to be inaugurated by Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba on Buddha’s birthday on 16 May with the arrival of a Jazeera Airways Airbus 320 flight from Kuwait City (*pictured*).

The same day, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is also inaugurating the Kushinagar International Airport 75km away, and then flying by helicopter to Lumbini to meet Deuba and inaugurate a meditation centre and a monastic area.

Lumbini in Nepal is where the Buddha was born 2,645 years ago, while Kushinagar in India is where he attained parinirvana at age 80. There are some misgivings in Nepal that Modi is deliberately bypassing Lumbini’s new airport.

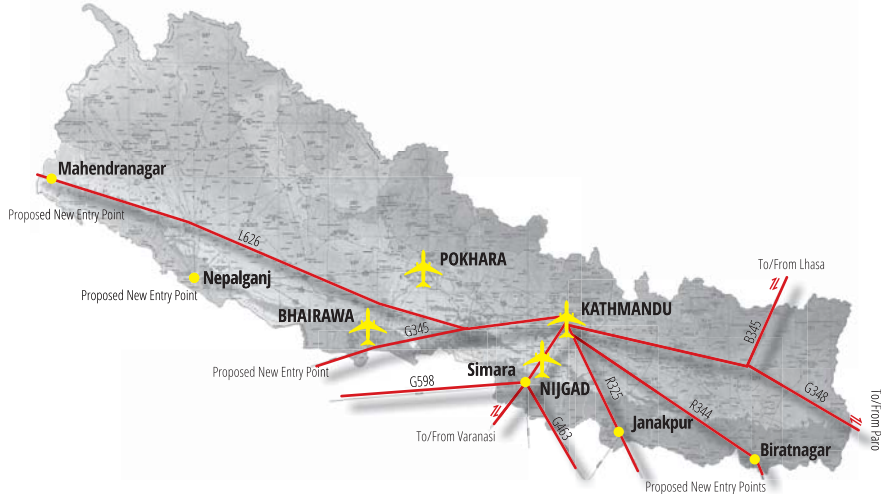
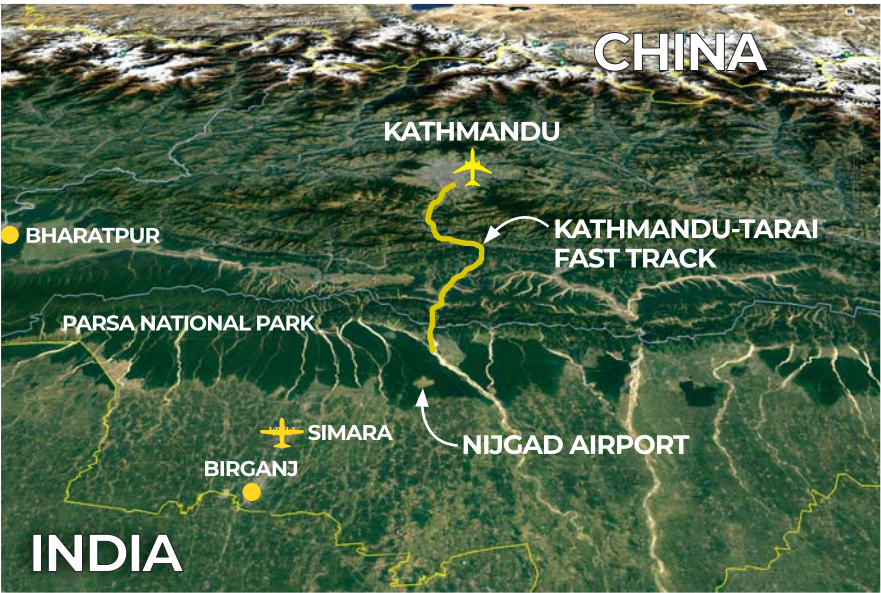
Located only 5.7km from the Indian border, Nepal does not have rights for descent clearance and departure procedures over Indian air space.

The Indian Air Force has an airbase only 100km away in Gorakhpur, and New Delhi has also been reluctant to provide two-way traffic on several air routes like Lima626 and Golf345 (*see map*). International flights arriving in Bhairawa will therefore have to descend via the overcrowded Simara corridor. These limitations also apply to Pokhara’s

international airport which will open in January 2023. The two new airports will therefore not be able to reduce congestion at Kathmandu airport by much.

Bhairawa’s new terminal can only process 2 million passengers a year -- too small for it to be a viable alternative international airport to Kathmandu. This means there is already a need for the proposed \$60 million Terminal 2 at Gautam Buddha International Airport -- even before Terminal 1 is officially inaugurated on Monday.

The new airport does increase capacity for domestic flights, and its 3,000m runway will allow it to serve as an alternate for flights diverted from Kathmandu due to poor visibility. The old runway meanwhile has been converted into a parallel taxiway. 🇳🇵



sites, and infrastructure in the construction and operation phases.

In its final phase, the airport would ultimately require 8,046 hectares of which nearly 95% is heavily forested at present. This has led critics to call Nijgad a “logging concession” rather than an international airport project.

Destruction of the Nijgad forest could impact on ground water recharge and river flow, affecting irrigation and agriculture production downstream in the fertile Tarai plains.

It would also remove the last remaining wildlife corridor for migration between the Tarai jungles and the Siwalik and Mahabharat ranges to the north.

Since the project area is a part of the Parsa National Park buffer area and lies in the Terai Arc Landscape (TAL), environmentalists say that the EIA should have analysed the impact of the project on biodiversity and wildlife much more carefully.

A 1994 report by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) showed the Nijgad forest to be ecologically fragile, rich in biodiversity and wildlife movement routes.

The forest has *khair*, *sissoo*, *sal* and *satisal* trees, some of which cannot be logged and exported by

law according to the revised forest rules of 2001.

Hardwood tropical forests with their canopy cover and undergrowth are much more effective at carbon sequestration, and experts have calculated that felling the Nijgad jungle would prevent 22,500 tonnes of carbon from being absorbed from the atmosphere annually.

Parts of the Nijgad jungle are community forests, or locally protected, and have small seasonal streams and natural drainage systems forming a ‘*paini*’ network that villagers traditionally use for wells, irrigation and drinking.

The EIA does not have a valuation of ‘ecosystem services’ and livelihood benefits for the 37,000 households that depend on the forest for firewood, fodder and water. If the forest is replaced by an airport, it could put further pressure on the nearby national park and other protected areas.

The EIA mentions that the government will compensate local communities for loss of livelihood, and initiate a major reforestation drive to replace the trees.

But it does not mention where and how many trees will be planted. Nepal’s record for compensation and replanting in other infrastructure projects is poor.

CAAN’s Adhikari argues that

SKY WAYS

The cleared forest for the proposed Nijgad airport can already be seen in satellite images (*left*). It is 60km from Kathmandu, and will be a 1-hour drive away once the Kathmandu-Tarai Fastrack is completed.

Pradeep Adhikari of CAAN (*right*) says TIA has exceeded its carrying capacity, and a bigger airport is needed to handle future traffic.

International operations at the new Gautam Buddha International Airport and Pokhara Airport will be complicated because India has not allowed two-way traffic on air routes like L626, G345 and R344 (*below left*).

no development project anywhere in the world comes with zero environmental cost.

“The idea is to mitigate the impact and strictly follow guidelines for replanting trees that are lost,” he says.

But such massive reforestation is an ambitious goal, and difficult with *sal* saplings that nurseries find hard to grow. It takes decades to build species diversity and fully functioning forest ecosystems, and they still cannot replace native forests. Environmentalists say the EIA also does not look at alternative sites for the airport that would be less damaging.

Nepal has increased forest cover in the past years, but sub-tropical and tropical forests are declining even as the country’s carbon footprint grows.

At COP26 in Glasgow last year, Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba set a target for Nepal to increase its forest area to 45% by 2030, and opponents of the project say Nijgad would be a step backward.

The Nijgad EIA was submitted in March 2018, and hurriedly approved within two months by the Ministry of Forests and Environment. Critics say it is wrong for both the presenter of the EIA and the approver being government agencies. In fact, the last sentence of the EIA even says Prime Minister K P Oli backed the project and wanted it to be started ‘ASAP’.

“We have to look at 20 years from now,” says Adhikari of CAAN. “There is going to be big tourism growth, Nepalis will be travelling more, and we will have outgrown Kathmandu, Pokhara and Bhairawa. Nepal needs a primary international airport in the coming decades.”

Even before the EIA approval, the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation had already contracted the Nepal Army to start clearing trees at the Nijgad site. At present 60% of land acquisition has been completed, tree felling has begun, and work has started on civil works and river training.

Politically motivated environmental assessments are common in developing countries like Nepal, and opponents say the Nijgad EIA is one such. 🇳🇵



KUNDA DIXIT

Pilgrim’s progress in Lumbini

The retreat of Covid-19 and the inauguration of the Gautam Buddha International airport on 16 May has breathed new hope to Lumbini, which had seen almost no pilgrim and tourist traffic since 2020.

As many as 15 new hotels were planned in anticipation of the new airport, but had to halt construction when the lockdowns hit. Some of the older hotels here were sold to new owners and the Lumbini Development Trust that manages the sacred site lost significant revenue.

“Many new hotels were being built because we expected a surge of traffic with the new airport,” says Lila Mani Sharma of Hotel Association of Lumbini. “They had taken bank loans and because they had already invested so much, they could not abandon the project.” Now, construction activity has picked up again in the 10km stretch from the airport to Lumbini, as well as on the road linking the airport to the Bhairawa-Butwal highway.

The pandemic not only hit the hotel sector but also the farmers who supplied produce to the hotels, guides, travel agencies and

others who relied on the sector.

Laxmi Choudhari of Mahilawar is looking to inaugurate his new homestay on the auspicious Buddha Jayanti, the very day that the new airport is being inaugurated.

“I have been working in the hotel business for a while and have wanted to do something on my own. The new airport will surely help bring more guests and as homestays we can provide a more authentic experience for them,” says Choudhari.

Lumbini’s Guide Association and Hotel Association are also cautiously optimistic. “If more people come directly to Nepal first instead of crossing over from India, it will be good for the local business. They will spend more time here and include more places around Lumbini in their itinerary,” says Sharma.

But according to industry experts, just having an international airport does not guarantee anything. Says Anu Lama, tourism specialist at ICIMOD, “There has to be an integrated approach bringing together the cultural, spiritual and natural aspect of Lumbini and involving the local communities. We have to tell and sell our story.”

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Crocodile tears

I wouldn't blame any of my valued customers if they failed to notice that May 8th was World Donkey Day. Thank you to those who sent me flying kisses on this auspicious occasion, and texted hee-haw emojis.

Keeping in step with these wokish times, it is incumbent on yours truly to draw attention to the plethora of speciesist adjectives and terminology that riddle the English language. Technological advances, especially after the industrial revolution, have given human beings an inflated opinion of themselves. Us animules are treated like sub-humans and often referred to in a derogatory manner.

As a donkey, I personally have been at the receiving end of slurs that paint us as a bunch of lazy asses sitting on our butts all day, rolling in the dirt, or chewing the cud. So I know what a snail feels like when it is stereotyped as being sluggish even though he is locomoting as fast as he can go.

Animal feelings can be hurt when humans pigeonhole them without first seeking permission from pigeons. Ugly ducklings get an inferiority complex whenever there is gratuitous reference to their physical appearance, and loons can develop mental issues from negative stereotyping.

Swans I know do not take it as a compliment when people refer only to their looks and describe them as being 'graceful'. Especially when there is a racist reference to unexpected events as being 'black swans'. And why should birds of a feather flock together? Why can't they be treated as individuals with their own dreams and aspirations of being great one day?

Moving right along to the genus

Canis lupus, pooches (despite being man's best friend) do get a lot of opprobrium in the dog-eat-dog world of Nepali politics. K P Oil (dam autocorrect) once said in a speech to supporters, "I have not been bitten by a mad dog to trust Nepal."

Why do politicians think that their mental stability is only the responsibility of a mutt? Besides, haven't they figured out yet that it is news only if man bites dog?

There is also a lot of gender bias in English. Why is 'bitch' an unacceptable swear word, whereas calling a well-loved uncle an "old dog" is perfectly acceptable, and he thinks it is high praise?

At a seminar on regional geopolitics in Kathmandu you often hear participants speak in hushed tones about the "elephant in the room". Some may even swivel their heads to see if there is a tusker trumpeting its way down the corridors of power, only to realise that the speaker was referring to a global superpower that has just invaded a smaller neighbouring country.

We have to be careful not to offend ostriches when we compare them to party leaders with their heads stuck up their asses. Snakes could take umbrage at being mentioned in the same breath as some contractors, and pigs do not want to be put in the same league for avarice as some coalition ministers.

My own gripe is at something credible being described as coming from a horse's mouth, but never from a donkey's orifice.



The Ass



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