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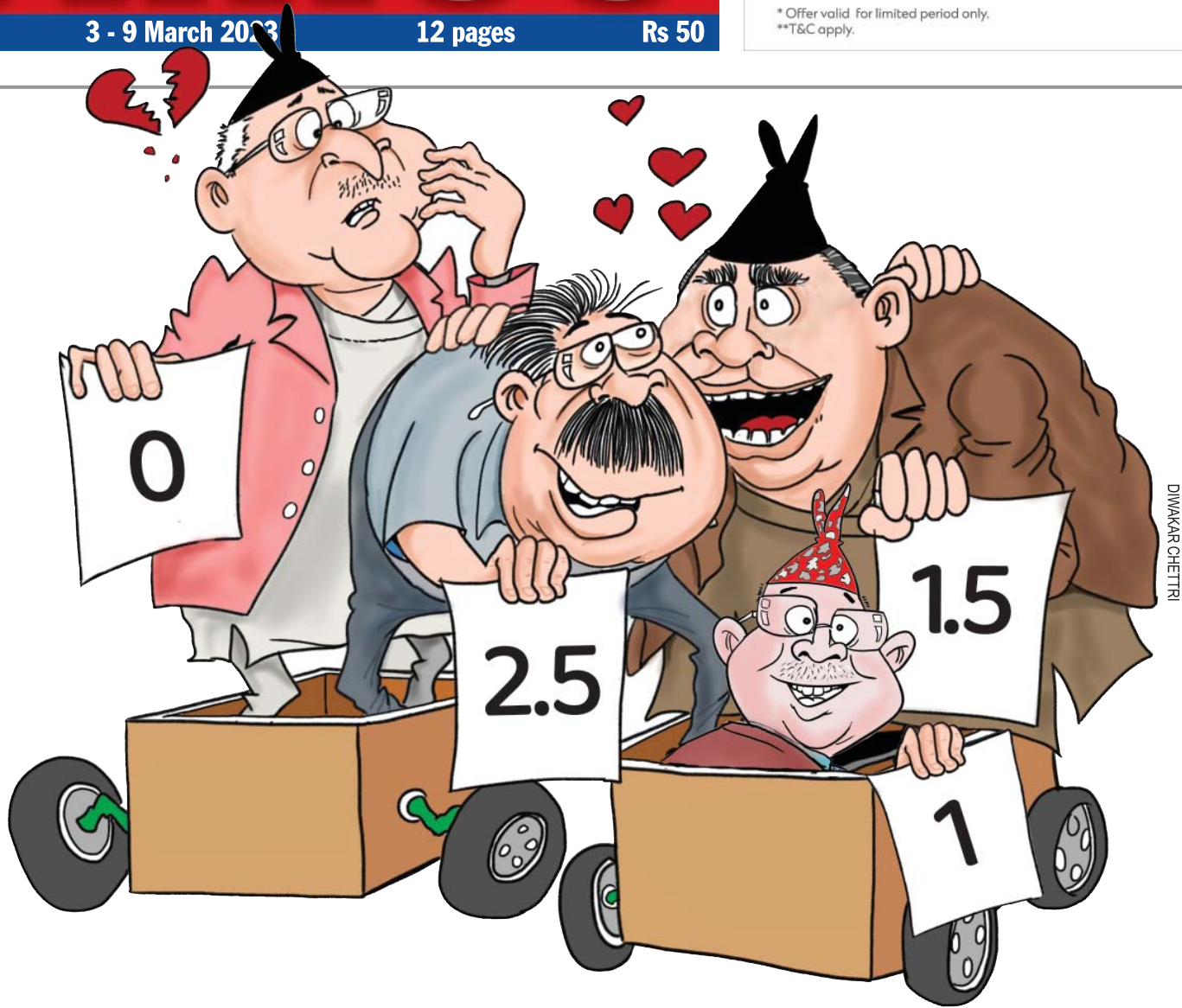
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■ Rabin Giri

There are many signs of Nepal’s democratic decay, but the one that has made the stench unbearable in recent weeks is the agreement between the three political alpha males to divide up the five-year term of prime minister between themselves.

That backroom deal was not what Nepalis voted for in 2022. Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal of the Maoist Centre (MC) has so far led three coalitions in two months: one with the Nepali Congress (NC) to fight elections, another with the UML to be prime minister himself, and then breaking that off to go back to the NC for the president’s election on 9 March.

Such do-or-die desperation to get an expedient candidate for a ceremonial post has shown just how deep the rot is. This graft-ridden male gerontocracy will do anything to cling to power through the skin of its teeth, the country be damned.

The recklessness does not just undermine Nepal’s hard-won democracy, but also invites instability and a dangerous drift towards extremism. It ignores the fact that only 61% of eligible voters bothered to cast their ballots last year with the message of ‘none-of-the above’. And among those who voted, most young Nepalis went for

# Premiership in instalments

the independents.

The alternative RSP and non-party mayors served as an effective safety valve to secure the democratic system, and protect traditional parties. It temporarily allayed the deep disillusionment of voters, providing some hope that change was possible.

Those hopes have now been dashed with the RSP showing itself to be like the rest. Although this may give comfort to Nepal’s serial politicians, it also shortens society’s

frustration fuse. Nepal’s overseas workers are already threatening to stop sending money home unless they are allowed to vote, and politicians behave themselves.

None of the main parties, civil society and activists have spoken up against populist media-bashing by RSP leader Rabi Lamichhane. The parties may be relieved that blaming the messenger deflected some of the public anger against them, and kleptocrats could be glad that the media that has exposed

their wrongdoings is being targeted for a change.

The superstructure of the Nepali state was already wobbly because its executive, legislative and judicial pillars were weakened. The media’s fourth pillar, which had been defending democracy by using its constitutional right for press freedom, has also been enfeebled.

It is easy to blame geopolitics: New Delhi’s domineering role in determining the course of Nepali politics, or the reverberations in Kathmandu of global Sino-US rivalry. But instability and external interference is a chicken-or-egg: do foreign powers interfere in Nepal because the government is weak, or does foreign interference weaken the government?

This being Nepal, things could change after the presidential election on 9 March, and the NC once again ditches the MC to lead the government. We will not be surprised if that happens.

It is hard to say who won and who lost in this see-saw politics. It seemed like KPO had outsmarted SBD, but then PKD suddenly switched sides, and KPO wooed MKN with presidentship. The 7-party coalition has been replaced with an 8-party one. Winners may not stay winners for long.

But in the end, everyone lost. And by far the biggest loss is to Nepal’s democracy. 🇳🇵

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MARCH

♀

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# Political patriarchy

The candidacy of Ram Chandra Paudel for Nepal's next presidency backed by eight parties including the Nepali Congress and Maoist Centre this week is the latest proof (if any is still needed) of Nepal's entrenched political patriarchy.

The series of backroom deals in the run-up to presidential elections on 9 March was meant to stop K P Oli of the UML from being all-too-powerful two-and-a-half years down the line when his party would have president, prime minister and speaker.

In this quagmire, we are losing a chance to elect a non-political president respected by all Nepalis. In the spirit of national unity and inclusiveness, it was the turn of a candidate from an indigenous community or a Dalit to be the third president of Nepal.

But what we are getting instead is another partisan figurehead who will continue the legacy of Bidya Devi Bhandari to do the bidding of a ruling party -- exactly why a ceremonial post has now become a dealmaker (or breaker).

Paudel's presidency is probably a

more sidelined as politicians used electoral alliances (between parties with diametrically opposing ideologies) to cheat them out of Constitutional provisions.

It is not surprising, therefore, that women are still unable to provide citizenship in their name to children while celebrities accused of rape wangle get-out-of-jail cards, and get back to business as usual.

Ironically, it is rural Nepal with its limited access to resources and low literacy rate where women are truly growing as leaders. With men away working overseas, women have taken a lead in every sector from community forestry and agriculture to school and health post management committees.

Community forestry, which doubled Nepal's canopy cover in 25 years, is an internationally recognised model, while the Female Health Volunteers (FCHVs) program is the backbone of community healthcare in the country. In many ways, the feminisation of rural Nepal is empowering Nepali women to take charge by default.

Among the most dramatic successes of the last decades is the decline in childhood malnutrition and maternal mortality rate in Nepal, both of which are inversely correlated to increased literacy of girls.

## Educating men to empower women in Nepal

But of late, progress has stagnated. In some areas, incidences of child marriage, malnutrition and maternal mortality are creeping up again. So, what are we missing?

**Explaining to men**

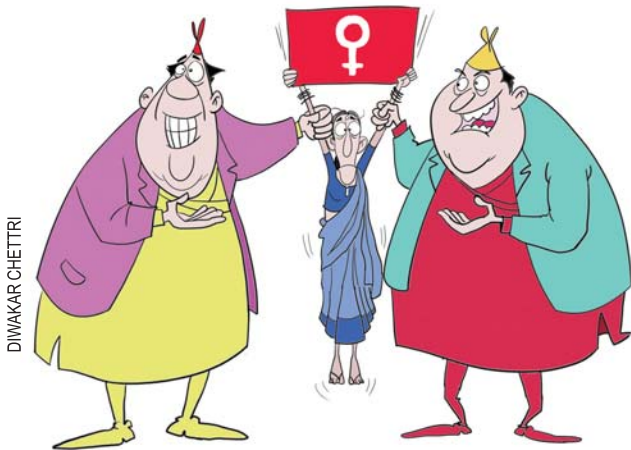
Women empowerment needs men to not just accept equality, but make up for historical marginalisation. Most Nepali women are now aware of their rights and potential, many have proven themselves. But the attitude of men towards gender equity has not changed at the same rate. This can mean young men and boys unlearning the culture they have grown up with.

Homemakers are not jobless people. If all of their work was monetised, they would be the biggest earners in most families (page 3). A girl child, if given the same opportunity, can be at par, if not above her male counterpart. Educated career women have a more difficult life balancing home and work.

Only when men are educated do they respect all individuals, their choices and decisions. International Women's Day on 8 March should not just be about women: it is about educating men, the men in our families, in our communities, and society.

Only then can we envision a world that is just and fair to everyone. And maybe then we won't need to mark an International Women's Day anymore.

**Sonia Awale**



foregone conclusion and underscores the gerontocratic patriarchy in which a handful of superannuated incompetent and tainted men have been reshuffling the cards for more than two decades. They will not tire of mansplaining to us that they are just defending democracy and stability.

This is in direct contrast to the people's strong show of support in the 2022 elections for young, independent leaders, the likes of Rabi Lamichhane, Toshima Karki, Balen Shah and Harka Sampang.

This is a sorry state of affairs for a country that at one time had women in the three topmost positions: Bidya Devi Bhandari as the President, Sushila Karki as the Chief Justice and Onsari Gharti Magar as Speaker.

Women also made up 33% of parliamentarians and, in the 2017 elections, women were elected to every local unit as either a mayor or a deputy mayor, or both.

While many argue that women were mostly confined to ceremonial posts or rarely got to contest the direct election, in 2022 they did not even get to be token women. Indigenous people, minorities and Dalits were even



## 20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

**It's a zoo out there**

The Central Zoo established in 1932 by Prime Minister Juddha Shumsher Rana houses 942 individual mammals, birds, fishes and 127 species of reptiles. Spread over six hectares, the park in Jawalakhel gets more than one million visitors a year.

Friends of the Zoo has a network of 200 schools and 6,000 members that engages students in cultural and educational tours to Annapurna Conservation Area and Chitwan National Park. But the Central Zoo is fast running out of space for rescued wildlife and wants to expand to Bhaktapur.

Two decades later, that is still just talk.

Excerpts of the report published on Nepali Times 20 years ago this week on issue #134 28 February – 3 March 2003:



crumbling or have gone bankrupt, the Central Zoo is also a management oasis. The zoo now earns Rs 20 million from ticket sales, corporate donations and the lending out of animals and is ploughing the money into development and conservation work. Since the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation (KMNTC) took on a 30-year management contract to run the zoo two years ago, our only zoological park is thriving.

"Luckily, the results of our management and good PR have been successful," zoo director RK Shrestha boasts. KMNTC recently secured the first donation made to the zoo by a multinational company: Toyota and the Vaidya Group gave a grant of Rs 4 million. Shrestha hopes this will open the door to future monetary assistance from other corporations, and says he finally has enough funds to begin work on redesigning parts of the zoo with an emphasis on animal welfare and visitor facilities.

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

## ONLINE PACKAGES



Homemakers make no money. But if all of their work was monetised, they would be the highest earners in most families. Single mother Subha Shrestha says it is harder to be a homemaker than working outside the home. Watch video on our YouTube channel and read story on page 3.



Kathmandu Valley's Safa Tempo is one of the success stories that helped clean up the city by phasing out more polluting Vikram three-wheelers. That was nearly 25 years ago. Meet some of the leading female Safa Tempo operators, and listen to their stories. Watch video online and subscribe to our YouTube channel for more multimedia content.

### POKHARA

To me it seems too late to save Pokhara ('Pokhara's desperation and hope', Kanak Mani Dixit, #1150). For years now, the ever increasing air pollution has taken its toll. The fine photos taken decades ago are now just sad reminders of what used to be. I just finished that Annapurna circuit and arriving in Pokhara is disheartening. Horrible pollution, no views of the mountains, massive road traffic. What used to be stunning mountain views are now gone.

Roger Ray

It is unfortunate the way Pokhara is developing. Two reports in the late 70's had suggested a roadmap for tourism development and conservation which neither government nor the local authorities bothered to read and follow.

Bijay Amatya

Kathmandu with its World Heritage Sites and scenic surrounding hills rich with birdlife would be Nepal's finest tourist destination, if not for the cars and crowds.

Kamal Ratna Tuladhar

Lakeside has turned into a Concrete Paradise. Building controls regarding height of structures was not followed. Pokhara lost its charm to other destinations in South Asia that planned better.

Marc McConnell

### BHAKTAPUR POLLUTION

Heavily penalise or strictly ban smoke-emitting school buses, transport trucks, and government and private vehicles, and most of the pollution problem will be solved ('Why is the air in Bhaktapur so bad', Sushila Budathoki, #1150).

Salman Khan Gurung

It is possible to introduce to the kiln owners a better way of firing bricks? There must be a more sustainable process.

Renate Schwarz

### PREZ ELECTION

What bewilders me the most is that almost everyone I here eschews institutional politics and wishes to vote for a youth leader who is also visionary only to succumb to their political peers' avarice laden exhortation and end up voting for Congress, UML and Maoists ('New chapter in Nepal political saga', nepalitimes.com).

Bobby Sharma

## WHAT'S TRENDING



### A family that works together stays together

by Sahina Shrestha

Instead of migrating abroad, Madan Bhusal and his family moved to Tiloottama seven years ago in search of a better life. Read about their expanding dairy firm which is now their home and business. Watch video online.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

### Why is the air in Bhaktapur so bad?

by Sushila Budathoki

Bhaktapur has the worst air quality in all of Nepal due to prevailing winds blowing all of Kathmandu's vehicular emissions and other pollutants to the eastern rim of the Valley where it is blocked by the hills. Visit nepalitimes.com for details.

Most popular on Twitter

### Pokhara's desperation and hope

by Kanak Mani Dixit

Pokhara is one of the finest attractions for tourists in all of South Asia. But Pokhara's tourism revival depends on residents and entrepreneurs understanding the treasure they own. Join the online discussion.

Most commented

### PhotoKTM 5's visual extravaganza

The fifth edition of PhotoKTM will be a month-long festival of various lens-based work, aiming to create resources for visual storytellers, researchers, educators, activists and other cultural producers to engage with social change.

Most visited online page

## QUOTE TWEETS

- 

**Nepal Times @NepaliTimes**

On average, Kathmandu Valley used to get about 95mm of rain between mid-October and mid-February. This winter, there has been zero precipitation.
- 

**Samridha SJB Rana @SamridhaR**

Really concerning. Especially considering that wildfires have now become the norm during this period due to dry weather #ClimateCrisis #ClimateEmergency
- 

**Nepal Times @NepaliTimes**

Young Nepali glaciologist Tenzing Chogyal Sherpa studies his melting Himalayan home to contribute to mitigating climate risks in the coming decades. Read on, Climatic change:
- 

**Milan Shrestha @MilanShrestha**

Couldn't have agreed more about integrating indigenous knowledge. Great to see you being recognised.
- 

**Nepal Times @NepaliTimes**

It is no exaggeration to say that #Pokhara is one of the finest attractions for tourists. Its tourism revival depends on residents and entrepreneurs understanding the treasure they own.
- 

**Amish Mulmi @amish973**

Grateful to be reminded about PKR's natural beauty and that its future is in our own hands. How else would we learn about it?

## 1,000 WORDS



PRADEEP RAJ ONTARSS

**VIRTUAL REALITY:** Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal remotely inaugurated from Baluwatar the Machakhola Hydropower Project located in Gorkha's Dharce on Monday 27 February.





■ Swapnil KC

Subha Shrestha (pictured) got married at 18 and became a mother at 21. A few years later, she was a struggling single mother trying to earn enough to raise her young son.

She had become the sole breadwinner of her family, and had to do all the unpaid household work as well.

“If you ask me, it is harder to be a homemaker than working outside the home,” says Shrestha.

Ask any Nepali: being a doctor or engineer is the most desired and respected profession in the country. A job in the military is regarded as being the toughest, and bank CEOs make the most money.

But what about homemakers? Most Nepalis do not even think of them in monetary terms. But maybe we should start putting a price tag on all the work ‘jobless’ women do at home.

According to salaryexplorer.com, an army officer in Nepal makes Rs66,500 a month on average. Salaries range from Rs30,600 to Rs106,000. And loksewajob.com pegs healthcare worker salaries at anywhere between Rs24,602 to Rs72,082.

A homemaker (or ‘housewife’ as we used to call them) makes no money at all. Women toiling away at home are not just underpaid, they are not paid at all.

Nepali Times tallied what an average Nepali middle-class full-time homemaker in Kathmandu would be earning if she were to be paid for all the work she does around the house. The total was



PHOTOS: SUMAN NEPALI

# A HOMEMAKER’S WORTH

If their work was monetised, Nepal’s homemakers would be highest earners in most families

Rs115,000 a month (see box), whereas a mid-level government official would have a monthly salary of only Rs45,000.

And this does not even include extra errands during occasional family gatherings, feasts and festivals where women end up doing all the work. Usually, the men sit around, drink, chitter-chatter and gossip about politics.

Moreover, we cannot even put a monetary value to the care a homemaker provides her family that no salaried help ever would, or could. For all this work, a homemaker does not expect anything in return, except love and acceptance.

Yet, the work of millions of Nepali women is not recognised, they are rarely anyone’s inspiration,

and they are often overlooked by other career women.

Most women with regular jobs have the added burden of balancing home and work. But it is the effort of a homemaker that makes it possible for male members of households to take up a profession in the first place.

Oftentimes, homemakers have to eventually sacrifice their careers because they are needed at home. Every career-oriented woman has a mother or a sister at home to thank for her success.

Our society also ignores how it is the women who have to make all the adjustments after getting married: she has to leave her home and parents for an unknown household.

Homemakers work 24/7, they cannot complain,

they get no breaks. They do not get annual leave. Public holidays are like any other day, and festival time means more work. There is no annual bonus, no pension. They do not have a sick leave.

Perhaps the most glaring inequality within most Nepali households is how mothers and grandmothers prepare all meals but are the last to eat, usually cold leftovers, and then have to do the dishes.

“I was free at my parent’s home, but having been married into a conservative family, it was really difficult for me to adapt,” recalls Shrestha, adding that she had to wake up at 3AM to finish all of her morning chores before heading out at 6AM to the store her husband’s family owned.

Shrestha was barely an adult herself at 18, and was caring for



## Putting a price tag on home work

How much would an average middle-class homemaker in Nepal earn if the work she does all day was monetised based on the current market rates? Nepali Times tried to calculate this in hard cash per month:

<b>Rs20,000</b>
Three-in-one full-time cook, house-cleaner and dish-washer
<b>Rs30,000</b>
Part-time baby-sitter
<b>Rs5,000</b>
Laundry person
<b>Rs50,000</b>
Caregiver for the elderly
<b>Rs10,000</b>
After-school tutor
<b>Total: Rs115,000</b>

her sickly son with no financial support.

Her son had to be taken to the hospital frequently, sometimes twice a day. Her sisters who are also homemakers looked out for her and helped her set up a stationery store later.

Says her son Evan, who is now 21 years old: “All the credit for how I have grown up to be a good person goes entirely to my Mom.”

Shrestha herself is thankful for the life she has now with her son despite a lifetime of hardships. 🇳🇵

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# Baking as a metaphor for life

Finding work overseas has been the icing on the cake for this passionate Nepali baker



**DIASPORA  
DIARIES 23**

■ **Aliza Basnet**

*This is the 23<sup>rd</sup> instalment of Diaspora Diaries, a regular series in Nepali Times with stories of Nepalis living and working abroad.*

One of my earliest memories growing up in Butwal is my maternal uncle coming home with cakes on our birthdays. He ran a bakery and his arrival with cakes and other tasty pastries during festivities made me associate the profession with joy and good memories.

Perhaps this is what instaled a passion for baking since my early childhood. Like my uncle, I also wanted to bring joy to others.

From Butwal, I went to Kathmandu for further studies and an undergraduate in hotel management was a natural choice. My uncle had taught me things practically and a formal education pushed me to understand the theory behind what I had seen and learnt in his bakery while growing up. I chose baking as my specialisation.

When Covid-19 hit, I immersed myself completely into the art of baking, and kept myself busy. I had moved back to Butwal and worked at my uncle's bakery. The lockdown and closing of the world had made time available in abundance and I found ways to stay productive.

From a loyal customer in my uncle's bakery as a little girl, I had now transitioned to become his protégé, baking cakes in the mornings and bread in the evenings. It came naturally to me, and I realised that this is what I want to do all my life.

Baking is exciting because it combines dedication, creativity and patience, and can transform seemingly familiar household



items that are lying around in the kitchen like flour, oil and sugar to rise into mouth-watering delicacies. I particularly like preparing birthday cakes because it allows me to indirectly contribute to and become part of peoples' lives and celebration.

When things started getting repetitive at my uncle's bakery, I moved back to Kathmandu and took up internships at Yak & Yeti and the Marriott. These short-term stints were enjoyable, but what I really wanted was an actual

job, and like all Nepalis, I was faced with the dilemma of staying back or leaving.

Having worked in Nepal in different places already, I felt like an overseas job had more to offer by way of learning, and would give me exposure. A job advertisement for a vacancy at the Atlantis in Dubai in my college social media group caught my eyes.

The 'free visa free ticket' scheme as advertised felt like a scam, since most recruiting agencies falsely advertise such offers despite



charging workers exorbitantly. But when I asked around, I found out that the job facilitated by my recruiter, Vision and Value Overseas, indeed was free and the aspirants were not charged a single penny.

This was too good to be true. Perks like these and the possibility of working at a luxury hotel made the choice to try for an overseas job easy and exciting.

I applied, and the recruitment fair was conveniently held at the Yak & Yeti, the hotel where I was working on a temporary contract. But my heart sank when I did not see my name in the list of selected candidates. Two months later, however, I successfully passed the interview round in another ethical recruitment drive for the same hotel by the same recruiter for which I had prepared more seriously.

Until then, I had not told anyone that I had applied for overseas jobs. My baker uncle was the first person I consulted with when I had the offer, and he encouraged me to pursue my overseas dream.

It has been four months since I came here to Dubai, but I have already learnt a lot. I get to work

with colleagues from diverse backgrounds, but it is also humbling to know that despite the language and cultural differences, we are all the same.

Whether from Mexico, Ukraine or Nepal, we are here in search of better learning and earning opportunities with hopes of improving our lives and pursuing our passions. There is a strong emphasis on soft skills like team work and communications.

While there were language barriers initially, I think my English has now vastly improved. As someone new here, I am still in my learning phase but then again, when does learning really stop?

I may have learnt how to make bread in Nepal, for example, but am also exploring new methods to do so in the UAE as there are differences in the ingredients used and procedures followed. Hygiene, in particular, is of incomparable standards in the kitchen here.

I also have it easier than many because my own brother and a cousin also work together in another hotel in the UAE as bartenders. Having a support system of family members overseas has definitely helped me adjust here. I earn six to seven times more than what I did in Nepal, and am able to send support to my mother and sometimes, even to my grandparents, even though they are reluctant to accept what I send. At this luxury hotel, it is common to see high profile visitors, even though waiters and those in customer facing roles get to interact with them more than we in kitchen who are behind the curtains. But I was fortunate enough to watch a Beyoncé show during our hotel opening. It was exciting beyond words.

My ultimate dream is to become a Pastry Chef, but as a Commis III, I still have a long way to go. My journey has just begun. 🇳🇵

*Translated from a phone conversation with the author. Diaspora Diaries is a regular column in Nepali Times providing a platform for Nepalis to share their experiences of living, working, studying abroad. Authentic and original entries can be sent to [editors@nepalitimes.com](mailto:editors@nepalitimes.com) with Diaspora Diaries in the subject line.*



**NMB BANK**  
**एनएमबी बैंक**

## Economic decline

Nepal's economic growth rate has shrunk by 0.8% in the first quarter of the on-going fiscal year, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics. The budget earlier this year had targeted a rate of 8%. The first quarter saw the largest decline in mining by 29.2% and construction sector by 24%. Meanwhile wholesale and retail trade also decreased by 3% but real estate saw a tiny growth of 2.2%. Hotel and restaurant services saw their largest growth, up from 45.8% last year when they rebounded from the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Budget for fertiliser

Finance Ministry has allocated Rs7.5 billion for the purchase of chemical fertilisers this year, down from Rs15 billion the year before. Rs2.5 billion will be from the budget of the Ministry of



Agriculture and Livestock. Farmers in Nepal have been suffering from the shortage of chemical fertilisers due to limited budget, reducing farm productivity.



## Two-wheeler amnesty

Motorcyclers across Nepal will be exempt from paying fines for 5 years if they pay their taxes by 14 March. The Transport Management Office has encouraged police officers to check vehicle tax records.

## NSI awarded

The Nick Simon's Institute (NSI) has been awarded the World Health Organization's Sasakawa Health Prize for 2023 for outstanding and innovative work in the field of public health, jointly with Vichai Tienthavorn of Thailand. NSI works closely with Nepal's Health Ministry to fill the gap in the country's health workforce and has trained 7,000 medical professionals. The institute also supplies essential human resources as well as equipment to rural hospitals. NSI also runs a hospital strengthening program and has helped 119 facilities.

## Old-age homes

Bihani Social Venture has established Nepal's first network of elderly care providers with 18 old-age homes. Members can exchange practices and communicate. The network also provides sessions on psycho-social support and paraprofessional counseling, post-disaster risk management and psychological first aid. From April 2023, the network plans to collaborate with more aged care providers and old-age homes.



## Murarka-Somany

Murarka Group and Somany Ceramics have collaborated to establish a manufacturing facility of around 3 million sq m in Nepal. Murarka and Somany will be operating and managing the ceramics facility together.



## IME-petroleum tie-up

Global IME Bank has agreed to help members of the Nepal Petroleum Customs Traders obtain and renew banking guarantees to issue an embassy permit. The guarantees can be taken from any of the Global IME branch.

## Hyundai EV exchange

Customers of Hyundai vehicles can exchange their electric vehicles under the new Hyundai campaign wherein IONIQ 5 and Kona users can now upgrade to newer versions of their cars.

## New Everest branch

Everest bank opened a new branch at Kamal Binayak in Bhaktapur. The bank has 124 branches, three extension counters and 160 ATMs across the country.



# Feminising farm-based firms

Women CEOs and entrepreneurs are taking the lead in expanding agribusiness in Nepal



PHOTOS: NISHU JOSHI

■ Shristi Karki

When Pratibha Rajbhandari worked with small business owners in New York as an MBA student, she had no idea that in some years, she would be applying what she learned to help Nepali women back home start their own businesses.

Rajbhandari had a Bachelor's degree in Finance, and first worked at a hedge fund in New Jersey, after which she joined the MBA program at New York's Pace University. There, she joined the university's Small Business Development Center as an adviser.

"The plan, since the very beginning, was to return to Nepal," says Rajbhandari. "I realised that my role in working with and helping small businesses grow was really

inspiring and fulfilling, and I had found my true calling."

Rajbhandari returned to Nepal, and between 2014 and 2017 worked with the Pashmina Enhancement and Trade Support (PETS) Project to promote handmade woolen products in the global market. In 2018, she joined the Nepal Agribusiness Innovation Centre (NABIC) — a 'for purpose' enterprise support organisation that provides business development services to agri-entrepreneurship start-ups across Nepal — as an Agribusiness Development Consultant.

In July 2022, she took over as NABIC's CEO, and since then, the organisation's day-to-day operations have been fully managed by a team of women.

NABIC was established in April 2017 with seed funding from the government's Project for Agriculture Commercialisation and Trade (PACT) and the World Bank. Six years later, it has become self-reliant with revenue from providing consulting services to implementing agencies.

"NABIC is a company not distributing profit, with the social objective of promoting

entrepreneurship," explains Rajbhandari, "The benchmark of our success is based on how much our clients have grown and what impact they have made in the community."

NABIC has provided business incubation and acceleration to 741 enterprises, trained more than 2,400 agri-entrepreneurs, and developed more than 1,300 business plans. It has enabled access to finance worth Rs6.7 billion to agri-business enterprises.

"There are quite a few female entrepreneurs in Nepal, especially because many jobs, such as pickle-making at home for instance, are works that women are already involved in," explains Rajbhandari.

But producing food items is the least of the challenges. The concentration of women in agri-business might be relatively high, but there are so many other aspects to running a business, and a lack of knowledge is what stops them from taking off, even though these challenges are not gender-specific.

Rajbhandari adds that women have more freedom when they are given the opportunity to take charge. She says: "Owning their own business makes women in charge of their own lives and gives us the flexibility to choose what we can prioritise in our lives."



## Organic Online

Srijana Pradhan (*right*) took a sabbatical from her job in the private sector after she got married and had her baby. But she had always wanted to go back to work. "I began to feel like being a homemaker wasn't enough — but even when I worked in the private sector, I had always felt unfulfilled, like something was missing," she says.

Three years after having her child, Pradhan along with three friends started an agri-business enterprise, but running it independently was easier said than done. The four partners had differences of opinion, and went their separate ways a year later.

But Pradhan did not give up. She and her former business partner, Gautam Gurung, decided to give it another go, forming Organic Online — an online platform that sells and delivers agricultural products made in Nepal — in 2018, despite their family's misgivings.

Given their previous experience, Pradhan and Gurung knew they would need a lot of guidance this time around. Shortly after they set up their business with a simple website and a team of four, Gurung came across an announcement of a World Bank-supported project called Enhancing Access to Business Incubation Service for Agri-Entrepreneurs in Nepal, which NABIC was part of.

NABIC's incubation client was Organic Online for which it provided packaged



mentorship that guided fledgling business in marketing and branding, accounting, finance, as well as regulatory requirements.

Organic Online used to sell more than 150 products before they were able to streamline supply to get their products from established and trustworthy suppliers. They worked with NABIC to tweak their product packaging to strengthen branding.

"We had not known what the vision for our business was, and working with NABIC helped us figure out where we wanted to go, and what kind of business we wanted to be in the next five years," says Pradhan. "We



PHOTO COURTESY: GAUTAM GURUNG

realised that we could not sell whatever appealed to us."

Organic Online currently sells and delivers its flagship products: child superfood (*bal aahar*) for children aged six months to three years, a fibre diet for adults, as well as hair care products including a hair mask, hair oil and hair healer. It also sells other products, such as rice, essential oils, *ghee* from Ilam and *sakkhar* from Kapilvastu. 85% of Organic Online's items are self-produced either at its offices in Panipokhari or at a site in Narayanthan. In five years, the company has expanded from four people to a

team of 28, of which 80% are women.

Pradhan says that the environment for women to become small business owners is positive, especially since the government, as well as private sector projects, have gender-specific participatory requirements.

"Our social structure is such that women have added roles in their personal lives which have to work out for us to be independent and successful professionally," says Pradhan. "Women in the workforce have more responsibilities in their families than our male counterparts, so we have to work twice as hard. We have to be stronger." ■



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SCAN ME



Ashish Dhakal

Spring is in the air. On Holi on 6 and 7 March, people shower each other with coloured water and paint faces with pigment.

Holi is fun, flirtatious, and philosophical: marking the passing of seasons and the material world, and new beginnings.

In the week leading up to Holi, the Manandhars of Kathmandu have erected a tall *chir* bamboo pole outside Hanuman Dhoka Palace. From the three circular pagoda-like tiers at the top hang multi-coloured fabric which flows out in the breeze.

Inspired by the famous episode from Krishna-lila when the young god-child steals clothes from *gopini* bathing nearby and hangs them up on a tree above, the *chir* is a symbolic representation of the arrival of spring.

This is a teaser for the revelry at Holi (also called Fagu Purnima) on full moon day next week. Yet, the irony is that this celebration of nature in all its hues is not natural because of the increasing use of synthetic dyes, most of which are toxic.

Artist Lok Chitrakar recalls that as a child, he and his friends would heat up *lalchhap* ink into a balloon-like shape and fill it with *abir* and perfume to throw at each other at Holi.

“Those colours were natural, but today the red powder stains hands for days, like a chemical dye,” says Chitrakar, who uses mostly natural pigment for his elaborate *paubha* paintings.

Traditional colours are either plant-based or from naturally occurring minerals. Red came from sandalwood (*rakta chandan*), pomegranates, or dried rose and hibiscus flowers. Henna, pine needles or spinach leaves were used to make green. Yellow was made from dried turmeric, blue from indigo and beetroot gave purple.

This is no longer the case. Most natural, organic colours have a shorter shelf-life and may not be as vibrant as synthetic dyes which are imported from India. Chemical powders have a smoother feel, look rich and intense, and are also cheaper to produce. The colours are dissolved in engine oil to turn them into paste.

Colours used in Holi contain many harmful chemicals like lead (Pb), chromium (Cr), cadmium (Cd) and even mercury (Hg), says environmental scientist Ram Charitra Sah at the Centre for Public Health and Environmental Development (CEPHED).

“Today, dry powdered *abir* is not organic, researchers have detected nickel, copper, silica, mica granules or ground glass, and asbestos,” Sah explains.

A 2016 research published in Journal of Occupational Medicine and Toxicology analysed four powders used in Holi and found that more than 40% of the particles had diameters less than 10µm (PM10) linking them to respiratory illnesses.

Research in India, where most of the colour powders found in Nepal come from, have detected a range of toxic chemicals used to make colours used during Holi and other puja rituals (*see table*).

The health risk increases when the colours are mixed with oil and other fluids to be applied to the skin, and is especially bad in the case of spray and enamel-based face paints used during Holi. The metallic silver and gold paint that give people an otherworldly look contain excessive amounts of lead and glass.

“Lead affects people of all ages, but it is especially harmful to children,” cautions Sah. “Just 5µg per 2 decilitres can affect a child’s physical and intellectual development, their growth, sight and hearing.”

The Nepal government in 2015 set the maximum amount of lead allowed in colours



and paints at 90 ppm (parts per million). But a 2021 study by CEPHED looked into 62 enamel paints currently sold in Nepal, and found that at least 30 of them contained more than the prescribed amount of lead.

CEPHED also investigated 21 brands of spray paints in shops in Nepal, and while only seven of them showed more than the prescribed lead content, the rest ranged from 751 to 15,618 ppm.

Sah says it is urgent for the government to enforce its regulation and raise public awareness — especially at festival time when the colours are profusely used.

Holi can be celebrated safely and responsibly by not allowing synthetic colours to be used, wearing long sleeves, and masking up. But this just reduces the risk, and does not eliminate it.

In case of exposure to the eyes, Sah advises rinsing immediately with clean water. Other tips: apply oil to hair and moisturise skin before going out at Holi. Use mild soap to wash off the colours afterwards, but do not use kerosene or petrol.

Enjoy Holi on Monday and Tuesday, but remember that the colourful fun can also be harmful to your health. 🚫



Colour	Chemical used	Potential health risks
Black	Lead oxide $Pb_3O_4$	Hearing loss, renal failure, poor circulation, intellectual disability
Green	Copper sulphate $CuSO_4$	Eye allergy, blindness, stomach cramps, nervous system disorders
Purple	Chromium iodide $CrI_3$	Bronchial asthma, allergies
Silver	Aluminium bromide $AlBr_3$	Cancer
Red	Mercury sulphide $HgS$	Skin cancer, paralysis, respiratory illnesses
Blue	Potassium Ferrocyanide $K_4Fe(CN)_6$	Dermatitis

# UN-HOLI COLOURS

Holi is fun, flirtatious, and philosophical but the colours used can be toxic







EVENTS



Fagu Purnima

The festival of colours celebrating the win of good over evil is upon Nepalis. Play with friends and family and make merry but be considerate of others.  
6 and 7 March

Children’s Lit Fest

Check out Nepal’s first children’s literature festival at Rato Bangala School complete with workshops, interactive stations and book launches. Highlights include *Dhumdham ko Ghumgham* play, book signing and rap battles.  
4 March, 9:15am-4pm, Patan Dhoka, 9840087066

Art Market

An art market with fellow artists, art loving friends and family.  
4 March, 5:45 onwards, The Yellow House, Sanepa

Ladies Night

Enjoy a night out with girlfriends and get a free cocktail every hour.  
Thursdays, Pauline’s Rooftop, Lazimpat (01) 4002711



Le Sherpa Market

Shop local at the Saturday Le Sherpa Market. Buy baked goods, meals, handicrafts and clothes.  
Saturdays, 8am-12:30pm, Le Sherpa, Maharajgunj

DINING



The Workshop Eatery

Indulge in an assortment of doughnuts, fries and burgers. Don’t miss out on the Nutella Doughnut and the Workshop BBQ Chicken Burger.  
Bakundole, 9860431504

MUSIC

Classical hour

Enjoy an unforgettable evening of Nepali classical music with a fusion of western style.  
4 March, 5:30 onwards, Patan Museum, 9801824746



Topi

Head over for a range of performances: TOPi’s first and last show in Kathmandu, Tunna Bell Thapa’s first show and SPACE’s new performance following the release of their second album.  
5 March, 5pm-11pm onwards, Beers N’ Cheers, Jhamsikhel

Tunes of Holi

Celebrate Holi with fun performances from the band Accoustix, Abhishek Karki and other DJs.  
6 March, 11am onwards, Bluebird Shopping Mall, Thapathali



A pinch of jazz

Love jazz? Enjoy jazz beats and tunes featuring Maria Fajardo Quintet this Friday at Zing Sky Bar & Lounge.  
3pm-7pm, Hyatt Place, Soalteemod

Osho Jain

Head over for the first performance by Osho Jain featuring Surakshya Malla.  
10 March, 7pm, Privé Nepal, The Soaltee KTM

Utpala Cafe

A monastery restaurant perfect for anyone looking for healthy vegetarian meals. Uses fresh produce and features scrumptious buffet lunch and mouth-watering baked goods.  
Boudha, 9801052333



Bricks Café

A multi-cuisine restaurant in the heart of Kathmandu offering flavourful dishes in a pleasant atmosphere. The lasagna is a must-try.  
Kupondole (01) 5521756

GETAWAY



Hotel Heritage Bhaktapur

This Newa-style boutique hotel surrounded by rich art and architecture also offers a great spread of Newa cuisine.  
Suryabinayak, Bhaktapur (01) 6611628

The Pavilions Himalayas

Nepal’s first lake-side tented luxury eco-villas that offer every amenity one could possibly need. The hotel spa also has some of the best treatments.  
Chisapani, Pokhara, 9756008117



Namobuddha Resort

An oasis of peace and tranquility offering spectacular views of the Himalaya on clear days.  
Namobuddha, Phulbari, 9851106802

Hotel Baha

Explore the cultural heritage of Bhaktapur while enjoying the peaceful ambience of the hotel.  
Bhaktapur (01) 6616810

Dom Himalaya

A space for visitors to indulge in traditional Nepali cuisine while relaxing to the sounds of Tibetan singing bowls amidst the chaos of Thamel.  
Thamel (01) 4263554



Taza

The restaurant brings a bit of Middle-Eastern flair to Kathmandu with its all Syrian items. Shawarma, falafel, hummus, kebab—everything is fresh and finger-lickingly good.  
Jhamsikhel, 9860960177

Bawarchi

Try the mouth-watering Kolkata Katti Rolls and other fusion Indian dishes at Bawarchi.  
Jawalakhel (01) 5526244

WEEKEND WEATHER



FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY
26° 10°	26° 10°	26° 9°	26° 10°	26° 10°

Warmer, drier

After that brief but welcome rain in Kathmandu this week, there are warmer and drier days ahead. Temperature will climb to the mid-20s with the minima in double digits. Expect some convection activity in the afternoons but not much rain in the plains and foothills. Higher elevations will get some precipitation. Holi Day is expected to be hot and sunny in Kathmandu. Satellite image on Thursday morning (left) with thick Indo-Gangetic smog blanketing Himalayan valleys.

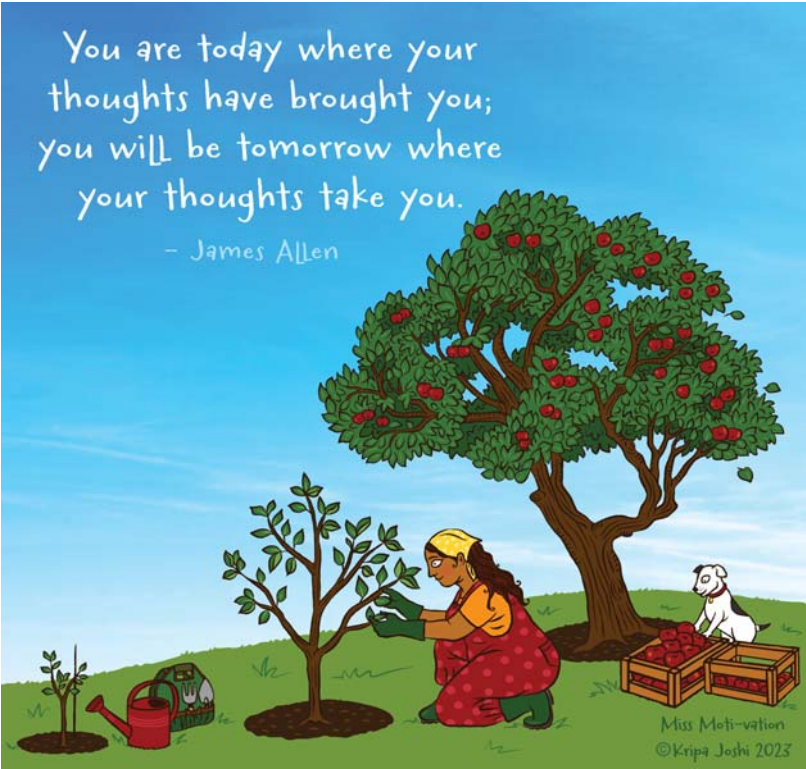
OUR PICK

Set in Europe before World War II, *The Pursuit of Love* follows the adventures of two cousins, Linda Radlett and Fanny Logan, whose contrasting personalities and priorities complicate their love and affection for each other. With characters who are types more than people, this British series based on Nancy Mitford’s novel of the same name is a prickly, satirical analysis of the flightiness and eccentricity of the wealthy, where fantasies and morality tales make intriguing bedfellows. Stars Lily James, Andrew Scott and Emily Beecham.



MISS MOTI-VATION

KRIPA JOSHI



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- Puppet Making
- Cartoon Corner
- Marble Art
- Read Aloud

Interactive Stations

- The Book Bus
- The School of Wizards
- Haunted House
- Let's make Manga

RBK highlights

- Book Launches
- Dhumdham ko Ghumgham Play
- Book signing

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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 चिठ्ठा 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 ।





Her costume, all white -- a cape and a mask. In the likeness of all superheroes, she has the gait of someone whose every move is purpose. And she wears her hair in a chic long bob — almost like Elastigirl.



SUBURBAN TALES  
Pratibha Tuladhar

My superhero is called Doctor Anu, in the spirit of the syllables most superheroes go by. When we first met, she was seated at her desk, a glass shield between us, examining my documents with brisk fingers and the silence of someone who is thorough with the content. Later, she ran her fingers over my abdomen, investigating, letting me know I had arrived. Doctor Anu, the one who never abandons her post. When the 25 April earthquake struck Nepal in 2015, Doctor Anu was in the operation theatre, delivering a baby. She had just disconnected the umbilical chord when the rattling began. One of the two nurses attending ran out, screaming, and the resident doctor sat down on the floor and started to cry. The mother, lying on the operating table, anaesthetised only below her waist as in the case of all cesareans, grabbed Doctor Anu's cape and said: "Please don't leave me!" I won't, said Doctor Anu. And while the earth continued to shudder in instalments, she completed the procedure. For a moment, she teared up, thinking of her own toddler, who she had no way of reaching as the phones were down. She conducted two more surgeries that day, saving six lives. It would be 26 April when she would finally be able to go home. At the hospital cafe, she chats with her colleagues through her mask. When they break into laughter, hers is the clearest, heartiest. And I think that is her superpower — the ability to steer clear of the morbid in all situations.



KESVI

# LIGHT of the ABSURD

“Women are born with pain built in. It is our destiny. Period pain. Sore boobs. Child birth. You know?”

She notices me, and gets up to join my table. There is a moment my eyes well up with tears as we converse and she puts one arm around me and pats. When she gets up to leave, she says: You call me or text me anytime you need, okay? Anytime I reach out, my phone pings back within minutes if not hours, with brief but clear instructions, very superhero style. I am here, she says. And she just is.

Prachinta is Resident 301. We have it written on a band she wears on her wrist, along with the cannula that makes her hand look like an inflating balloon. She speaks every two hours asking me if she can have some water and I keep denying her request. It will make you sick, I say. Her body is still reacting to the anesthesia, making her throw up every few hours between zoning in and out and saying the blood pressure cuff is tight. What time is it, she asks. 2AM. How many more hours until morning? Prachinta's companions in the

ICU are resident women 307 and 302. And a man in 603. Resident 307 needs careful handling. While phasing in and out of sedation, she wants to know what drugs she is on and how much the hospital will charge. At the end of most sentences, she says, "don't tell my husband I said this", constantly censoring herself. And then, I am done with being here, I will go home today. Resident 302 murmurs. Once, she asks if I am her granddaughter and if we are in a hotel. She says, I haven't seen my grandchildren for so long, they are abroad. Then, Babu, why are you dressed in this uniform like you work in a hospital. I work in one, Ama, I tell her. Then she apologises. I guess you are not my granddaughter. Narisaunus hai. Don't mind me. Then she falls asleep. Resident 307 curses. Being born a woman is a curse, she says. If you have a uterus, you are sin and suffering. You don't say so, Ama. All living beings suffer in our bodies.

MARCH 8 Men fall sick, too, I explain. Prachinta starts to stir. Even with all the painkillers we have been shooting through her veins, she appears muted by pain. She can barely speak when she finally comes awake from the sedation. I help her sit on a stool and tell her to brush her teeth. Her hands, ballooning from the cannula, can barely hold the toothbrush. How do I do this, she asks. I find a black hairbrush among her personal belongings. She has long, greying hair. It reminds me of someone from my childhood. I comb the matted strands and ask if the greys are highlights. No, just age, she says. I use my best braiding skills and tie up her hair with a piece of gauze. You have thick, beautiful hair, I say. Like the information even matters to a person who is spending time in the ICU. Thank you, she says. Her inner elbows have turned blue from the repeated punctures we have had to cause. But every time we make her wince in pain, she says: thank you.

Writes Phoebe Waller-Bridge for *Fleabag*: 'Women are born with pain built in. It is our destiny. Period pain. Sore boobs. Child birth. You know? We carry it within ourselves throughout our lives. Men don't. They have to seek it out. They invent ways to. Gods and demons and things so they can feel guilty about things, which is something we do very well on our own...and we have it all going on in here, inside. We have pain in a cycle for years and years and years. And then, just when you feel you are making peace with it, what happens? The menopause comes. And it is the most wonderful thing in the entire world. And yes, your pelvic floor crumbles...and then you are free. No longer a slave, no longer a person with parts.' Maa sometimes says: I prayed all the years of my youth for the menopause. I have been thinking lately about how much I want to arrive at the menopause, so that my body can stop self-destructing. Suburban Tales is a monthly column in Nepali Times based on real people (with some names changed) in Pratibha's life.



# हिमालको फागुन अंक बजारमा



हिमालमिडिया प्रा. लि.  
पाटनढोका, ललितपुर



# THE WOMEN CONNECTING NEPAL

From Mechi to Mahakali (and rivers in between) women engineers overcome hurdles to make Nepal more accessible

■ Sahina Shrestha

Growing up in Jhapa, Sabita Giri often had to cross over to India with her family to buy daily goods and essentials. On one such trip, she overheard some people talking about how the bridge across the Mechi River was “dying”.

As a sixth grader, she wondered what made bridges “die”. It was only when she came to Kathmandu for higher studies and became a civil engineer that she realised that bridges indeed have a life expectancy.

Today, Giri is among 21 trainee engineers working on the Motorable Local Roads Bridge (MLRB) Program that aims to connect Nepal’s roads with bridges across the country’s mainly north-south rivers.

“When I was young, all I knew as a career choice was completing a PhD and working as a teacher. Becoming a civil engineer has opened a whole host of possibilities,” says Giri, who is stationed at MLRB in Hetauda.

An average rural road in Nepal needs a bridge across a river every 15km, and this is not counting culverts and drainage overpasses. Although there are now roads almost everywhere, the lack of bridges means large parts of the country are inaccessible during the monsoon.

Giri and her colleagues provide the much-needed technical expertise to design and construct safer, more accessible bridges throughout Nepal.

Over the last two decades, the government worked on expanding both the Local Road Network (LRN) and Strategic Road Network (SRN). These have now been reclassified as national highways, provincial highways and local roads by Constitution of Nepal 2015. While most national highways are now all-weather, provincial highways and local roads remain largely unpaved and are fair-weather.

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) initiated MLRB program in 2011 in response to a request from the Nepal government, and it is a logical extension of Swiss technical assistance in designing and building nearly 10,000 trail bridges across Nepal since the 1970s.

After 2015, national highways fell under the purview of the federal government while many of the 25,728km roads previously identified as district roads were the responsibility of provincial governments.

These provincial roads needed 1,720 bridges to make them all-weather, but the provinces lacked institutions, legal frameworks, and technical capacity to deliver.

The government approached the

Swiss, and the initiative continued. SDC had started an internship program for female civil engineers in 2008, with six women engineers recruited in the first cohort to work in the District Road Support Program (DSRP). This internship program has continued and grown since with women engineers working on various infrastructure projects across the country.

“During the nine-month traineeship, engineers learn and are involved in a whole cycle of bridge building: survey, design, investigation and construction,” explains Aman Jonchhe at SDC.

For the first month, the engineers are trained in technical aspects, designs as well as constitutional provisions and management skills. Then they gain first-hand experience working on trail bridges as well as motorable bridges.

This year, 31 female civil engineers have been enrolled in the traineeship program in Swiss-funded projects: 21 in motorable bridges and 10 in small-scale irrigation. So far, 82 women engineers have worked on various infrastructure programs including DSRP, MLRB and irrigation.

“The best team must be as diverse as the society it works in. Diversity is proven to generate more innovative, creative, and inclusive decisions and better performing teams,” says Elisabeth von Capeller, the Swiss Ambassador to Nepal. “We need to change the mindset of society, challenge gender stereotypes, and do a better job of showing, supporting, and promoting diversity.”

As of July 2019, with technical support from the MLRB program, the government constructed 358 motorable bridges, making an additional 4,895km of local roads accessible throughout the year.

Says Ambassador von Capeller, “Attracting and supporting more women in engineering benefits everyone by increasing the potential to develop inclusive, innovative solutions for the complex problems the world is facing.”

Bigyata Sitoula (*pic, right*) was in the first cohort of trainee women engineers to work on the motorable local bridge program. She joined the traineeship in 2013 right after graduating with a degree in civil engineering and today heads the team in Karnali Province as Project Coordinator.

Sitoula is from Tehrathum and is no stranger to the hardships posed by lack of access in the mountains. When she was young, a trip to her hometown from Kathmandu meant days of walking. The bus would take her family to Basantapur from where the district headquarters was

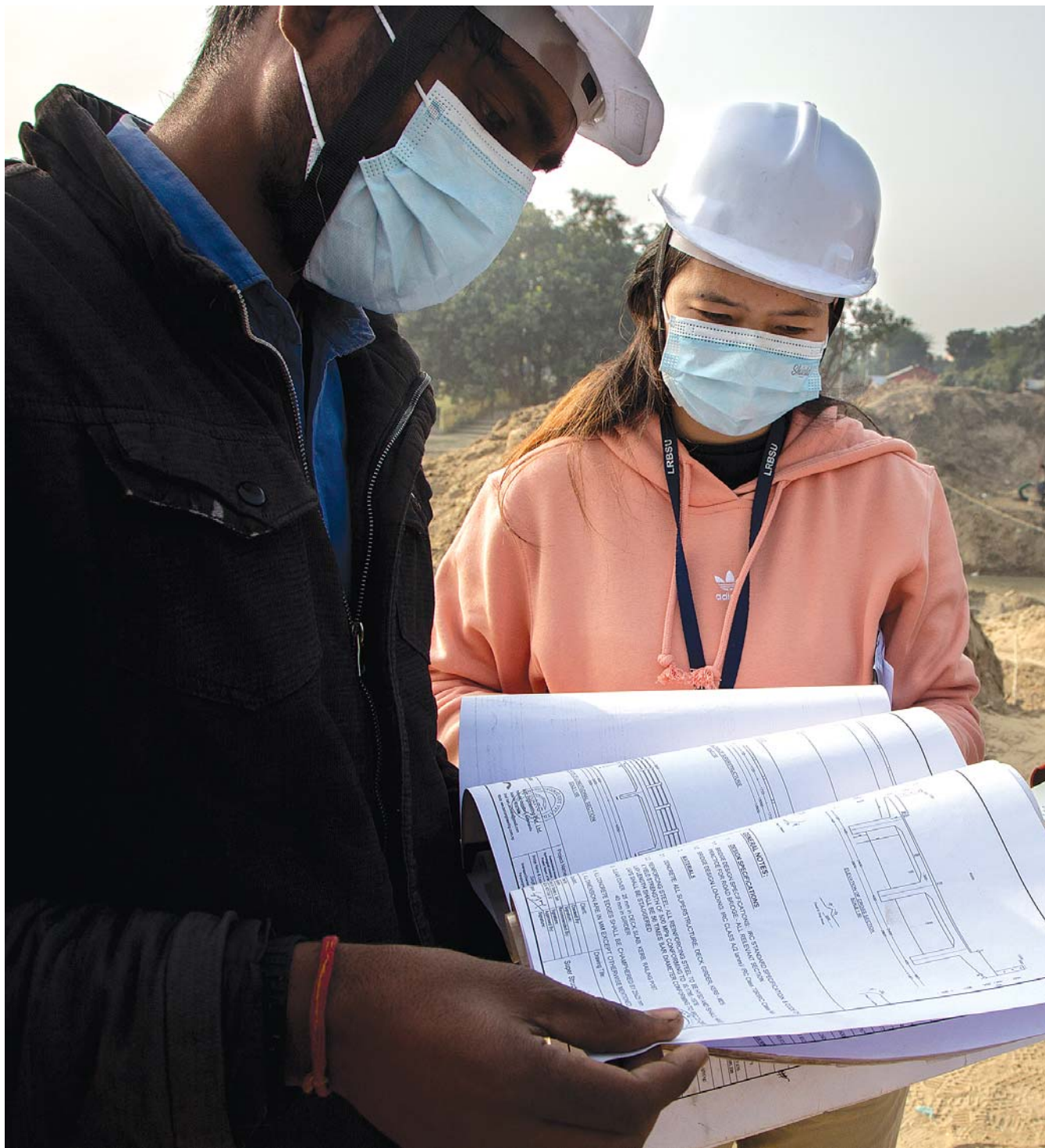


PHOTO COURTESY: BIGYATA SITOULA

a day’s trek. From there it took two more days of walking to reach her village of Chuhandanda. With a new road, the trip is much shorter today.

Having motorable bridges contributes to better access to health, education, and economic opportunities, especially for women who often have to travel long distances to fetch water, firewood, or during childbirth and health emergencies, which can be life-threatening.

In fact, the spread of Nepal’s road network has been a factor in bringing down the country’s maternal mortality rate dramatically

through an increase in institutional deliveries.

Although Bigyata Sitoula has not had the opportunity to work on bridges in her own Tehrathum, she has been to almost all the districts in Karnali Province designing and building bridges. One of her work trips took her to parts of Jajarkot, where the roads were yet to be connected via motorable bridges.

“We had to cross a suspension trail bridge then change vehicles, then get off and cross another suspension bridge and then get on another vehicle numerous times during the entire trip,” says Sitoula. “It was one of the more challenging

areas I have been to, and it showed the problems we faced.”

Sitoula says her main motivation is the realisation of how much a bridge helps local people. In Jumla where a bridge joining the district to Mugu is under-construction, villagers crowded around her team to urge them to work faster.

“They were excited about the possibilities of trade, shorter travel time and because the bridge would help women in their daily chores or to get to a health post,” says Sitoula.

There have been challenges. Some of it is geographical and some more socio-cultural. Female civil engineers have had to deal with the patriarchal mindset of local people and other stakeholders.

“When I first started as a trainee, people were skeptical that a woman could be an engineer,” recalls Sitoula. “That attitude has changed to some extent, and I have now grown more confident in myself and my work. But even now, there are times when people are doubtful about my qualifications and experience just because I am a woman.”

Nepal ranks among the countries with the lowest female representation in senior and middle management roles. According to the World Bank, in 2017, although the female labour force participation rate in Nepal was 78.7%, only 13.9% of women held jobs in management positions.

“Maybe because the number of female civil engineers is still lower compared to men, the discrimination persists,” adds Sayara Bhujel, a civil engineer completing her traineeship in Bagmati Province.

Women engineers also often have to deal with being undermined and ignored. Even when men in the same or similar position are addressed as ‘Sir’, women are called ‘Nani’ and ‘Baini.’ In the field, most queries are directed at the men, even if it is women leading the project.

“There are times when contractors and labourers don’t take us seriously and resort to teasing





PHOTOS: SDC



**MAKING BRIDGES:** Swiss Ambassador to Nepal Elisabeth von Capeller with trainee civil engineers building bridges across Nepal's 7 provinces.

us," says Radha Yadav, who is also completing her traineeship in Hetauda. Some others have also had to deal with casteist remarks.

But it is not just the professional environment where they face discrimination, it starts in college. "As a student, I had to speak up and asked to be included in lab work and other tasks like data recording, since boys were given more priority," recalls another engineer, Nisha Lama. "Some teachers also discriminated against girls."

The female engineers we spoke with said they have taken all this

in their stride, and have learnt to navigate, create, and claim spaces for themselves in the profession and society. When questioned about their technical designs or expertise, they all said they let their work speak for themselves.

Says Bigyata Sitoula: "Being in a leadership position is a challenge and an opportunity to change the opinion of society and to create a safe space for the next generation of women coming into the workforce."

Coming from a community that does not usually give enough importance to the education of girl children, Radha Yadav believes she can serve as an example of what women can do if they are given equal opportunities. She says fair compensation for work and a good support system at home also help.

"I am here because my father is a principal at a school and understood that girls have to be educated, and he encouraged me to realise my potential," says Yadav.

During one of her initial deployments in Surkhet, Sitoula got into an argument with a contractor when she pointed out that the plan for support work on an under construction bridge had problems. The design was eventually revised.

"I could do that because my supervisor at the time gave me the authority to speak up," she says. "The more representation we have in the workforce and the more people get used to seeing women in public spaces and professional environments, the easier it will become to gain the trust of the society." 🇳🇵





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# Nurture in her nature

School teacher Sarala Basnet wants students to avoid the same struggles she faced in life

■ Babita Shrestha in Tanahu

When Nepalis are leaving the country in droves, there are unsung heroes providing selfless services in isolated parts of the country. Teachers like Sarala Basnet (pictured) do not crave wealth or fame but work one day at a time to meet their ideal of bringing up the next generation of motivated and compassionate Nepalis. Sarala, as her name suggests, values simplicity and is guided by a straightforward attitude towards life: integrity, diligence and decency. After working her way up from a small village in Baglung, Sarala, at age 35, is the first female principal of Chandrodarya Secondary School (photo, below) in Abu Khaireni of Tanahu district. Back in Baglung, she was also the first female student to pass SLC from high school two decades ago at a time when very few girls attended school in such far-flung villages. “The mindset was that if the girl is educated, she will contaminate traditional culture,” recalls Basnet. “But I had my heart set from an early age to being an educator.” Her father was in the military, and Basnet was the youngest of many siblings. Luckily, the family valued education and sent her to school, unlike many of her childhood mates. But it was not an easy path. When she raised her young voice against prevailing gender inequality, neighbours scoffed



PHOTOS: SWAPNIL KC



at her. This only made her more determined to be a teacher. After school, she graduated with a Bachelor of Education from Gorkha Campus, which was an accomplishment on its own at a time when families married off their daughters instead of sending them to colleges. She traveled to Butwal for an internship as a maths instructor but seeing the need in her own hometown, returned to Baglung and was a teacher for 17 years. Eight years ago she was transferred to Abu Khaireni and made principal in recognition of her dedication and commitment. During this time, she got married to musician Krishna

Prasad Bhatta, who works as a music teacher in Kathmandu. The couple has two children, 13 and 8. Abu Khaireni is a small picturesque farming town mostly inhabited by families whose men serve in the British, Indian or Nepali armies. The rest of the young men have migrated for work to the Gulf or Malaysia. There are not a lot of jobs for young people here and child marriage is common. Which is why one of the first things Sarala did when she became a teacher was to counsel parents about the importance of schooling girls. It used to be the girl students who dropped out in Grade 5 when their parents married them off, but interestingly these days it is the boys who are dropping out. “The boys are leaving to work in the cities or to try to get into the military,” says Sarala. “This

is worrying, it is not good for the future of this village.” Schools in rural Nepal have insufficient amenities, instruction is impractical and curriculum outdated. During the Covid-19 pandemic, students at Chandrodarya School did not have access to the Internet, and were deprived of online classes for nearly a year. To fill the gap, Basnet organised physical sessions with varying schedules for the students. By the time the second Covid wave hit in 2021, the school was prepared for remote classes. Even so, parents still make students complete their household chores before or after school, and there is not much time for the children to play and have fun. Sarala remembers her own childhood and how she had to

struggle to balance home work with homework. She had to finish her assignment under the faint light of a kerosene *tuki* lamp. “We had to walk an hour every day to get to school, the path was steep and through forests with wild animals,” she recalls. All 160 students at Chandrodarya now have access to extracurricular activities including basic computer classes, sports, and other contests, including arts and crafts. It is extraordinary for a government school to have activities that are much better than neighbouring private schools. After having spent over two decades shaping young minds, Basnet believes that age or circumstance should not affect the process of learning. She says: “We should never stop learning, it is a lifelong process. My biggest sense of fulfilment comes from seeing my students do well in life.”

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