



GOPEN RAI

MY COUNTRY

A flight from the Gulf to Kathmandu this week was full of returning migrant workers. The excitement in the cabin was palpable as passengers peered out of the window at the nearing Himalayan horizon.

A Nepali on the aisle seat worked in a café in Dubai and was coming home after two years. A taxi driver from Abu Dhabi had not seen his new-born daughter and was using his savings to build a new house. A bar manager connecting on a flight from London was going to Pokhara to get married.

After landing some knelt to touch their foreheads on the tarmac. The long queue at the health check did not dampen their spirit.

Their return to Nepal coincided with the shocking self-immolation outside Parliament by Prem Prasad Acharya, 36, a former migrant worker who said in a long suicide note that he could not bear abuse and cheating by the government, businesses and banks.

In 2021/22, some 630,000 labour permits were issued to Nepalis migrating overseas for work. But 471,000 workers returned to Nepal in the same period.

The financial remittances and

economic exposure they bring, however, is not being leveraged for sustained wellbeing of their families and the national economy.

Nepal's new government has a unique chance to adopt a bold new worker-centred approach to streamline the migrant labour sector. The bar has been set low by previous governments, and there is lots of room for improvement.

After all, migrant worker rights played an important role in building support for former tv anchor Rabi Lamichhane when he decided to enter politics.

Today, as Chair of the independent Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), he is Home Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, playing a key role in the 7-party coalition of Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal.

Lamichhane's सिधा कुरा जनतासंग (Straight Talk with Citizens) tv show was where migrant workers stranded abroad or duped by recruiters reached out to. It made sense that his party got the labour portfolio, but questions have also been raised about the RSP's own commitment to integrity and good governance.

Lamichhane got himself appointed Minister of Home Affairs, which is probing his own controversial citizenship matter.

RSP's appointment of Dol Prasad Aryal as Minister for Labour, Employment and Social Security also raised concerns about conflict of interest due to his reported links to recruitment firms and a remittance company.

Aryal's supporters give him the benefit of doubt, saying he may be better than past labour ministers from mainstream parties who were clueless about how overseas migration works, or were in the payroll of recruiters.

Besides, they say, there will be watchdogs within his RSP who could keep him in check.

The RSP's stance on foreign employment is to forge a society in which Nepalis are not forced to migrate. Its policies focus on a one-stop shop for migrant workers, investment incentives for productive use of remittances, diversification of overseas work, higher-skilled opportunities, reintegrating returnee migrant workers, and rapid response

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LEAVING ON A JET PLANE: Migrant worker Madhu Sudan Adhikari, 35, from Gorkha hugs his five-month-old daughter on Wednesday, before boarding a flight at Kathmandu airport that would take him to Croatia to work on a farm.

While bidding a tearful goodbye to his family, Adhikari told us: "I am leaving to take care of my family because of the lack of jobs in Nepal, and my financial condition. I don't know when I will be back. Maybe after 5 years."

An average of 1,800 Nepali overseas contract workers fly out every day from Kathmandu airport, while 1,300 return.

arrangements for those in distress.

These are all reasonable goals, and ones we have heard before in past pledges by previous governments. What Nepalis always needed was implementation of those promises.

After all, the RSP's stunning victory in the November 2022 elections was partly due to its commitment to do things differently, and to get things done.

With its young technocrats in government, the RSP has a real chance to show that it means business -- but not business as usual. 🇳🇵

FULL STORY PAGE 10-11

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Dying to travel

The question everyone has been asking after the tragic crash of the Yeti Airlines flight in Pokhara on 15 January is why airline accidents are so frequent in Nepal.

The answer may lie in the question itself. It is a mistake to call them ‘accidents’ — which are unfortunate incidents that happen unintentionally. The fact is that most deadly air crashes in Nepal over the past 60 years have been found by investigation committees to have been caused by negligence, carelessness, over-confidence, or not following rules. This means they should not have occurred. Lives need not have been lost.

As we reported in last week’s edition of this paper, 92% of the fatal crashes since 1962 happened when airworthy planes flew into mountains obscured by clouds. Despite strict rules about flights maintaining visual at all times in the mountains, planes kept being operated in no-go weather en route or at destination airports.



PAWAN PAUDEL/NEPALI TIMES ARCHIVE

The Pokhara crash did not follow this pattern. Early clues point to possible lapses in the pre-landing cockpit procedure during a checkout flight for the co-pilot. We will have to wait for the investigation report to know what went so horribly wrong in those final moments.

But that will be too late and of no comfort to the relatives of those who died. Entire families perished in the Seti Gorge that Sunday morning. The dead included promising surgeons, musicians, scientists, entrepreneurs, journalists. Besides the unbearable individual tragedies, this was an incalculable loss to the whole nation.

There are many factors that contribute to our inability to learn from past mistakes. It may sound deterministic, but at a deeper cultural level there is a tendency to blame ‘accidents’ on ‘fate’ — factors beyond human control. But most crashes could have been avoided if rules were followed.

In many aspects of modern life, Nepal is have not come to terms with the rapid advance of modern technology, and the conventions that must be followed in operating them. It is manifested in the carelessness in handling electric wires, LPG cylinders, and how building codes are flouted.

Earthquakes in Nepal cannot be called ‘natural’ disasters. As we saw in 2015, it is not earthquakes that kill people, but poorly

designed houses, and owners knowingly using sub-standard materials to cut costs.

Also, look at the way we drive. There were more than 4,000 road traffic ‘accidents’ in Nepal last year, resulting in nearly 2,800 fatalities and at least 5,000 people with serious injuries. Ironically, this figure would possibly be much higher if the roads were properly built and maintained, because that would encourage over-speeding. The Covid-19 lockdowns in 2020 paradoxically saved thousands of lives that may have otherwise been lost on roads and highways. There is an epidemic of what are called ‘road traffic accidents’, and it has become the number one cause of disease burden among young Nepalis.

A week after the Pokhara air crash, four people were killed and 15 injured when a jeep plunged into a gorge in Surkhet. On 11 December, 11 died when a bus veered off the road in Jajarkot. On 12 October, a passenger bus plunged down a mountain in Mugu,

Ninety-four people lost their lives in air crashes in the past 12 months, but the number of people killed on Nepal’s roads was 30 times higher.

killing most of the 40 people on board. Ninety-four people lost their lives in air crashes in Nepal in the past 12 months, but during that same period the number of people killed on roads was nearly 30 times higher. Bus and jeep crashes have become so routine that they do not even make it to the front pages of newspapers anymore. Each is reported as a separate event, not as a trend showing the sharp increase in road and highway fatalities in Nepal year-on-year.

News is defined as whatever is negative, or out of the ordinary. It is the nature of the news ‘business’ that aviation disasters get more priority. People who travel by air tend to be better off, there is more international interest because foreigners may be involved, or the aircraft type is in operation all over the world.

Policy decisions and rules save lives. Proof of this is the dramatic drop in fatalities in Kathmandu Valley after the crackdown on driving under the influence. Time cards to control speeding along highways have also been effective. Better maintenance of roads and their safety features could prevent many road mishaps. As with other disasters, it is the poorest Nepalis who are most vulnerable to dangerous roads, and this is a criminal lack of responsibility on the part of the state. We expect the new coalition government with a crop of young technocrats in the various ministries to swing into action to ensure the safety of the travelling public.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Education for all

Nepal has made dramatic improvements in literacy rates and school enrollment over the past 20 years. The same cannot be said for the quality of education. In fact, standards have declined progressively because of obsolete curricula, untrained teachers and poor instruction.

Shishir Khanal of Teach for Nepal is the new Education Minister, and he has his work cut out. He should delegate responsibility for school-level education to municipalities as directed by the Constitution, and fund them. There should be no more talk of nationalising education, which would discourage those who are doing what the government should have been doing all along.

Excerpts from a guest opinion by Dhawal SJB Rana (who is now MP of Banke from the RPP and who used to be a regular columnist to this paper) published in Nepali Times issue #129 24-30 January 2003 20 years ago this week:

In the past 12 years, the private sector stepped to fill the gap left by the government in the public’s demand for quality and quantity of education. Education soon became an industry and spurred by a huge demand went through a boom cycle. And as with all booms, came malpractice. Unethical norms for enrolments, exorbitant fees and dubious deposits and charges were heaped on unsuspecting parents.



politicisation, low motivation, lack of training and budgetary cuts...

Governments everywhere cannot afford to take up the sole burden of education, they delegate a part of that to the private sector. In Nepal, there is even less of a chance that the government can take up this responsibility. It cannot even manage basic primary education with the proper application of quality standards. How can it compete with the global trends in information technology and English language instruction?

Those who cannot afford good education must be ensured free quality education by the state so that they have the same opportunities to pursue higher education as graduates of private schools do.

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

ONLINE PACKAGES



EDUCATION FOR ALL

There was a class divide in Nepal’s education even before Covid-19. The pandemic just widened the gap between urban-rural, private-government, rich-poor. But it is also an opportunity to upgrade IT facilities in classrooms, train teachers in online instruction, and narrow the digital divide. Watch video on *Nepali Times* Youtube channel. Subscribe for more original multimedia content.

YETI CRASH

This is a clear, cogent article that deserves to be cited (‘How to make Nepal’s skies safer’, Kunda Dixit, #1145). Thank you for illustrating the specific case of the current accident, that it was not due to weather as most of Nepal’s aviation accidents have been.

Prashna

LABOUR MIGRATION

It is sad but understandable to see young Nepalis leaving their country that really needs them. Instead of voicing their dissatisfaction and creating change, they leave to work 24 hours a day in Europe, Australia, Canada, America or the Gulf. I wish you guys could do something to make them stay and fight.

Anne Mette Nordfalk

■ Forty years of corrupt government, wasted development aid and inefficient state administration leading to poor education, health and infrastructure...No wonder they leave.

David Durkan

NEPAL TOURISM

No one, including the Ministry or the tourism businesses, has shown proper interest in our tourism sector, which is why Nepali tourism has been overshadowed (‘Peak tourism in 2023’, Ramesh Kumar, #1143).

Krishna Kumar Limboo

■ On what basis will tourists come to Nepal when nothing seems to function appropriately? Words on paper are not enough, our systems need to be strengthened, and the government must ensure that our infrastructure is safe.

Kamal Ghimire

KTM FROM SPACE

I hope the people who want to build basement parking under Khula Manch read this article (‘Kathmandu from space 60 years apart’, Kunda Dixit, nepalitimes.com).

Kamal Ratna Tuladhar

■ If Kathmandu were a pressure cooker, it would have exploded 20 years ago.

Ram Chamling

DEVOLUTION

The hurdles and resistance to decentralisation are enormous (‘Un-centralising the federal structure’, Chandra Kishore, #1145). If we succeed, the hegemony of upper castes especially the BCN on state power will collapse.

Neeranjan Rajbhandari

EARTHQUAKE SAFETY

Everyone in Nepal wants development, but at the same time is unwilling to accept any change that would benefit them (‘In a disastrous state’, Sonia Awale, #1145).

Samaya Upadhyaya

MELTING MOUNTAINS

All climate change deniers need to come to Nepal (‘Knowing our mountains’, #1144).

Shane Williams

OPEN GARBAGE BURNING

Kathmandu is now unliveable (‘Kathmandu’s toxic trash’, Sonia Awale, #1144). Pokhara is not far behind.

Roger Ray

1,000 WORDS



END OF IRONY: Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal saluting a memorial to Armed Police Force Inspector General Krishna Mohan Shrestha in Kathmandu on Monday. IG Shrestha, his wife Nudup, and a bodyguard were killed by Maoist assassins under Dahal’s command exactly 20 years ago on 25 January 2003 in Lalitpur. This photo has created waves on Nepal’s cybersphere.

RSS



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WHAT'S TRENDING

Save Nepal's orchids

by Reshu Boshyal

Nepal has made progress in recent years to conserve charismatic mammals like tigers and rhinos, but similar attention now needs to be paid to orchid conservation. Otherwise, we may soon find that these flowers will only exist on Instagram.



Most reached and shared on Facebook

How to make Nepal's skies safer

by Kunda Dixit

Analysis of accident data of the last six decades of Nepal’s aviation history shows a pattern. But the tragic crash of the Yeti Airlines ATR72 in Pokhara on 15 January did not fit this template. The Pokhara crash was an outlier, but underscored deeper regulatory failure. Full article on nepalitimes.com

Most popular on Twitter

Dying to travel

Editorial

Ninety-four people lost their lives in air crashes in the past 12 months, but the number of people killed on Nepal’s roads was 30 times higher. Also on this page in this week’s print edition. Join the online discussion.

Most commented

Cut from a different cloth

Nepali Times

Krishna Timilsina returned to Nepal from Malaysia to start a garment business and now employs more than 700 people. His clothes are now sold in Malaysia, Qatar and Dubai, the very countries where Nepalis work. Read the latest instalment of our popular Diaspora Diaries series, and browse the archive online.

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
#Editorial Dying to travel in Nepal
94 people lost their lives in air crashes in the past 12 months, but the number of people killed on #Nepal’s roads was 30 times higher.
#aircrash #RoadAccident



Satish Pandey @satishpanday01
Every life matters with equal priority. However, there needs full priority to reform the road sector in Nepal to save people and prevent premature deaths in Nepal. The next 5 years should be focused on road safety among a few other priorities.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
#Migrant worker who returned to start his own thriving #garment business now provides jobs for fellow Nepalis. His clothes are now sold in #Malaysia, #Qatar and #Dubai, the very countries where Nepalis work. Latest in Diaspora Diaries:



Neha Choudhary @neachoudhary
In a time where we mostly report on the grim aspects of labour migration, every week I look forward to reading this particular section of Nepali Times which attempts to document some of the positive changes in lives of people migration can also contribute to.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
The Pokhara crash was an outlier, but underscored deeper regulatory failure.
How to make Nepal skies safer | @kundadixit



Kim Hontan @kimhontan
What’s it going to take to improve Nepal’s flight safety record? I’m planning a trek there this year and need to fly into Pokhara...



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Putting Nepal on the right track

A train network will generate jobs in construction and operation, bring efficiency and connectivity

■ Arnico Panday

Imagine it is the year 2070 AD. You board a train in Janakpur at 7:37AM, enjoy scenic views between tunnel stretches, and arrive into Kathmandu Central Station's cavernous underground hall at 8:43AM.

You take the escalator up to the South Exit and emerge on to the front steps of what was once Narayanhiti Palace, gazing on to a broad plaza and Darbar Marg beyond. You stroll along dust-free streets to New Road, take care of business and hop onto the Metro back to Central Station to catch the 12:46PM West-Nepal Express.

After a four-minute ride through a tunnel, the train stops briefly among the high-rise bank and office buildings that long ago replaced the ageing factories and vehicle service centres at what was once Balaju Industrial Estate.

At mid-day the station is quiet, unlike in the mornings and evenings when it is crowded with tens of thousands of people who come by train to work from outside the valley. After several tunnels and quick stops in Bidur, Galchhi, Charaundi and Shaktikhor, you reach Bharatpur at 1:35PM. You finish work in Chitwan and catch the 5:30PM East-West train to Janakpur, reaching home at 7PM.

This may sound like a dream, but dreaming is important for long-term planning.

On 27 August 1893 industrialist Adolf Guyer-Zeller was hiking in the Swiss Alps with his daughter when he imagined riding a train from the pasture at Kleine Scheidegg to the mountain viewpoint at Jungfraujoch.

By 1896 he had permission and financing in place and began construction. The project was completed in 1912 and still brings thousands of daily visitors to Europe's highest train station, 3,435m above sea level.

Railroads are the backbone of Switzerland's train network, putting much of the mountainous country (one third the size of Nepal) into commuting distance to the largest city Zurich, while transporting across the Alps tens



of million tons of freight a year between Switzerland's larger neighbours. The country's first rail masterplan was prepared by British engineers in 1850, and big parts of today's network was built over the next 60 years, at a time when Switzerland's GDP was comparable to Nepal's today.

In Nepal, railroads are back in mainstream discourse with the opening of the updated railway from Jaynagar past Janakpur to Kurtha (pictured, above). Nepal's now have firsthand experience of how trains can cheaply transport thousands of people at a time.

While railroads have high up-front costs and need phased construction with long-term financing, they are right for Nepal's future for a number of reasons:

- Electric trains will use clean domestic energy instead of imported fossil fuels.
- Railroads carry more people (and freight), faster and more safely using a narrower right-of-way

than roads. Railroads thus have less impact on agricultural land, slope stability, and even urban vitality compared to multi-lane roads clogged with traffic.

■ Travel by train is smoother than by road, allowing passengers to read, write and do other productive activities while traveling, without the risk of congestion delays faced in road traffic.

■ Trains make it feasible for people to commute daily from 50-150km away, reducing the pressure to migrate to large cities for education and work.

■ As the world reduces fossil fuel consumption to mitigate climate change, air travel will necessarily become rarer and more expensive, as it does not have ready clean-energy options. Nepal's neighbours have extensive railroad networks; direct transboundary trains could bring to Nepal large numbers of tourists without relying on air travel.

■ Nepal's location between large and growing economies means there is

the potential for trans-Himalayan freight trains to partially displace sea-shipping and air freight between the two countries.

Several potential railroad projects in Nepal are in the pipeline. These include a freight connector from Jogbani border to Biratnagar, expansion of the line from Kurtha to Bardibas, as well as more ambitious projects including a train from Raxaul to Kathmandu, and a train along Mahendra Highway, with side-connectors to Biratnagar, Bhairawa-Lumbini, and Nepalganj. (See map, page 5)

Most ambitious is the proposal to bring trains from across the Tibetan Plateau to Kathmandu via Rasuwagadi-Bidur, with 98% of the track in tunnels or on bridges.

There have been proposals for possible extensions to Pokhara and Lumbini, but without clarity on alignment. In addition, there have been several proposals for a metro rail system for the Kathmandu Valley.

What is missing from the discourse on individual railroad lines is the longer term thinking of what a 50-year masterplan for Nepal's network should look like. The individual lines considered so far need to be part of this larger future network, with design decisions for the individual lines based on the masterplan.

Preparing a five-decade Railway Masterplan for Nepal needs to be led by National Planning Commission (NPC) in consultation with stakeholders in Nepal and experts abroad. Several questions need to be addressed early in the master planning process:

First: What kind of ultimate railroad network would address Nepal's domestic needs in the context of long-term plans for land-use, agriculture, industry and urban growth? Which cities should grow, and what should be their catchment areas? Where should agricultural land and forests be protected (and thus no stations



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India-Nepal conclave

The Indian Embassy With the Centre for South Asian Studies organised 'India-Nepal Development Partnership Conclave' on 23 January in Kathmandu to mark the 75 years of India's Independence, as well as the 75 years of diplomatic relations between India and Nepal. The conclave was inaugurated by Deputy Prime Minister Narayan Kaji Shrestha, Prabhat Kumar from the Government of India, and Indian Ambassador Naveen Srivastava.

Daayitwa graduates

Daayitwa organised a Fellowship Symposium to celebrate the graduation of its 12th Cohort of Public Policy Fellows which placed six Fellows selected from 200+ applicants trained in 15 countries, at 3 government host institutions, including Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Supplies and National Planning Commission, and 3 Parliamentarians including Gagan Thapa, Gokarna Bista and Kamala Roka.

IME health camp

Global IME bank with Nepal Family Planning Association, gynaecologists and local municipalities organised free health camps across Nepal in which 809 women accessed cervical cancer tests, uterine prolapse case treatments, and other services at the camps. Global IME bank and Nilkantha municipality in Dhading district have also agreed to provide interest subsidies and investment to vegetable, poultry, goat, fish and fruit farmers.

StanChart debenture

Standard Chartered has acquired regulatory approval to issue debentures amounting to Rs2.4 billion at interest rate of 10.30% p.a. They will have face value of Rs1,000 per unit with a maturity period of five years. NIBL Ace Capital is the issue manager and individuals as well as public and private companies seeking regular fixed income can invest.

Himalayan AGM

Himalayan Bank is distributing 8% bonus share worth Rs1.03 billion, and 11.11% cash dividend of Rs1.44 billion from profits from the previous financial year to shareholders in its Annual General Meeting. The Bank also elected Bijaya Bahadur Shrestha as Public Director. Himalayan Bank will be acquiring Civil bank at the swap ratio of 1:0.8028.

NPEA new chair

Nepal Private Equity Association in its first annual general meeting elected five new board members: Siddhant Raj Pandey representing Business Oxygen (BO2), Manish Thapa of Global Equity Fund, Dinesh Thakali of Prabhu Capital, Bidhyabaridhi Sigdel of True North Associates, and Nidhaan Shrestha of Dharma Fundations. Pandey was also elected new chairman of the association committed to advancing innovation, entrepreneurship, and job creation by promoting access to finance to SMEs in Nepal.

Shequal & Ncell

Shequal Foundation with Ncell is organising 'Hacking for Humanity Hackathon' from 10-12 February for female and non-binary hackers. Interested participants can form groups of three and register through the Ncell app.

Tata discount

Sipradi Trading, the official distributor of Tata Motors, is offering discounts on genuine parts and oils of Tata vehicles. The offers can be accessed at Tata service centres all over Nepal.

Royal Singi is 25

Hotel Royal Singi celebrated its 25th anniversary last week. Residents and guests can enjoy 35% discounts on food and beverages, and a special two-night package through February.



Honda service

Honda customers can pay any price for Honda Shine and Honda Grazia if the vehicle does not arrive within 99 hours. Owners of Honda Grazia can also access servicing and spare parts for 3 years at Rs1.

Hyundai Venue

Laxmi Intercontinental, the authorised distributor of Hyundai vehicles in Nepal, has launched Hyundai Venue in the Nepali market. The SUV features a parametric Dark Chrome Front Grille, new bumper and a skid plate design. The car can be purchased and serviced at 17 dealers and 19 service centres across the country.

built) and from where will products need to reach the market? Should the east-west railroad connect the towns along Mahendra Highway or run further south? Why?

Should it go through Madi Valley and Chitwan National Park or via Hetauda-Bharatpur? Where should the main interchange between the proposed Raxaul-Kathmandu line and the East-West line be located?

Would it make sense to co-locate it with the proposed Nijgad airport the way Frankfurt and Paris airports integrated long-distance train stations? While many critical questions about the airport project remain, including its exact final location, a direct rail link to Kathmandu would certainly improve the airport's useability compared to four lanes of traffic jam on a 'fast track'.

But should the Raxaul line terminate in Chobar, or continue underground to a city centre station as imagined in the opening story? What additional places in Nepal need to be connected to the railroad network? Dhangadi? Surkhet? Dang Valley? Pokhara? Dharan? Are there mountain towns whose access will be easier to maintain via cable car rather than roads? How should the base stations of these cable cars be integrated into the train network?

Second: What kind of a railroad network would meet Nepal's needs for interconnectivity with the neighbouring countries? Direct trains to Nepal from Indian, Chinese and Bangladeshi cities would enhance tourism in Nepal. There is already a twice-weekly train from New Jalpaiguri near Siliguri to Dhaka. Can the end of Nepal's East-West trains be connected to New Jalpaiguri to allow direct trains from Nepal to Bangladesh? How would that be negotiated?

Third: What kind of a railroad network would allow Nepal to optimally facilitate and earn from transit trade across the Himalaya? Currently the proposed line from China is expected to descend to Bidur and then to climb up 800m to end in Tokha, north of Kathmandu, while the train from Raxaul on the India border is expected to end at Chobar, south of Kathmandu. This does not allow easy transfer of passengers and freight.

Would trans-Himalayan freight not travel more easily along a track from Bidur to Galchhi and through a tunnel to the Rapti Valley without climbing up to Kathmandu? Or are there other north-south corridors that could work better than the Trisuli Valley, such as Arun Valley?

We also need to keep in mind that freight trains often run at night, when their noise may be unwelcome in larger cities.

Fourth: since our neighbouring countries' railroads use different track standards, which one should we align with? Most of China's trunk routes are 'standard gauge' with a 1435mm (4' 8.5") separation between tracks, similar to Europe's. Trunk lines in India and Bangladesh use 'broad gauge', with a 1676mm (5' 6") separation. Janakpur's existing train is broad gauge.

Given the larger number of potential border crossings to India, does it make sense for Nepal to use broad gauge throughout most of its trunk network, allowing direct trains from cities in Nepal to India and Bangladesh? Then, how far into Nepal should China's standard gauge line come?

That is partly determined by where there is enough space for a transfer station where cranes lift shipping containers between Chinese and South Asian trains, and

where tourists coming from China cross the platform to board Nepali, Indian and Bangladeshi trains. Does Bidur have space for such a station?

If so, we could have a broad gauge line coming up from Nijgad to Kathmandu, passing under the city, descending to Bidur and then heading southwest to Galchhi and the Rapti Valley to re-connect with the East-West line, while a standard gauge line runs north from Bidur.

Fifth: Where do we need to learn from? Engineering challenges and costs increase greatly when trains leave flat open areas to run through mountains or under cities. Design decisions can have large impacts on cost, durability and usability.

Before we invest in construction, it is important for us to learn from the experience and expertise in other countries. While discussion have started with India and China, it will be particularly worthwhile

to learn from Japan's experience in building and maintaining railroads in steep terrain with frequent earthquakes.

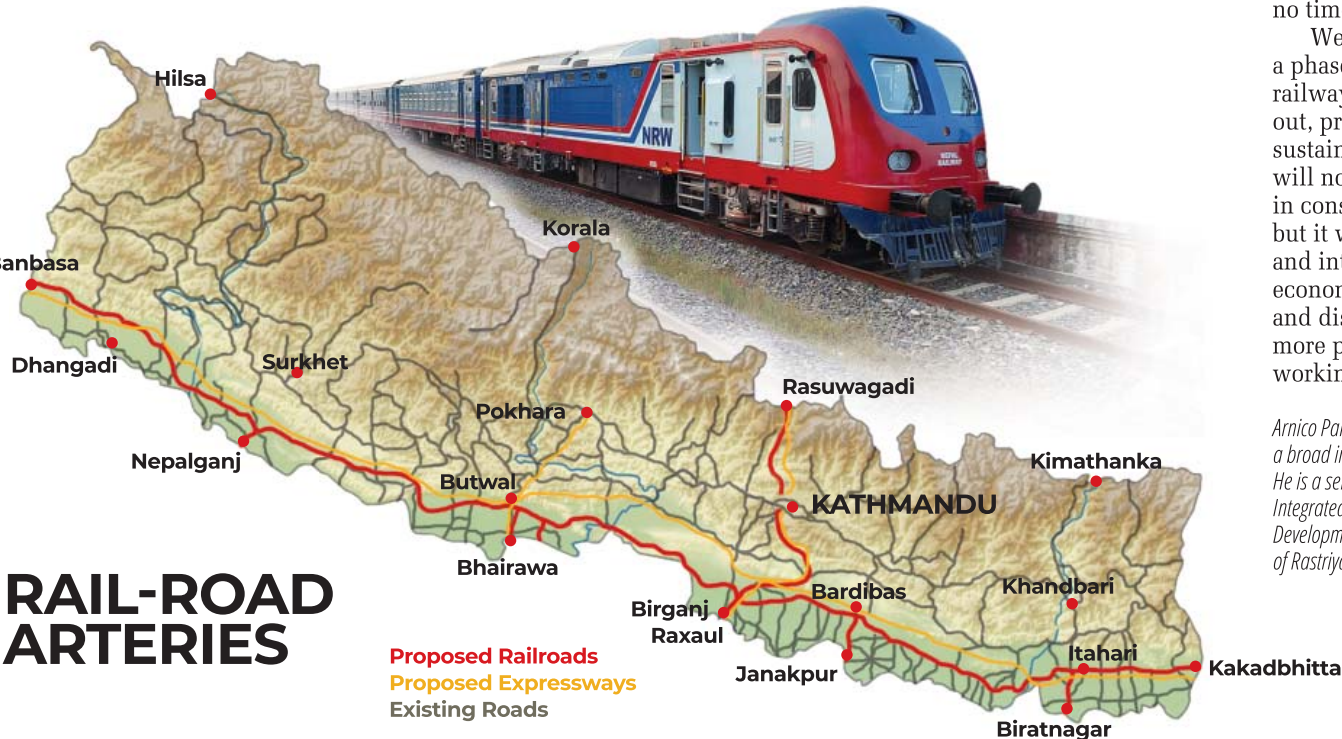
It will be important to learn from Austria and Switzerland about how they manage transit freight trains. And learn from the experiences of European cities on how to build effective intermodal connections that tie together urban and long-distance transport while maintaining and enhancing the vitality of historic cities.

In addition, it will be worthwhile to study the financing models used in more recent railroad projects in Kenya, Ethiopia, Thailand and Laos.

Designing and building a national railway network will require longer-term planning than we are used to in Nepal. The leaders who plant the seeds today may not even be alive by the time the investments bear fruit. But there is no time to waste.

We need a masterplan to guide a phase-wise construction of our railway network in well thought-out, predictable and financially sustainable way. Nepal's railroads will not only generate employment in construction and operation, but it will also bring efficiency and interconnectivity to Nepal's economy. They will shrink costs and distances while allowing more people to live at home while working in larger cities. 🇳🇵

Arnico Panday is an atmospheric scientist with a broad interest in sustainable development. He is a senior research fellow at the Institute for Integrated Development Studies (IIDS) and chairs the Development Planning and Policy Analysis department of Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP).



On the fast lane to expressways

Nepal's Transport Policy needs an overhaul to reflect demographic shifts and need for better connectivity

■ Chandra B Shrestha

Piecemeal and whimsical decisions by governments about Nepal's transport infrastructure have not only drained scarce resources, but also created long-term economic inefficiencies.

The Transport Policy of 2001 is obsolete, and over-run by vote bank politics. Two parallel East-West Highways and one railway along the entire length of the 20km wide Tarai is a triplication, and sure to yield negative economic returns.

The railway's bisection will inhibit natural trickle-down development affect and further settlement expansion southwards. Water impounding is another challenge, and Nepal is already suffering from drainage obstructions by embankments on the Indian side.

Then there is the Madan Bhandari Highway along the Chure Range just 20km north of the East-West Mahendra Highway. It has disturbed the ecologically fragile region, intensified deforestation which in turn has unleashed sedimentation and floods.

The ongoing widening of the Kathmandu-Pokhara Prithivi Highway to 4 lanes, parallel to the 2-lane Pushpalal Mid Hill Highway is not justifiable, either. North-South links for India-Nepal-China tripartite trade do not make sense if Korala on the China border is linked to Gaidakot, which is an Inner Tarai city with no border checkpoint.

A road connection to Sunauli on the Indian border is a better option. But the alignment of the Kali Gandaki Corridor in Gulmi and Baglung have been politically determined, jeopardising the much more convenient route via Syangja and Parbat which would have saved time and cost.

Out in the east, the roadhead connecting Khandbari to hydropower projects along the Arun Valley was built in the wrong direction towards Basantapur from Hile, instead of Leguwaghat involving a detour of 40km.

The previous government set aside

budget for the Chandragiri-Chitlang-Palung-Chitwan Expressway with a design speed of more than 100km/h to be implemented by the private sector. This pie-in-the-sky expressway is doomed because the Kathmandu-Tarai Fast Track, is already under construction by the Nepal Army.

This kind of haphazard, ad hoc planning is not just happening at the federal level. Provincial and local governments are also on a full-scale road building spree, often duplicating each other's plans and wasting money.

Nepal's Strategic Highways are supposed to harness the development potentials of adjoining regions to complement agricultural



and manufacturing, spur education and tourism. Such highway arteries are also essential because of national defense and security considerations.

Strategic Highways have to be fully backed by a national political consensus, and strictly adhered to. The 2001 Transport Policy has to be redrafted to reflect Nepal's new federal structure and changing demographics.

The 2021 census revealed that although the Tarai makes up 23% of Nepal's area, 54% of the country's 30 million people live there. On the other hand, only 6% of the

population lives in the high mountains and trans-Himalaya, which make up 35% of the country's area. The mid-mountains have 40% of the population and 42% of the area.

Nepal's population is on the move and this has created new urban hubs in the Tarai: the eastern conurbation based in Itahari, the Madhes centre in Janakpur, the Inner Tarai conurbation in Chitwan, the Butwal and Lumbini hubs, and Nepalganj and Dhangadi conurbations in the far west.

Surkhet, Pokhara and Kathmandu are the mid-mountain population centres, and interconnectedness among these nine focal points should be the first principle for transport network planning.

The 24 custom checkpoints with India, prominently Kakadbhitta, Jogbani, Birganj (Raxaul), Bhairawa (Sunauli), Nepalganj, Dhangadi (Gauriphanta) and Gaddachauki (Banbasa) need to have roadheads aligned with Indian railway terminals, and treated as obligatory points for Nepal's domestic transport network.

To the north, there are only five main trading points based on topography and connectivity: Yari, Nheghung, Rasuwagadi, Tatopani and Kimathanka which are conveniently located along rivers that start in Tibet and cut through the Himalaya.

In addition to the interconnecting all these points, high-speed connectivity will be required to accelerate growth and exploit locational advantages for which the shortest alignments are necessary. This means Nepal has to move towards expressways.

The Mahendra Highway and the Nijgad-Kathmandu fast-track will be the arteries

of Nepal's transport network, but the development quadrilateral of Kathmandu-Pokhara-Lumbini-Nijgad-Kathmandu needs to also be factored.

Raxaul-Rasuwagadi is a low hanging fruit among the North South corridors as the Raxaul to Kathmandu section is under construction and the Kathmandu-Rasuwagadi segment is a relatively short 100km, albeit technologically demanding. The ongoing plans to construct three other North-South roads: Biratnagar-Kimathanka, Bhairawa-Korala and Nepalganj-Hilsa require realignment in a number of sections, and the design standards have to be improved if a trilateral agreement between India, Nepal and China can be concluded.

Expressways must have design speeds of 100-110 km/h with hard shoulders. They need CCTVs, numbered junctions, regulated entries and exits, at least two lanes each direction with median strip and restricted grade crossings. Slow vehicles are prohibited.

This means that in mountainous contours, a number of considerable stretches may require viaducts or tunnels to also reduce environmental impact. Passages for wild animal crossings are mandatory. The critical issue here will be financing.

International creditors like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) are engaged in upgrading the Mahendra Highway. But their design standards will have to be revisited. The private sector could be urged to build the Pokhara-Kathmandu, Pokhara-Butwal and Kathmandu Rasuwagadi expressways under at Build Operate Transfer scheme.

Expressway concessionaires and other investors should also be encouraged to build road corridors in niche areas with tourism and religious importance. Planning expressways along industrial corridors and setting up other infrastructure will be the backbone of Nepal's future prosperity. 🇳🇵

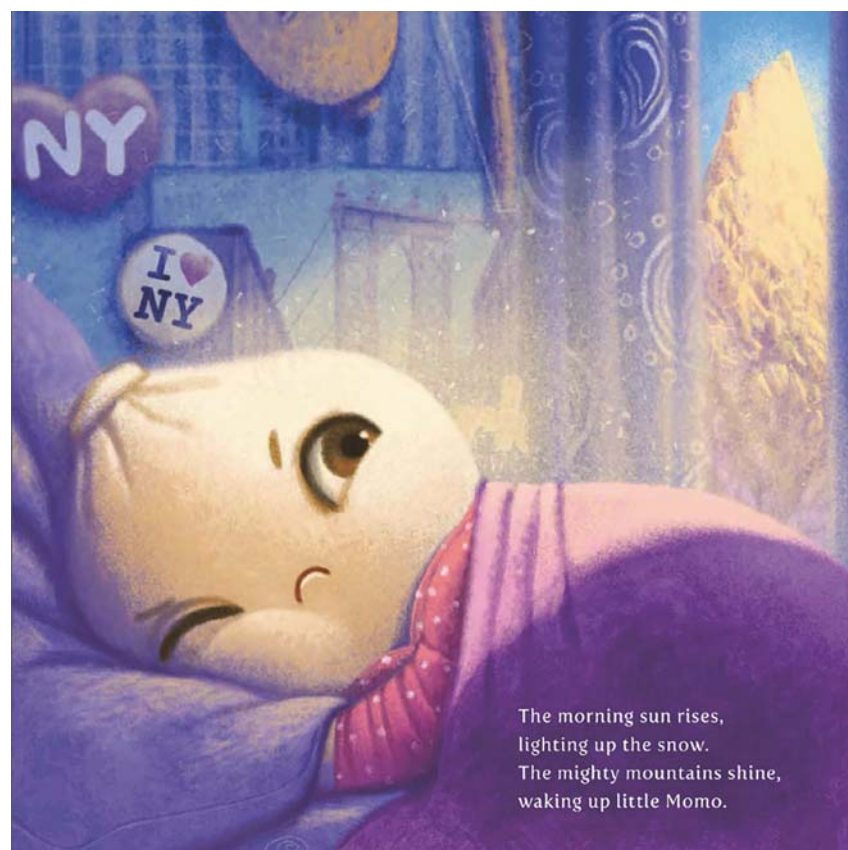
Chandra B Shrestha is former member of the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA).



Adventures of a little dumpling



Nepali myths and characters are the subject



The morning sun rises,
lighting up the snow.
The mighty mountains shine,
waking up little Momo.



"You will see."
says the big echo.

Dear Momo,
Please come and find me
in New York City!
I need your help! I am lost, and I am hungry,
and while you're here, you'll explore
a new country.
Surely you can find me in this big city.
Please come soon. Love, Uncle Yeti.



At JFK airport, Momo does

Welcome to

Worry not, for the legendary yeti

■ Sahina Shrestha

In the high Himalaya of Nepal, a little dumpling child Momo wakes up to the sight of the majestic mountains. While on an adventure to climb one of the peaks, Momo receives an invitation from a family member via postcard to travel to a different land with a promise of an exciting undertaking.

Thus begins the journey of Momo to New York to find Uncle Yeti who went there to sample the various foods the city has to offer.

Washington DC-based Nepali-American author Sibani Karki chronicles Momo's voyage to the Big Apple in a new children's book, *Momo and Uncle Yeti: Adventures in New York City*. Her poetic prose is accompanied by artist Oleg Goncharov's spectacular

illustrations which make the book a visual treat for both children and adults alike.

"The book represents my own journey to the US as a child from Nepal and also some of my favourite things in life: travel, good food, cultures and family," says Karki, who moved to the US when she was 11.

New country meant new people, new experiences, and living between two cultures. It was also an opportunity to connect with and share her own Nepalianness. And one way Karki does that is through food.

As any immigrant can attest, food brings one closer to home. With food, one makes new friends, can court lovers, understand a new country, hold on to memories of a

home left behind.

"Momo parties happen more frequently here than in Nepal," says Karki. "More than food, momo is a feeling. And having a momo party is an opportunity to get together, share stories, and reconnect with friends and family."

As someone who enjoys myths, Karki knew she had to include the Yeti as one of her characters. However, Karki's Uncle Yeti is not scary. He is jolly, has an insatiable hunger and loves getting lost in new cities while hunting for new tasty food.

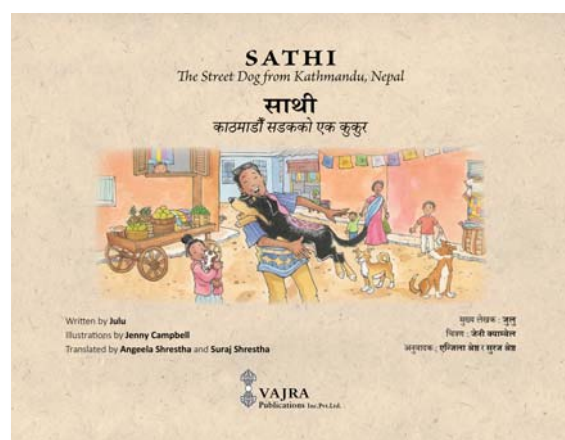
Like many Nepali children, Karki did not grow up with a reading culture at home and developed a reading habit only after moving to the US. At bookstores, she often found herself in the children's book section leafing through the colourful pages with vivid images.

But what was missing in the books was the representation of characters with life experiences and culture people like her could relate to.

She started writing the story of Momo and Uncle Yeti in 2016 while at Columbia University. But it was not until the pandemic that she finally got a chance to sit down and collate it into a book.

While she ran the rhymes by her family, she struggled to find an artist for the illustrations. A few collaborations fell through as the art style wasn't what she was looking for. Then, a chance meeting with designer Larry Issa at a farmers' market helped her connect with illustrator Oleg Goncharov.

There was a catch: Goncharov did not speak English, and lived in Crimea. So, the entire conversation between the two

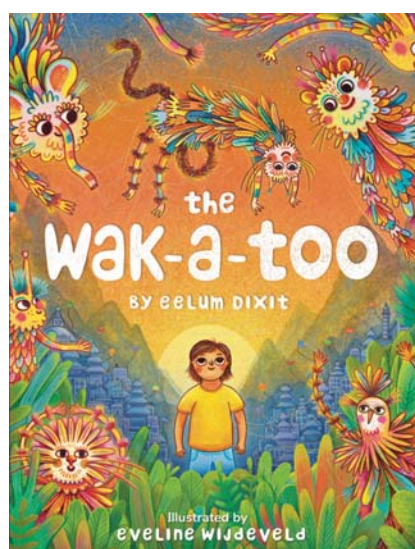


Sathi

Sathi is an exquisitely illustrated bilingual book for children and adults that tells a fairy tale story of an abandoned dog, who is scalded on Kukur Tihar by a city shopkeeper. Sathi, the dog, is miserable and in pain as she licks her wounds by a garbage pile, until she finds a benefactor who takes her to the real-life animal shelter, KAT Centre in Kathmandu. She is cared for at the dog home, and the burns on her back heal slowly. She makes friends with other dogs at the shelter who have also been attacked, abandoned, or hit by cars, and finally emigrates to a new forever home in Canada.

Sathi: The Street Dog from Kathmandu, Nepal
साथी : काठमाडौं सडकको एक कुकुर

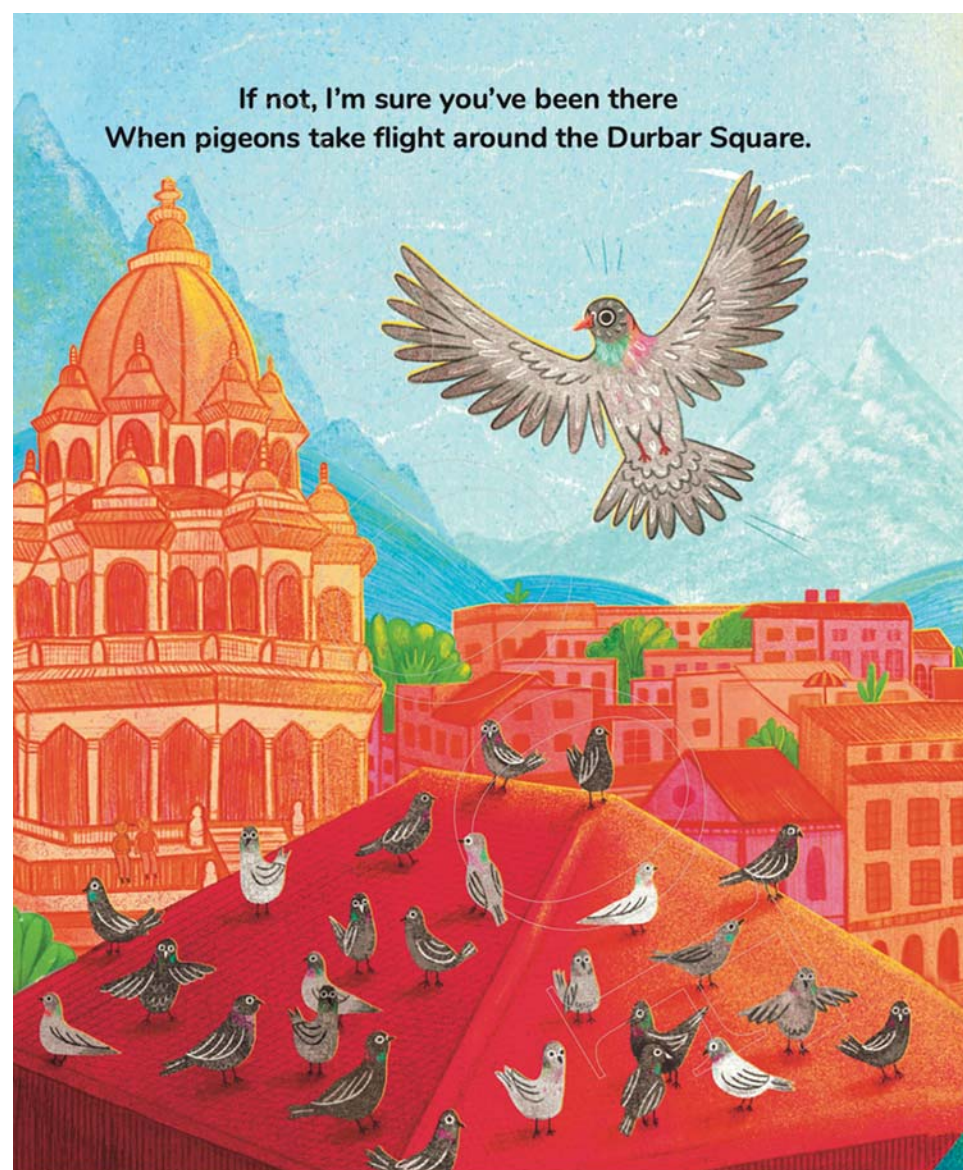
Written by Jenny Campbell
Illustrations by Jenny Campbell
Nepali translations by Angeela Shrestha and Suraj Shrestha
Vajra Publications, 2021
44 pages
\$14.95



The Wak-a-Too

Another international children's book featuring Nepal is the soon-to-be published *The Wak-a-Too* by Nepali film-maker Eelum Dixit (who himself became a father recently), and is lavishly illustrated (pictured, right) by the US-based Dutch designer Eveline Wijdeveld. The book begins with an ornithological overview of Nepal, including its urban birds and then takes children into a dreamlike fantasy world of the Wak-a-Too. At the end of the book, young readers are asked to draw their own versions of the imaginary Wak-a-Too and post them @thewakattoo on Instagram and Facebook.

The Wak-a-Too
by Eelum Dixit
Illustrated by Eveline Wijdeveld
Very Tale Books, 2023
45 pages
Hardback: \$27.99



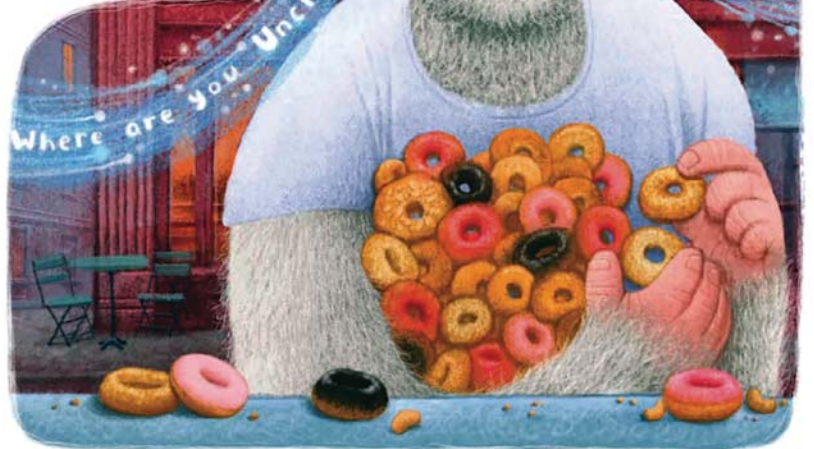
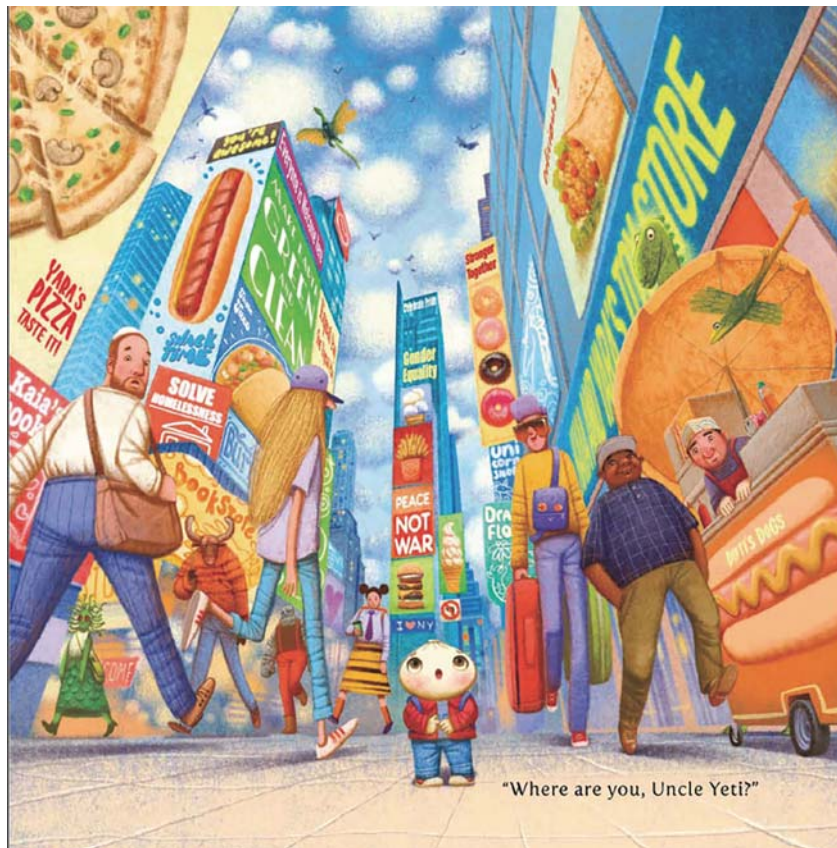


ling named Momo (and other books)

ject of new international children's books



ry yellow taxi drivers will know!



happened on Google translate. One cannot tell, browsing the book, of the struggle to communicate between the two. From realistic depictions of the airports and landmarks in Kathmandu and New York to a more creative approach in assimilating animals and humans, Goncharov's gorgeous images add another dimension to Karki's words.

"From my experience with my nieces Kaia and Yara, I know that children sometimes take to the smallest characters in the book. They will notice the small ladybug rather than the big main character. Since it is a children's book, not everything had to make sense. The anthropomorphism in the book is also to show the cohesion of animals and humans," she explains.

Coming from a close-knit family, the names of relatives are scattered through the



book. Pramila Soon Pasa is named after her mother, Shyam Chiya Pasa after her father. The names of her brother, sister-in-law, husband, nieces also make an appearance.

Karki now works as a gender specialist at the World Bank and has also included other aspects she is passionate about in the book. At Times Square where Momo goes looking for Uncle Yeti, the usual advertisements are peppered with social messages including those of gender equality, inclusivity and positivity.

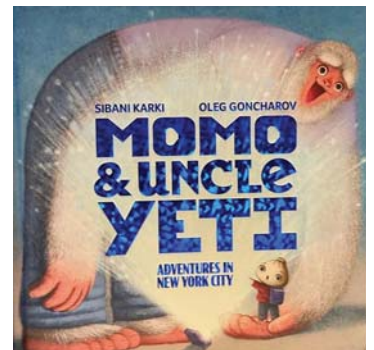
Rosy cheeks with big inquisitive eyes, Karki's Momo enjoys discovering new places, eating new food, solving puzzles, and is gender neutral. "Often, we see that adventure is associated with boys. But I want the children to see themselves in the

pages and connect with the characters. So, Momo is not a he or she or they, Momo is just Momo," she says.

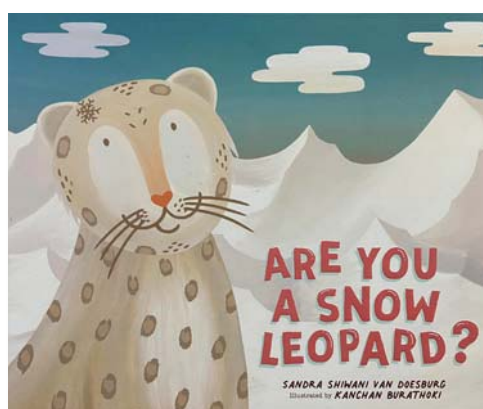
While New Yorkers have a reputation for being brusque, there is also a sense of community in the city's diversity. This comes across as Momo runs (hops?) around the city looking for Uncle Yeti.

Karki's Momo and Uncle Yeti are very Nepali and the high-rises of the Himalaya and New York will make it relatable for not only the global Nepali audience but also those who are familiar with Nepal – weaving a sense of adventure, appetite for food and travel, appreciation of one's family, and tolerance of different cultures.

The book is available on Amazon and through momoandyeti.com. It will soon be launched in Nepal. 🇳🇵



Momo and Uncle Yeti:
Adventures in New York
Sibani Karki
Illustrations by Oleg Goncharov
Pathways LLC, 2022
38 pages
\$20.50



Are You a Snow Leopard?

Written by Sandra Shiwani Van Doesburg and illustrated by Kanchan Burathoki, *Are You a Snow Leopard?* tells the story of Hiuko, a snow leopard who goes looking for others of her kind to befriend. As she traverses through the mountains, she meets and befriends other animals found in Nepal: Ooney, the yak, Chulbuli, the blue sheep, Jooney, the black bear, Bhukule, the red panda, and finally Tiktiki, the snow leopard.

Sandra and Kanchan met in fourth grade in a boarding school in Nepal. After high school, Kanchan went to Boston and Sandra to Rotterdam. They reconnected 15 years later to work together on the story of Hiuko, which primarily has an underlying message of diversity and inclusion. The book also features photographs by renowned wildlife photographer Chungba Sherpa.

Are You a Snow Leopard?
Sandra Shiwani Van Doesburg
Illustrations by Kanchan Burathoki
Van Doesburg Creative Works, 2021
28 pages
Hardback: Rs1,850 | Paperback: Rs1,550



The Ambassador's Dog

This delightful children's book is the tale of Lo Khyi (Lo for Mustang, and *khyi*, which fortuitously means both 'dog' and 'happiness' in Tibetan), a pup that dared to dream big and who went on to become the source of happiness for Scott who adopted the dog to America after his tenure in Nepal. 'Scott' in the book is Scott H DeLisi, who served as the real-life American ambassador in Kathmandu from 2010-12. *The Ambassador's Dog* has a dream-like quality to it, but at its heart is a story of optimism and positivity. Lo Khyi is a canine medium for an important message: set goals for yourselves and believe in them. And somehow (stars will align, or you will find avenues) your dreams will come true. Sadly, Lo Khyi died of old age recently at his home in Virginia, and DeLisi wrote a tribute on his Facebook page: 'He had become a dog of near mythic proportions in my mind – surely he would find a way to live forever. But, of course, for as long as there is a single copy of *The Ambassador's Dog* to be read by someone with an open heart, he WILL live forever.'

The Ambassador's Dog
Scott H. DeLisi
Illustrations by Jane Lillian Vance
Vajra Publications, 2020
40 pages
Rs1,600



EVENTS



Slam Poetry

All aspiring poets head over to the slam poetry competition this week and present original works of poetry. Register now. 28 January, 2pm onwards, Pulchok Engineering Campus

Weekend hike

Enjoy a weekend hike from Pilotbaba to Kakrebari with friends and family. Call for details. 28 January, Rs700-1400, 9846190957/9851014616

Deurali Daandi

Deurali Daandi directed by Rose Schwietz and written by Sahalesh delves into the disappearing practice of sati ghatu in the Gurung and Magar communities, and about labor migration in Nepal. Call for ticket and timing details. 27-29 January, 4:45pm onwards, Nepal Film Campus, 9843932952

Wood Expo

Learn interesting woodworking machinery and view wonderful wood designs at the Nepal International Wood expo. 27-29 January, 10am-5pm, Bhrikuti Mandap



Labim Bazaar

Shop local at the Saturday Labim Bazaar. Buy baked goods, meals, handicrafts and clothes from 80 vendors. 28 January, 10am-4pm, Labim Mall, Lalitpur, 9861119954

DINING



Bungalow Bar and Kitchen

Visit for Thai dishes like Som Tam Essan, Pad Kra Pao and Red Curry, or Asian - fusion dishes like the Pork Bamboo Shoot, Buff Lemon Grass and Fried Calamari, all with a side of refreshing cocktails. Naxal, Bhatbhateni, 9802032396/ 980106830

MUSIC

Shaurav Bhattarai

Tune to a performance from Shaurav Bhattarai and his fresh new lineup this Friday. 27 January, Beers N' Cheers, Jhamsikhel



Abhaya Live

Head over for a fun rock and roll night with Abhaya & the steam engine. 27 January, 8pm, Liquid lounge, Darbar Marg

Riya Bhattacharya

Book tickets now for a fun night with Riya Bhattacharya and her band next week. Call for more details. 3 February, 7pm, Elevate Lounge, New Road, 9863593163



Midnight Riders

Have a great weekend with family and friends at Midnight Riders' first 2023 gig. 28 February, 8pm onwards, Titos Pub, Thamel

Music Classes

Learn to play a new instrument with musicians and educators at the Music Room started by Jazzmandu Music Education Initiative. Call for more details. 9818856982



Chez Caroline

Chez Caroline specialises in authentic French and continental cuisine in Nepal. Try the Profiteroles au Chocolat and Choux pastry filled with vanilla ice cream and hot chocolate sauce. Baber Mahal Revisited (01) 4263070/ 4264187

Pawan Sweets

In the mood for Indian food? Enjoy sweets, South Indian cuisine and other meals. The Pawan Special Dosa is a must-try. Baneshwor (01) 5906437

About Town

GETAWAY

The Pavilions

Visit this luxury boutique eco-resort with boutique villas, a swimming pool, organic farm, restaurant lounge and bar. For refreshing morning walks, therapeutic and relaxing day-ins, authentic gastronomical experience and quiet nights. Chisapani, Pokhara (061) 694379

Bandipur Safari Lodge

Bandipur is mainly known for its rich cultural heritage. But it is home to a wide variety of wildlife. Go beyond the temples and explore the jungles of the town with the Bandipur Safari Lodge. Bandipur, 9449597880



Heranya Yala

Get a genuine feel of authentic Newa heritage by living right in the middle of Maha Boudha and the Hiranya monastery. The hotel provides a complete tour package to immerse in the rich cultural heritage of Patan. Gujibahal, Patan (01) 5523168

Mirabel Resort

Perfect for families, Mirabel Resort offers comfort, continental cuisines and views of Kathmandu Valley. Take a walk around Dhulikhel before tucking into a Nepali lunch or mouth-watering barbeque. Dhulikhel (01) 490972



Jagatpur Lodge

Jagatpur Lodge's private tents will take one to the heart of the grassland in the comfort of luxury amenities. Jagatpur, Chitwan (01) 4221711

Embers

A large, cosy place serving a blend of continental and Nepali favourites. Check out traditional marinated boneless chicken kebab served with vegetable, rice and chutney. Krishna Galli, Pulchok (01) 5555306



Cibo Bistro

With simple dishes and fresh ingredients, enjoy a wide variety of pastas, pizzas, sandwiches and mouth-watering desserts. Kid-friendly options are available. Pulchowk (01) 5541940

WEEKEND WEATHER



Wet West, Dry East

This NASA Earth satellite image of north India, Nepal and the Tibetan Plateau taken on Wednesday morning shows just how bad the smog blanketing the Indo-Gangetic plains has been this week. The heavy concentration of particulates has lowered the Air Quality Index (AQI) to hazardous levels in the Nepal Tarai and Kathmandu. The image also shows how the smog is sucked up the Dudh Kosi, Arun and Tamor right up into the high mountain valleys. Meanwhile, a strong westerly has brought rain and snow to western Nepal, while the rest of Nepal has been precipitation-free. Another westerly is approaching and will bring cloud cover, and a 20% chance of brief light showers to Kathmandu early next week.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
20° 4°	21° 5°	21° 8°

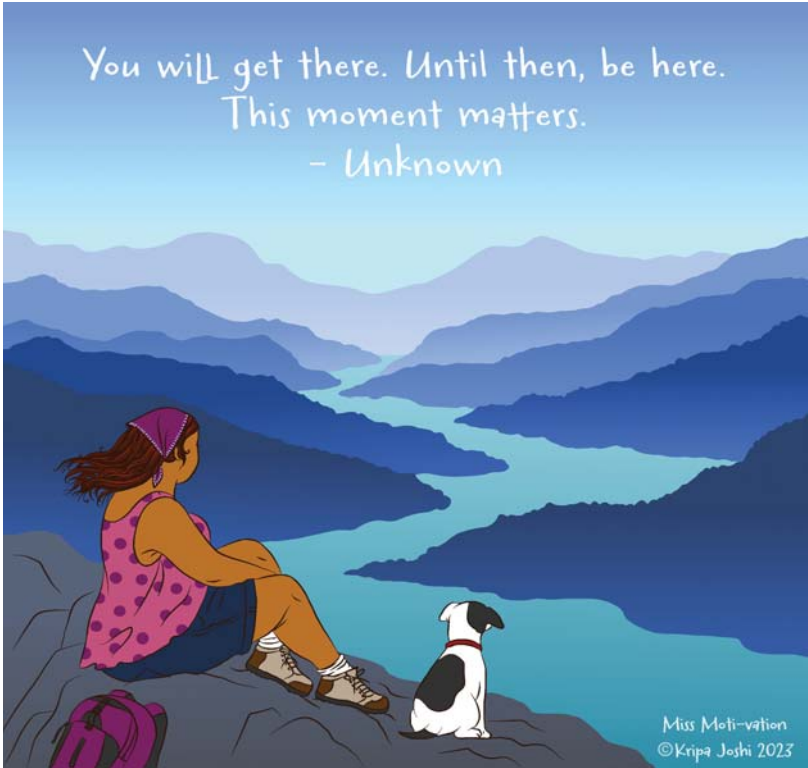
OUR PICK

From virtually nothing to virtual reality, Diane Morgan's straight-faced Philomena Cunk is back to show how far humanity has come – or not – in this witty mockumentary tracing the history of civilization. There are famously no stupid questions as this eager-to-learn presenter mocks docs, speaks to leading academics and wanders around looking at things, which may or may not be the things she is talking about. This impeccably surreal and genuinely insightful series comically tells the story of our greatest inventions such as the wheel, the Mona Lisa and nuclear power, and makes one wonder the most important question of them all: Are the interviewees in on the joke as well?



MISS MOTI-VATION

KRIPA JOSHI

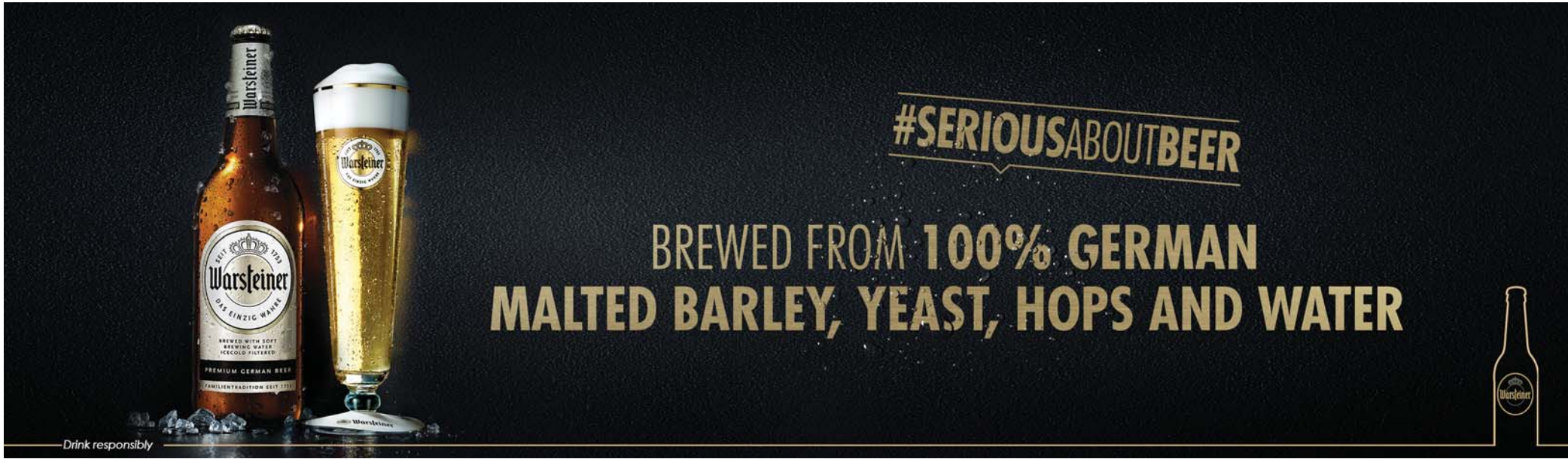


सामाजिक सञ्जाल प्रयोगमा सचेतता अपनाऔं

- सामाजिक सञ्जालमा अपरिचित व्यक्तिको साथी बन्ने अनुरोधलाई विश्वस्त भएर मात्र प्रतिक्रिया जनाऔं ।
- अपरिचित व्यक्तिलाई जथाभावी साथी बन्न अनुरोध नपठाऔं ।
- सामाजिक सञ्जाल तथा अन्य विद्युतीय माध्यमबाट चिन्ता पुरस्कार जस्ता आर्थिक प्रलोभनका प्रस्तावको भरमा नपरौं ।
- आफूले प्रवाह गरेका सन्देश वा सूचनाबाट समाजमा पर्नसक्ने नकारात्मक प्रभावको ख्याल गरौं ।
- आफ्नो सन्देशले कुनै व्यक्ति वा अन्य कुनै समुदायको आत्मसम्मानमा चोट नपुऱ्याऔं ।



नेपाल सरकार
विज्ञापन बोर्ड



The sky is the limit for photography on canvas

Wind Horse's latest contemporary exhibition looks upwards through a blend of genres and techniques

■ Ashish Dhakal

Contemporary multimedia artist Aakash Pradhan's latest show at Wind Horse Gallery in Jhamsikhel comes across as being a quiet affair. Corny Clouds, curated by Ujen Norbu Gurung, is far from the mawkishly sentimental.

It leads the viewer through the glass doors into a dimly-lit corridor which has a calming atmosphere – quite literally, as on the walls one finds variously sized photography-on-canvases of the sky.

The first is part of a triptych, 'Nothing But Good Energy'. Large canvases as blue as the word 'clear' itself. The colour gradient shifts concentrically around a brilliant sun, as amorphous clouds trail in. The canvas in the middle shows a snowy mountain peak rising from the bottom-left corner. But what hour is it -- early morning or late afternoon? There is no telling, and, at the same time, perhaps it does not matter. What we are asked to view here is the sky itself, in its many forms and moods.

Right across are two more canvases 'Was Good Till It Lasted' which show markedly different



skies in juxtaposition to the striking blue. The colours are warmer, with swirling shades of pink, orange and purple, like the ether in twilight or breaking dawn. A sliver of the crescent moon sits in one while a brilliant golden dot in another, as a mass of shaded clouds gathers under them. If 'Nothing But Good Energy' gave one a sense of an impending adventure, a flight, 'Was Good Till It Lasted' reminds one to pause, consider oneself, and be grateful for the beauty around.

Elsewhere, a group of three smaller canvases present an almost cinematic look at the city. '5'o clock in the morning' appears as though one zooms out from the brilliant yellow orb in the sky above dark hills to find an array of high-rise buildings and houses under the sky. While from the right, it is the exact opposite direction. There is, of course, no right or wrong motion: one either moves deeper into the vastness of the sky or reckons with the sprawling civilisation around us. Drawing in from Pradhan's vast experience in photography and videography, the exhibition is an intriguing cross-genre excursion. At the centre of the gallery, a video of clouds in motion is projected onto the wall, and in the adjoining chamber a series of nine works displaying absorbing experimentation with form and content. Clever collages,

almost psychedelic in nature, ask the viewers to interact with spirituality and consciousness. Declutter your mind, they seem to say, and open yourself to a dazzling alteration of themes.

The saying 'The sky is the same everywhere' takes on an interesting tune among Pradhan's works. One look above and we immediately become aware of the expanse, whether from Lalitpur or the Base Camps or anywhere else in the world. Sometimes it is overcast, sometimes it is absolutely still and clear. But there is a sense of common experience.

Generations of humans have turned to the sky, adding and uncovering meanings in its folds and colours, sometimes worshipping its vastness. We too share in this experience, as the clouds rearrange themselves in various shapes and sizes. Here a rabbit, there a yaksha, each a different story than the last.

Pradhan's works are inviting, with a subtle promise of familiar exposures. Then they quickly become more: one must exercise one's own imagination. The artist shows the door but we have to walk through it ourselves, processing, discovering connections and interpretations. ■

Corny Clouds
By Aakash Pradhan
Curated by Ujen Norbu Gurung
Wind Horse Gallery, Jhamsikhel
Till 4 February 2023, 11am—6:30pm

हिमालको माघ अंक बजारमा



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Making migration better

The RSP has a responsibility to fulfil its pledge to improve the wellbeing of Nepali migrant workers

Over 90% of Nepali workers abroad (except India) are handled by the private sector. Recruiters serve an important function of matching workers with overseas jobs, but they are mired in unhealthy, fierce competition, not just among themselves, but also with agencies in other countries competing to procure job orders.

Getting any type of job with a disregard for employment terms, and at any cost (workers will pay) has been the norm, as many Nepali workers in the Gulf related recently. Cases of migrants getting duped by recruiters, or those who pretend to be recruiters are far too common.

It is a national disgrace that migrant workers who are desperate to improve their lives, suffer as a result. The public has pinned its hope on the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) to boldly regulate the migrant labour sector with integrity, and prevent fraudsters from manipulating decisions. It may help that Rabi Lamichhane is also Minister for Home Affairs.

To deliver practical results, however, the private sector needs to be involved, since there are 880 'manpower' agencies which have enabled millions of Nepalis over the years to be good providers for their families back home.

Reforming emigration requires bolder and more innovative interventions than presently. Regulation and facilitation are both needed in a balanced approach. What we hear a lot in the media is call for regulation, and that is because of corruption and political patronage. Facilitation, for its part, has never been a priority.

How would workers in Dhanusha or Banke who have never left their villages or are not technologically savvy find employment at a Dubai-based company? How will they ever navigate the layers of bureaucracy imposed by the government and kickbacks every step of the way?

This intermediary role of the recruiting agency is vital, and we cannot wish it away. The trouble is that it gets obscured in the daily media bombardment of dire experiences of migrants being exploited, hoodwinked or abused.

Recruiters are often notorious for cheating workers, but usually it is that a share of the 'pie' has to be set aside for politicians, party cadres and bureaucrats up the food chain. The practical challenges facing the recruitment industry are immense because the process is international, it is fuelled by desperation and aspiration, competition from within and beyond Nepal's borders, with tens of thousands of intermediaries, as well as negotiations with foreign employers who themselves are looking for ways to minimise costs.

There is a lot of lip service about reforming recruitment practices, lofty moralistic principles are voiced, with non-binding, soft commitments that mean little in practice. Interventions are far removed from the ground reality, but they need to start where we are, not where we need to ideally be.

The good, and bad

Good recruiters can market themselves better to attract the best employers with strong employment practices. If not, 'manpower' agencies will continue to resort to 'buying job demands' from employees which can include companies that do not take good care of hired workers.

Among all the bad apples in the recruitment industry there are also good ones trying to do things better. But not much is done to help them because such initiatives go counter to prevailing populist narratives that amplify the negative.

All recruiters are tarred with the same brush, and a perfunctory call for more regulatory action is made. How will more regulation help when regulators are a part of the problem? There is disproportionate coverage in the media, social media and public discourse of negative migration stories and it affects our attitude towards emigration.

Foreign employment has allowed scores of migrant workers to overcome odds stacked against them, but perhaps not in newsworthy ways. A story of a sting operation will get much more media attention and readership than profiles of workers who came back with savings, skills and with a network of contacts.

Foreign employment has its faults but it has also changed the lives of many workers, like those who have been featured in the Diaspora Diaries series in this newspaper in the past two years. Many of them started with nothing, they charted out their own futures thanks to foreign employment.

It may be time for us in the media to step back and assess how such coverage affects the way society regards emigration, and how this impacts migration governance.

This is even more important in the way female migrant workers are primarily portrayed as being abused or exploited, referred to as powerless victims चेल्नी. The media obsession with the negative, sensational and out-of-the-ordinary feeds such stereotyped coverage and results in the government imposing restrictions like the partial or blanket bans on Nepali women going abroad for domestic work. Women just bypassed those bans, crossing the border into India to fly to the Gulf, increasing their risk of being trafficked, exploited or abused.

The RSP has emphasised that it will henceforth give Nepalis good reasons to stay in their own country and, for those already abroad, to return. But it should also provide migrant workers good reasons to leave. The party and the government that it is a member of should not just help us imagine a society in which Nepalis are not forced to migrate, but also one in which Nepalis can improve their quality of life.

To be sure, Nepal needs to create jobs at home. But harnessing the immense potential of foreign labour migration should also be a priority. These two requisites do not have to be either-or.

Migration should also be more inclusive. Most people from far western Nepal migrate to India, very few go overseas. Why are there barriers for strivers there? Nepalis from remote areas should also have equitable access to ethical recruitment to jobs in West Asia, or seasonal jobs like picking apples in the UK which would earn them as much as Rs1.2 million in a single season, and provide exposure to modern farming methods.

After recent media exposure of the exploitation of Nepali migrant workers, employers are now reportedly reluctant to hire Nepalis despite worker shortages, leading to continued recruitment drives from other countries on the same terms.

Stay, or leave

Malpractice in recruitment need to be exposed, and perpetrators punished. But follow-up corrective action is also needed, so the consequence is not lost jobs. Otherwise, activism or regulatory interventions can result in migrant workers being deprived of the benefits of overseas employment.

One example is the lost opportunity in the Qatar Police in 2021. These were jobs with high salaries and pensions. Media reports exposed workers being charged exorbitantly for these jobs, and the recruitment was cancelled.

It is criminal to cheat migrant workers. But it is also criminal for migrant workers to lose potentially transformative jobs because of vested interests, especially when there are few employment alternatives back home.

The RSP's domestic employment agenda is praiseworthy and much needed to create domestic jobs. But these recent examples show that recruitment malpractices without corrective action can also be costly for workers. Nepali workers in Nepal are unlikely to ever earn Rs300,000 a month as they would have done with Qatar Police.

A Japan government agreement was signed in 2019, but has not



NOW, GET TO WORK: Home Minister Rabi Lamichhane with Dol Prasad Aryal, also of RSP who is the new labour minister.

SALIGRAM TIWARI




been implemented. The deal, built on a Government (Nepal) to Business (Japan) model, is stalled despite Nepal being the second country to sign such an agreement. This is costly for many workers, including the hundreds who have taken Japanese language classes. Reviving such models should be prioritised because in cases like Japan's SSW (Specified Skilled Worker) and Korea's EPS (Employment Permit System), these schemes are the only legal pathways for workers to access these markets. The Labour Ministry under

Dol Prasad Aryal must emphasise innovative, practical interventions that will address or prevent malpractices while also allowing workers to benefit from what the world has to offer. His portfolio has great potential for a willing and creative leadership. The party will then be held to much higher regard by the public. Tangible changes in migrant governance can make the RSP even more politically popular — just as Rabi Lamichhane himself was propelled to stardom with his activist tv show. Most of Minister Aryal's

predecessors in the Ministry of Labour have accomplished precious little. Those who tried to implement reforms were punished by the powers that be. But if done right, migration can be a powerful tool to transform the lives of common Nepalis and their families. Some wins are much easier and could score RSP early brownie points. Being digitally connected to migrant workers, as has been done in Malaysia, can make them feel the government's presence and get support when needed. Nepal's embassies in destination countries need reflect better the

needs of the labour market there. The RSP's Labour-Home Affairs combination can hold migrant abusers to account and send a positive message. The Free Visa Free Ticket scheme failed, and needs to be revised. The demand verification process for jobs also needs an overhaul as employers complain that it takes much longer to source workers from Nepal than from other countries like the Philippines and India. Progress with the reintegration program for returnees has been slow and needs to be urgently enforced. Allowing workers to contribute to social security, set

to begin in March, and to invest in productive sectors are important and will require proactive follow-up. Nepal's labour diplomacy should not be just junkets for ministers, but a chance to explore new opportunities for workers and raise those issues forcefully with host governments. It is incongruous that Nepal still does not have labour agreements with major destination countries like Saudi Arabia, even while existing agreements with the UAE, Japan and Malaysia are not properly implemented. Even after years of watching families receive the remains of their loved ones, no progress has been made in investigations of migrant deaths. "सुत्तासुत्दै मर्ने" is now the colloquial Nepali term for sudden death syndrome. Labour diplomacy should also entail engaging with the bilateral donors in Nepal itself who represent existing and emerging destination countries, such as KOICA, JICA and UKAid, to see how those corridors can be strengthened for aspirants, current and returnee workers. KOICA has recently stepped up to contribute to the integration of EPS workers who have returned to Nepal from Korea. The embassies of Qatar, UAE and Saudi Arabia should be lobbied to follow suit. After all, Nepalis are helping to literally transform their deserts into liveable cities and organise global events. They can also invest in joint skills, language and information training so workers are better prepared. The government has its work cut out. There is a lot to be done, and a lot that can be done. The real test begins now. As a coalition partner with important portfolios, the RSP can prove that it is indeed a party for the people by taking the practical route focused on results, not be sidetracked by populism and implement bold initiatives, including unpopular ones.  Kunda Dixit

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An architect of a better Sikkim

Just like in Nepal, a professional fed up with corruption, decides to contest local elections

■ Shristi Karki

Corruption was rife. There was rank opportunism. Service delivery was poor and impunity had become institutionalised. There was environmental degradation everywhere in the mountains.

No, we are not talking about Nepal. This is Sikkim, which till 1975 was an independent Himalayan kingdom, and has been a state of India since its annexation.

Like in Nepal's 2022 polls, professionals fed up with the way Sikkim was being governed, and impatient for change decided to contest elections. One of them was architect Kailash Pradhan (pictured).

"When I noticed the state of affairs in Sikkim, I felt like an ostrich with its head buried in the sand," recalls Pradhan. "I was thinking about architecture and beautiful designs, but that was not what Sikkim needed."

Pradhan studied in Ahmedabad to be an architect and spent time in Zurich as an exchange student. But he always intended to come back and build a life in Sikkim.

"When people asked me if I was going to stay in Zurich, I often wondered to myself what I was going to do there that hadn't already been done," Pradhan says.

He eventually came back to India, and spent some years in Delhi, being one of the very few Sikkimese architects to work with the government. In the early 90s, he returned to Sikkim, building his own architectural practice.

As the years passed, Pradhan became more and more aware of the socio-politics of Sikkim. New Delhi had historically poured money into the geopolitically-sensitive state, with most people benefiting directly from federal grants.

There was lack of transparency everywhere. Sikkim's nature was being destroyed by an infrastructure spree. Watching all this unfold, Pradhan started feeling a professional restlessness and he took up a job offer in Bhutan where he was witness to Bhutan's transition from an absolute monarchy to a democracy.

Five years later, he returned to Sikkim with a fresh perspective, inspired to do more activism back home. In 2020, Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang's government amended the Sikkim Municipality Act, abolishing party-based municipal and local elections.

Candidates contesting municipal elections could not be affiliated with any political party, and could not receive direct or indirect support from them. Essentially, candidates for local governments were independent.

When municipal elections were announced in Sikkim in early 2021, Pradhan's friends, including his business partner, approached him to contest the election.

"My knee-jerk reaction was to refuse," says Pradhan, having not been interested in anything

political till then. But he was familiar with politics, since his father had been a government employee, and his uncle was active in the anti-Chogyal revolution in the 1970s leading to a referendum that abolished the monarchy.

Eventually, Pradhan filed his candidacy and became one of 64 aspirants in two wards of Gangtok Municipal Corporation. Pradhan and his team deliberately did not seek funding from businesses and contractors, conducting a 'zero-budget' campaign.

"When parties need money they reach out to businesses, and then become crony capitalists, giving rise to oligarchies," says Pradhan. But supporters would voluntarily support him with cheques for small amounts, food, beer.



PHOTO COURTESY: KAILASH PRADHAN

By this time, Pradhan was known among locals for stopping the Sikkim government from felling almost 400 trees to make way for new roads. His team had around 25 volunteers: friends who were photographers, graphic artists, filmmakers -- and social media became his medium to reach voters.

Pradhan lost in both Gangtok wards in Municipal elections in 2021. The winning candidates belonged to the governing party, even though it had not explicitly thrown its support behind them, as per the rules. "You can take the party out of elections, but you cannot take the party out of voters," Pradhan explains, admitting that he may not have been able to connect to grassroots voters who may not have had access to his social media outreach.

But Pradhan is encouraged by the people he met and the team he built throughout the campaign. He says, "We connected the most with young people who are much more egalitarian and have much less ego. And while the winners indicated that things have gone back to normal, it was good to see so many independent candidates contesting the election."

Next time, anyone contesting from Sikkim could take a tip or two from Nepal's own independent mayors elected in 2022, and the independent Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) which rose to become the fourth party in Parliament just five months after it was formed.