

Demographic dividend

■ Shristi Karki

A year-and-half after the Nepal's 2021 National Population and Housing Census was conducted, the final results were finally published on 24 March

Nepal's population has crossed 29.1 million but annual growth has slowed to 0.93% from 1.35% ten years ago. The gender ratio is even more skewed, with only 95.6 males per 100 females. There are now 6.6 million households across the country: an increase of 23% over the decade, which means more nuclear families.

The population pyramid now shows fewer children, a youth bulge, and greater numbers of elderly. Ten years ago, 35% of the population was below 14, that proportion had gone down to 28%. Meanwhile, the number of people older than 60 has climbed to 10% from 8%.

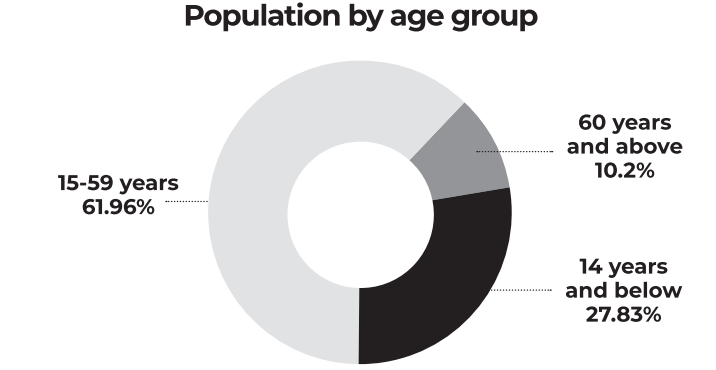
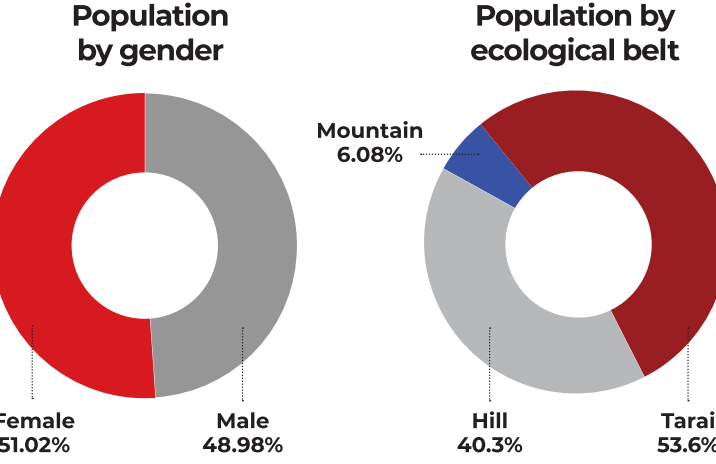
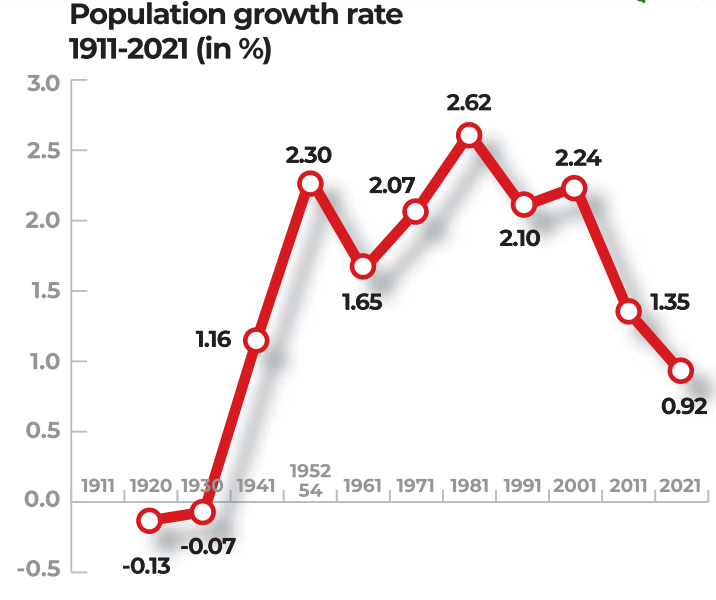
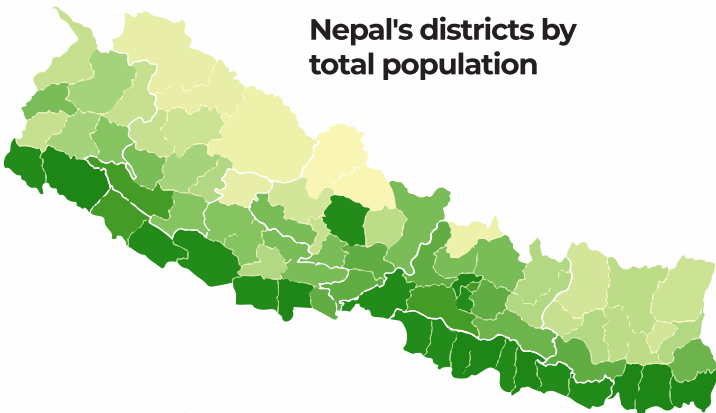
"The decrease in the population growth rate is characteristic of the state's efforts to drive socio-economic development, and is similar to global population trends," says Keshab Prasad Adhikari at the Central Department of Population Studies at Tribhuvan University. "What the government and related agencies need to do now is formulate programs and policies so that the annual population growth rate does not go down any further. And if it does, not less than 0.5%."

Adhikari finds it alarming that the number of female births and the female population under 14 is lower than male. Which shows a cultural preference for boys, even though women tend to live longer.

More than 66% of Nepalis now live in urban areas, but that is only because of the new demarcation of municipalities. Even so, there is a mass migration of the mountain population to city hubs in the plains. Nearly 54% of Nepalis now live in the Tarai, while only 6% remain in the high mountain districts.

"Transmigration to urbanised spaces and to the plains has been haphazard. And in many cases, areas that do not need to be have been unnecessarily assigned as urban," adds Adhikari.

The 2011 census had shown that 64% of total households used biomass for cooking, and this has gone down to 51%, mainly because



44% of homes use LPG. Access to piped drinking water has gone up to 57% in 2021 from 48% a decade ago. Almost 73% of Nepali households have smartphones while 37% have access to internet services, and nearly half own a television. Meanwhile, 27% of total households own a motorcycle, with only 3% having a four-wheeler.

Nepal's literacy rate has gone up to 76%, up from 66% in 2011, with female literacy increasing from 57% to 70%. However, only 19% of young Nepalis opt for higher studies after completing school.

The census was conducted using Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) techniques with tablets to collect data in Kathmandu Valley, using cartographic GIS maps to better reach enumeration areas, and allocating a separate data processing centre within the CBS premises.

Chief Statistician Ram Prasad Thapaliya at the National Statistics Office writes in the final report: 'The census process and results were designed and managed to generate comprehensive demographic social and economic data in consultation with stakeholders.'

However, there are questions about the precision of the census data. For instance, Nepal's absentee population is recorded as crossing 2.1 million, but this appears to be a gross under-estimate considering that there are about 2 million Nepalis in the Gulf states alone, and it does not include Nepalis in India and students in Australia, Japan or Canada.

The results also have not disaggregated the data by ethnicity and religion even though those questions were included in the census. The government could have considered those to be too sensitive in Nepal's present context.

Hem Raj Regmi of the National Statistics Office (NSO) says, "There was confusion about some respondents declaring unlisted religion and ethnic affiliations which is why we have kept back those figures."

But the RPP-N's Kamal Thapa has accused the government of deliberately hiding figures that would have shown a growing Christian population due to proselytisation.

The Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), now the National Statistics Office, established 7 provincial, 87 district and 349 Local Census Offices to conduct the census, deploying 8,545 supervisors and 35,657 enumerators with local knowledge to collect data across Nepal. The census was conducted over a fortnight from 11-25 November 2021.

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Counting on Nepal

After much delay, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal on 24 March made public the full report of Nepal's 2021 National Population and Housing Census.

The country's first official census was conducted in 1911, primarily to identify Nepal's able-bodied population so the Rana rulers at the time knew the 'stock' of able-bodied youth who could be conscripted to fight for the British in World War I.

Over the last century, each census has documented Nepal's demographic, economic, socio-cultural, and technological history and changes.

The 12th national census, Nepal's most ambitious yet, reflects how rapidly the country's socio-cultural, economic, and demographic substrate is changing. The National Statistics Office (formerly the Central Bureau of Statistics) made an attempt to be inclusive in the data collection this time to varying degrees of success.



AMIT MACHAMASI/NEPALI TIMES ARCHIVE

Enumerators were selected from local communities with knowledge of languages, 50% of them were women, and included people from the Dalit and minority ethnic communities, as well as people with disabilities.

The census puts Nepal's population at 29,164,578, with the annual growth rate at 0.92% — down from 1.35% in 2011. There are 95.59 males for 100 females. More than 2 million people live in Kathmandu, the most populated district.

The census has also revealed that more than half of Nepal's population lives in the Tarai, while only 6.08% of Nepalis live in the high mountains. It shows significant internal transmigration from Nepal's mountains to the plains (*see page 10-11*).

This is a reflection of the infrastructure development and increased connectivity in the Tarai, which has experienced the expansion of small towns into urban conglomerations.

But the Tarai is now bursting at the seams: fertile farms are being overrun by urban sprawl, there is worsening water scarcity, and pollution has made the cities unliveable.

Even so, half of Nepal's economically active population is still primarily involved in agriculture. But farming contributes

only 23.9% to Nepal's GDP, according to the 2021/22 *Current Macroeconomic and Financial Situation of Nepal* published by Nepal Rastra Bank.

Remittance is clearly running the country, but it is vulnerable to geopolitical tensions, and other global crises. Nepal's over-reliance on migrant labour was especially clear during the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The census also shows that women have been making significant progress socio-economically. Nearly 24% of the total households now have ownership of land or a housing unit or both in the name of a female. One-third of all households are female headed, up by 5.82% since 2011. Women also own 45% of small-scale enterprises because of government financing for women entrepreneurs.

Elsewhere, malpractices like child marriage still persist: 7% of Nepalis get married for the first time between 10-14 years.

While the census provides valuable demographic data, there are some questions about the accuracy — especially about the diaspora. The census says Nepal's absentee population stands at more than 2.1 million, but this appears to be a gross undercount.

More than 4.7 million Nepalis have sought labour permits since 2008. While many of them have obviously returned home, 1.8 million Nepalis have renewed their labour approvals since 2011, with an additional 348,867 Nepalis seeking labour permits during the 2021/22 fiscal year.

This count does not include Nepalis who have migrated to work in India, where Nepalis do not require a labour permit, nor does it encompass hundreds of thousands of

Nepali students who have left to work and study abroad. The 2021 census sought data about Nepal's sexual and gender minorities by including an 'other' option alongside the male and female options under gender. But this attempt at inclusivity shows a lack of awareness about sexual and gender minorities because the 'other' option fails to distinguish between sex, sexual orientation and gender identity, and mixes them all up. 2,928 Nepalis (0.01% of the population) identified as 'other' gender on the house and household listing cannot be an accurate representation.

The census results do not disaggregate ethnicity and religion. Some anti-secular political parties see a conspiracy in hiding the rising population of Christians due to proselytisation. The census office, however, says the breakdown was not possible because of confusion over respondents who said they were from unlisted ethnicities or faiths.

Shristi Karki

Nepal's most ambitious census yet fell short of being an accurate representation of the country

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Go east

In this space every week, to no one's delight, we find how Nepali politics and society have not changed. But let us take a break this week to look at how Nepali Times 20 years ago this week featured the *Tinjure Milke Jaljale* (TMJ) ridge in eastern Nepal that is abloom in rhododendron every March.

The TMJ spans over 585km and up to 5,000m in elevation and is home to 28 species of Nepal's national flower and saw more than 30,000 visitors on Nepali New Year's day last year.

Excerpts from the report published on issue #138 28 March-3 April 2003:

It may not rank among the natural world's most celebrated events like the monarch butterfly passage, phytoplankton blooms, wildebeest migration, or the New England fall colours. But the annual flowering of the rhododendron in Nepal is well worth travelling to see.

And the place to see it is the Tinjure Milke Jaljale (TMJ) ridge in eastern Nepal. In the coming weeks these scenic hills will be awash with red—not of political fervour but of rhododendrons in full bloom. The junction of Taplejung,



Sankhuwasabha and Tehrathum is home to Nepal's prime rhododendron forests and a natural niche for several rhododendron species. This is nature's display case for our national flower.

If the regular in mid-hill topography is north and east-west ranging hills cut by longitudinal valleys, the TMJ ridge is different. It ranges north in one long stretch and extends from Dhankuta to Basantapur and all the way to the Jaljala and Lumba Sumba Himal and Tibet. The run-off from the eastern flank joins the Tamur

river system, from its western flank, the Arun. The ridge is a recently peopled frontier, as the mixed nature of the larger settlements will tell. The more recent arrivals followed the roads into the area and the opportunities that came with it—portering, inn keeping and petty trade.

...East Nepal is exciting even minus the flora—less explored, great ethnic diversity and wildlife, magnificent views of the eastern Himalaya and lots of adventure options for rafting and mountaineering.

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

ONLINE PACKAGES



LIFE ON A FARM

Durga Karki, 59, has raised all five children on her own after an alcoholic husband left her. She tends to her cows and vegetable patch but does not get a fair price for the produce. Unable to even pay for a surgery she needs, Durga says she doesn't want her children to be farmers like her. Read profile on *page 4-5* and watch video online.



ORGANIC UNCLE

Meet Chandra Prasad Adhikari who was on the verge of giving up agriculture, turned things around for himself and others by investing in organic farming and homemade fertiliser. Read profile on *page 5* and watch video. Subscribe to Nepali Times YouTube channel for more multimedia content.

NEPAL-INDIA RELATIONS

You have beautifully penned a subject that is very well spread across the border and is in the interest of the people of both the nations which has several dimensions directly related to human civilisations and culture and environmental necessity ('Nepal-India trans-boundary bonds', Chandra Kishore, #1154). It does enrich human culture, I will not hesitate to call our mutual relations a human heritage. All of us were truth seekers about Siddhartha Gautam Buddha's Path, free from the limitations of citizenship.

Ram Sharan Agrawal

ROPEWAY

Reminds me of the Nepali proverb, coconut in monkey's hands ('Rust in peace', Daniel W Edwards, #1153). Our deconstructionist leaders destroyed everything, from trolley buses to tires and other factories, our unity, history, heritage, tradition, and so on.

Lal Bahadur

ODD HOFTUN

Only few realise the impact this man had on the development of Nepal ('Odd Hoftun, missionary engineer', Kunda Dixit, nepalitimes.com). Proud to have known him.

Ben-Erik Ness

■ Thank you for remembering his life. May he rest in peace.
Pawel Pyra

AMRIT GURUNG

Always admired Amrit Gurung ('Amrit Gurung, unplugged', Ashish Dhakal, #1153). His interviews are very inspiring and so is his minimalist lifestyle.

AgnosticGirl

NEPAL ARMY

Don't disturb the Nepal Army ('Defence mechanism', Editorial, #1154), they're playing musical instruments instead of military activities.

Narayan Koirala

WORKPLACE HAZARD

I would also like to know how often labs are checked for quality control ('Nepal health workers at risk of workplace hazards', Ramita Marasini, nepalitimes.com).

Kalps Para

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



From Serf to Solicitor

by Santosh Dahit

At age of nine, Urmila Chaudhari was brought from her home in Dang to be an indentured servant in Kathmandu. At age 21, she was still washing dishes. Now, at 36, she is a 'Freedom from Fear Award' laureate and a 3rd-year student at Kathmandu School of Law. Read more about this inspiring life at nepalitimes.com.

f Most reached and shared on Facebook

Five decades of Lok Chitrakar

by Shaguni Singh Sakya

Artist Lok Chitrakar's work is not just about continuation of age-old techniques, but a homage to the talent of unknown ancient artists — to revive it and leave an indelible mark by preserving the paubha artform for ages to come. He is a 21st-century master of preserving tradition, letting artistic styles evolve and revolutionise. Take a peek at his ongoing exhibition on *Nepali Times* website.

t Most popular on Twitter

Nepal-India trans-boundary bonds

by Chandra Kishore

Borders do not just divide countries, they also join them. And few international borders are like the one between Nepal and India, where the markers cut across households. This frontier cannot erase the geography, religion, culture and lifestyle of the communities that live on either side that share surnames and family ties. Join the discussion.

“ ” Most commented

Cooperatives leave Nepalis high and dry

by Ramesh Kumar

As many as 32,000 cooperatives across the country have deposits worth Rs700 billion, but there is no concrete data on how many cooperatives have not paid their clients' money. Now, the fraud committed by some of them has resulted in a widespread loss of faith in cooperatives, Nepalis are at risk as cooperatives collapse, and the government is no help. Read the report online.

🔍 Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS

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#editorial The Nepal Army has no business going into business.

A R T @AmulyaSir
Agree totally: or road contracting or training doctors and running hospitals and welfare funds. Defence only please

Nepal Times @NepaliTimes
It took 15 years for Da Vinci to complete 'Mona Lisa' and three years for 'The Last Supper'. The greatest example of Lok Chitrakar's artistic magnanimity is the 'Hevajra Mandala' which has taken him 25 years, and is not yet complete.

Marc Stirrup @MarcStirrup
An artist still making stunning religious art!

1,000 WORDS



RSS

PREMIUM MINISTER: Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Kathmandu Mayor Balen Shah at the first national conference of the Judicial Committee organised by Kathmandu Metropolitan City on Wednesday.



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■ Anita Bhetwal in Chitwan

She wakes up before dawn, throws away the blanket and heads quickly down to the cowshed, and promptly starts preparing the feed for her four cows.

Already by 5AM the cows have been milked, the shed is cleaned, and the dung removed to the compost pit. Then by 7AM the milk is delivered to a collection centre 3km away.

This has been Durga Karki's morning routine for the past 13 years. In the afternoons, she tends to her leased vegetable patch where tomatoes, cabbage, cauliflower and radish are growing.

"If I do not work, my family has nothing to eat," says Karki, 59, who lives in Bharatpur of Chitwan. "I have to feed my children, send them to school and buy them new clothes."

Karki took up farming after her alcoholic husband, who regularly beat her, disappeared for good one day. "I didn't waste my time worrying over him, and put my efforts into raising my children all on my own," she says.

Of her five children, her oldest daughter is already married and another is studying journalism. The two younger daughters are in high school, and her youngest son is in Grade 5.

Altogether, their tuition fees total Rs15,000 a month, and another Rs10,00 is spent on books, uniforms and school lunches. Then there is another Rs10,000 a month in household expenses.

"There is so much expense but my only cash income is from milk. Vegetable farming has left me in debt," explains Karki, who makes Rs50,000 a month selling milk. Even then, she spends Rs15,000 on cow feed and care, so there is not much savings.

Durga took up vegetable

"MY CHILDREN SHOULDN'T BE FARMERS"

Is it any surprise that farmers in Chitwan are agitating?



PHOTOS: SUMAN NEPALI



CASHLESS CROP: Durga Karki spends over 12 hours a day tending to her cows and vegetable farm, but doesn't have enough funds to afford a gallbladder operation. She raised all her children on her own after her husband abandoned the family.

farming hoping it would augment their income but she has been struggling. Most recently, she took a loan of Rs100,000 to plant cauliflowers in the plot, she made only Rs70,000.

"I don't think it is because I cannot farm or I'm down on my luck, vegetable farming just does not have the margins," says Durga, who cites the low price of her produce in the market.

Farmers in Chitwan are agitating against the low prices middlemen pay by dumping tomatoes, cabbages and other vegetables along the East-west Highway. Karki's neighbour Narahari Prasad Kandel agrees: "If you don't sell them in time, they



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UEFA in Turkish

Turkish Airlines has opened a UEFA Champions League Finals exhibit in its Business Lounge at Istanbul Airport. The exhibit starts with the Milan-Liverpool 2005 final, dubbed 'Miracle of Istanbul', and ends in 2023 with 18 finals. Displayed in the exhibit are jerseys, shorts, cleats, goalkeeper gloves and captain's armbands worn by players such as Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, Ronaldinho, Karim Benzema, Iker Casillas, and more. The lounge also has a console play area with the FIFA 23 game.

Says Ahmet Olmüstür, the airlines' Chief Marketing Officer: "I believe football fans will enjoy the exhibit which shows the journey that started in Istanbul back in 2005 and will end in Istanbul again in 2023."

MG eVs

Paramount Motors, the authorised importer and distributor of MG vehicles in Nepal, has started pre-bookings for its electric SUV MG ZS EV which has a 99kW peak power, battery capacity for 320km range, and a eight-year battery warranty. The SUV has two variants – Comfort and Deluxe – with starting price from Rs4,849,000 and Rs5,249,000 respectively.



Tata parts

Tata Motors has declared Sipradi Auto Parts as its sole distributor for spare parts and lubricants. Genuine spare parts and lubricants can only be supplied in Nepal through customer code 2081290 and 2081295.



Standard fundraiser

Standard Chartered held a staff fundraising program 'Home Run 2023' for its sustainability initiative 'Futuremakers by Standard Chartered' in which 200 staff walked, ran and cycled across a 11km route. Futuremakers is the bank's initiative to tackle inequality and encourage greater economic inclusion for youth in communities.

Samsung launch

Samsung is launching the Galaxy A34 5G and A54 5G in Nepal. The phones are part of the A-series and come with a triple-lens rear camera and Nightography feature. The phones also are water- and dust-resistant, with Corning Gorilla Glass 5 protection and Knox security.

Hyundai 2080

Hyundai distributors in Nepal, Laxmi Intercontinental, has announced a New Year offer in which customers get cash discounts up to Rs500,000, along with special deals like a New Year Bonus up to Rs80,000, exchange bonus of up to Rs80,000, and model year discount up to Rs200,000.

Everest money

Everest Bank completed its Global Money Week from 20 to 26 March. The bank launched programs at its branches in all



seven provinces, covering topics such as saving money, financial literacy for youths and elderly, managing money from a young age, and more.

will spoil. When you do sell them, you don't get a price that is worth the produce.”

Kandel repeats the reason for the price drop: cheaper vegetable imports from India where farmers get subsidies for everything from seeds, fertilisers to diesel for irrigation pumps. In Nepal, the opposite is true.

Back in the Karki household, the daughters help with the farm. She herself tends to her vegetable patch from 10AM to 7PM every day. And while they are struggling, the farm has also kept them together as a family.

As a matriarch, Karki had tried to keep her hopes up that things would change. But lately she has been plagued by doubts. She wonders if others in different professions also live their life as miserably, if they too cannot pay their debts, afford schooling and healthcare even after working over 12 hours a day.

Now, she needs a gall bladder operation which she cannot afford, and her doubts about farming are deeper. She cannot lift heavy objects and physicians have told her to rest, but she cannot afford to do that either.

“I’m sick because of all these years on the farm and yet I couldn’t even earn enough to treat my condition,” laments Karki, pouring out her anxiety to a visiting reporter. “I have told my children they shouldn’t become farmers.”

Karki did reach out to a local agricultural extension centre which provided her with higher yield vegetable seeds, and new cultivation methods. This helped her yield but, once again, the market price was much lower than the investment.

Says agricultural expert Krishna Poudel: “We have been relying on Singha Darbar to act so far, but now there is no choice but for the local government to step in to solve the problems of their farmers once and for all.”

The ‘Organic Uncle’ of Chitwan

A farmer on the verge of giving up turned things around for himself and others

Every year, Chandra Prasad Adhikari suffered losses on his farm. For years, his tomato crop did not earn enough to sustain itself.

In 1988, he even brought in agronomists to test the soil, and planted new varieties. The batch sprouted upwards within a month only to be wiped out by cotton bollworms when it was time for harvest.

Frustrated, Adhikari used the chemical pesticide democrene to kill the bugs under the recommendation of an entomologist. That too failed, as the bugs were immune to the pesticide. “I was tired to the point where I wanted to give up agriculture,” recalls Adhikari.

Then the entomologist, Phanindra Neupane, a professor at Rampur Campus, suggested switching to organic farming. Adhikari’s father Badrinath had also previously practiced organic farming and his 2.5-hectare farm had produced maximum yield.

“My father never used chemical fertilisers. When the extension workers came to the village to promote urea, he sent them away saying our cattle manure was enough to give good crops,” recalls Adhikari who then took to organic approach, especially after finding out that chemicals had hardened the soil and reduced fertility.

Adhikari improved the cowshed, collected dung and used it in the farm. The results were not instantaneous. It took time for the organic methods to reverse the damage caused by years of agro-chemical abuse. He also joined the group Digo Krishi Society and Bhakaro Reform Program.

By 1993, Adhikari’s investment had paid off. His carrot plantation was especially successful for which he credits Bhakaro Reform Program



that taught him various techniques of making organic fertilisers. In the subsequent years, his farm produced more crops than his neighbours' that used chemical fertilisers.

Soon, he had people coming to him to learn about organic farming, including students from Rampur Campus.

At a training program on organic agriculture in Kathmandu, Adhikari met Neupane once again. He gave him books on managing pests and manure via organic methods. It was after reading those books that Adhikari realised the real meaning of organic farming – one that is done without harming the environment and through the use of local resources and skills.

“I started preparing fertilisers at home. The best ones were made by farming earthworms,” says Adhikari. “My method of farming

organically was also recognised by the government following a soil test from the Nepal Institute of Science and Technology.”

Next, Adhikari stopped planting the crops in favour of sunflower oil seeds which is financially more beneficial, but by then he was running his farm just on insects and home-made pesticides. “My income has doubled since going organic and making my own pesticides.”

Adhikari also established an organic agriculture cooperative in 2013 which now serves as a learning centre for 230 farmers. For someone who was once on the verge of leaving farming, he is now known as ‘Organic Uncle’ for influencing many towards soil conservation.

And for the past 13 years, Adhikari has also been involved in collecting rice seeds for future use. So far, he has collected 110 varieties

which he has submitted to the National Gene Bank in Kathmandu.

“Rice varieties have been disappearing for generations,” says Adhikari. “Just as powerful nations have taken hold of fertilisers and various seeds, Nepal should be self-sufficient when it comes to rice seeds.”

After 35 years of organic farming, Adhikari sayslike how healthy mothers give birth to healthy babies, we need chemical-free soil for a good yield, which in turn is crucial for healthy living.

Says Adhikari: “Organic farming needs patience, especially to revert all the damages previously done to the soil by chemicals. After that, there is nothing but prosperity for the farmers, there is no loss, and they are also healthier not having to handle all those toxins.”

Anita Bhetwal

Greenhouse Gas Emissions of Nabil’s Infrastructure & Project Financing Portfolio (IPF)



Disclosure Results: The absolute emission attributable to loans and investments of Nabil Bank under IPF division (excluding renewable energy) is tabulated below:

S.N.	Global Industry Classification Standard (GICS)	Absolute Emission tCO2e		Total Absolute Emission tCO2e (Scope 1 & 2)	Bank's Exposure in USD Million	Data Quality Score
		Scope 1 tCO2e	Scope 2 tCO2e			
1.	Construction Materials	74,970.32	914.11	75,884.43	56.06	Score 4 Option 3 (3a)
2.	Airlines	4,426.61	15.03	4,441.64	15.40	Score 4 Option 3 (3a)
3.	Integrated Telecommunication Services	321.13	24.17	345.30	32.57	Score 2 Option 1 (1b)
Total		79,718.06	953.31	80,671.37	104.02	

(Weighted data quality score for above calculation is 3.37 where score of 1 indicates high data quality and score of 5 indicates low data quality.)

Avoided emissions from loans and investments in energy & renewables (operational projects)

S.N.	Global Industry Classification Standard (GICS)	Emission tCO2e (Avoided)	Bank's Exposure in USD Million	Data Quality Score
1.	Renewable Electricity (Hydropower)	2,086.54	26.82	Score 3 Option 2 (2b)
2.	Renewable Electricity (Solar)	45.27	1.23	Score 3 Option 2 (2b)
Total		2131.81	28.05	





An abandoned house and farm in Dhankuta are in ruins after the owners left for the Tarai.

GOPAL DAHAL

Eastern Nepal depopulated

“We keep talking about r



Gopi Krishna Bhadari of Chaubise has seen his neighbours lea

■ Gopal Dahal in Dhankuta

The farming household of Gopal and Rupa Pariyar is the only one still left in the sloping village of Chaubise Rural Municipality here in eastern Nepal.

After their children go off to school, the couple is alone all day at home. All their neighbours have moved out, and they have to walk for an hour just to bring water from the nearest spring.

Till 10 year ago, there used to be 20 households in this village. They all left one after another for

the Tarai. Now, their terraced farms have turned into a jungle, and the monkeys regularly destroy crops.

“We are all alone now and there is no one to ask for help when we need it,” says Gopal. “It used to be lively here, neighbours came together for festivals and to help out with harvest.”

Up the mountain in Thulagaon like many others in Chaubise, only four of the 22 families that lived there are left. The mud brick homes are crumbling, the roofs of many of them have caved in, the front yards are covered in shrubs.

The rate of out migration is

also accelerating: last year alone 561 residents from 185 households got migration certificates from the municipality. The real figure was probably more as many have not even bothered to get papers (*see Editorial, page 2*).

“No matter what we do to keep people here, they just want to leave, it is becoming a national problem,” says municipality deputy chair Tankamaya Pangmi Magar. “We keep talking about rural development, but there is no one left to develop here. It hurts to see them abandon their ancestral land like this.”

Dhankuta Bazar was the administrative centre of eastern Nepal since the Rana days. Even till recently there would be crowds of people at government offices here. Now, even the residents of the town have moved out. The shops are shut because no one is shopping. Traders have also moved down to the Tarai.

Sabitra Rai is the District Coordination Committee head. She says, “We have tried to think of strategies to stop this trend. But have not been able to stop people who seek an easier, more convenient life in the plains.”

Out migration is not just a problem in eastern Nepal, it is happening right across the mid-mountains (*see story from Kaski, below*), and the depopulation is seen in the 2021 census results released this week.

Here in the east, outmigration in Tehrathum district is even more severe than in Dhankuta. Even in the Myanglung bazar area, fields are fallow, shops are closed, and land value has dropped since there is no one to buy property.

Tehrathum district had a population of 113,111 in the 2001 census, it had dropped to 101,577

Letter from Sikles

As depopulation hits home, Himalayan village mulls ways to reverse outmigration

■ Kunda Dixit in Kaski

The densely packed houses cling to a steep mountainside in scenic Sikles village below the Annapurnas. The doors of many of the homes are padlocked, some have wads of electricity bills shoved into them.

The barren terrace farms below the town now have *uttis* forests growing in them. The Sikles health post ambulance is permanently stationed in Pokhara, since most of the residents have moved down to the city. The student body of the secondary school in nearby Taprang has shrunk by half.

Yet, a new highway will soon make it possible to shorten the three-day trek from Pokhara to Sikles to a one-hour jeep ride. Some of the traditional stone-and-tile Gurung homes are being demolished to build multi-story concrete structures in anticipation of a tourism boom.

A new cable car is planned to nearby Kori Peak at 3,800m which commands a sweeping panorama of Lamjung and Annapurna Himals.

“What you see here is the government bringing development to villages, but villagers have moved to cities, and the cities have become unliveable,” laments Buddhi Bahadur Gurung, 70, who is collecting buffalo dung from the trail to turn into fertiliser for his maize field. Most of his family is in Kathmandu, Pokhara or London.

The village of Sikles was made famous because it was in the office of the Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA) that Maoist leaders Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Baburam Bhattarai

in April 2016 negotiated the ceasefire before being flown to Kathmandu to form an interim government.

Sikles is also the birthplace of Chandra Gurung, who was inspired by shared decision-making and collective participation of his people to design Nepal’s innovative approach to community-led conservation of nature.

The ‘Conservation Area’ model has since been replicated in Gauri Shankar, Api Nampa, Manaslu. And it was just after the inauguration of the Kangchenjunga Conservation Area in November 2006 that Chandra Gurung, along with other top Nepali environmentalists, was among the 24 people killed in a helicopter crash.

“Everything you see here is because of Chandra, these mountains used to be denuded,” says Purna Gurung, who has retired after working for ACA for 30 years. “But look at Sikles now. Still, what is the use if no one is going to live here?”

Even Chandra Gurung’s own house is locked up, and only his elder brother lives there. In stark contrast, another cement-plastered house with iron rods poking out of concrete beams is coming up down the hill.

“Dr Chandra would not have approved of this new construction,” says resident Bal Bahadur Gurung, shaking his head. “Now it is up to us to carry on his work.”

The Kori Peak cable car project has also divided the Sikles community. Some lodge owners in town welcome it, hoping it will boost the local economy and help slow outmigration by creating jobs. Others say it will irreparably damage the wilderness, which is the region’s biggest draw.

After international tourism collapsed



ALL PHOTOS: KUNDA DIXIT

Nepal's Empty mountains

...t rural development, but there are no people left to develop here.”



...urs leave, but has invested in a goat farm. BHANDARI FAMILY

in 2011. In the latest census, it had dropped even further to only 89,125.

According to the 2021 census results, 32 of Nepal's 77 districts have witnessed a sharp decline in population, all of them in the mountains. Of these are all nine districts of Kosi Province, with Khotang, Bhojpur and Tehrathum showing the sharpest declines.

Of the 75 municipalities in 14 districts in Kosi Province, only those in Morang, Sunsari and Jhapa have seen population increases. While outmigration is the main factor, birth rate and death rates

have also declined.

The 2015 Tehrathum District Profile noted that the push factors for outmigration was better health care, education, employment. There is no one reason for the trend, says social scientist Suresh Dhakal, but the search for a more convenient lifestyle is primary.

In eastern Nepal, this is not a new phenomenon. It started in the last century with the migration of people to Assam, Sikkim and Bhutan for better opportunities. Recruitment into the British Army and the pension office in Dharan meant that most military families bought land and settled there, resulting in the sustained real estate boom in the Dharan-Itahari-Damak corridor in the Tarai. Most people living here are from Khotang, Bhojpur, Tehrathum and Taplejung in the mountains to the north.

This trend accelerated during the 1996-2006 Maoist conflict when villagers moved out to flee

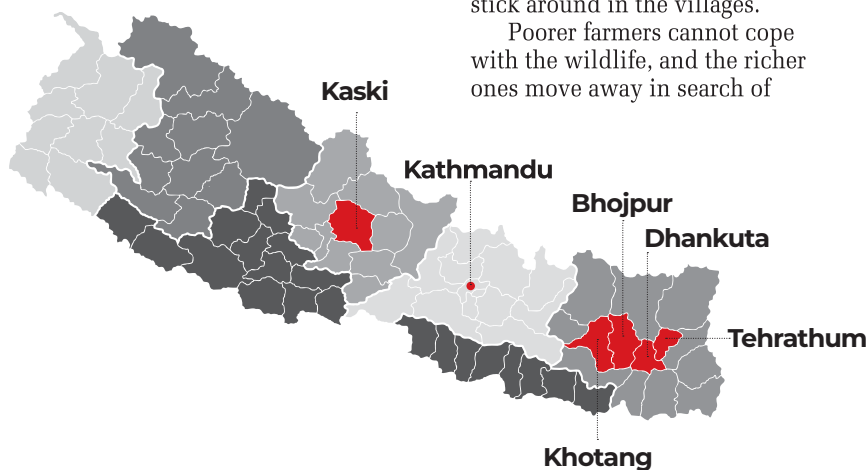
the violence. Now, many young men in the mountains are not just moving down to the Tarai, but to Kathmandu and then overseas for employment.

Bhojpur MP from the Maoist party, Sudan Kirati, who is now Minister for Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, had warned three years ago that the outmigration trend was accelerating for better education, health and water supply.

Destruction of crops by wildlife and springs going dry due to the climate crisis are also cited as factors driving people out. Additional factors are ethnic and caste discrimination, says journalist Khilanath BK who has himself moved from his home in Bhojpur to Dharan. He says, “Discrimination is more rife in the villages than in the cities.”

Then there is the poor condition of the roads, which are impassable in the monsoon and farmers cannot take their produce to market, the sick cannot go to hospital, and good teachers and doctors do not want to stick around in the villages.

Poorer farmers cannot cope with the wildlife, and the richer ones move away in search of



SKY HIGH: The traditional architecture of scenic Sikles amidst a backdrop of Lamjung Himal is changing with new concrete structures (*r/left*). Water buffalo grazing below Annapurna 2 at the point where the proposed Kori Peak cable car will have its terminal.

better opportunities in the cities. “We only have the children and elderly left in the villages here,” says Arjun Mabuhang of Lalguras Municipality. “People are voting with their feet.”

Many see increased outmigration as a failure of the 2105 Constitution in guaranteeing balanced development through political devolution to local government through federalism. The political parties had made grand promises to “take Single Darbar to every village”, but rural development took a back seat.

“The world over, the reasons for migration are economic and social security,” explains economist Bigyanbabu Regmi. “Local governments are spending their budgets on non-productive sectors even after federalism, and the rural economy has not improved.”

Lack of quality health care and education are other reasons families are moving away. Pregnant women with complications die waiting for an ambulance.

Most people from the mountains of eastern Nepal land up in the Tarai districts, where the population growth rate of 1.9% in Sunsari, for example, is higher than even Kathmandu's 1.4% per year. Population density in Kathmandu is highest (5,108 / sq km) but Sunsari (743 / sq km) is the district with the fifth-highest population density in Nepal.

The latest figures from the National Statistics Division show that more than a third of Nepalis are now living in a place away from where they were born. Nepal's overall population growth is now down to 0.93% per year: the mountain areas have near negative growth, while the Tarai has 1.56% growth. Most of the undocumented settlers along river banks in the Tarai to crush stones and in squatter areas of cities have moved down from the mountains as well. Some are flood and landslide victims who have been promised safer places to live.

Meanwhile, the government finds it more beneficial to declare

even roadless rural areas as municipalities without doing much to ensure services and facilities. It is such gerrymandering that has allowed the government to show that 66% of Nepalis live in ‘urban centres’.

Infrastructure investment is also concentrated in connecting Tarai cities rather than upgrading connectivity in the mountains. Four mountain rural municipalities in Kosi Province still do not have roads.

Desperate to reverse the trend, some rural municipalities like Chhathar in Dhankuta have announced that they will gift a cow and Rs 100,000 to each family who returns. In Chaubise, the municipality is trying to convince families to stay by bringing water supply to them. Dhankuta is trying to spread vocational education classrooms in each municipality.

Says Chhathar municipality chair Santabir Gurung: “It is possible to bring people back and hold those who are here. We just have to understand what is driving them out. We need help in education, health, and in job creation from the federal government.”

Lalguras municipality chair Mabuhang adds, “Now, it is not a gap between rich and poor: it is between urban and rural. Even the rich are moving out of villages because of the lack of services. We need to incentivise people to stay put.”

The provincial government and elected rural leaders all seem to know what the problems are, and the solutions. It is in the implementation and prioritising resources that there seems to be a problem.

Says Kosi Province Chief Minister Hikmat Karki: “We are worried about the outmigration trend from the mountains to the Tarai. We plan to coordinate with the federal government, and invest in rural education and health, infrastructure development.” 🇳🇵

Translated from a Centre for Investigative Journalism report in the March-April edition of Himal Khabar.

Sikles Peak

The imposing pointed peak stands out when viewed from Sikles because of its dramatic summit pyramid. This is why most people coming here mistake it for Mt Machapuchre.

But this peak is just a spur of Annapurna 4, and is only 5,900m, compared to 6,990m of Machapuchre, which is not visible from here.

Since so many people take selfies saying it is Machapuchre, Sikles native Hum Gurung has decided to christen the mountain Sikles Peak (*pictured*). This is a sensitive topic here because Lamjung Himal which looms over the town bears the name of the adjoining district even though it is now in Kaski after a change in the border.

Says Hum Gurung: “Since we cannot change the name of Lamjung Himal, we can at least call this one Sikles Peak.”

during the pandemic, it was mostly Nepalis trekking to Kapuche Lake that brought some income here. The lake itself is an indicator of the climate crisis and is fed by melted ice from more-frequent avalanches from Annapurna II, and at 1,980m is the lowest glacial lake in Nepal.

Ward 1 chair Devi Jang Gurung, who was elected last year and is a former radio journalist, is not a fan of the cable car project because, he says, it will just bring visitors on day trips from Pokhara after the road is finished.

“Sikles will not benefit at all, tourists will not stay here. In fact, Nepalis going to Kapuche spend much more money because they buy local food and spend nights in homestays,” adds Devi Jung Gurung, who believes that, if properly managed, trekking tourism can reverse the out-migration trend.

Schools in Sikles and Tarbang that have seen a drop in enrollment are also trying to make 10+2 classes more relevant and useful, so school education does not drive young people away. One idea is to have 9+3 classes with a focus on vocational training in subjects like tourism, disaster preparedness, heritage and environment preservation.

The Kori Peak cable car project was being initiated by the same group that operates Chandragiri in Kathmandu Valley, but has been stopped after an interim order from the Supreme Court in response to a public interest litigation arguing that it was being pushed without a proper Environmental Impact Assessment.

Also from Sikles is environmentalist Hum Gurung, formerly with the National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC) and now Asia Partnership Manager at the Singapore-based BirdLife International Asia. He is worried about unregulated construction that is eroding the traditional architecture of Sikles town and its main attraction besides mountains.

“The road has already arrived in Sikles with all its consequences,” he says. “But with new infrastructure like the cable car we have to make sure it has minimum impact and improves livelihoods, creates jobs and slows out-migration. Ultimately it is about balancing economy and ecology.” 🇳🇵

EVENTS



Thai food fest

Immerse in the rich and diverse culinary traditions of Thailand at the Thai food festival this week. Make it a day for your family and friends, with spicy curries, seafood and refreshing salads.
31 March-4 April, 7pm onwards, Rs3500 per person, Hyatt Regency, Taragaon, 9801031235

SLAY screening

Join an insightful evening of vegan dining with documentary Slay which shows the impact of the fashion industry on the environment, and non-human and human health.
31 March, 5pm-7pm, Loving Heart Vegan Restaurant, Thamel, 9813738956



3 Nations Cup

Head over to final match of the 2023 Prime Minister's Three Nations Cup between Nepal and Laos this Friday. Book tickets online or buy them on the spot.
31 March, 5:30pm onwards, Dasharath Rangasala

Sakura Festival

Enjoy the Sakura festival with Japanese food, merchandise, traditional and cosplay dress experience, music and dance.
1 April, 12pm-7pm, Ekhalakhu Chok, Patan



Kiran Manandhar

'Manka rekhaharu' is the latest exhibition of works by the prolific Kiran Manandhar at Galley Mcube.
5 April-20 April, 11am-8pm, Gallery Mcube, Mitra Road, Chakupat

DINING



Anatolia

Anatolia's Indian and Turkish dishes are packed with spices and an unforgettable assortment of flavours. From the Mutton Kofta Curry to the Baklava, the dishes will keep one wanting more. All the food is halal.
Thamel, (01) 4258757

MUSIC

Spring pit fever

Celebrate Friday night with performance from bands Jai Faak, OutControlJoys and Youth Unite.
31 March, 4pm-8pm, Rs300, Bunker Hill Pub, Kupondole



Underground Infamy IV

Love listening to heavy metal music? The full metal concert by the Extreme Underground metal society of Nepal featuring bands and singers is just for you. Call for event/location details.
3 April, 6:45 onwards, 9860907357

Live music

Join a special night of soulful Nepali music with Kali Prasad Baskota and Sathi Bhai.
31 March, 7:30pm onwards, Rs1000, Sanchaya Kosh Chok, Thamel



Abhaya+the Steam Engines

Have a blast this Friday at the live performance from Abhaya and the Steam Engines.
31 March, 6pm onwards, Club Fahrenheit, 9841726830



Music academy

Learn guitar, bass gutiar, keyboard, drum, Western Vocals and more at special prices at Kaleidoscope Music Academy. Call for more details.
Putalisadak, 9851073966

Choila

How comfortable are you with your spices? Because Shyam Dai Ko Haas Ko Choila (Shyam Dai's duck choila) -- THE place to get choila for the last 24 years -- is not for the faint of heart.
Dhobighat, (01) 4280273



Gangnam Galbi Barbeque

Korean barbecue, grill and galbi, roasted in charcoal at high level of heat to add more softness, different flavor and scent to meat.
Naxal, (01) 4434780

About Town

GETAWAY



Hotel Barahi

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

Jagatpur Lodge

The lodge nestles in 8 acres of jungle grassland. Choose to stay in special tents which are no less than 5-star accommodations, each furnished with a private viewing deck to bask in the breathtaking natural beauty around.
Jagatpur, Chitwan, (01) 4221711



Hotel Heritage Bhaktapur

Immerse yourself into the rich culture and heritage of Bhaktapur in this Newa-style boutique hotel. Hotel Heritage also offers some of the best authentic Newa delicacies in this conch-shaped city.
Suryabinayak, Bhaktapur, (01) 6611628



Gokarna Forest Resort

The resort is a paradise, thick with centuries-old trees rustling out natural tunes and great restaurants for fine dining. Golf, anyone?
Gokarna, (01) 4450002

Mount Princess

Surrounded by mountains and woodlands, Mount Princess is a haven for city-dwellers who can't wait to get out.
Dhulikhel (01) 490616



Haopin Hotpot

Hotpot is best served with a side of good and hungry company. Haopin offers a wide variety of meats and vegetables to dip in flavoured soups and delicious sides to enjoy while the broth cooks.
Narayan Chaur, 9808064999

Buingal

With a variety of both vegetarian and non-vegetarian options, Buingal has something for everyone. Give the vegetarian sekuwa a try during your visit.
Maitidevi, (01) 4421393

WEEKEND WEATHER



Wet and cooler again

After this week's warmer days, we are looking at a wetter and cooler weekend as a westerly front sweeps across Nepal. The Meteorological Forecasting Division predicts scattered showers for Kathmandu right through Friday till Monday, with the skies clearing up on Tuesday. Overcast skies will keep the temperature in check with maximum temperature even slipping to below 20°C on Saturday. This means more snow at higher elevations. A heat wave is forecast for the north Indian plains and the Tarai in the coming weeks.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
23° 12°	19° 10°	21° 10°

OUR PICK

The acid-tongued Roys are back, bringing with them drama (and satire, for good measure) of Shakespearean proportions. The much-awaited final season of HBO's *Succession* picks up a few months after the shocking showdown in Tuscany: Logan celebrates his birthday in New York while Kendall, Shiv and Roman are in Los Angeles to propose a new media startup to investors. A divine comedy of absolute power and dysfunction set in the crackling world of media, *Succession* is a compulsive look into corruption and the Great American Circus. The characters may all be scheming vipers, but they are just as vividly profane and hilariously sharp. Stars Hiam Abbass, Nicholas Braun, Brian Cox, Kieran Culkin, Matthew Macfadyen, Sarah Snook, Jeremy Strong and J. Smith-Cameron.



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 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 ।



नेपाल सरकार
विज्ञापन बोर्ड

A new trail opens in Kathmandu Valley for avid mountain bikers

■ Luja Manandhar

In the small forest of Karyabinayak on the outskirts of Lalitpur, Tejson Kunwar quickly lands the jump and glides through the trail. He is so agile, his mountain bike seems to be an extension of his body.

The pine forest is a hub for migratory birds and bird-watchers in the morning. But these days, as the natural morning light hits the forest, the tyres hit the dirt. This newly completed mountain biking trail is the latest addition to the fleet of downhill and enduro trails in and around Kathmandu Valley.

Kunwar with the help of Trail Builders Nepal, a group of individuals with backgrounds in tourism, biking and management, Tessellate Design Studios, an architectural design firm, Balkumari Samudayik Ban and Lalitpur Municipality ward 18, worked to establish the Bhanjyang trail which was completed earlier this year.

“This trail is completely different. It is beginner friendly and is for mountain bikers who want to develop their skills. It is more of a bike park that is near the city,” says Nishant Shah, one of the founders of Trail Builders Nepal.

The idea for building a sustainable trail in Bhaisepati came about five years ago when Tejson Kunwar with his friend Anup Khatri would go to the forest to practice. They would spend hours making small jumps and navigating the terrain. Since the forest was not actively in use, and given the landscape, Kunwar thought it would be a good place for the future generation of MTB riders to practice.

The Bhanjyang trail is conceptualised as a beginner-oriented park with a trail system. Located in Bhaisepati, its closest landmark is the Manjushree Bridge.

The trail system is unique in Nepal, in it starts with a ramp that leads to a 100m long flow section, then to tabletops, which is a platform for riders to safely practice small jumps. There is a roller pump that helps riders



WHEELING IN THE WOODS



PHOTOS: LUJA MANANDHAR

to gain speed or jump and three switchbacks, or berms, for a 180° turn.

From local children with their beginner bicycles to professional mountain bikers, the team believes that it is the perfect spot for enthusiasts to hone mountain biking skills, all in the lap of nature.

Every day after school, Sakshyam Dongol makes his way to the trail. “I use the trail to practice my mountain biking skills, and it is fun to ride as the trail finishes in about 3 minutes,” says Dongol, who learned about the trail from social media.

Kunwar is happy to see young and old faces make the most of the trail. He himself has been riding for eight years now and is a well-known face in the downhill and enduro races in Nepal. The Kathmandu MTB fest 2016 was his first-ever race, and his latest was the Okhaldhunga Urban Downhill Race 2023, which he participated in with Nischaya Shrestha representing Radrides.

The adrenaline-rush of launching off a ramp or going downhill might be too much to take for some, but for the 22-year-old, it is nothing short of thrilling. One

thing he feels that is currently missing in the community is mentorship for younger athletes.

“My friend Nirav Shrestha and I would go on rides and learn from each other. We didn’t have a certain mentor who would train us for professional purposes. There still aren’t,” says Kunwar.

When he is not riding he works as a freelance photographer and videographer, and is an instructor at The ZeroLevel Nepal, a mountain biking school. He is also the founder of Radrides, an agency working with the local community and businesses to

educate people about MTB and establish sustainable trails in Kathmandu. Through Radrides, he is also trying to mentor upcoming athletes and provide them with a platform. With schools focused on mountain biking, a burgeoning community of riders and a number of trails being built in the outskirts of the valley, Kunwar is hopeful for the future of the sport and his role in it.

Says Kunwar, “I want to change, or help to change, the scenario for riders in Nepal by supporting or bringing more exposure to athletes through this platform.” 🇳🇵



हिमालको चैत अंक बजारमा



हिमालमिडिया प्रा. लि.
पाटनढोका, ललितपुर

NO COUNTRY FOR YOUNG MEN



For four high schoolers in Nepal, overseas work is the only way out of their station in life

■ Priti Thapa

It was their last day of high school, and as is the custom, the four students were writing messages on each other's shirts.

The students, Nirajan, Rajan, Niraj and Bisan, posted the pictures of the messages on their uniforms on social media meme groups, but

never imagined that they would go viral across the country and abroad.

The messages in Nepali read 'Have a safe journey to Japan', 'Safe travels to Korea', 'Hope you have a good overseas journey' or 'See you in the Gulf', reflecting the actual plans of the four friends to go abroad.

Nirajan and Niraj want to migrate to Japan, while Rajan and

Bisan want to work in South Korea under the Employment Permit System. The Persian Gulf is the last resort for them.

The four left their homes in Kavre, Ramechhap, Sindhupalchok and Lalitpur to study at Bageswari High School in Bhaktapur.

"We don't have many course options in our village to study," says Nirajan. "Here, at least the

teachers show up regularly, and when a teacher is absent, there are substitutes. Our principal is also very hands-on."

Finishing up Grade 12 is an important milestone, and foreign employment is the natural choice for many young Nepalis. This is reflected in the scrawled messages on the students' shirts.

"Our families took care of us

Turning the desert green

Nepali farmhand in Saudi Arabia talks about the decade he has spent growing vegetables and tending to goats



DIASPORA
DIARIES 26

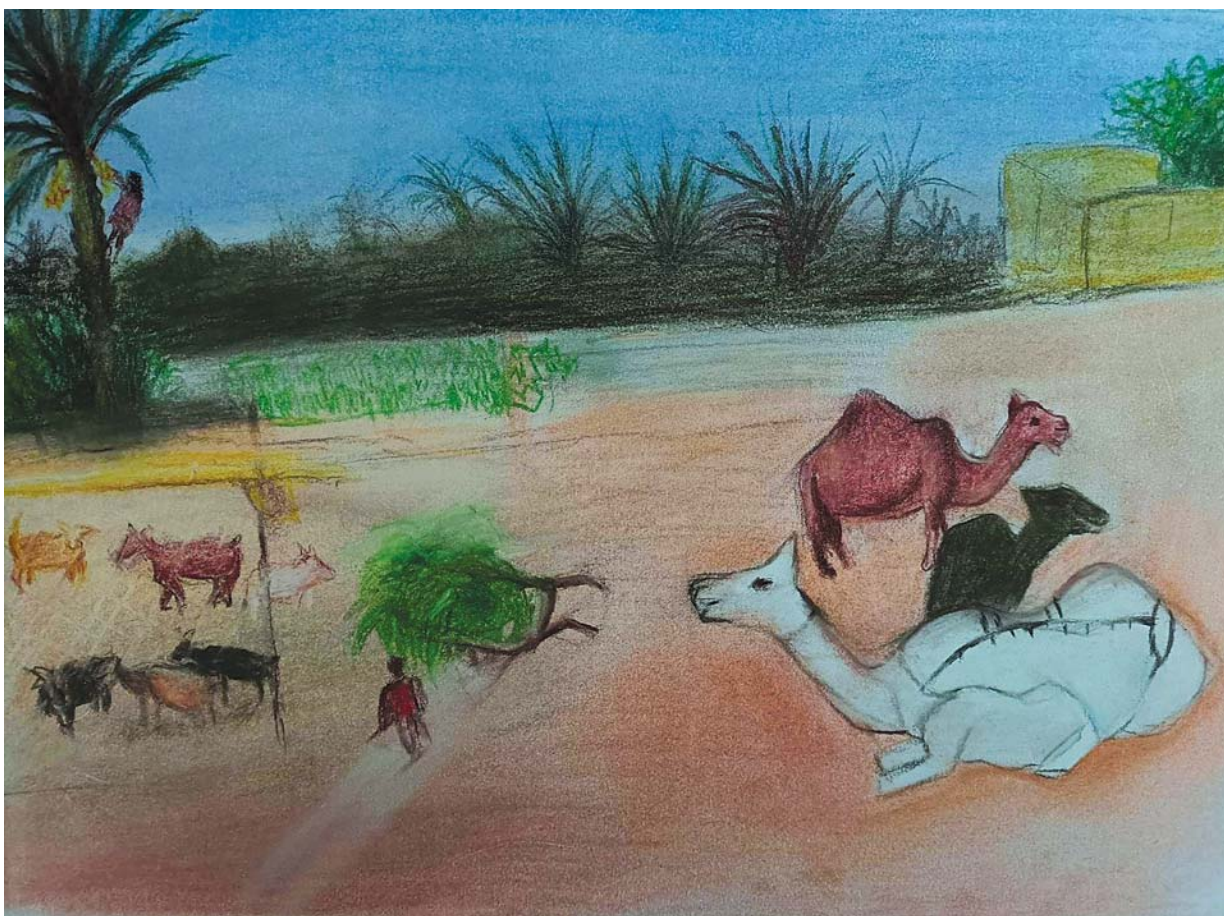
This is the 26th instalment of *Diaspora Diaries*, a regular series in Nepali Times which tells the stories of Nepalis living and working abroad.

For almost a dozen years, I have been working as a farmer in a *majra*, deep in the desert of Saudi Arabia.

Despite spending so much time here, I have not really seen much of the country. The only time I leave this wadi (called *majra*) is when I go to Nepal every two years for a few months. The airport is quite a distance from here, and all along the long ride I have my eyes glued to the countryside from my taxi window.

I grow vegetables in the farm along this dry river bed, so I get to see a lot more greenery than others do in Saudi Arabia. We grow *khajoor* (dates), tomato, cauliflower, millet and livestock fodder while tending to over 350 goats. Work is busy and can get exhausting with the heat especially during summer months.

A lot has changed over the years, even though I have worked in the same *majra* under the same



kafeel sponsor the whole time. A Nepali colleague who worked in this *majra* for 18 years went back recently. He came here when he could call home on a landline with much difficulty once every two weeks or so.

But I arrived here during the Nokia phone days. We used to

watch Hindi shows on a small tv back then. Things are better now with smartphones and social media. Killing the empty hours overseas alone between vacations is much easier with YouTube and Facebook.

But I do not know much what has changed in Saudi Arabia beyond the boundaries of my farm,

since the wadi is an isolated world, disconnected from the rest of the country. The day I finally decide to leave Saudi, I think I will still not have seen much of the country.

I have worked with the same *mudir* (boss) for almost a dozen years, but I would not say I have stuck it out because he is a

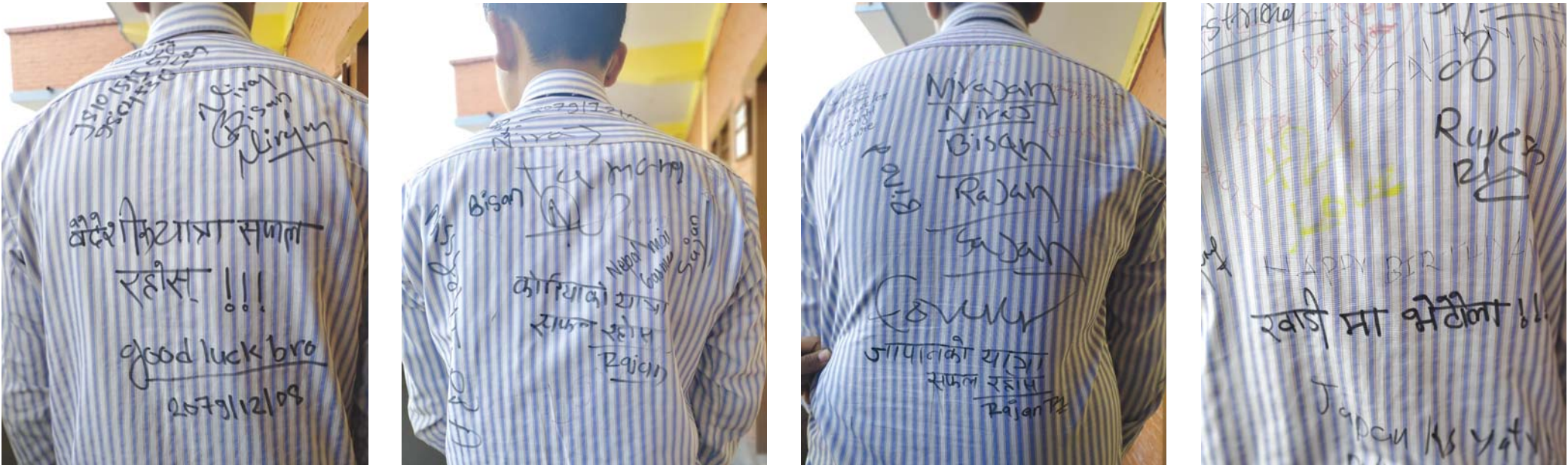
good boss. It is because there is no certainty that the next one will be any better, or even much worse.

Familiarity with him and his expectations is helpful: he does not delay my salary and pays for my roundtrip ticket to Kathmandu every two years. Even then, I do not feel any particular affinity towards him. He is a source of money for me, just as I am a source of labour for him. The day either of us stop providing this transactional value to each other is the day our relationship ends.

By Saudi standards, I do not believe my *mudir* is a very rich man. Of course the number of workers he employs in his house or *majra* including domestic help, driver and farmers is equal to the size of his entire family. But after hearing about the lifestyle of other *mudir* of fellow Nepalis, he seems less extravagant and opulent. He has never left the country, not even once, since I have known him, unlike other Saudis who go abroad for business or holiday. It does not seem like he has any other engagement beyond this small *majra*.

But even then, the Saudi *hukumat* (government) provides well for its citizens. We Nepalis are unlucky. Neither our own government nor the governments of the countries we are employed in look after us.

The Nepali in the *majra* has left, and I now have fellow workers from Sudan. We speak in Arabic which I am now fluent in. I used to maintain a notebook with basics



VIRAL DREAMS: (from left to right) Nirajan, Rajan, Niraj and Bisan. The images (above) of their shirts with messages ‘Hope you have a good overseas journey’, ‘Safe travels to Korea’, ‘Have a safe journey to Japan’ and ‘See you in the Gulf’.

so far, and we also worked part-time to cover our expenses. But once you finish 10+2, it will not be the same. It is our turn to become providers for our families,” says Bisan who, like the others, feels that a bachelors degree in Nepal is not a viable option.

It will be expensive to work and study in Kathmandu, and they believe that although it will be a struggle for a few years overseas, they will be set for life.

The boys have already got a glimpse of just how untenable combining work and studies can be in Nepal. Niraj works as a waiter, and has struggled to balance college and work. Despite working 12 hours a day sometimes in a party palace, he makes only Rs500 daily.

Not only are wages low, the work is also demanding and does not leave time for studies. He says, “If I have to struggle, I might

as well do it in Japan because at least it will lead to something. Living in Nepal can be great for the well-off, not for people from our background.”

There were times in their lives when the students aspired to be lawyers, engineers, accountants or journalists. Nirajan always wanted to work in a bank growing up because he was good at accounting. But his grasp of the subject declined during Covid lockdowns when he could not adjust to online classes and this was reflected in his SEE scores. So he gave up his dream of working in a bank and joined humanities.

The photos of the students writing messages on each others’ shirts were widely shared on social media for the same reasons as pictures of migrant workers lining up at the airport do: it reflects the government’s inability to retain the

youth in Nepal itself.

But they also showed the lack of support systems for the students as they make critical decisions about their futures. But questions to the students about who they aspire to be, or what led them to decide on Japan or South Korea, are met with silence or generic answers.

They are unable to articulate why those countries, other than mentioning a distant acquaintance or the friend of a sister who is doing well in Japan or Korea. They view these countries as more realistic dreams than the US and Australia, which are out of their reach due to cost and because people they know have not chosen that route.

The possibility of exploring scholarship opportunities for university abroad or in Nepal is not on their radar. But their educational background has given them the confidence to dream beyond the

Gulf and attempt language tests for Japan and Korea.

Three of the four have immediate family with Gulf migration experience. Rajan’s brother is in the UAE, Niraj’s father is a former Qatar migrant, and Bisan’s brother is a gym instructor in Saudi Arabia.

Niraj is the son of a Qatar migrant returnee who spent over a decade overseas to provide for his family. “Things were much easier for us financially when my father was in Qatar compared to now when he is back,” he explains. “Now my father wants to send me to a better-paying destination country like Korea or Japan.”

To this Rajan adds, “Even if we do end up going to the Gulf, we will make sure we take proper skills training and go there as trained workers, most likely in hospitality which we already have

work experience in.”

The students are surprised how widely their social media posts of shirt-signing went. But they want it to turn into tangible action. They want the government to pay serious attention to the dreams and future of the 500,000 plus Nepali students taking Grade 12 exams every year, for whom the education certificate does not amount to much to get jobs with liveable wages.

In less than a month, they will take their final board examinations after which they have important life decisions to make. There are uncertainties ahead, including who will be the first to leave amongst this tight-knit group of friends, or what the ultimate destination will be.

What is certain is that sooner or later, they will all leave. Chances are, they will see each other in the Gulf indeed. 🇳🇵

like numbers that I noted with the help of colleagues. Other than that, necessity also pressured me to learn.

I had to know how to communicate with my *mudir* to ask him for basic supplies like food items or toiletries as the closest shops were quite a distance away and I was not mobile. I also tried to be extra attentive when he gave me instructions in Arabic at work, some of which I used to note and memorise. Somehow, I have learnt to manage.

Other than Arabic, I have not learnt anything significant after coming here. Sure, I now know how to drive a tractor or fix a broken leg of an injured goat, but I do not feel I have achieved much. There is not much innovation in the agriculture work I do here. With my limited educational background and training, there are not many professional opportunities available for people like me.

But then again, if everyone becomes a doctor or engineer, who will grow your vegetables and ensure there is food to eat? Even so, it is difficult to survive as a farmer.

Over the last decade, I managed to buy land and build a house back home. I send my children to good schools in Nepal. Whether I like it or not here, I must stick around in Saudi Arabia for my children’s education. After all, are not Nepalis overseas also all making these sacrifices to secure their children’s futures?

All things considered, I earn Rs40,000-50,000 a month depending on tips, with food and lodging covered by my *mudir*. This provides an important cushion for my family. I had to work for a dozen years with the same *mudir* to be where I am today. If I had the guarantee of earning even Rs30,000 a month back home, I would stay back in Nepal with my family.

Even if we can manage to earn Rs1,000 a day as a labourer in Nepal,

it will not be enough if the work is not consistent throughout the month. Here, I get a lump sum every month even as a farmer, and do not have to worry about getting work the next day or about my accommodation and food. Why would I or anyone in my position live in this monotony, far from my family, if I did not have to?

There are other *majra* in the neighborhood I live in with many migrant workers from Asia and Africa who also did not see much hope for themselves in their home countries. I do not think any of us are particularly happy to be here in the desert, but none of us have better alternatives. I know of three Nepalis who live in my area and work in neighbouring *majra*. We meet every few days to chat and have dinner. It gives me a sense of belonging and a break from this routine. Just like the Saudi Arabia outside the farm is unfamiliar to me, Kathmandu during my visits home also feels very foreign. I pass through it every two years and do not linger there much. When I come home for my vacation, I am in a rush to go back to my village to my family in Nawalparasi.

When it is time to return to Saudi Arabia, I try to spend as much time with my family in my village as I can before saying goodbye. Even when there is time to see Kathmandu before my flight, I do not really feel like it because I am weighed down with the heaviness of leaving home and family. 🇳🇵

Translated from a 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 with ‘Diaspora Diaries’ in the subject line.

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Sherli goes trekking

A four-year-old Nepali goes forth to discover Nepal

■ Sahina Shrestha

Sherli Doma Sherpa goes hiking regularly in Shivapuri National Park. She has trekked around Lamjung, explored Parsa in scorching heat, and decorated houses in Dharan. Last month Sherli went on a seven day trek to Gosaikunda, skipping up the steep slope like a mountain goat in freezing sleet.

Sherli is just four years old. But her travel atlas can make even the grown-ups envious. Parents Anamica Gauchan and Prem Tsering Sherpa have also taken Sherli to Surkhet, Bhojpur, Kaski.

“We wanted her to explore her country’s geographical, social and cultural diversities as much as possible from a young age,” says Anamica. “She can value her roots, the place she is born in and experience the majestic charm our country can offer.”

Sherli’s explorations actually began when she was just five months old, when she joined her mother and father on a work trip to Dhading district.

After giving birth, Anamica knew she did not want to compromise on breastfeeding once she was back at work. So, she took Sherli along during her fieldwork. Her husband Prem, who is a documentary filmmaker and also leads solo expeditions, joined them whenever he could take time off work.

What initially started as a necessity, soon turned into an



PHOTOS: NIRJALA SHARMA

adventure when the two realised how easily Sherli adapted to the new environments, and that she enjoyed travelling.

Sherli’s travel took a break during the pandemic hit. And even though she started pre-school this year, her parents manage to take her out when they can.

In early March, Prem planned a trip to Gosaikunda with two of their family friends. At the very

last minute, it was decided that Anamica and Sherli would join the trip as well. They informed Sherli’s school and went off on a week-long trek.

Though Sherli had traveled to quite a few places, she had never been to such a high altitude. So, unlike the traditional route from Dhunche, the group started their journey from Kutumsang (2,371m) of Sindhupalchok to ensure that she



adjusted to the altitude.

“I was a bit worried since it was their first time,” admits Prem. “But she finished the trek without a hitch.”

One complaint she did have was not seeing any red pandas along the way. Her parents had promised red panda sightings, but the only one they saw was on a poster along the way.

“Snow and eggs,” Sherli says, were her favourite part of the Gosaikunda trip. Throughout the trek, she would fuel up on eggs at the start of the day for the journey up snow-bound trails.

It had started snowing on the third day at Ghopte (3,430m), giving Sherli the first snowfall of her life. She took it all in stride in her white sneakers, singing rhymes and eating

snacks. Her parents carried her only when the road got too tricky.

“She constantly surprised us,” says Anamica. “She taught us the true meaning of gratitude like when she turned up to the sky and suddenly uttered ‘Thank you God’ in between the trekking days when the weather forecasted rainfall, but turned sunny and bright.”

Trekkers they met on the way often commented how brave the ‘babu’ was. Sherli would promptly correct them: “I am not babu, I am nanu.”

When she is not out and about, just like any other children her age, Sherli spends time making art, reading and enjoys going to school.

Following the trek, Sherli’s parents have noticed she has become more assertive. ‘Diva meets Dora’ is how her mother Anamica describes her personality. “She has a sense of adventure, is kind and empathetic but knows how to stand up for herself,” she says.

Named after two cultures Sher’pa’ and Thaka’li’, Sherli’s sense of adventure runs in the family. Apart from her own parents who enjoy their time outdoors, her great grandfather was the late Min Bahadur Sherchan, who became the oldest person to climb Mt Everest in 2008, before Japanese climber Yuichiro Miura beat his record in 2013.

Her parents want to nurture Sherli’s sense of adventure as much as possible. Next year at age five, the parents want to take her on the Everest Base Camp trek. 🇳🇵

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