

New Nepali decade

■ Sonia Awale

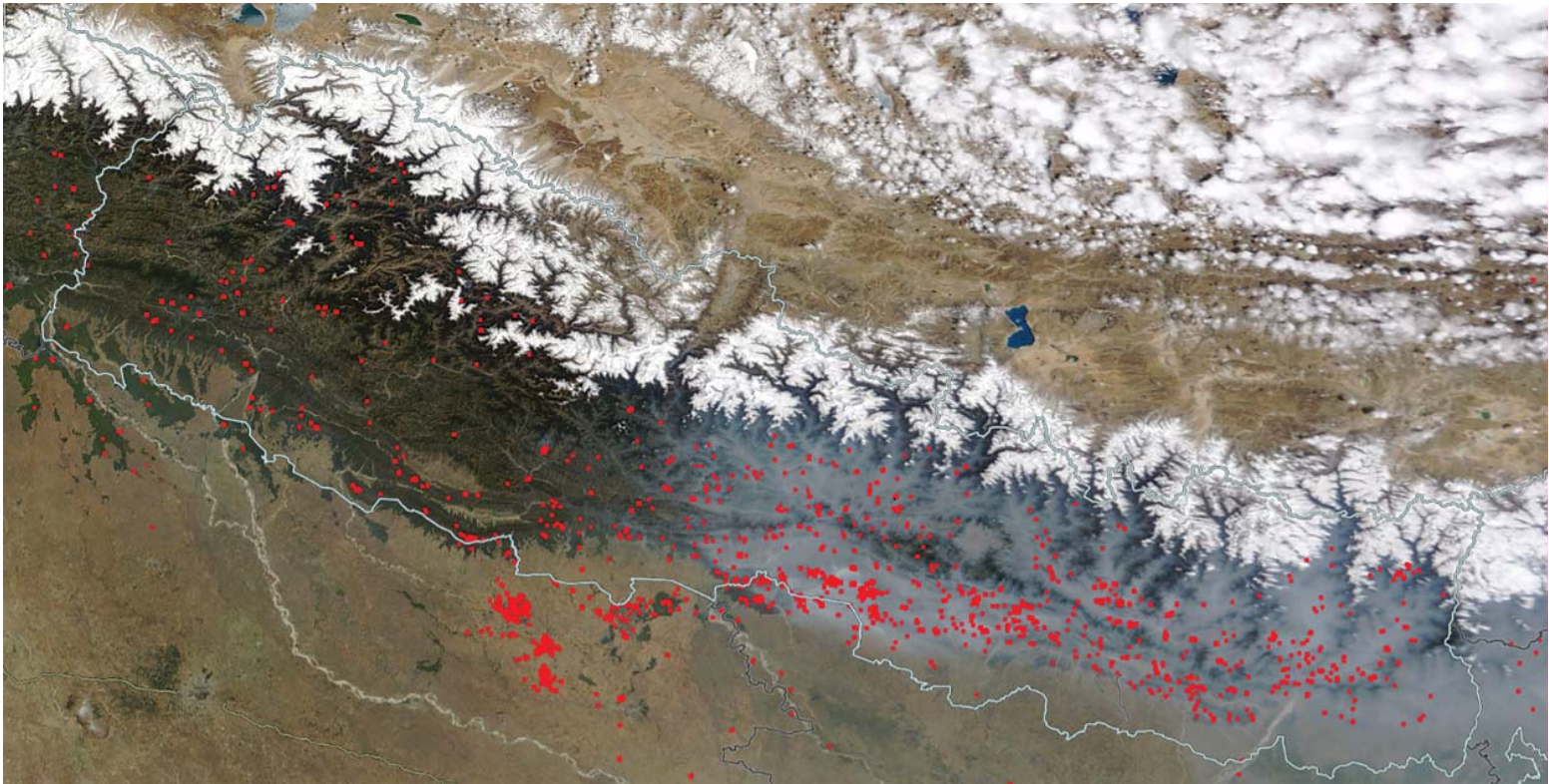
On new year's day BS 2080 on Friday, we also embark on a new decade in Nepal. If this was the Gregorian calendar, by 2080 Nepal's population will be in decline and most Nepalis will be above 50 years old. Perhaps the mass migration of Nepalis for overseas work will have stopped, and the country will finally be on the path to stability, prosperity and equity.

Anything is possible in the next 57 years. But one thing is certain: at the current rate of global heating, global average temperature will have risen from the present 1.1°C to at least 2.3°C above the preindustrial era. The Himalaya will heat up even more: by 3°C. Which means nearly half the glaciers in High Asia will be gone. And that is just the optimistic scenario. It could be worse.

Even at current rates of heating, springs are going dry, forcing people to migrate. Prolonged droughts and destructive floods affect harvests. Wildfires like the ones we are witnessing this week across Central Nepal will be even more severe and widespread.

On Wednesday, the Air Quality Index (AQI) in Kathmandu hit 400 due to smoke, emissions and imported pollution. Last week the Ministry of Health and Population and USAID put up huge HEPA filter lungs to focus attention on Kathmandu's pollution hazard. In just five days, the lungs have started going black (see pictures online).

In its BS 2080s decade, the Nepal government should be prepared for more disasters. Added to the country's seismic risk, we have to be ready for the impact of climate collapse and adapt to future risk. Multi-hazard preparedness means countering weather extremes, more intense storms, more destructive debris flows on rivers, more frequent lightning strikes, glacial lake outburst



A NASA-FIRMS satellite composite of wildfire hotspots across Nepal on 12 April (above). Close-up of forests on fire in Taplejung (below, left) and Nuwakot (below, right).



PHOTOS: RSS

floods, landslides, more extensive wildfires.

Mitigation is a low-hanging fruit. For Nepal it is not so much about reducing our carbon footprint to save the planet, but reducing our petroleum imports to save the economy. Nepal will soon have surplus electricity all year round, we need to have the transmission lines in place and an incentive policy to switch to electric transport and cooking so we can reduce our trade deficit.

Switching to electricity will slash our petroleum import bill significantly, also improving public health. The fund can then be diverted to clean energy if there is political will to do so. The old leaders are tried, tested and failed. The new parties at least have world renowned atmospheric scientists, economists, disaster preparedness experts and physicians. Let us give these technocrats a chance to prepare Nepal for the future. 🇳🇵

हिमाल भित्तेपात्रो

Happy New Year BS 2080 too
all readers and partners.

Go online to download calendar.

NEW YEAR
FOOD SPECIAL

PAGE 6-7, 10-11

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Last week of the old year

Even by Nepali standards, politics in the last week of the old year was fast-paced. The missteps and scandals came thicker and faster than usual.

Kathmandu mayor Balen Shah declared on Twitter that he would start dumping Kathmandu's garbage inside the Singha Darbar to punish uncooperative national politicians, who he said also needed to be thrown into the landfill site at Sisdoles.

Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister Narayan Kaji Shrestha went walkabout in the departure hall of Kathmandu airport to talk to one or two of the 3,000 migrant workers leaving that day. Someone told him this would be a good social media photo-op to showcase a caring government, but it backfired. The migrant worker Shrestha decided to speak to just glared at him, and he cringed as the minister tried to tap him reassuringly on the shoulder.

Summit Hotel in Lalitpur had for four decades been a leafy refuge for Nepalis and expats alike. Two years ago, it was bought by Nepal's only self-declared dollar billionaire, and also a Nepali Congress (NC) member of parliament, to erect a pair of 17 story luxury hotel and apartment towers. It turns out he had not got a building permit nor done an EIA, and all the digging led to the collapse of neighbouring homes this week.

Nepal's cybersphere has started leaking like a Melamchi pipe in the runup to by-elections in Chitwan, Tanahu and Bara. This is an important test for the new RSP and the political future of its chair Rabi Lamichhane.

The defection of economist Swarnim Wagle from the NC to the RSP after accusing the conjugal kangresi leadership of "grand larceny" has turned Tanahu into a critical electoral battle ground.

In the midst of all this, hospital tycoon Durga Prasai (he, of the 'red rice' fame) leaked a WhatsApp conversation with a RSP lawmaker asking for Rs20 million so he (the MP) could give the money to Lamichhane's "core team" to make him health minister. The RSP quickly suspended the lawmaker, who it turns out had more chequered dealings in Pokhara, and went into damage control mode.

Meanwhile, Lamichhane made one of his needlessly distasteful remarks by saying he was willing to be sacrificed at Gadimai like hundreds of buffaloes if caught being bribed to make people ministers.

By current South Asian standards these are minor infractions. Many in Nepal's executive, judiciary, legislative, and bureaucracy may be on the take, but democracy is still on the rails. The media can still say the army is bloated and commercialised, and the ex-brass can rebut in politely worded op-eds.

Media outrage about the Home Ministry requiring birth registration of offspring of single mothers to be signed by a maternal uncle and not the mother, prompted the ministry to quickly backtrack.

Nepal's democracy is work in progress, but it is vibrant and open. Democracy is a mechanism for rule of law by an inclusive elected leadership. It is supposed to empower citizens to bring reform through participation. Leaders who do not perform can be thrown out at the ballot box.

No other system of government guarantees the right to free expression or political preference. No other system promotes peaceful competition in a free marketplace of ideas.

There is a tendency to blame democracy, and not those who abuse it. If we do that, we throw the baby out with the bathwater. Nepal's obsolete politicians think that to govern means to rule over, not serve those who elected them.

This is why despite living in an open society in Nepal, human rights continue to be violated, tolerance is decreasing, constitutional provisions for inclusion are not working as designed, central leaders have made federalism dysfunctional.

Speaking at a program on 10 April, former chief justice

Kalyan Shrestha, former ambassador Nilamber Acharya and former house speaker Daman Nath Dhungana agreed that it was time to review the implementation of the Constitution. They blamed the political parties for governance failure that

was leading to economic and socio-cultural breakdown.

"The only clauses in the constitution that have been implemented are the ones that directly benefit the political leaders," Shrestha stated. "No decisions that deliver justice, development and rights have been taken. The only industry that is thriving in Nepal today is politics."

The concept of proportional representation is blatantly misused in elections, tickets for candidacies are bought and sold. Acharya feels it is time to review the whole process so that only a majority party or the largest party forms a government.

Dhungana also wants the Constitution to be reviewed, but says the fault is not in the rules but in people breaking them.

Nepalis have to be wary of the intolerant and authoritarian winds blowing from the South, and safeguard our hard-won freedoms. Despite the disillusionment with the political leadership, the electoral mechanism is throwing up alternative candidates and parties. And that is why next week's by-elections are so important for the new year 2080 and beyond.

governance was beginning to work—hinting at how much more we could have achieved in the past ten years if only our national-level political leaders were more accountable.

Alas, disillusionment and apathy with democracy set the stage for the flames of the peoples' war to spread. It is clear now that the Maoists were not particularly clever or strong, it was just that successive elected governments were so feckless, faction-ridden and preoccupied with power. They are back to their antics this week, trying to be more radical than the Maoists by raising the republican slogan.

In the coming weeks, the novelty of hearing their speeches will wear off, and hopefully the mainstream media will not devote so many column inches to the comrades unless they have something particularly important or jargon-free to say.

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

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Nepal's obsolete politicians think that to govern means to rule over, not serve those who elected them.

ONLINE PACKAGES



HIGH AND DRY

In Mustang, a trans-Himalayan region that receives less than 200 mm of rain a year, erratic rain and snowfall have led to an acute water crisis. Amidst the dramatic scenery, remote villages like Samzong and Yara are literally drying up. Rivers are a trickle, taps are dry and crops are desiccated. Life was already difficult, now it has become a lot harder. Watch the video on our YouTube channel and subscribe for more.



TASTE OF NEPAL

This week *Nepali Times* brings readers food special in its New Year 2080 edition. Watch this video of Prashanta Khanal who came out with a cookbook last year as he explains the culinary diversity of Nepal with over 100 ethnic communities residing in the country, each with their own taste and flavours. *Dal bhat* special on page 6-7.

TIMS RULE

This sums thing up pretty well ('Government is God', Editorial, #1156). These are ill thought out plans and procedures that yield to the trekking agencies and guide cartels, at cost to Nepalis.

Roger Ray

I have no idea what is happening to Nepal. It is as though those at the helm of the tourism ship are trying to run it aground. The incompetence and lack of understanding is overwhelming.

Roy Francis

Bulldozing the road through to Ghorepani, dumping debris on the old trail... One wonders what ACAP does with all the fees it collects, and who planned or allowed this destruction. The trail is now dangerous.

Teresa Williams

Flights to Lukla from Ramechhap is another factor that will keep people away or prevent them from returning.

Stephen Ash

There is always freedom for people to go anywhere in Nepal other than to restricted areas. Having a guide does not limit freedom, in fact it increases it, as they will not have to worry about safety. Guides can be communicators and teachers of culture. What I see being interpreted as lack of freedom is actually being alone. That is an absolutely wrong notion.

Samnbiddev

NEPALI DIASPORA

Talent, drive and now giving back to younger Nepalis ('Adventures of a Nepali coffee aficionado', Laxmi Prasad Timilsina, page 10-11). This is really inspiring.

Himali Upadhyaya

This is extremely sad ('No country for young men', Priti Thapa, #1155). I feel really sorry for these young kids graduating to go abroad.

Bins Aryal

WHAT'S TRENDING



Adventures of a coffee aficionado

by Laxmi Prasad Timilsina

When he started out as a waiter in the UAE, it was not easy at first for Laxmi Prasad Timilsina. He learned on the job to become a barista, and is helping bring the coffee culture back to Nepal. Read the latest on Diaspora Diaries on page 10-11.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

Dengue outbreak this monsoon

by Sonia Awale

Last year, dengue ravaged Nepal. Public health experts warn that the virus can strike again in the rainy season in 2 months as the virus hibernates within the larvae of infected mosquitoes which are just waiting to hatch. Get details at nepalitimes.com

Most popular on Twitter

Government is God

Editorial

Nepal's tourism slogan 'Guest Is God' is turning into a farce. The TIMS and guide provision bureaucratises trekking, adding to hassles visitors face and increasing chances of extortion, bribery along the trails. Join the discussion online.

Most commented

Chopper vs Chauri

by Bhadra Sharma

The Nepal government suddenly banned cargo helicopters to Everest Base Camp at the beginning of the spring mountaineering season and told expeditions to use porters and yaks. The decision has been greeted with cheers and jeers, expeditions face delays. Full story on our website.

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Last year's #dengue virus is in #mosquito larvae, ready to spread when the rains come. Local government must start the search-and-destroy larvae campaign now to prevent an #outbreak this #monsoon. Read the full report for the details:



TaraTeacher @TaraTeacher1

Dengue is far worse than Covid for most people. We need to give it the same amount of attention and get on to removing larvae now before we have another terrible summer like the last.



Jan Brunson @jan_brunson

This grabbed my attention as a couple of doctors mentioned to me (unprompted) their concerns about #dengue in the coming monsoon.



Paras K Pokharel @Paras21K

Post-monsoon has higher chances of Aedes aegypti breeding even in low quantities of water that is left unattended for a few days. Although dengue could be perennial & endemic for Kathmandu, bigger outbreaks in the rainy season.

1,000 WORDS



RSS

SEEING RED: Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal disembarking from a Buddha Air flight in Dhangadi on 9 April to participate in the third graduation ceremony of Sudurpaschim University.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

A lost decade

Twenty years ago this week we were marking the beginning of a new Nepali decade, as we are this week. That was the 2060s. Much has changed since, but as we enter the 2080s, so much is the same. If not worse.

The country has gone through a decade-long war, abolished monarchy and ushered in federalism. And yet, the old leaders have not changed, they are just older. They were and are as short-sighted, power-hungry and feckless as ever before. Former rebels are now the government, but a just and fair Nepal is a mirage that keeps receding.

Excerpts from the editorial published in issue #140 11-17 April 2003:



This is also the last week of the 2050s. Politically, this has been a lost decade. A decade of unkept promises where selfishness, short-sightedness and a complete disregard for the national interest took its toll. Even so, progress was made in education and health. Local self-



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TURKISH AIRLINES

Winds of change sweep Mustang

Mustang district has always adapted to socio-cultural and trade influences from the south and north, but this trend has accelerated bringing drastic change to the lives and livelihoods of this region north of the Himalaya.



COMMENT
Jagannath Adhikari

When I first visited Mustang in 1992, we had to walk for a week from Pokhara just to get to Muktinath. Today, this shrine is an 8 hour jeep drive from Pokhara. Nearly all villages in the district are now connected to dirt roads. Horses and mules are still seen, now mainly used to haul goods between villages, or to carry manure to farms.

Horse race at this year's Yartung Festival is a symbolic display of the animal in this rugged and arid region, but it is now more of a tourist attraction displaying a way of life that is on the verge of extinction.

In the dining hall of a lodge in Kagbeni, a middle aged woman was threading wool to weave jumpers for her grandchildren. I had stayed in the same lodge 10 years earlier. This time, the woman told me that her children had moved to Kathmandu and overseas, and she has rented the hotel to a businessman from Dhading. Many other lodge-owners here have done the same.

The pace of outmigration from Mustang has accelerated, as locals move out for better education and jobs. The original Thakali, Loba and Gurung families still own property here, but they hire people from Dolpo, Dhading, Gorkha, Prabat, Maygdi, Rukum and Rolpa to take care of their businesses and farms.

In Mustang, highlanders are coming down and lowlanders are moving up. In some cases, down-valley families are simply asked to stay and look after property without paying rent. Some elders still remain, but with the young men and women away, there is a demand for outside caretakers.

Many of the shops in Jomsom are run by outsiders who have

rented the space from the Mustangi. Most jeep drivers are from outside, even though absentee locals own the vehicles. It is in fact difficult to tell a local from an outsider since the migrants have developed good social connections. On this visit, a lodge-owner in Muktinath said he had hired a young manager from Dailekh to look after his place.

This could be the reason why despite depopulation of most mountain districts in Nepal, the 2021 census actually recorded an increase in Mustang. In 2001, Mustang's population was 14,981, it declined to 13,452 in 2011, and bounced back to 14,596 in 2021.

The 2021 census also showed that 5,907 people (41% of Mustang's population) were recent migrants, mostly from outside. Another 1,207 Mustang people live overseas -- two-thirds of them in Europe and North America.

Along the traditional trekking route from Lete to Muktinath and Lo Manthang, nearly every house has one or two family members working or living in the US, Japan, France, UK, and Australia. Unlike other parts of Nepal, very few are in the Gulf or Malaysia.

Most schools in the district have mainly students from migrant families, and the enrollment has shrunk to as low as 4-12 per primary school. This is why the government



ONE FOR THE OTHER: One third of households in Tetang (*above*) have moved out. Those who remain have at least one family member working abroad. People from Rukum, Rolpa and Dolpa districts have moved here instead. There used to be 32 households in Chusang village (*below, right*) but there are only a handful now.



PHOTOS: JAGANNATH ADHIKARI



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Team Europe for Covid

Nepal has received over 1.5 million doses of Pfizer-BioNTech's Covid-19 vaccines donated by the governments of Austria, Czech Republic, France, Greece and Italy through the Covax facility. So far 83.1% of Nepal's total population has been vaccinated against Covid-19 while 9,418,479 have received booster shots.

Internet on Turkish

Turkish Airlines will offer free messaging service to all passengers on international flights where internet access is available via Turk Telekom. The service is complimentary to all



Miles&Smiles member passengers and joining non-members. Says CEO Bilal Ekşi: "By combining our innovative approach with customer satisfaction, we are ensuring our passengers will be able to freely message their loved ones from above the clouds."



Tamu media in Tang Ting

The Association of Tamu (Gurung) Journalists, Nepal (ATJON) held its 5th General Convention in Tang Ting village in Kaski last week supported by the Tang Ting diaspora mainly in the UK, Hong Kong, and Japan. The 100 participants elected a new executive committee and decided to promote tourism in the scenic region. "Tang ting has great tourism potential since it is only an hour and a half drive from Pokhara with a 360 degree panorama of the Annapurnas from Krau Danda," says Jit Gurung, one of the attendees. www.tangtingtourism.com

Tata EV

Tata electric vehicles are available in Nepal with a large charging network available in hospitals, banks, restaurants, malls and more. Tata EVs come with a 205mm ground clearance, Ziptron technology and highly rated battery pack. Customers can get an 8 year or 160,000km warranty on batteries and motor.

Samsung New Year

Samsung has launched a New Year 2080 scheme for customers on electronic products such as TVs, refrigerators, washing machines and more. The company has also set a 41% cashback for consumers. Discounts up to 25% on QLED TVs and Crystal 4K UHD TV, 25% cashback on refrigerator and 28% on washing machines.

New Asian Paints

Asian Paints has launched Silicon Shield and Hydraulic which are waterproofing agents that protect walls from



efflorescence and dampness. The company has also added two new product ranges to its Royal Play category of interior décor.

Toyota upgrade

Toyota Nepal conducted an upgrade event from this week in Toyota outlets across the country including Kathmandu, Pokhara, Chitwan, Pokhara, Butwal, Birtamode and Dhangadi.



Bajaj turns 25

Bajaj celebrated its 25 years by organising the 'Bajaj 25 Years of Leadership - Leader's meet 2023' this week, launching a new year campaign offering 25% down payment, Rs10,000 cash discount and 1kg silver for 25 people buying Bajaj motorcycles.

Summit collapse

Digging for the construction of the 17-story luxury hotel and apartment towers Summit Residency in Sanepa Heights has led to the collapse of neighbouring homes this week. Upon inspection, Mayor Chiribabu Maharjan said that the municipality had not passed an EIA or building permit for Summit Residency which was formerly Summit Hotel. The hotel has since released a statement claiming it tried to present an EIA and a building permit to the municipality.

is trying to merge schools. A few private medium schools in places like Jomsom have children of local families, but most others have sent theirs to Pokhara or Kathmandu.

A prominent politician running a hotel here says that the economy could get a boost if people returned and invested in Mustang. But that is not likely to happen, since most moved out at an early age.

At this pace of in and out migration, a demographic shift in the district's ethnic composition may force a redefinition of who a Mustangi is. But migration is not a new phenomenon, in fact even the current inhabitants of Mustang once moved in from Jumla and Tibet.

Mustang has a potential to become a trading hub for Chinese commodities, with the upgrading of the road to the border at Korala. Shops in places like Lo Manthang sell mainly goods from north of the border.

Trading opportunities have helped generate income and employment. Mustang's new ethnic heterogeneity is also enhancing social and cultural capital, and entrepreneurship. But there are also questions as to who is actually benefiting from these changes.

Mustangi are well known as a resilient people well able to adapt to changes. Some of them who moved out when salt trade with Tibet declined in the late 1950s, sought other economic opportunities elsewhere.

That trend continues to the present day. They are moving out in search of prosperity while still holding onto property back home, hoping one day to return when things are right. 🇳🇵

Jagannath Adhikari is an independent researcher on socio-economic and environmental issues, and occasionally teaches in Nepal and overseas.

■ Daman Rai in Khotang

Until some years ago, this village in Halesi of Khotang used to be a bustling hamlet of 16 households nestled amidst terraced fields. Today, it is a ghost village.

The thatched-roof houses are dilapidated, their walls have caved in and there are bushes and grass growing out of the ruins (pictured, right). There used to be 18 families in Purano Gaun, only a handful of people remain.

Dharma Raj Karki is the only one whose entire family is still in the village. Navaraj Regmi's family has already moved to Biratnagar, but he has had to stay back in the village to teach at the local school. Mahesh Regmi's family has settled in Kathmandu.

Only Kamal Raj Regmi of the Nepali Congress is home in the next village of Kathare-Siruvani, forced

to stay behind because he is a former ward chair.

As elsewhere in Nepal, farmers impacted by springs going dry due to climate crisis are moving to the Tarai. Last year's wildfires in Khotang affected many families.

Not everyone who has migrated has relocated to the plains, some have just moved down the mountain to the fertile plains of Regmitar along the Gaighat-Diktal road hoping that business will pick up.

"People used to have to travel

for days to buy salt and rice, and sell ghee," says Hari Budhathoki of Regmitar whose relatives have moved on to Gaighat in Udaypur district, or Biratnagar.

Many people from eastern Nepal have followed the footsteps of their forebears to migrate even further afield to Nepali-speaking regions in Northeast India or Sikkim. This is also the recruitment region for young Nepalis wishing to join the British, Indian or Nepali militaries.

Khotang is one of the 32 of

DAMAN RAI

Nepal's 77 districts which has witnessed a sharp decline in population. Most of those districts are in eastern Nepal, with adjoining Bhojpur and Tehrathum witnessing the sharpest declines.

But even among them, Khotang has been hit especially hard – the district's population fell from 206,321 in 2011 to 175,340 in 2021. The annual population decrease is -1.56%, the second-lowest out of all of Nepal's districts.

The village of Bahungaun is completely deserted, its 40 houses abandoned. In Gairikhola, only Judda Bahadur Karki's family remains. It is the same story in village after village with just a few elderly men and women.

This does not surprise ward chair Anish Karki of Halesi Tuwachung-11, since there have been no incentives for locals to stay. There is no help in finding market for the area's produce, harvests are destroyed by wild animals, and water supply is erratic. Schools and health posts are not properly run, and there are no jobs.

Says Budathoki: "Having a vegetable patch or livestock is no longer a measure of wellbeing here. Today, a family's worth is determined by whether it owns own land in the Tarai." 🇳🇵

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KUNDA DIXIT

KHANA KHANU BHO?

Bhojan Griha reopens offering guests the Nepali staple

When Nepalis run into each other on the street, most greet each other with “खाना खानु भो?” which literally means ‘have you eaten your rice?’ It is our ‘good morning’, ‘good evening’ and everything in between. And one is not supposed to respond with a detailed account of the food that was eaten.

But what is it about *dal bhat* that Nepalis (and many visitors) just cannot do without? It is a comfort food, like a warm hug. For Nepalis outside Nepal, it is a reminder of home. And some trekkers seem to get addicted to the carb kick *dal bhat* gives.

“It is so wholesome, so tasty.

Perhaps it is tasty because it is wholesome,” explains Prabigya Basnet of Bhojan Griha, a Nepali restaurant in Nepal that has just reopened in a renovated historic building in Dilli Bazar.

She adds: “Everything is freshly cooked and prepared, there are all these spices and different flavours. It is a balanced diet, it is ayurveda on a plate.”

Bhojan Griha offers options for everyone: vegetarian, non-vegetarian and even vegans. White fluffy rice (or brown, or red) flavoured with ghee, warm and hearty lentil soup, seasonal vegetables, a potato dish and *achar*, perhaps of *gundruk*, *lapsi* or radish. A bowl of yogurt or a glass of lassi can be a refreshing accompaniment. For meat lovers, there is either a chicken or mutton curry. Some add fish or eggs to the set.

At Bhojan Griha most dishes

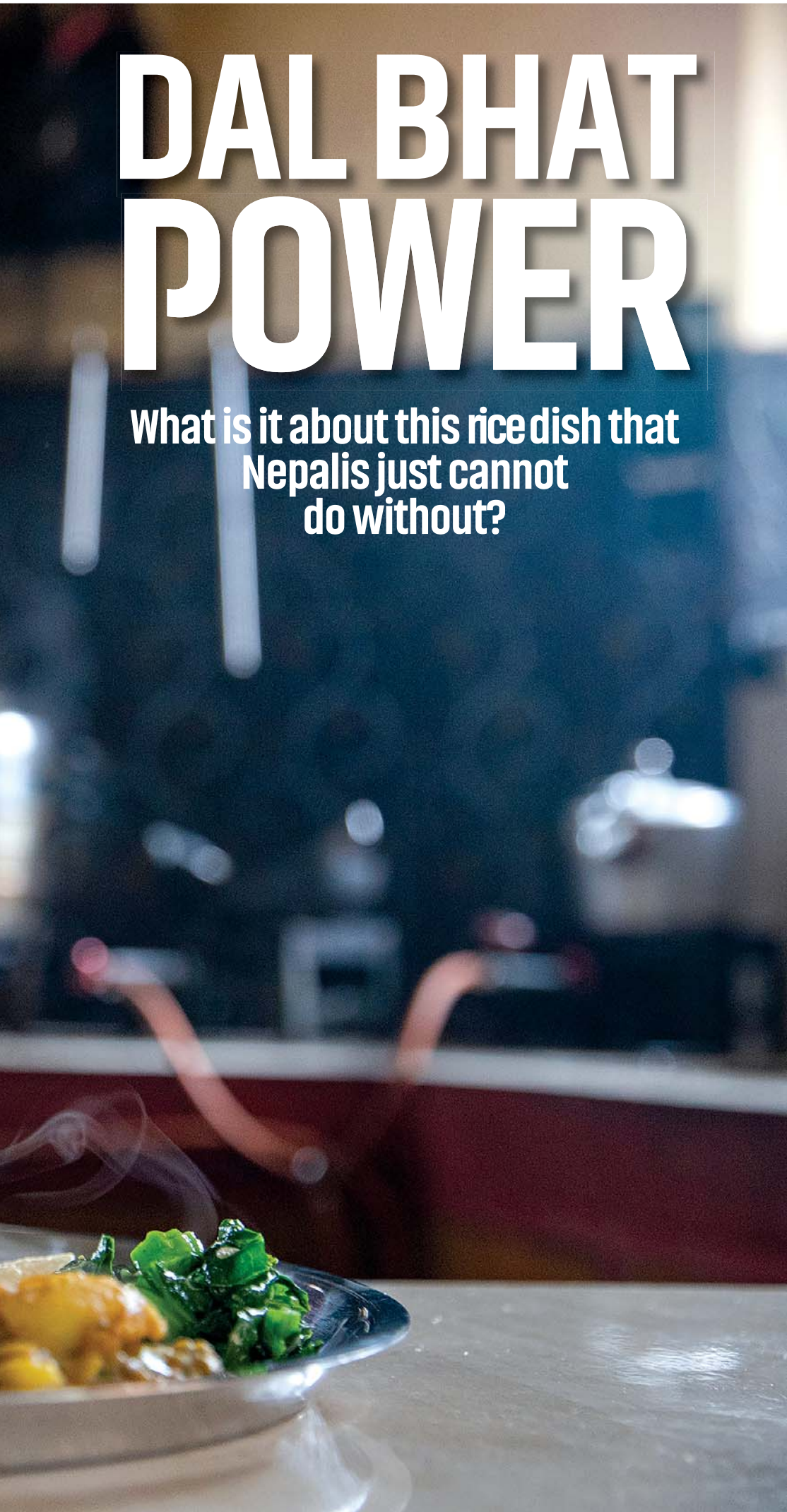
are prepared using organic produce from Basnet’s family-run Three Trees Permaculture Farm in Bhaktapur. “The idea is to share and preserve ethnic Nepali cuisine, and give visitors a flavour of Nepali food and culture,” says Basnet, as a group performs Tamang *selo* dance number between the low-set chairs and tables.

Before the main course, there are starters: *makai* and *bhatmas* combo (popcorn and soybean), *alu-jira* (a quintessentially Nepali potato with cumin pickle), *aila* (the potent Newa liquor), steamed momo and *quati* (the healthy sprout bean broth).

Dal bhat is served on a traditional *charas ko thal* (a brass plate) with the black lentil and greens arrayed around a mound of rice. Seasonal vegetable dishes, including cauliflower and mushroom, are added, as are chicken and mutton curries.

Bhojan Griha has a set menu but also does à la carte with festival-specific menus. The day this reviewer visited, most tables were taken inside the newly-refurbished interior.

The restaurant is housed in a 150-year-old heritage building that was once the residence of the



DAL BHAT POWER

What is it about this rice dish that Nepalis just cannot do without?

PHOTOS: JANA AŠENBRENEROVÁ

royal priest of the kings of Nepal. It was set up in 1998 by tourism entrepreneur Bharat Basnet who renovated the crumbling building.

Says Prabigya Basnet about her father's passion for nature and culture: "Growing up, he used to take us for clean-up campaigns and bird-watching, he made us outdoorsy and nature lovers, he always said we can give back a lot. So I always dreamt of doing something in Nepal,"

She also heads Kheti Bazar

which sells fresh produce from the family's farm and has a store called Khali Khutta that specialises in handmade products made with ethically sourced, biodegradable materials.

At Rs3,525 per plate, Bhojan Griha is on the pricer side, and perhaps could have experimented with some of its dishes. But the new modern ambience and historic setting make for a gastronomically stimulating night out. 🇳🇵

Sonia Awale

Maila Dai's kitchen

Early spring snow is coming down in big flakes outside the kitchen window in the coastal Norwegian town of Kristiansand as Harald Eikeland (right) adds *timur*, *methi* and *lwang* to the tomato *achar*. The dal is bubbling away, the scent of steaming Thai jasmine brown rice fills the room, and the *kauli kerau* is ready.

Eikeland is now a teacher back in Norway, a world away from Palpa in Nepal where he developed a passion for preparing and eating *dal bhat*.

His culinary tutor was Subhadra Bhusal who taught the Norwegian everything: taking him to Tansen Bazar to buy the best *silauti* stone and pestle to grind spices, laying down the rules of the exact condiments for each dish, and the cooking sequence for different items.

Bhusal even taught him to offer rice grains as *sida* to the gods with a pre-meal prayer, a practice that is now mostly ignored in Nepal. Later in Kathmandu, Eikeland was a premium customer at Nanglo in Darbar Marg, where the chef gave him more hands-on tips on preparing *dal bhat*.

Recently, Eikeland was chosen as a finalist from among 5,000 contestants in the Norwegian MasterChef tv show, where he prepared *chiura*, *chhoila* and *kachila* as a pre-*dal bhat* snack. He did not win, but was happy to have gotten so far.

"Whatever I know is from Subhadra Didi. She was very strict and even used to slap me lightly if I did something wrong. She was a perfectionist, and swore by *tori ko tel*, no other cooking oil would do," recalls Eikeland, whose Nepali name is Maila Dai.

Asked what makes *dal bhat* so popular even among non-Nepalis, Maila Dai says it is the simplicity, diversity and freshness of the ingredients that gives the dish its healthy and tasty attributes. This is probably why it is such a staple during treks in the Himalaya. The aroma and taste of *dal bhat* takes Maila Dai and two Nepali students in Kristiansand straight back to Nepal. The only thing missing is *tori ko tel*, and with a forefinger to his lips, he quips: "I used sunflower oil, but don't tell Subhadra Didi that."

protein, vitamins, fibre and other minerals, *dal bhat* can make for a truly balanced diet – that is, if taken in balanced portions, especially as rice often gets bad press for being too carb heavy.

Public health specialist Aruna Uprety explains that *dal bhat* is a good food combination because it is a wholesome source of energy. "When we say *dal bhat*, it is only a short form that also includes *tarkari* and *achar*, and this makes it a complete, fresh and wholesome meal," she says.

Dal bhat is also very easy to make. "Unlike many other grains in Nepal, rice does not take a lot of effort to cook," says Kedar Sharma, who specialises in food writing. "You can set it on your stove and do other things." *Dhindo*, another popular Nepali dish, by contrast, requires continuous monitoring and stirring so that it does not collect in lumps and carbonise.

"And we do not really eat just rice," Sharma adds. "Together with the *dal*, vegetable curry, and *sag*, it all makes the dish taste better. Everything accompanies and enhances the taste and aroma of the rice."



"I don't feel like I have eaten anything till I have had a plate of *dal bhat*," confides Sharmila Paudel, 48, signalling a server to bring some more cauliflower curry. "No matter the time of the day or night," she adds, laughing.

Indeed, just as buses stop for diesel, travelers stop for some *dal bhat* power in Mugling.

Eaten at least twice daily, the steamed rice and a soup of lentil or other pulses, with cooked seasonal vegetables, is not just a Nepali staple, but something deeper and essential.

A rich source of carbohydrate,

And not just in Nepal or South Asia where variants of *dal bhat* are widely popular and staple, the dish is well-loved across the world, including Norway.

"It is hard to have bad *dal bhat* in Nepal, I used to have *dal bhat* outside and come home in the evening and have *dal bhat* again," recalls Norwegian MasterChef contestant and *dal bhat* aficionado Harald Eikeland (see box, below). "In fact *dal bhat* is much more wholesome than Indian food, and can be unhealthy only if you pile on too much white rice on your plate." 🇳🇵



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EVENTS



Ladies night

Enjoy an evening out with girlfriends at Pauline's Rooftop's weekly ladies' night, and get a free cocktail every hour.
Thursdays, Lazimpat, (01) 4002711

Nanee culinary

Head over to The Nanee for a memorable celebration of Biska Jatra and enjoy great food made from the hotel's chefs and two local culinary artists.
13-16 April, The Nanee, Itahen 2, Bhaktapur, 9801132163



Street fest

Have a great start to BS 2080. Watch Nepali artists including Kutumba, Pahlenlo Batti Muni, Trishala Gurung, The elements Bank, Deepak Bajracharya, Laure and more perform.
15 April, 11am onwards, Darbar Marg

Nepal dance fest

The upcoming Nepal dance fest features a 32 hour workshop of eight different dance styles and a live jamming session. Call for more details.
28-29 April, 4pm-10pm, Bento Lounge, 9865083360



Labim Bazaar

Shop local at the Saturday Labim Bazaar to buy baked goods, meals, handicrafts and clothes from 80 vendors.
Saturdays, Labim Mall, Lalitpur, 9861119954

DINING



Blenders

Have a cold reusable bottle of milkshake at this milkshake bar. The exciting flavours and cute light-bulb shaped glass bottle will keep one coming back for more.
City Centre, Kamal Pokhari, 9851219100

MUSIC



Live music

Ring in the new year with music from the band Lunibha, accompanied by good food.
14 April, 5pm onwards, Loyal Lounge, Satungal

Strings

Have a musical start to the year with a live performance from the Strings band.
14 April, 7pm onwards, Shisha Lounge and Bar, Thamel



Avantika Bakshi

Head over to watch a performance of the DynaWhite Vol 3 with DJ Avantika Bakshi this weekend. Bakshi has been invited all the way from India and has performed many solo gigs.
15 April, 5pm onwards, Rs1500, Hyatt Place, Soalteemode



Sound journey

Avata's Yogshala will host an open sound journey session this week. Start the year with an open, calm and peaceful mind.
16 April, 6pm onwards, Avata, Baluwatar

New Year party

Go with friends to the New year's party at The Ai-La lounge where Pasa Rockers will be the main act, and DJ Rolex will host the afterparty.
14 April, 6pm onwards, The Ai-La Lounge, Kumaripati



Piano Piano South

Taste delicious Italian cuisine at Piano Piano South. The grilled pork chop is not to be missed, nor are the varieties of pizza.
Bakhundole, 9802302303

Gangnam Galbi Barbeque

Korean barbecue, grill and stick food, a.k.a. galbi, will tantalise taste buds tempt visitors at Gangnam Galbi Barbeque.
Naxal (01) 4434780

GETAWAY



Shangri-La Village Resort

Get away for a couple days this spring and head to the idyllic Shangri-La Village Resort. Meditate in the outdoor Yoga Pergola, indulge in a massage in Phewa Spa and soak up the sun in the Sanctuary Garden.
Gharipatan, Pokhara (61) 462222

Yatri

Indulge in a relaxing spa treatment which includes a full body massage, body scrub, sauna and steam at Yatri Suites and Spa.
Amrit Marg, Thamel, 9802063086



Maruni Sanctuary Lodge

Chitwan National Park is home to a wide range of flora and fauna. From the comfort of the cabins and cottages of the Maruni Sanctuary Lodge, one can take a peek at the wandering wildlife and nature of the park.
Sauraha (01) 4700632

Hotel Baha

The brick walls, wooden beams and cosy spaces of this Bhaktapur hotel are reminiscent of the cultural heritage of the old town of Bhaktapur.
Bhaktapur (01)6616810



Balthali Village Resort

A simple and cosy retreat just beyond Kathmandu Valley, Balthali Village Resort is ideal for anyone seeking to get away somewhere that is not too far away from the city.
Panauti, Kavre, 9851087772

Detox Café

Looking to kick-start a health regime? Detox Café is the place. With the cafe's healthy smoothie bowls, quinoa salads and green juices, one can still eat out while eating clean.
Labim Mall, Pulchok, 9849371072



Tasneem's Kings Kitchen

Take a gastronomic tour of India at Tasneem's Kings Kitchen. Make sure to call ahead and make reservations.
Pulchok, 9803299610

WEEKEND WEATHER



FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY
31° 15°	32° 16°	31° 15°	32° 15°	33° 15°

Hot and hotter

It is about to get really hot in Kathmandu with the mercury rising to 32°C in the coming days. This is the result of an unseasonal heat wave sweeping the north Indian plains, and the warm air is rising along the mountains. Such high temperatures are more usual for the hottest days in May, so this is indication of something seriously amiss with the climate. This is also very dry heat, making it slightly more bearable. Convention systems may bring some rain on Sunday afternoon. The poor air quality is due to many wildfires in central Nepal, emissions and wind-blown desert sand.

OUR PICK

HBO's *The Last of Us*, the acclaimed 2023 American drama adapted from the celebrated video game of the same name, follows smuggler Joel, who is tasked with escorting Ellie-- a teenager immune to a pandemic caused by a mass fungal infection that leads to its hosts to transform into zombie-like creatures-- across a post-apocalyptic America. Throughout the cross-country trek, Joel, the hardened survivor, and Ellie, humanity's last hope for survival, are forced to endure ruthless killers who stand in their way and confront their painful past. Stars Pedro Pascal and Bella Ramsay.



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

Political trash

The garbage piling up inside Singha Darbar is an indication of the rot that has set in

■ Shristi Karki

On Wednesday, the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) expelled Dhaka Kumar Shrestha from the party and Parliament three days after audio of an alleged WhatsApp conversation was leaked in which he is asking tycoon Durga Shrestha for Rs20 million to be appointed Health Minister.

In the audio, Shrestha says he has to bribe the RSP’s “core team” so he could be appointed health minister in the previous Pushpa Kamal Dahal and K P Oli-led coalition.

The RSP’s Rabi Lamichhane, busy campaigning in by-election in Chitwan, told media on Wednesday that the party would cooperate with corruption watchdog CIAA, where a complaint has already been filed to open an investigation into Shrestha.

But the fact that Shrestha insinuated that the core team was close to Lamichhane has further tainted the RSP chief, who is facing accusations of illegally having a US and Nepali passport. Shrestha himself threatened to reveal the names of the core team.

Shrestha still maintains the voice in the audio is not his. But the other question is why Prasai leaked the recording now, just before the RSP candidates face critical by-elections in Chitwan, Tanahu and Bara on 23 April.

Lamichhane is on the campaign trail in the three districts for himself and his two other candidates, including the economist Swarnim



GOPEN RAI

Wagle in Tanahu who defected to the RSP from the NC, accusing his former party leadership of “grand larceny”. (see Editorial, page 2)

The by-elections are crucial for the future of the RSP and especially important for party chair Lamichhane, for whom the polls will be a test of whether voters have stood by him amid all the scandals.

“The cult of personality that has surrounded Rabi Lamichhane has caused people to fail to objectively evaluate his pre-political life, how he acquired funding to run for office, as well as work as a politician,” says political analyst Indra Adhikari.

She adds: “Many politically aware people in November voted for change, and it remains to be seen if people in Chitwan still think he represents change. This is not to say that the RSP does not have promising young leaders.”

Dhaka Shrestha’s tape scandal has invited additional public scrutiny of the party that has promoted a strong anti-corruption stance. Goodwill towards the party also took a hit when Lamichhane became Home Minister in January and Dol Prasad Aryal was made Labour Minister – raising strong questions of conflict of interests.

The timing of the audio leak

has led many to question if this is an attempt to sabotage the new party at the cusp of by-elections. Mainstream leaders have joined the chorus denouncing the RSP, prompting many on social media to call this ‘the pot calling the kettle black’.

“The timing of the leak is definitely not a coincidence and politically motivated, considering which party the other individual in the tape has been previously associated with,” adds Adhikari, alluding to Durga Prasai being close to Oli and Dahal. “Otherwise, the tape could have come out during the previous coalition government,

but it did not.”

Prasai admitted to leaking the tape, but denied having done so at the behest of any party. He said he “wanted the Nepali people to know who they were voting for”.

All of this has come up at the same time Kathmandu’s mayor Balen Shah decided to challenge the federal government, announcing that KMC would no longer collect garbage from Singha Darbar and that the leaders inside the political centre needed to be dumped in the Sisidole landfill site in order to ‘clean up’ Nepal.

‘After nine months of repeated attempts to reach out, it seems like Singha Durbar, which is merely half a kilometre away from the KMC, does not have any intention to work together with the local government for public welfare,’ wrote Mayor Shah on social media.

He lashed out at the chronic lack of cooperation of the federal government towards him, laying out unfinished business and correspondence between the KMC and 14 ministries.

‘If one level of government does not acknowledge or understand the representatives from another tier how can we believe that the central government is for strengthening federalism?’ added Shah. ‘Let the federal government get rid of the bureaucratic red tape so that local governments can do the jobs they were elected to do.’

“Nepal’s centralised political parties, despite having backed federalism in the country, do not seem to want it in practice because they want full control for as long as possible,” explains Indra Adhikari.

She adds: “It shows how immature the leaders are to think that public threats and confrontational tactics, like Mayor Balen’s, will achieve results. Ultimately, this tussle will affect service delivery and the only losers will be the Nepali public.”





Happy New Year

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Adventures of a Nepali coffee

■ Laxmi Prasad Timilsina

This is the 27th instalment of Diaspora Diaries, a regular series in Nepali Times with stories of Nepalis living and working abroad.

It has been 16 years since I left Nepal after finishing Grade 12. I was already in Dubai when I found out I had passed my exams.

Growing up in Chitwan with four sisters, I never had to do any household chores. My father, a teacher, made sure I was never deprived of anything.

So, when I had to suddenly work as a waiter in the UAE, it was not easy at first. My English was not good enough, and I had no Arabic. This made my initial days abroad very difficult.

Soon, I was transferred to the dishwashing department of Gloria Jeans Café. The two months I spent behind the scenes as a dishwasher were life-changing because the barista's bar was close by and a Sri Lankan was kind enough to teach me the art of coffee-making. I transferred to his department, and that was when my coffee journey began in earnest.

When the Sri Lankan won in a GJC barista competition, I too made it my goal to participate in the contest. Not only did I win it next time, I also got to participate in regional and global competitions in which I secured second place and even got to travel to Egypt.

You get 15 minutes each for preparation, presentation and clean-up, and are evaluated by



**DIASPORA
DIARIES 27-28**

The return of a master baker

The struggle and success of a migrant worker who has returned to Nepal to start a thriving bakery

■ Raju Pakhrin

This is the 28th instalment of Diaspora Diaries, a regular series in Nepali Times with stories of Nepalis living and working abroad.

I am the youngest of four brothers who have all helped to give my career a head start. One worked as a trekking guide and the other two as chefs in Nepal and the UAE.

Trekking was not really for me, although it was a natural choice given that my father and brother were guides. Our house in Makwanpur was often filled with foreigners, an unlikely sight in the 1980s in that part of the country.

I was a simple village boy juggling school and farming, and was shy of foreigners. I started joining my brother on treks as a kitchen boy, including three 22-day trips across Thorung La, which was difficult but exciting.

I was promoted to guide for groups of 20 trekkers with 60 support staff. At the end of a trek we bonded like families, and there were even tears in the last evening before goodbyes around the campfire. I made friends with local people and looked forward to the adventures.



Trekking was fun, but the income was seasonal. I also missed the stability of staying put in one place. Once in 1985, I had a chance meeting with a German tourist in Ghorepani who was blowing bubbles to entertain excited children.

He ran a German bakery in Jawalakhel and before I knew it, I had a job there that earned me

Rs500 a month. Waking up at 3AM I learnt how to make different types of bread – sourdough, multigrain, you name it – first in Jawalakhel and then in the Pokhara branch.

Then I joined my brother who was an Executive Chef at Summit Hotel. In 1996 I joined my other brother who was a chef at Le Meridian in the UAE. My starting salary was much higher than

in Nepal, but more importantly I gained a lot of knowledge and experience about food hygiene, customer service and standardisation of food quality.

I worked among colleagues from over 120 countries, and learnt that hospitality was more than just serving food. I had it much easier than fellow Nepalis in the Gulf, but faced challenges. Even though

I had English language skills, it was inadequate in the hospitality business.

I ended up spending over 19 years in the UAE, working at the same bakery for ten years where I was trusted enough by my employer to make key decisions and hone my baking skills. My carrot cake was a hit. Every time I handed in a resignation letter, I got hefty salary increases. With political instability back home and a good employer, there was always a reason to postpone my homecoming.

Many Nepalis I know have it really hard in the Gulf. Even then, I find it discomfiting when politicians refer derogatorily to us as camel grazers under the desert sun (खाडीको घाममा उँट चराउने), when truth is that there are many Nepalis engaged in high-paying jobs as well.

By the time I left the UAE in 2015, I was making 14,000 Dirhams a month (\$3,800). If I had stayed on, I would probably be earning even more. I do not want to undermine the struggle of Nepalis in the Gulf, but there are many of us who have left handsome salaries to come home and contribute meaningfully to Nepal, including as job-creators ourselves.

The Nepal government needs to prepare its youth to compete in the overseas market so they can take up better jobs which are available, and get good promotions. There is plenty of money floating around in the Gulf, perhaps more than anywhere else in the world. With the right skills, training and approach, there is a potential for Nepalis to flourish.

aficionado

Barista learns on the job in cafés in the Gulf and helps bring coffee culture to Nepal



certified judges. This learning can be transformational because you are no longer mechanically preparing coffee to serve your customers, but you have to learn the process behind it, experiment with different recipes, and present your story in a compelling manner.

And all this happens under extreme pressure live on camera and with an audience (above). During my presentations I shared stories about why I had to leave Nepal and switched from being a tea lover to a coffee aficionado. What you learn in these few months during the competition easily outweighs working passively behind the bar for years because you push your boundaries and find out what you are capable of.

I have got to work in unique cafés like Majlis Café in the UAE that was a camel milk café, and

then at Boon Specialty Café where I learnt to care about the origin of coffee, right from farmers to roasters. Us baristas also have the ultimate responsibility to ensure coffee is brewed perfectly, and working in specialty cafés expanded my horizon to think about the story behind the beans.

It was while I was working in the UAE that I came across investors in Qatar who were looking to start a specialty café in Doha. Since its launch, for the last five years, I have been working at Flat White as manager and trainer.

Given my love for socialising with people and coffee, my friends and I started Coffee Samaj Nepal recently. It is still a relatively new organisation and one of our aims is to complete the paperwork necessary to conduct training by Nepali coffee enthusiasts for Nepali jobseekers in Qatar for promising baristas.

My relationship with coffee has been evolving over the years. Initially, latte art was exciting as it gave new baristas an opportunity to experiment with different patterns and art forms. My favourite patterns are tulips and rosetta (left), but I also enjoy other patterns like seahorse, chameleon and swans.

Then I found it exciting to experiment with different roast levels and brewing temperatures to come up with that perfect mix of flavour and aroma. It is always motivating when my regular customers demand that I prepare their drink for them. I put in a lot of care to prepare each cup.

Now, my passion is to produce and promote baristas, and helping to coordinate barista competitions can be an important platform to promote talent. I no longer participate in competitions myself but help younger baristas do so. Coffee Samaj Nepal recently organised a Latte Art Throwdown

in Qatar, in which there were 64 participants, and the winners were a Nepali and two Filipinos. We also coordinated another Qatar national barista competition, which was won by a Filipino with Nepalis coming second and third. When capable baristas cannot afford participation fees, we help fundraise.

These competitions provide people with an opportunity to showcase their talent and get recognised in the coffee sector. As a previous winner in competitions, it certainly helped elevate my profile in the region. With Nepalis winning in many barista related competitions that are judged by renowned SCA-certified international judges, it sends a powerful message that Nepalis are as good as the best in the world and this could translate to better opportunities globally.

When baristas come to Qatar from Nepal after getting trained and some work experience in cafés, it is much easier for them to pick up on the job requirements. Nepal's barista training is good but not enough. Given the differences in machines used, coffee grades and techniques, they still require training on the job for a while before they can handle the role on their own. But there is great demand for baristas overseas, and Nepalis are building a strong reputation in this category.

There is potential not just to export Nepali coffee-making services, but also high-quality Nepali coffee. The high altitude and climate of Nepal makes it favourable for good quality coffee production. When my friends and I eventually return to Nepal, we want to help promote Nepali coffee globally. As a coffee aficionado, I deal with coffee every day, but I still cannot forget the whiff of my first ever coffee I tried as a 21-year-old in Dubai 16 years ago. 🇳🇵



I decided to return after the 2015 earthquake. I had seen the UAE transform itself as a country in a short period and I wanted the same for Nepal. Except, that was easier said than done.

Soon after I opened my restaurant in Nepal, the Indian Blockade of 2015 wrecked my business. I had to pay Rs7,000 for a cylinder of gas, and spent weeks cooking for my customers in firewood. My restaurant did not do well, so I started The Lemon Tree bakery in Bhaisepati and Jhamsikhel.

This was my area of expertise, and I felt more in control. I still work 15-16 hours a day and rely on my loyal customer base of both foreigners and Nepalis. I employ 14-15 workers, primarily female, who are getting well trained on the job. Both my employees and customers are like family, just like

in my trekking days.

It is not easy to work in Nepal. There are opportunities but it has to be an area in which you have experience, and requires patience. Our natural desire for overnight success and profits needs a reality check. The plan to have a bakery in Nepal was brewing in my mind for a long time, and I used to collect recipes in the UAE which I still use.

Costs are high and continue to increase. Flour used to cost Rs2,700 a sack two months back and now it

is Rs5,200. Even simple things like chocolate are hard to find, so we have to change brands. Loans are inaccessible, suppliers can be unreliable. Another drawback is the lack of importance given to hygiene, and some restaurants actually need to be immediately shut down. There is always a new competitor – a café or a bakery.

But everything I have done from my trekking days, waking up at 3AM to make bread in Jawalakhel, to the years in the UAE has brought me to this time and place at The Lemon Tree. 🇳🇵

Translated from interviews with the authors.

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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The non-accidental rise of Harsh Shringla

The remarkable journey from Darjeeling to Delhi of a former Indian Foreign Secretary of Nepali descent

■ **Aria Parasai** in Darjeeling

Harsh Vardhan Shringla appeared immaculate in a freshly pressed suit and a peaked *dhaka topi* (right) to address a rapt audience at the St Joseph's auditorium in Darjeeling last week for the launch of his biography.

Born to Sikkimese father Tshering Tendup La, and Nepali mother Hari Devi Basnet in 1962, Shringla grew up in various parts of India following his father's government job. But wherever he went, he always felt connected to his Nepali roots.

"My father has always been there for me. He inculcated values and principles that have stood me with over time," Shringla told *Nepali Times* in an interview. "My mother was practical, efficient and also very disciplined. She guided me closely throughout my career."

At 9, Shringla was sent to Mayo College in Ajmer, where he was an avid reader of books on philosophy, history and foreign affairs. In college, he was part of the hockey team and by 19 he graduated from the elite St Stephen's College with History Honors.

All these details about Shringla's childhood right up to being appointed Foreign Secretary and his last job as Chief Coordinator for India's G20 Presidency are detailed in Dipmala Roka's biography of the man, *Not an Accidental Rise: Harsh Vardhan Shringla*.

"My father said the IFS (Indian Foreign Service) was the best career anyone could have. My aunt Chokila Iyer was in the IFS and was a role model," added Shringla, who aced the All India Civil Services exam, placed 15th out of 137,000 applicants and at age 22 became one of the youngest IFS officers.

Biographer Dipmala Roka is a deputy professor at Sikkim University who first met Shringla in April 2021 and was fascinated



PROUD MOMENT: Harsh Vardhan Shringla with his aunt Chokila Iyer, also a former foreign secretary, and the author of the biography Dipmala Roka at the book launch in Darjeeling last week.

by how a man from Darjeeling (which is underrepresented in the Indian bureaucracy) went on to become one of India's most distinguished diplomats.

'He is self-made, and rose by dint of sheer grit and hard work. His perseverance and determination are remarkable, as are his skills as a diplomat and administrator. He innovates constantly,' Roka writes in her book.

Shringla's career began in India's mission to UNESCO in Paris, followed by a posting in Vietnam. He was then promoted to the northern division that oversees India's relations with Nepal and Bhutan at a time of the controversial 1997 Mahakali Treaty. He was subsequently sent to India's permanent mission to the United Nations in New York.

Not an Accidental Rise also goes into Shringla's work as co-chair of the India-Bangladesh Joint Boundary Working Group

that finally led to the signing of the landmark 2011 agreement that mended strained bilateral relations.

"The best diplomacy is preventive diplomacy," says Shringla. "If an issue arises then it should be worked behind the scenes, without fanfare and public attention."

In her book, Roka gives many other examples of Shringla as a natural team player who looked for solutions, especially in South Asian diplomacy. Shringla was Joint Secretary looking after SAARC, the regional body that has now gone into protracted hibernation.

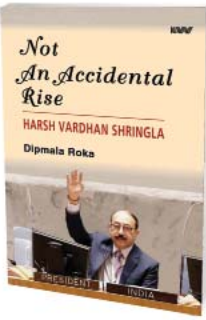
Shringla also served as India's envoy to Bangladesh and Thailand, and ambassador to the United States. But within a year of being posted to Washington DC, he was appointed Foreign Secretary in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government in 2020. The Shringlas are just one of two Indian families to produce

more than one foreign secretary. His aunt Chokila Iyer was the first female foreign secretary of India in 2001-2.

Shringla visited Nepal as foreign secretary in 2020 where his Nepali heritage helped smoothen relations just after the Lipu Lek border dispute. "Our people enjoy easy, free border movement and no visa regime," he says in Nepali with a perceptible Darjeeling lilt, "special and unique relations must be maintained, especially between Nepal and the Nepali-speaking parts of India in Sikkim, West Bengal, Uttarakhand and Nepal."

After being appointed chief coordinator for India's G20 presidency last year, he chose Darjeeling for the group's tourism working meetings, promoting the region's many natural and cultural attractions. Shringla says he now wants to give back to his home region, and is involved in the Darjeeling Welfare Society. Nepal's own public figures could learn a thing or two from Shringla's work in skills development activities for Darjeeling's youth to prevent outmigration.

"Nobody knows where our career trajectories will take us," says Shringla. "A younger me would have had a hard time believing that I would become foreign secretary someday. One needs to focus, work hard and produce results. Lucky for me, I belonged to a system that acknowledges meritocracy above all."



Not an Accidental Rise: Harsh Vardhan Shringla
by Dipmala Roka
KW Publishers 2023
182 pages
INR 784 (hardcover)
The book is also available in Nepali, Hindi and Bengali.

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