

WORKING JOURNALISTS: The busy newsroom of Kantipur on 1 May Labour Day. The lines between mass media and social media are getting blurred.

GOPEN RAI

The new news age

The mainstream and online media have a voracious appetite for hard news because they need to keep feeding the beast. Press meets are cheap to cover on deadline, they do not need much context or analysis. Politicians know that, and provide reporters with soundbites masquerading as 'news'. In this symbiotic politico-media landscape, politicians know that journalists know that it is all spin. But they still need it for their perpetual news machines. Politicians play to the gallery, and the mainstream media laps it all up to push it out as straight news through social media handles. As politics and media merge, it is also getting difficult to tell the difference between what used to be the mass media and social media. The tail is wagging the dog. Social media videos and posts by politicians become grist for the

mass media, which then pushes it out as news via the same platforms on the social web. The public therefore has no need to subscribe to or read newspapers, or tune into the evening news on radio or tv. Everything they want to know is right there on their smartphones. In the past, newspapers competed with radio and tv. More recently, the legacy media vied for readership with news portals. Now, online news sites have also become legacy media since they rely on the same revenue sources: advertising or corporate promoters. Paywalls, subscriptions and crowd-funding have not worked in Nepal for online media. The real mass media in this new news age is TikTok, YouTube and Facebook. Information has to compete with entertainment for eyeballs, and it is a losing battle.

At a time when journalism has an ever more important role in safeguarding democracy and press freedom against populist demagogues, media companies are at their financially weakest, struggling for revenue, and to remain relevant. International Press Freedom Day on 3 May serves as a reminder that a financially dependent media cannot be politically independent. Governments around the world know this, and are glad the press is no longer holding power to account. Much of this was on display this week as Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, the RSP's Rabi Lamichhane, and Gagan Thapa of the NC all took to social media either directly or through legacy media reporters to position themselves in the new scenario after by-elections.



Between inaugurating a new cable car and attending a trade union event on 1 May, Prime Minister Dahal squeezed in a meeting with Rabi Lamichhane of the RSP. Dahal and Lamichhane lead the third and fourth largest parties in Parliament, and need each other. Lamichhane's political capital went up after his party's wins in last week's by-elections. Lamichhane is driving a hard bargain, and is not in a mood to settle for anything less than Home Minister and deputy prime minister. If Dahal does not maintain the magic 138 votes in Parliament, he will have to seek a third vote of confidence. For his part, Lamichhane needs the post to make his dual passport case go away. In the coming days, it will be revealing to read into social media posts of politicians, as journalists try to go beyond the soundbites to make sense of why they are saying what they are saying. **Sonia Awale**

MONOPOLY ON INFORMATION
EDITORIAL
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Monopoly on information

Us journalists have always believed that informing the public is our job and it is the editors who decide what the public needs to know.

In the past, the modes for sharing information were limited: when something happened, a reporter would go interview witnesses or experts, write up the story, and news agencies distributed the news. This monopoly over selection, production and dissemination convinced media owners that they owned and controlled content, and defined its price.

The media business is about mass producing news and getting revenue from subscriptions and advertisements to pay for it. It was any other product and media companies believed the public should pay for news because it cost them to cover it. Journalists set themselves apart from the reading public, only going back to sell content.

Till recently, we were forced to consume whatever the mainstream media dished out. Gatekeepers at radio, tv and newspapers gave the audience what they thought they wanted, not what they needed.

This left the media ill-prepared for the Internet era when competition became stiff and audiences had the freedom over format and a global reach.

While in a hurry to adopt the next shiny thing, publishers gave away for free what they previously sold. Readers anywhere could access the product, which was regularly updated and more conveniently available on their monitors, free of charge.

Audience habits had changed, but the Nepali media and its business model did not. The new online portals that emerged in the 2000s and 2010s followed the footsteps of legacy publishers, and they are now the legacy media — depending on advertising.

Most users in Nepal are not paying for online news, many are not even going to new sites, but to YouTube and TikTok entertainment. Publishers rarely know how many are willing to pay or can be persuaded to pay.

While surviving on 100% paywalls, membership or subscriptions is still a far-fetched dream in Nepal, reader revenue can help increase accountability among publishers and, in turn, trust from the audience.

Much of the digital boom in Nepali media happened alongside Facebook. Which is why many mainstream publishers did not think about establishing themselves as a

destination, a homepage to come home to. They relied instead on traffic that Facebook, Twitter and other platforms brought in.

These same platforms allow communities to communicate directly and have proven to be good at helping them to share information. People can now easily find what they need without relying on journalists.

But there is much Facebook users need to know beyond what they share among friends. That is where journalism comes in — to report and investigate, add context and explain, to fact check and debunk assumptions.

Recently social media platforms have been weaponised to deface media itself. This week, Twitter in Nepal has been abuzz with a leaked audio clip of a conversation between a noted tv anchor and an interviewee, in which the latter asks when the interview will be aired. The journalist is heard explaining that while the program is ready, the station was still waiting for sponsors.

Most comments on the thread attack the anchor, saying this is one more proof that the media is for sale and how news is not aired unless there is money involved. There were some journalists and others who defended the anchor, saying that is how tv functions anyway. But the damage was done.

Public trust in the media is wavering. A 2022 survey by Sharecast Initiative showed that for 76% of Nepalis, friends, family and neighbours were the primary source for local news and information: for national and international news it was 50%. Both were followed by Facebook,

radio, YouTube and tv.

Media literacy in Nepal is low. Audiences confuse mainstream media for social media, opinion, or unfiltered content for news, and YouTubers for professional journalists. But pushing the accountability towards the audience is not the answer when the question is what can journalists do to change this.

Just when its role in safeguarding democracy and press freedom has become more important than ever before, journalism struggles to survive and retain its relevance. This ends up undermining the independent check-and-balance role of the fourth estate in defending democracy.

All this may look discouraging, but the internet, like all technologies, has always been a double edged sword. The only way out now is to compete with the entertainment-filled social channels and information pages masking as news sites, by focusing both on the content and the medium.

More than ever before, the medium is the message.

Sahina Shrestha



More than ever before, the medium is the message.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Business as usual

20 years ago this week, the political parties found themselves sidelined by both the palace and the Maoists as the peace talks were finally starting. Cornered, they threatened an uprising that would abolish monarchy altogether, a front page story in Nepali Times reported.

Now in 2023, with the country having transitioned into a federal state with the former rebels as the government, but it is still politics as usual. Even the 'alternative' RSP is demanding for its pound of flesh.

Excerpts of the report published in issue #143, 2-8 May 2003:

How the tables have turned. Political parties that till six months ago were talking about bringing the Maoists into the mainstream find themselves on the periphery. And the Maoists are centre stage, in the limelight.

By launching street agitations fronted by their student wings and refusing to be a part of the government-Maoist peace talks, the parties have deliberately distanced



themselves. Their sights are on a rerun of the 1990 uprising that turned the absolute monarchy into a constitutional one. This time, they threaten, the change may be from a constitutional monarchy to a republic.

Realising that most Nepalis blame them for the ills of the past 13 years, the parties have appropriated the Maoist agenda by borrowing their slogan and trying to appear more

radical than the revolutionaries.

The Narayanhiti Royal Palace and the Chand government seem to be taking these threats seriously. The reduction in fuel prices, release of detained students and the setting up of an inquiry into student beheadings in Hetauda all show they do not want the situation to get out of hand.

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

ONLINE PACKAGES



Himal Media Mela is back with over 200 senior editors, digital journalists and media educators discussing and dissecting a wide range of issues this week, including deep fake and alternative facts, geopolitics, digital revenue, viable media business, investigative journalism. Follow the two-day conference on Nepali Times social media platforms and online through 3-4 May.



Lumbini will once again see thousands of pilgrims from around the world for the birthday of Sakyamuni Buddha, which this year falls on 5 May. Archaeologists have now unearthed the ruins of ancient Kapilvastu nearby revealing that Gautam Buddha was also a historical figure. Watch video on our YouTube channel. Buddha Jayanti special on page 6-7.

BY-ELECTION RESULTS

No one wants mainstream political leaders to wake up. ('In with the new, out with the old', Shristi Karki, nepalitimes.com). It is time for them to go to bed for good.

Agnostic Girl

EVEREST TRASH

Worry less about what some climbers may leave on the mountain and more about what Nepalis throw out of bus windows every minute of every day ('Nepal can't keep up with trash building up on Everest', Bhadra Sharma, nepalitimes.com).

Slow Trekking

■ A tiny deposit for the expedition if the climbers do not follow the rules and haul out garbage, that amount is nothing to western 'climbers', many of whom have paid tens of thousands of dollars to go to Everest. The expedition and the climbers can easily and without a second thought ignore the paltry fine.

Roger Ray

GEOTHERMAL SPRINGS

Nepal's hot springs should be developed as a health tourism spot ('The heat beneath our feet', Sahina Shrestha, #1158).

Gauri Rimal

KATHMANDU POSTCARDS

The urbanisation of Kathmandu has been disrespectful, implacable, invasive and destructive ('Postcards from Kathmandu', #1159). Simply disappointing.

Chilled Pills

NEPAL PILGRIMAGE

Nepal - with its mixture of Hindu and Muslim populations - has, in the past, also been able to host both Indian and Pakistani delegations, providing 'neutral ground' for a variety of meetings ('The geopolitics of pilgrimage', Nabraj Lama, nepalitimes.com).

David Seddon

■ I wonder why it took us this long to realise the significance of Nepal's location. Even so, have we been able to make the most of it?

AbstractiveEluse

WHAT'S TRENDING

The Reign God

by *Santa Gaha Magar*

The Maoists may have thought they were kingmakers, but it is the RSP, with its increasing support from Nepali voters disillusioned with mainstream politics, that now has the role. Visit nepalitimes.com for the latest political updates and analyses.



Most reached and shared on Facebook



Old wine in old bottles

Editorial

Nepal's by-election results reaffirmed the message that Nepali voters have been sending to establishment leaders since the 2022 elections: you ageing serial politicians, it is time for you to bow out gracefully. You have failed. Give someone newer a chance.



Most popular on Twitter

Postcards from Kathmandu

The famous Das Studio was established in Darjeeling in 1927. Since then, 3 generations (Dwarika Das Shrestha, Gyanendra Das Shrestha and Kashish Das Shrestha) have been documenting the changes of Nepal through photography. Join the discussion online.



Most commented

Love and loss. Healing and hope.

by *Kunda Dixit*

Maggie Doyné's biography, *Between the Mountain and the Sky: A Mother's Story of Hope and Love*, is an emotional coming-of-age story of how one gap year student can change the world. Along the way, there are personal hurdles, financial challenges, the tragic loss of two children, and finally finding love. Read full review and profile on our website.



Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Postcards from Kathmandu
Three generations of photographers from the Das family with a visual overview of a changing Nepal.



Nimesh Dhungana @NimeshDhungana

Amazing documentation of shifting physical & socio-political terrain of Kathmandu by three generation of photographers. Great resource for those interested in visual history as a method. Kudos to @kashishds.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

#editorial Nepal's ageing career politicians, it is time for you to bow out gracefully. You have failed. Give someone newer a chance.



Narendra Khadka @NKHadka

I congratulate you all young Nepali faces and I hope you do good for the country. Please do not compare Nepali geriatric politicians with fine old wine as it gets matured with age and heavenly on the palate.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Eight years after the #earthquake, many new settlements for survivors are ghost towns. Building back (not) better after 2015 | Sagar Budhathoki



Lavish Jung Gurung @gurungLaavish18

Not enough homework was done to address the social, cultural and economic background of the people who have lived in Laprak for generations.

1,000 WORDS



CAN @CRICKETNETP

UMBRELLA

MOVEMENT: Rain or shine, 13,000 cricket fans thronged the stadium at TU on Monday for the Nepal vs UAE ACC Premier Cup finals. The game was postponed due to heavy rain and a water-logged field. On Tuesday, Nepal won the match, securing a berth in the Asia Cup.





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Media mêlée in the age of AI

This year's Himal Media Mela will discuss the survival and relevance of journalism

■ Kunda Dixit

The theme of this year's Himal Media Mela is 'Trust and Introspection', highlighting the need for journalism to reinvent itself and regain its credibility for impact.

We face much of the same issues in Nepal and worldwide as we did last year: political disarray and a looming economic crisis at home, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a Sino-US Cold War, and more evidence of record breaking heat that is an ominous sign of climate breakdown.

The only difference is that this year, all of these crises have got worse.

In Nepal, we have more or less the same leaders, the same disputes, the same reactive media content that we have seen over the past two decades. Besides trying to find a new role for journalism in the age of AI, Nepal's traditional press also has to turn the gaze on itself.

Because of its relentless emphasis on the negative, journalism tends to make citizens cynical. Despite our disillusionment with politics, Nepal's human development parameters have improved, voters showed in last week's by-elections that there is a groundswell of support for reform, and unlike other countries in the region Nepalis are still free to complain about how miserable we are. Nepal is a relatively open society, and to a certain extent there is rule of law.

Let us hope we can build on this in the coming decade of the 2080s



NEWS DESK: A busy Kathmandu Post newsroom on Tuesday. Newspapers, tv stations and portals in Nepal do not compete with each other, together they compete for revenue against Google and Facebook.

GOPEN RAI

BS. But imagine how much further we might have been if there had been a peace dividend after 2006, better governance and transparency in the years since.

And now the country faces the twin challenge of the Himalaya being both a climate and geopolitical hotspot. The media landscape has also changed drastically in the past year, as it has the world over. Mobile internet has spread further, bandwidth has expanded. This has led to shorter attention spans, and a mass migration of users to social media platforms.

Across the world and the region, there are ominous signs of democracy in retreat. In the past year, the independent judiciary, the legislature and the executive have all been further weakened in the world's largest democracy to our south. And to the north, we have the Great Firewall of China.

At a time when we need a robust and independent media to tackle global crises like climate collapse and the steady depletion of freedoms, the press as we knew it is weaker than ever before. The legacy media now also includes digital

portals, and both our business models are collapsing. Independent journalism is even more vulnerable to political and corporate pressure, undermining our public service role.

Newspapers, tv stations and portals in Nepal do not compete with each other, we compete with Google and Facebook and independent content providers.

Nepal's media industry, supported by private sector advertising, was the amplifier of every sphere of development: health, education, business, science, culture and heritage, the arts and

technology. That role has eroded.

And all this is happening as news competes with entertainment for collective attention. The publishing industry is no longer a one-way street from newsrooms to doorsteps. It is an eight-lane highway of interactive websites, apps and comment threads. And now, we are all hurtling into this long dark tunnel called Artificial Intelligence without knowing what is on the other side.

Maria Ressa calls this "toxic sludge of anger and conspiracy a pipeline of hate, a hyper socialisation, and the tyranny of trends". How is media going to survive algorithmic radicalisation to manufacture customised mass persuasion? Facts do not matter anymore, fact-checking doesn't seem to make a difference when codes make us distrust everything and everyone. Traditional mass media is no longer the gatekeeper. Everyone is now guarding their own doors and windows.

Over Wednesday and Thursday, the Himal Media Mela will hear from practitioners and supporters of media from Nepal and the region on how journalism can keep up with these changes, be meaningful, and survive into the future.

Readers and viewers will not come to us, our content has to go where they are. If facts do not change things, we have to tell our stories better. We have to be explainers and share how we do the stories we do, and why they are important. 🇳🇵

Excerpted from Welcome Address to Himal Media Mela on 3 May 2023.



NMB BANK
एनएमबि बैंक

Turkish World Golf

Lt. Colonel Dinesh Baniya won the Turkish Airlines World Golf Cup held at Gokarna Golf Club in Kathmandu this week. Played under Stableford 3/4 handicap format with a maximum allowance of 24, Baniya accumulated 40 points to finish first



while the runners-up were Pradip KC and Chandra Kumar Limbu. The tournament had 82 golfers participating. Baniya now qualifies for the 2023 Turkish Airlines World Golf Cup grand finals in Antalya, Türkiye, in December where he will compete with 88 other participants from 57 countries.



Buddha's 15th ATR

Buddha Air, Nepal's largest domestic airline, is getting even larger with the addition of its 15th ATR-72-500 this week. Later this year, it is acquiring two more of the 72-seater aircraft and will add frequency to the Dhangadi, Surkhet and Tumlingtar routes, as well as intercity flights from its Pokhara hub. This year, Buddha sold its two remaining Raytheon Beech 1900Ds to a Canadian operator.

ADB for climate

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) this week announced a finance facility for Climate in Asia and the Pacific (IF-CAP) at its 56th annual meeting in Incheon, South Korea. IF-CAP will contribute to ADB's raised ambition for \$100 billion from its own resources for climate change and could create up to \$15 billion in new loans for much-needed climate projects in the region.

ADB

Nabil training

Nabil Bank with Chattar Rural Municipality in Tehrathum has provided entrepreneurship development training to 57 participants.

Power in Dolpo

Dolpo in Nepal's trans-Himalaya has been connected to the national grid with Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) completing the construction of an 11KV transmission line from Musikot



substation, with electricity supply started from 27 April. Only Humla and Mugu now remain to be connected to the national utility.

Everest with DCGF

Everest Bank and Deposit and Credit Guarantee Fund have signed an agreement to guarantee microfinance for the underprivileged. Everest will provide Rs1.5 million for women entrepreneurs, Rs1 million each to returning migrant workers or Dalits and for national players to set up businesses after retirement, and Rs300,000 for earthquake reconstruction.



Tatopani reopens

Tatopani border point has reopened after eight years, but only for cargo between Nepal and China. The transit point was closed following the earthquake and Covid-19 pandemic. Also, Nepali trucks have to transfer cargo to Chinese containers at the border.

IMF review

International Monetary Fund (IMF) has completed its first and second reviews under the Extended Credit Facility (ECF) for Nepal to withdraw \$52.8 million. This brings total disbursements under the ECF for budget support thus far to \$157.4 million.

While crediting monetary policy tightening for stabilised external position and lower inflation, IMF Executive Board recommended preserving macroeconomic stability and fiscal reforms in line with debt sustainability, banking regulation and supervision, reducing the cost of doing business and barriers to FDI, enhancing governance and social safety net.

Citroën C3

Shangrila Motors, distributors of Citroën cars in Nepal, is launching the new Citroën C3 compact SUV following the unveiling of the C5 Aircross SUV in 2021. The French carmaker boasts new design, advanced suspension systems and a spacious interior.



WorldLink-PUBG

Given the rapid growth of mobile gaming, WorldLink and PUBG Mobile have joined to share information and technology to upgrade the digital infrastructure of WorldLink to make it more compatible with PUBG gaming, ensuring seamless gameplay and faster response times. They will also host PUBG tournaments.

Doko turns 6

Doko Recyclers which has been managing and recycling electronic waste in Nepal has just completed its six years. With 50 workers, half of them women, it has so far managed 2,100 tonnes of waste and processed 136,077kg of plastic.



On Buddha Jayanti, a journalist
pays homage to a town that she
was named after that dates
back to the Buddha's time

SRAVASTI



■ **Sravasti Ghosh Dastidar** in Sravasti

Lying in the plains below the Himalaya near where the West Rapti River flows down from Nepal, Sravasti is a sleepy agricultural district in India's Uttar Pradesh state.

Sravasti dates back to the Purana literature of ancient India. As the prosperous capital of Kosala, an important kingdom among the 16 Mahajanapadas, Sravasti was a political, economic, religious and philosophers' hub during the 5th and 6th century BCE.

It is extensively cited in the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and later Hindu texts of Harshcharita and Kathasaritsagar. The Ramayana cites Lord Rama dividing Kosala into two parts, giving Sravasti to Luv and Kushavati to Kush.

In the Mahabharata and Bhagavata Purana, the town is said to have been built by a Suryavanshi king named Sravasta, the son of King Srava. In the Ajivika and Jain literatures, it has been referred to as Saravana, Kunalnagari and Chandrikapuri.

Sravasti is called Sahet-Mahet in archaeological research papers. In 1862-63, Alexander Cunningham discovered mounds and identified Mahet as the actual ancient mud-walled city of Sravasti that was damaged during excavation. Bordering Mahet was the smaller site of Sahet, which Cunningham recognised as Jetavana.

Gautama Buddha spent 24 monsoons after his enlightenment here, imparting many of his sermons, converted most of his famous disciples, and performed the Twin Miracle. Consequently, Sravasti features among the eight most significant sites of the Buddhist pilgrimage circuit.

Treta Yug Sitadwar Temple

Ancient idols of Sita and Lakshman were unearthed in Sitadwar in Tenduwa Mahant, Bahraich. Supposedly, this was where Valmiki's ashram was located. Lakshman left Sita nearby. When she was thirsty, Lakshman made a hole in the ground with his arrow that transformed into a 365 hectare scenic lake, the biggest in the area.

Sita spent her exile here. Luv and Kush were born and raised in the nearby forest. The simple Sita and Valmiki temples are regularly visited by devotees during Akshay Navami, Devotthani Ekadasi and Kartik Purnima when an annual fair is held. The historical authenticity is difficult to determine.

Dwapar Yug Prithvinath and Pacharannath Temples

These temples in Khargupur, Gonda, in Sravasti district are located close to each other. Legend says that the five Pandavas established four Shivalingams in this area of Chakranagari during their Agyatvas. Bhim and Arjun established Prithvinath and Pacharannath temples, respectively.

The Prithvinath temple might have been built by the Gahadavala kings (11th-12th century CE) and renovated in 1282 CE by Ram Chandra Paramhans Giri. The lingam and a copper plate grants were excavated from under a six-metre high mound. The well-kept temple is made of bricks, stone

and limestone, and has a sanctum sanctorum with a circumambulatory path. The lingam, apparently the world's tallest, goes 11m below ground.

The Pacharannath temple, however, is ill-maintained. The structure of the temple is similar but not painted, with plants growing roots and parrots finding a resting place on the tower. The lingam is much smaller. The priests' families have served the temples for generations, but do not have much information about them.

Archaeological expeditions in Sravasti were led by Cunningham and thereafter by Dr Hoe, Dr Vogel, Dr K K Sinha and Archaeological Survey of India in association with the Archaeological Research Institute of Kansai University in Japan. Cunningham unearthed several temples and monasteries, including the Mulagandha Kuti in Jetavana and inscriptions of Gahadavala kings Madanpal and Govind Chandra confirmed donations by these kings to the Jetavana Viharas. Excavations led by Dr Sinha exposed terracotta figurines of the Mother Goddess, a Naga and several Mithuna idols.

Japanese archaeologists dug deeper layers





ALL PHOTOS: SRAVASTI GHOSH DASTIDAR

and unearthed relics from the 8th century BCE. Sravasti was damaged by annual floods and fires, and citizens tried rebuilding the monuments repeatedly. Excavations at Mahet revealed well-planned houses with proper sanitation and drainage, temples, stupas, fort and watch towers.

Some findings in Mahet were the remains of Jain art and architecture belonging to the 4th century BCE to 12th century CE. After that these were most probably destroyed when Alauddin Khilji raided Sravasti.

Mahet Jain Temple

In contrast to Sravasti's violent destruction, serenity prevails in all its Jain and Buddhist sites today. Tourists rarely visit these well-preserved brick ruins. The sprawling rectangular courtyard of the Jain temple of Bhagwan Sambhavnath or Shobhnath seems soaked in peace. A converging flight of steps leads to the 2.5m x 2.5m shrine.

From the top-most platform, several smaller ruins can be seen below. The temple has distinctive architectural features with

two courtyards at different levels and instead of a spire, has an Iranian style lakhauri brick vault, of which only half remains. The inner wall of the sanctum has niches where Jain idols must have been kept. Idols of all 24 Tirthankaras and an almost 1,000-year-old seated idol of Bhagwan Rishabhdeo, engraved on a flat stone, were discovered with carvings of an ox, lions and yaksha.

This is the birthplace of the revered third and eighth Jain Tirthankaras Bhagwan Sambhavnath and Chandraprabha. The Ajivika literatures state that Guru Gosai Mankhaliputra was born in Sravasti.

Mahet Buddhist Stupas

A few kilometres away from the Jain temple, lie the monuments of the Sudatta Stupa or Kachchi Kuthi and the Angulimala Stupa or Pakki Kuthi. The excavations revealed ruins of brick stupas, shrines, residences and 300 terracotta panels, illustrating scenes from the Ramayana in the Gupta style.

Fa Hien, the Chinese Buddhist Monk, visited Sravasti in the 5th Century CE, during

SRAVASTI

From my childhood, I have had to explain the spelling and meaning of my name to most people. Hardly anyone had a name like mine, in those days. Some Bengalis, however, are aware of Sravasti due to its mention in two well-known poems – Nagarlakshmi by Rabindranath Tagore and Banalata Sen by Jibanananda Das.

Due to the above, I felt a connection with this city that I knew was part of ancient India during the Buddha's time. Came to know much later that it still existed in Uttar Pradesh. It topped my bucket list but remained a distant dream for years. After decades and multiple failed attempts, I managed to visit this Buddhist pilgrimage, in February 2023.

I dedicate this article to my parents.

the reign of Chandragupta II. He observed that the flourishing Buddhist cities had lost their importance. Only 200 families inhabited Sravasti but the roads were safe to travel. When another Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang came to Sravasti, it was in wild ruins inhabited by honest citizens. There were hundreds of dilapidated Buddhist monasteries and Hindu temples.

Hiuen Tsang identified the foundations of the old 'Palace city', ruins of the chapel that Prasenjit built for Gautama Buddha, the nunnery of Bhikkhuni Prajapati, the site of Sudatta's house, and the stupa where Angulimala gave up his evil ways to become the Buddha's devout disciple and saint.

The Angulimala Stupa is a terraced monument on a rectangular platform that is undergoing maintenance. It has signs of structural modifications of different periods, maybe starting from the Kushan Age. Fa Hien determined that this was where Angulimala was cremated. A tunnel through the mound, drainage for floodwater and constructional supports were made during excavation to preserve the memorial.

Sudatta, the Buddha's chief male patron, was popularly addressed as Anathapindika. The Sudatta Stupa has a gradual flight of terracotta steps that leads to a platform from where the sunken substructures of two circular stupas are. The stupa is impressive and has remains of several alterations done during the 1st to 12th centuries CE.

Fa Hien noted that the stupa was erected on the foundation of Sudatta's house. However, the numerous relics and ruins excavated here reveal that there might have been a Brahmanical temple from the Gupta period below a Buddhist tope from the Kushan period.

Sahet, Jetavan Buddhist Monastery

Sahet lies outside Sravasti/Mahet, and Fa Hien identified this as the Jetavan Vihara. He saw two 17m high stone pillars – one on each side of the east gate, reportedly built by Emperor Ashok when he visited in 249 BCE. The sole structure that remained was a brick building containing a 1.3m high image of the Buddha created by King Prasenjit.

Hiuen Tsang mentioned only the Jetavana monastery, the ruins of which are from 1st and 2nd century CE. Among them, the earliest unearthed artefact possibly from the Mauryan era was a sandstone casket with bone relics, a gold leaf and a silver punched coin.

Jetavana is of great religious importance. Gautama Buddha spent 18-19 monsoons here and six monsoons at the Purvarama Vihara. Scholars believe that 871 suttas of Buddhist canons were imparted in Sravasti.

Anathapindika built a spacious monastery for the Buddha to stay, in a peaceful and secluded garden named Jetavana (Garden of Jeta), outside the south gate of Sravasti. He

bought the land from Prince Jeta, son of King Prasenjit of Kosala.

The aura of this historical park with lush foliage bordering the walls and the cloisters is most sublime during sunset and dawn. Monks in kasayas and international pilgrims, mostly wearing white, offer homage with incense sticks and flowers at the bases of the different brick temples. Soft, solemn chanting and the scent of incense sticks permeate the air. The monuments are well-marked with relevant information. Gautama Buddha's residence with his bed, the Gandhakuti, used to be a 7-storeyed sandalwood building that was later destroyed by a fire. Beside this is the Kosambikuti, the Buddha's meditation room. Opposite lies Stupa H, where he delivered his sermons. Adjoining are a well where he bathed and two elevated rectangular brick terraces marking the original promenade where he went for walks.

Above the stupas is the now fenced and propped ancient Anand Bodhi tree. Anathapindika planted a sapling from the original Bodhi tree in Bodhi Gaya to offer prayers during the Buddha's periods of absence from Jetavan.

Some of the stupas are devoted to the great disciples. The largest structure, Temple and Monastery 19, has a shrine, a well within the courtyard, a portico and 21 cells for the monks' use. An engraved copper plate charter of Govindachandra of Kanauj and a sculpture showing the Buddha receiving a bowl from a monkey, belonging to the 10th century CE, were found here.

Orajhar Mound Buddhist Stupa

On the highway near Jetavan lies the Orajhar mound. After hiking up a worn-out trail to the top, a stunning 360° view greet the pilgrims who meditate in the middle of a star-shaped monastic complex from the Kushan period.

The Buddha performed the Twin Miracle here. He silenced his pedantic dissenters by creating a jewelled walk in the air and standing on it. He levitated on a thousand-petalled lotus and appeared in pairs of opposite characters, producing fire from the upper part of his body and streams of water from the bottom part. The Miracle lasted for days, during which the Buddha gave sermons answering various philosophical questions.

Purvarama Mahavihara Buddhist Monastery

A few metres away from the Orajhar Mound is the Purvaram or Pubarama Monastery. A narrow road winds into an isolated semi-forest area to reveal a raised ground with the stump of an Ashokan Pillar. Two rusted boards declare it to be the monastery erected by Mrigara Mata Vishakha. Alongside the pillar is a semi-dark modern room, inside which are a few broken relics of red stone and a Buddha idol donated by the Thais. Regular thefts have depleted the monastery of many more artefacts.

Vishakha, an aristocratic lady, donated 90 million worth of gold coins towards the Buddhist Sangha and built this two-storeyed vihara with meditation halls and 500 residential rooms for monks and nuns on each floor. Of the 24 monsoons that the Buddha spent in Sravasti, 6 were spent here where he preached 23 important discourses.

King Ashoka visited Sravasti in 232 BCE and erected the pillar which was 20m long and thicker at the base. The Archaeological Survey of India excavated only 2.2m. It was damaged during the Hun and Muslim invasions in 512 CE and between the 9th and 12th century CE, respectively. It is now being worshipped as a Shivalinga.

The simplicity and peacefulness of these religious sites steeped in history raise a dichotomous question: Should this lesser known gem of a historical city be advertised in the tourism world and be subjected to commercialism? Or, should it be allowed to retain its austerity and tranquility that is so ideal for Buddhism? 🇮🇳

Sravasti Ghosh Dastidar is a photographer, travel and lifestyle journalist. sravastighoshphotos@gmail.com



GETTING THERE

EVENTS



Kalamasi Hike

Take a break to take in nature this weekend, and head to a six-hour hike to Kalamasi via Banepa Gadi. Call for details.
6 May, 9851014616/9841178536

Art exhibition

Attend the exhibition Interpretation, which will showcase works of five local artists: Sagar Manandhar, Sujan Dangol, Sundar Lama, Kuntishree Thapa and Prakash Pun Magar.
5-21 May, The Nanee Bhaktapur



Ladies night

Have a girlfriends' evening out. Get free cocktails every hour at Pauline's Rooftop on Ladies Night.
Thursdays, Pauline's Rooftop, Lazimpat (01) 4002711

Archiving showcase

Archiving for the future: An intersection of Heritage and Architecture highlights the works of notable artists and photographers inspired by Nepal's historical monuments.
Until 30 May, 10am-5pm, Taragaon Next, Boudha Road



Boudha Farmers Market

Enjoy fresh seasonal produce, artisanal food and handicrafts from local businesses and artists at the Boudha Farmer's Market.
Saturdays, 8am-2pm, Utpala Café, Boudha

DINING



Choila

Shyam Dai Ko Haas Ko Choila is not for the faint of heart. It has been the best place to get choila for the last 24 years, and only those who can handle their spice dare to try the dish.
Dhobighat (01) 4280273

MUSIC



Papon Live

Experience a unique blend of Indian classical music, folk music and electronica during Papon's live performance this Friday. Book tickets through Khalti.
5 May, 5pm-8pm, Privé Nepal, Tahachal

Arun Thapa

Revisit the timeless classics of Arun Thapa on the third episode of Cassette, an initiative to enjoy the rich history of Nepali folk and modern music.
6 May, 7:30pm onwards, Rs500, Moksh Auditorium, Jhamsikhel



Jetshen Dohna Lama

Jetshen Dohna Lama, winner of reality TV show SaReGaMaPa Lil Champs in 2022, will be performing live this week in Nepal. Call for tickets.
6 May, LOD, Thamel, 9843948991



Music room

Learn Western and Eastern music from the best music instructors in town at Music Room, Initiated by Jazzmandu. Call for more details.
9818856982

Manaslu Blue

See Nepali-American folk fusion band Manaslu Blue in concert next week as they embark on shows around Kathmandu. Tickets can be found at Moksh, Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory, Jazz Upstairs and Musicology, and will also be available for purchase at the door.
13 May, 7pm onwards, Rs1000, Moksh

Andaz E Awadh

Third generation culinary artist and Master Chef Meraj Ul Haque, takes visitors through a gastronomic journey at Hyatt Place's food festival Andaz E Awadh. The feast is accompanied by live classical music.
Until 6 May, 6:30pm-10:30pm, Hyatt Place, Soalteamode

Bayleaf

Drop by the garden restaurant for Burmese dishes including Burmese Tofu Thoke, Khao SweThoke (Noodle Salad), Mohinga (fish noodle soup), and other signature pork dishes.
Tangal (01) 4437490

Casa Mexicana

Take a culinary tour of Mexico with an assortment of tacos, quesadillas and tres leches. From vegetarian to meat, there are options for everyone.
Gairidhara and Patan, 9840542082

GETAWAY



Dwarika's Resort

A holistic retreat, drawing on ancient Himalayan knowledge and philosophy of care for nature and for oneself, set in magnificent natural surroundings.
Dhulikhel (01) 4579488



Dahlia Boutique Hotel

A luxury hotel at the bank of Phewa Lake with 180-degree mountain and city views, Dahlia Boutique Hotel is a good place to end a memorable trek.
Lakeside, Pokhara (061) 466505

Tiger Palace Resort

Considered one of the most dynamic, exciting and luxurious resorts in Nepal, Tiger Palace Resort offers a wide variety of entertainment, eateries and activities from an international Casino to six restaurants that visitors can choose from.
Rupandehi, Bhairawa (071) 512000

Mystic Mountain

Situated within the forests of Nagarkot, the resort is exquisitely built using ultra modern designs and provides world-class comfort.
Nagarkot (01) 6200646



Milla Guesthouse

A quaint stay that combines both the old and the new, Milla Guesthouse is the perfect getaway for those who don't want to get way too far from the city.
Dattatraya, Bhaktapur, 9851024137

Kyubi's Kitchen

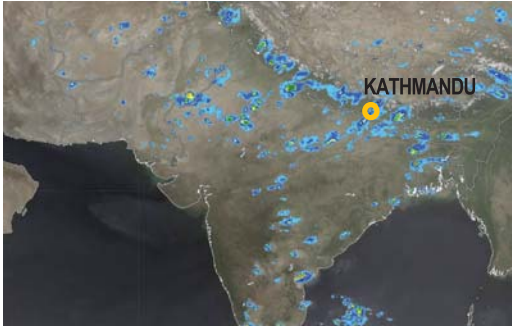
For customizable bowls of noodles, platters filled to the brim with dumplings, spicy noodles, kimbab, corn dogs, da-pow and more, rooms paying homage to popular animes like Tokyo Ghoul, Kyubi's Kitchen is the place to go.
Jhamsikhel, 9810298050



Haopin Hotpot

If one plans on visiting Haopin Hotpot anytime soon, make sure to take friends, because hotpot is best served with a side of good, hungry company. Choose from a wide variety of meats and vegetables steeped in flavoured soups, accompanied by delicious side dishes.
Narayan Chaur, 9808064999

WEEKEND WEATHER



FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY
23° 11°	25° 12°	24° 13°	24° 11°	24° 11°

In and out of rain

There will be a slight respite from the monsoony rains of this week from Friday onwards as the forceful westerly front moves out. However, it has left a trail of moisture in its wake, and this will rise along the mountains in convection storms, especially in the afternoons, evenings and night over the weekend with only Saturday looking relatively dry at this point. Trekkers in the high passes should exercise caution, especially along avalanche fans along the trails.

OUR PICK

The non-sensationalist 2022 biographical drama She Said is the story of the two New York Times reporters, Megan Twohey and Jodi Kantor, and their battle to write the story about Harvey Weinstein and his decades-long practice of intimidation, harassment and rape of young female actors and junior staff, hushing them up with threats and NDA payoffs. The title takes the second half of the famous phrase habitually used to dismiss rape allegations as hearsay – “he said, she said” – and in doing so restores the importance of women's testimony. This worthy, well-acted tribute to journalistic integrity, directed by Maria Schrader, does away with salacious literalism to show smart, persistent people taking down a Goliath with a lot of hard work. Stars Carey Mulligan and Zoe Kazan.



MISS MOTI-VATION

KRIPA JOSHI



गर्मी मौसममा संक्रामक रोगबाट बचाउँ र बचाऔँ

- गर्मी मौसममा मलेरिया, कालाजार, डेंगी, हैजालगायतका विभिन्न संक्रामक रोगहरू फैलिन सक्छन् ।
- संक्रामक रोग फैलाउने झिँगा, लामखुट्टे, भुसुना आदिको नियन्त्रण गरौं ।
- संक्रामक रोगबाट बच्न शुद्ध र उमालेको पानी पिऔं ।
- बासी तथा सडेगलेका खाना नखाऔं ।
- घरभित्र र वरपरको सरसफाइमा ध्यान दिऔं ।



नेपाल सरकार
विज्ञापन बोर्ड

Wounded in the line of duty

A Nepali factory worker in Malaysia loses a limb but gets help from colleagues and both governments



DIASPORA
DIARIES 31

This is the 31st instalment of *Diaspora Diaries*, a regular series in *Nepali Times* with stories of Nepalis living and working abroad.

It had been nine years and one month since I had been working in Malaysia. I was planning to return home for good after reaching the 10-year mark. But I met with a life-threatening accident at the steel plant where I worked. It was dangerous work, and the explosion reminded me in the cruelest way just how dangerous it was.

I was unconscious for five days in hospital. When I came to, I realised I had lost my left hand. I wept. As a worker who has only done physical labour all my life, what was I worth without my hand? The idea of returning home made me uncomfortable. I felt like it would be better if I just died there in Malaysia.

Losing my hand, I had also lost my sense of dignity, confidence. The desire to isolate myself just grew stronger. But as time passed, I started coming to terms with reality. Malaysia was a second home to me. Of my nine siblings, seven have previously worked there.



I had family and friends there who reached out to me, took care of me, fundraised for me and showered me with love. Life in my village in Ramechhap was difficult growing up given our economic background. I had no education or skills. To get a job that paid liveable

wages overseas felt like the only option. After nearly a decade in Malaysia, I was well liked by my supervisors. I had good duty hours. In those nine years, I came home thrice on vacation. I had gone there with dreams and ambitions, but I was on my final

flight home, maimed and dispirited. I had narrowly escaped death, but dreaded homecoming. I only told my family back home about my situation 15 days after regaining consciousness at the hospital. They were shocked and heartbroken, and insisted I come home immediately.

I hung around in Malaysia with a missing limb. I refused to return home without compensation for my workplace accident. I wanted to benefit from their social security scheme and although I heard there were provisions for such support, being able to access it entailed paperwork and constant follow up.

I also relied on informal support of friends and family until I got this sorted out. I may have lost my limb but my responsibility as a father continued so, I decided to persist. I had nothing to lose.

I used to be offered food and basic items for free from shops frequented by Nepalis, Bangladeshis and Vietnamese. They gave it out of love, but I used to feel bad as I felt these were handouts out of pity. But I also felt guilty about the reluctance to appreciate their generosity. These were complex emotions to deal with.

My persistence finally paid off. I now get a monthly disability benefit of 824 Ringgit (\$185) via bank transfers from SOCSO every three months. If I face any problem, the foreign employment board in Kathmandu supports me. It has helped me with some of my household expenses, and has ensured my children's education.

The Governments of Nepal

and Malaysia have signed a social security agreement that makes it easier for people to benefit from the scheme in case of accident or death. The agreement provided me with strong support to claim my dues.

I get Rs2,100 as a disability benefit from the Nepal government as I am categorised under the 'अ' category of disability and not 'क'. But without my limb, I cannot work at all. What can I do with a meager Rs2,100? Which is why the lifelong Malaysian SOCSO benefit is important for me.

Through the contributory Foreign Employment Welfare Fund and mandatory insurance under Nepal's labour approval process, I also received a one time support of around Rs800,000 which provided some financial relief. Thankfully my labour permit was valid, if not, I would not have been eligible.

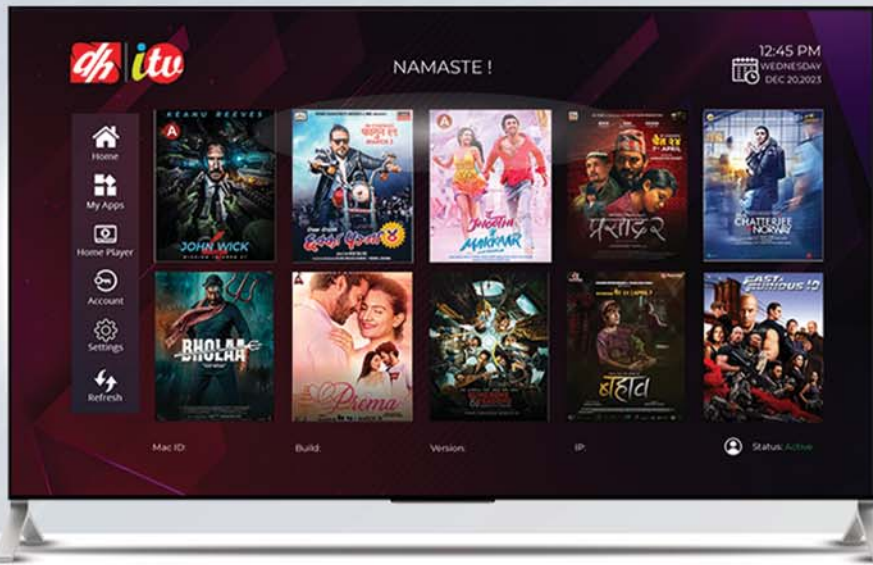
Even after years, I can feel the weight of my missing limb. My phantom fingers feel like they are tightly clutched together and cause pain and discomfort throughout my waking hours. I use prosthetics but it is heavy and unnatural. I still break down when I watch shows like *Indreni* that cover similar stories.

The memories do not go away, and the tears do not stop. When the odds are heavily stacked against you and you are left with lasting scars, lifetime social security support can at least provide something reliable to fall back on. 🇳🇵

Translated from an interview with the author.



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FIBERNET

Geopolitics of Nepal's rivers

India edges China out of Nepal's river projects as water becomes a strategic commodity

■ Ramesh Kumar

India's interest in regulating Nepal's rivers is not new. But with the Himalaya becoming a geopolitical and climate hotspot, its strategic interest in regulating river flow has grown.

Climate models show that the hydrology of Himalayan rivers will change dramatically in the coming decades, with peak water in the 2030s and low flow levels in the dry season thereafter. With 70% of the annual discharge on the Ganga flowing down from rivers in Nepal, most of it in the four monsoon months, storage projects in Nepal will be ever more important.

At the annual Nepal Power Summit in Kathmandu on 18-19 April, officials called on India to allow Nepal to export power at real time prices, not just in the day-ahead market. Also discussed was a need for more flexible guidelines on market access for Nepal's electricity to India which currently buys power on a project-to-project basis, boycotting those built by Chinese investment or contractors.

Ever since Sher Bahadur Deuba became prime minister for the fifth time in 2021, he has fast-tracked a slew of projects in which Indian companies are involved, including the West Seti reservoir project that has languished for 20 years mainly because of Indian objections to Australian and Chinese investment.

Most recently, Indian National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) Limited is in talks to be awarded the 480MW Phukot Karnali Hydroelectric Project in Kalikot jointly with Nepal's state-owned Vidyut Utpadan Company Limited with a share ratio of 51% to 49%. The project will likely be launched during Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal's state visit to India in May.

India's NHPC has already been granted licenses for West Seti and Seti River-6 projects, and is also eyeing another 1,902MW megaproject on the Karnali.

In fact, across Nepal, Indian companies are building a series of hydropower projects which will add a total of 4,000MW to the grid, three of which were rushed through only in the past year. Three more Indian projects are in the pipeline.

Why the sudden renewed Indian interest in Nepal's rivers? And what is the hurry? The answer lies in the need to plan for the decades ahead when water is going to be a strategic commodity in the Indo-Gangetic plains because of climate change, increased industrial, irrigation and household consumption.

Energy analysts say that although India's interest seems to be in hydropower to fulfil its decarbonisation pledges, exports of power from Nepal will only be \$800 million the next three years, which



TUNNEL VISION: The headrace tunnel of the 900MW Arun 3 project in eastern Nepal (left).

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and then Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba look on as Satluj Jal Vidyut Nigam's Nanda Lal Sharma and the NEA's Kulman Ghising exchange MoUs in May 2022 in Lumbini to build the 409MW Arun 4 (below right).

Sushil Bhatta of Investment Board Nepal and Abhay Kumar Singh of India's NHPC, after signing an agreement to develop the 760MW West Seti and 460MW Seti River 6 projects in 2022 (below, left).



will only be a tiny percentage of the 1,600 billion kWh that India generated in the last fiscal year.

And although power demand is expected to rise with rising incomes, industrialisation and increasingly intense summer heat waves in the plains, India's long-term interest is in reservoir projects to store monsoon water in Nepal's rivers to reduce monsoon flood risk and keep rivers flowing in the dry season. And New Delhi has not tried to hide its distaste for any Chinese involvement in these projects.

Hydropower Investment and Development Company Ltd (HIDCL), in which the government is a majority shareholder, informed the Investment Board Nepal (IBN) in February that it was withdrawing from the export-oriented 762MW Tamor Hydropower project.

CEO Arjun Kumar Gautam is upfront about why: "We cannot sell electricity generated with Chinese involvement in the Indian market."

Tamor was one of the two projects agreed upon during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Nepal in October 2019. Soon after, IBN signed up China Construction to build the project after completing a feasibility study.

The HIDCL now wants to null the agreement with the Chinese contractor and bring in a new

contractor more amenable to the Indians. Meanwhile, India's state-owned Satluj Jal Vidyut Nigam (SJVN), which is involved in a cascade of projects on the adjoining Arun River to generate a total of 2,000MW, is said to be aggressively lobbying top Nepali officials to also build Tamor.

Besides the 900MW Arun 3, Satluj was awarded the Lower Arun by the K P Oli-led government in 2021 without competitive bidding. Then in May 2022, the Sher Bahadur Deuba-led government suddenly awarded Arun 4 to Satluj (with 51% share) during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Lumbini.

But even though Satluj is said to be also interested in the 1,061MW Upper Arun, Kulman Ghising of the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) says it is building the project. "Upper Arun is our first priority, we are planning to start the construction of the access road," Ghising told us.

Arun and Tamor are in eastern Nepal (see map, below), but India is also interested in rivers in the west because of the proximity of its main load centres, as well as to augment dry season flow of rivers that flow down from Nepal.

There was some hue and cry last year after the Deuba-led government abruptly handed over the 750MW

West Seti Dam and Seti River-6 projects to two Indian state-owned companies without competition or transparency. Experts pointed out that Nepal's Public-Private Partnership and Investment Act 2075 states that there should be competitive bidding.

The Seti saga is three decades long. After successive partnerships with Australian, Chinese and private Indian companies fell through, India's state-owned NHPC finally took the lead. Since the terms of the deal are opaque, many experts question how beneficial the \$1.6 billion project that involves building a high dam in Doti district will be for Nepal.

Indian state-owned companies appear to move faster than private Indian companies interested in river projects in Nepal. The GMR Group obtained a permit to build the 900MW Upper Karnali and a Project Development Agreement was signed with the IBN in 2014 to start construction in two years after securing funding. Nepal's decision to extend the deadline for the GMR by two years is being challenged in the Supreme Court.

The export-oriented 456MW Upper Tamakosi project finally started production in June 2021 after much delay. But because a part of the Upper Tamakosi was built by Sinohydro of China, India

refused to buy power from the project during the monsoon surplus last year – even though it was built with NEA investment.

One international lender told Nepali Times: "Obtaining an Indian nod before building any big hydropower project in Nepal has now become a must." Indian pressure manifests itself in its agreement to buy only 364MW of electricity which was recently increased to 452MW. This being the sum total of generation capacity with no direct Chinese involvement.

India's international electricity trade procedure issued in February 2021 prohibits the import of electricity from projects invested in third countries that do not have a bilateral agreement for cooperation in the energy sector. The fact that India does not have an energy cooperation agreement with China has therefore become an excuse, not just to blacklist projects in Nepal with Chinese investment, but even Chinese contractors. India has even stopped a supply of explosives for projects like the Tanahu and Upper Trisuli-1 schemes being built by Chinese contractors.

"Even though there is nothing in writing, India does not want any involvement of the Chinese in any capacity in Nepal's hydropower projects, they even have details of which country is the contractor and where are the machines being used from," explains Ganesh Karki of the Independent Power Producers Association Nepal (IPPAN).

India first allowed imports of electricity only from the 37MW Trisuli and 14MW Devghat projects, which it built back in 1967 and 1984. But after Deuba signed an agreement on energy cooperation between the two countries in 2022, NEA was allowed to sell 364MW.

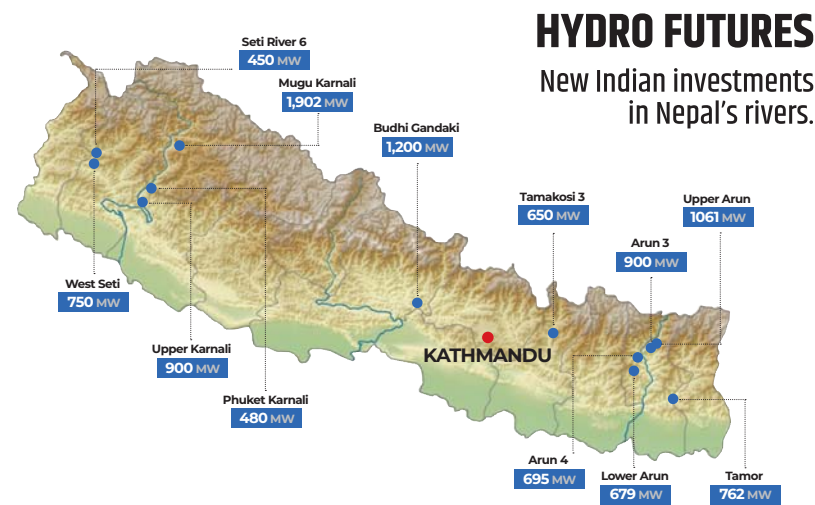
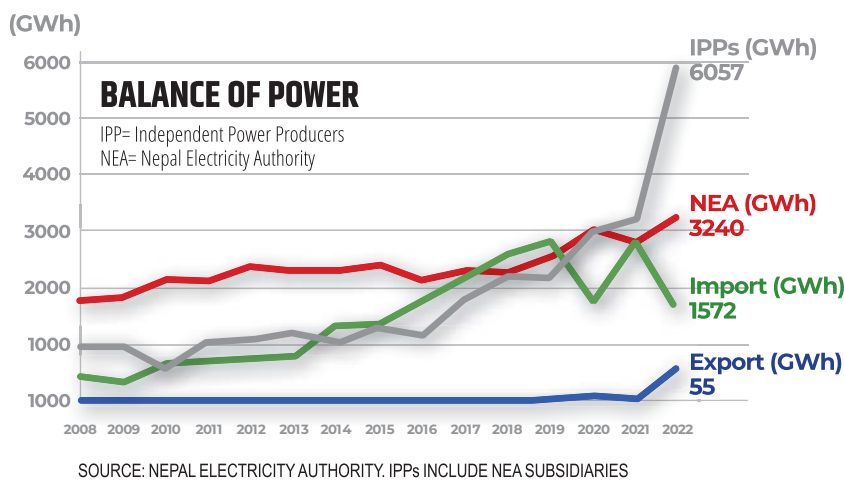
Even so, Nepal must renew this export provision every year, which is a hassle. Nepali officials have been trying to convince the Indian side that it is in their own best interest if Nepal has a surplus in the coming years. Based on projections of generation capacity, NEA has sent a proposal to New Delhi to export an additional 600MW.

The installed capacity of hydropower projects in Nepal has reached 2,400MW and is expected to cross 3,000MW after the completion of more projects this monsoon. Projects with a combined capacity of 3,200MW are under construction and will be completed in the next three years. On the demand side, average domestic consumption is about 1,600MW and is expected to increase only to 2,000MW next year.

There are critics who say Nepal should not be exporting power to India at all since it will not make a big dent on the trade deficit, and the \$85.8 million it earned last year is negligible compared to the \$8.33 billion Nepal earned in remittances.

They say the priority should be in increasing electricity consumption for cooking, transportation and industry. At present, 70% of Nepal's energy is from biomass and only 5% is from electricity.

Since most of the electricity in Nepal is from run-of-river schemes in which generation depends on river flow, Nepal will have to continue to import power from India during peak winter months for the next three years. In the monsoon, though, generation is double of demand, but due to the Indian quota, inadequate transmission lines, and low domestic demand, much of this power is wasted.



Dinesh Kumar Ghimire at the Energy Ministry says Nepal is looking to sign a 25-year export agreement with India. "We are preparing a draft. If both sides are on board with it, there may be an agreement during the Prime Minister's visit to India."

While India is awarded one hydropower project after another in Nepal, China is being edged out. Both Phukot Karnali and Tamor hydropower projects were supposed to be implemented under Beijing's Belt Road Initiative (BRI) scheme.

Last month, Sichuan Wangping Energy Science and Technology gave up its license to build the 235MW Humla Karnali-1 and 335MW Humla Karnali-2 in partnership with a Nepali company. The survey permit for these projects has now been granted to Ruru Hydropower, a Nepali company.

The 1,200MW Budi Gandaki reservoir project has been caught in a geopolitical tangle between India, China and Nepal for the past six years. In May 2017, the Pushpa Kamal Dahal government gave the project to China's Gezhouba Group without competition. A few months later, the Deuba-led government reversed the decision.

Fast forward a year later and the Oli-led government awarded Budi Gandaki back to Gezhouba, only for the Deuba-led coalition government in March 2022 to reverse the decision again. Exasperated, the then-Chinese ambassador Hou Yanqi abandoned diplomatic niceties to declare publicly that it was wrong for Nepal to keep changing its mind every time a government changed.

Says Ganesh Karki of IPPAN: "We have to conclude that because of India's stance, it is difficult to get Chinese investment in Nepal's hydropower. The top political leadership should lobby with India to remove this obstacle."

Nepal's former energy secretary

Dwarika Nath Dhungel is convinced India considers water a strategic commodity, and its emphasis on electricity export hides its real intention to secure water supply in the coming decades.

"We in Nepal, on the other hand, have no idea about this, and there is no clarity about our own water and energy policy. In fact, our policymakers are not working in the national interest at all," he adds.

Water scarcity in the Indo-Gangetic plains will increase as Himalayan glaciers dry up, and the groundwater level falls due to over-extraction. And in the monsoon there is too much water.

Building storage dams in Nepal is a win-win-win for India, reducing flood risk, augmenting dry season flow of Nepali rivers, and generating electricity. Nepal will get export income, but will not benefit much from irrigation, and its mountain valleys will be inundated by future reservoirs.

"Nepal's export of a few thousand megawatts will not mean much for India's huge power system with a capacity of around 400,000MW," adds Dhungel. "What India is fixated on is our water. And that is why it does not want any third parties involved, especially not China."

Former secretary at the Ministry of Energy Anup Kumar Upadhyay on the other hand is all for more Indian investment in Nepal's hydropower, and does not think there is any ulterior motive.

At present, Indian companies have agreed to provide about 22% of electricity to the Nepal government for free, and hand over the projects to Nepal after 25 years.

Says Upadhyay: "Whatever projects we are giving to India now, India does not even have the benefit of regular water flow from them, so there is no reason to be suspicious that India has a grand design to control our rivers." 🇳🇵

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