



BHAWIN KARKI/RSS

This tipper truck (above) was washed down by a flood on Sabha Khola on 19 June as the first monsoon squall lashed eastern Nepal. There is increasing risk to infrastructure from climate-induced extreme weather.

But the spectacle of this half-submerged truck is also emblematic of the sorry state of the Nepali state. The fake refugee scandal exposed how kleptocrats have hollowed out the country. Impunity is so rife that a ruling party absolves its students for maiming university officials.

A populist mayor oversteps his brief to reclaim Nepal's pre-1816 boundaries and concurrently

declares war on Bollywood for a non-existent dialogue so as to distract public attention from failures to address more pressing issues citizens face. Social media is weaponised to silence critics, proving that ultra-nationalism is the last resort of scoundrels.

The truck is also symbolic of the shambolic state of the economy. Nepal's macroeconomy is quite robust, with foreign exchange reserves enough to pay for 11 months of imports, and remittance inflows hitting record levels.

Reserves increased because of last year's

import curbs. But solving one crisis created a bigger one: reducing imports also brought down tax revenue. Without that revenue, the government has much less money for capital investment and most of the available cash is spent on recurrent expenditure.

Finance Minister Prakash Sharan Mahat's budget is problematic at many levels, and even the NC's coalition partners have sworn not to pass it because of perceived favouritism to some districts. He slashed import tax on certain types of LPG cylinders to appease gas companies, and raised

taxes on electric public transport and cheaper battery vehicles. The government's decarbonisation commitments are just greenwash.

The most egregious item in the budget is a provision to retroactively tax FPOs and profits from mergers, stock and property transactions. Businesses have met the prime minister, finance minister and other officials saying it will kill foreign investment at a time when the economy is already a wreck.

"This does not happen anywhere else in the world," said one banker who did not want to be named. "The government is so desperate for revenue it is taxing everything left,

right and centre."

Finance Minister Mahat has refused to budge, saying the budget is written in stone, and reportedly told businesses which had gone to see him that they could always go to the courts to challenge it.

With cooperatives folding, banks in crisis, and the government cash-strapped, one would have thought that Prime Minister Dahal's government would be busy addressing the economic crisis.

But by visiting temples, his message seems to be: "Only Pashupatinath can protect us now."

Kunda Dixit

**The tragedy of
Tek Nath Rizal**
EDITORIAL
PAGE 2

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The tragedy of Tek Nath Rizal

There was silence in the chamber of the Kathmandu District Court as Bhutan's refugee leader Tek Nath Rizal started to speak. He began in a soft voice, recounting his struggle for democracy and citizenship and his persecution by the Bhutan regime.

His voice rose as he protested his arrest for complicity in helping Nepalis obtain fake refugee papers for resettlement in the United States. Glancing behind at over a dozen accused, including two former ministers, a government secretary, recruiters and their accomplices, he said: "These are the crooks who insulted us refugees, these senior government officials are solely responsible for the crime that has brought them here."

Former deputy prime minister Top Bahadur Rayamajhi, who defected from the Maoist-Centre to the UML, former NC home minister Bal Krishna Khand and secretary Tek Narayan Pandey listened, expressionless.

Rizal then turned to the judge, pounded the rostrum with his fist, and thundered: "I cannot take such humiliation anymore, how can these scoundrels extort Nepalis in the name of resolving the issue of 6,000 remaining refugees?"

A few days later on 20 June, the District Court ordered Rizal, Rayamajhi, Khand and 13 others into judicial custody. Twelve more accused are still at large in a scam that involved extorting 875 Nepalis for up to Rs5 million each to make fake refugee documents, and tricking them into believing that the resettlement program had been reopened.

Rizal was arrested after police found evidence that one of the accused recruiters had paid Rizal. And in a deposition before the government attorney, Rizal is said to have told Minister Rayamajhi in 2019 that he was not concerned about fake refugees being resettled as long as the welfare of genuine Bhutan refugees was addressed.

Tek Nath Rizal is a leading Bhutanese pro-democracy leader and was an Amnesty International Prisoner of Conscience who spent nearly 10 years in jail in Bhutan. Rizal used to be a royal counsel and head of Bhutan's anti-corruption bureau, but was targeted by the regime for speaking out against persecution of the country's Nepali-speaking Lhotsampa people.

Fearing arrest, Rizal fled to Nepal in 1988 but was kidnapped by the Panchayat regime and deported to Bhutan where he was mostly in solitary confinement in the notorious Chemgang Prison for 10 years. Rizal has documented much of this in his 2010 book, *Torture: Killing Me Softly*.

It was an investigative story by Devendra Bhattarai in Kantipur in March that first exposed the story of hundreds of Nepalis who had been duped by recruiters into paying them large sums in return for fake refugee documents.

The recruiters were arrested, and under interrogation by police, started singing -- implicating senior government officials who were given a cut of the extortion racket.

It is hard to believe that someone with

Rizal's history of struggle would be involved in helping Nepalis get fake citizenship papers. But he apparently admitted to borrowing money from one of the recruiters, but for some other purpose.

Another accused told police he paid Rizal Rs1.1 million to sign off on the citizenship of 34 fake refugees. Rizal accepted signing some of the citizenship papers when Rayamajhi asked him to, and indeed, many of the fake Bhutan citizenship papers are said to be from Rizal's constituency of Lamidanda in Bhutan.

In an affidavit to police, Rayamajhi is said to have taken Rizal to meet Pushpa Kamal Dahal of the Maoists and Sher Bahadur Deuba of the NC when they were prime ministers. Rizal told the court his purpose in meeting them was to warn them of the fake refugee scam, and have his Rs100,000 monthly allowance reinstated.



How can a stateless person commit treason against the state?

From what we have heard of the evidence presented to police so far, it looks like the kingpins used Rizal's credibility and respect in the refugee community to convince fake refugees that the scheme had official sanction. It may also be that Rizal signed the papers in return for fulfilment of his demands for reunion of family members of refugees.

There is also the question within Nepal of whether the really big fish have been caught. There is said to be evidence of the three top leaders of the parties instructing police to just investigate those caught so far, and not go further up the food chain.

"I stayed behind in Nepal even though most refugees have been resettled because I wanted to either go back to my homeland, or be a refugee in the land of my ancestors," Rizal told the court.

Whatever the final verdict in Rizal's case, it has done irreparable harm to the Nepali state, bureaucracy and the Bhutan refugee leadership. The only entity to gain from this sordid tale is the Bhutan regime that 30 years ago evicted one-sixth of its population.

Rizal, who spent 10 years in prison in Bhutan, now faces the tragic prospect of more jail time in Nepal.

ONLINE PACKAGES



Join Marty Logan on a trip to Sarlahi district where a rising number of women are now going for regular health checkups during pregnancy, have a nutritious diet and opt to deliver at health posts. But much more is needed for safer pregnancy. Read the story on page 10-11.



For the LGBTQIA+ community in Nepal, drag has provided a powerful platform to express, explore and celebrate their identities. Although at a nascent stage, Nepali drag queens, kings, and performers are using the culture for visibility and representation. Shuby Bhattarai gives us the 101 on drag. Watch the video on our YouTube channel and read the story on page 9.

PM PRACHANDA

Their master first gave them the red cover to foster division in the Nepali people ('Red to Saffron', Shristi Karki, #1166). That cloth coloured with the blood of innocent Nepali people has now become all tattered and torn. On this visit, after prostration in front of the fictitious Akhanda Bharat map, the master was pleased to provide the saffron to cover the decayed red.

Lal Bahadur

■ Dahal a Communist? Nope. He is another just another power junkie selling his soul to the devil. The BJP/RSS' Neo Fascist Hindutva will be the end of Nepal.

Aleksandr Verkovsyn

■ The photos say it all, from combat to suit to daura to saffron.

Rupa Joshi

■ A warrior in youth, a ruler in maturity and a priest in old age. The circle of life.

Netashwa

SCOTCH ON EVEREST

I would love to know how much it eventually auctioned off for ('First Scotch on the summit of Everest', Lisa Choegyal, #1166).

Kalps Para

■ A \$25,000 bottle of alcohol has made it to summit of Mount Everest, will there perhaps be any changes to its taste now?

Ratna Sansar Shrestha

MONSOON

I'm not sure government is ever the answer for disaster preparedness ('When it rains it pours', Editorial, #1166) I lean more towards personal responsibility.

Sigmund Stengel

■ Pollutants from India and China melt Nepal's glaciers. Over the last 20 years, rivers have become smaller, and there is less water for downstream valleys. In some decades, Nepal will have run out of water.

Gorkhe Tweets

CORRECTION:

Photo credit for the story 'Tara Pariyar's Karnali' (#1166, 16-22 June 2023) should be Skanda Gautam.

WHAT'S TRENDING

Tara Pariyar's Karnali

by Anita Bhetwal

As a single mother from the Dalit community, Tara Pariyar had to struggle against discrimination in culturally conservative Karnali. Now, Pariyar's apple orchard has allowed her to turn her life around and single-handedly care for her family and community. Read about her journey on our website.



Most reached and shared on Facebook

The story so far

We have to understand the past to make sense of Nepali politics today. Sanjay Upadhyaya's new book *Democracy in Turns: A Political Account of Nepal* looks back at the country's struggle to construct a new democratic identity under seven constitutions in seven decades. Read the excerpts of the final chapter at nepalitimes.com



Most popular on Twitter



Red to Saffron

by Shristi Karki

Nepal's Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal is overseeing a cultural revolution in reverse. It was a matter of time before India's Hindutva supremacist politics would influence Nepal, but few expected it to be as dramatic as the 180 degree turn by the Nepal PM. Join the discussion online.



Most commented

Bridging the Andes and Himalaya with music

by Sewa Bhattarai

Chilean musicians Thomas Carrasco Gubernatis and Moa Edmunds Guevara have found uncanny similarities between the traditional music of their native Andes and the Himalaya. They are now collaborating on the music of Pungmo, a remote Nepali village. Details at nepalitimes.com.



Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Farmers dumped tomatoes on the roadside of Kalimati on Sunday, after they failed to sell the produce even at Rs4 per kg.



Som Raj Shrestha @somrajstha

Please sell it to tomato ketchup and other products manufacturer.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

"Nepal has a good Constitution and there is a reason why the new model was chosen. Please give this model a try, pass the much needed acts in order for this system to work."



कमल गाहा मगर @kamalKThapa

On top of that, Acts shouldn't be amended for personal benefit and should be strictly obeyed by top leaders.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

While the latest national census represents the ethnic and linguistic diversity of Nepalis, this diversity is reflected nowhere in the corridors of power.



Forester @kuenvmgt504

Shame on the Nepali State

1,000 WORDS



MINERAL WATTARA: Leaders of the Maoist Center, JSP, CPN-Unified Socialist, and Communist Party of Nepal (Biplav) announced the formation of their Socialist Front, a loose forum of leftist parties on Monday at the Rastriya Sabhagriha in Kathmandu.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Learning Education

The quality of instruction in Nepal's classrooms was an issue even 20 years ago. And so is the disparity between public and private schools. Covid-19 made the gap worse. Decline in the quality has often been used as an excuse for governments to take over the education system.

Regulate private schools for sure, but more importantly the government should improve and upgrade the quality of education in public schools, where 80% of Nepali students are enrolled. Excerpts from an editorial 20 years ago this week on issue #150 20-26 June 2003:



asked the parties why it is that they are once more threatening an indefinite closure of schools throughout the land, they washed their hands off it. It's not us, they said, it's the student unions.

How convenient. It has become standard operating procedure for the vision-challenged party leadership to use their affiliated "student" unions to take aim at schools in order to create maximum social disruption with minimum effort. A few phone calls threatening violence usually does the trick.

The main reasons for the rot in our school system is the mismanagement and corruption over the past 13 years by the mentors of the same unions that are shutting down schools today. Successive elected governments abdicated their responsibility to provide affordable quality education even though the period saw the largest-ever infusion of foreign aid into the sector. So, private schools filled the vacuum.

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

Why are private schools the target of everyone's wrath? Every time anyone wants to make a political point around here, they force schools to shut. In effect, our way of taking revenge on political rivals is to punish our own children. Very few societies in the world have shown such consistently self-destructive behaviour.

Earlier this month, the five main political parties signed a declaration making schools Zones of Peace. When we



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Nepal's curse of the white gold

Rasuwa villagers have not seen the promised economic bonanza from hydropower project on their river

■ **Ramesh Kumar** in Rasuwa

Tipper trucks piled with cement rumble along the rocky 15km road that runs alongside the Trisuli River that flows out of glaciers in Tibet and tumbles through mighty gorges into Nepal.

It is the steep gradient of this frothing river that makes it so ideal to generate hydropower. Which is why there are eight existing or planned run-of-the-river schemes in a cascade along the Bhote Kosi.

The narrow valley reverberates with the roar of excavators, drills and a mix of Korean, Chinese and Nepali voices among the workers in the newest plant under construction on the river: the Rs65 billion 216MW Upper Trisuli-1 hydropower project.

Despite its proximity to Kathmandu, Rasuwa had largely been bypassed in Nepal's infrastructure development. Even after India helped build the Trisuli (1967) and Devighat (1984) plants, investment here languished. But after 1990, politicians started promising that the district would prosper from the 'white gold' of the Bhote Kosi, there would be jobs, industries and money would pour into the local economy.

The biggest and newest of these projects is the Upper Trisuli-1 and it was sold to the indigenous Tamang community as their economic salvation. Far from jobs



PHOTOS: BISWAS NEPALI

and economic benefits, local farmers have seen the destruction of their ancestral land and sacred sites.

"We had hoped that this project would finally bring us resources for local development that we sorely needed, but it has only made our lives more difficult," says Ashabir Tamang (pictured, right) from Mailungbesi village by the Bhote Kosi.

A decade has passed since the Nepal Water and Energy

Development Company (NWEDC) began exploring the Upper Trisuli-1 project in Mailungbesi. Financing was secured from Korea (75%), 15% from the International Finance Corporation (IFC) with and 10% from the local Nepali partner Bkesh Pradhanang. Asian Development Bank, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Dutch Development Bank and other international banks also have investments.

During the project design phase the IFC, which is also the primary loan manager for the project, had stipulated that its PS-7 performance criteria be applied to the project. The stipulation seeks to ensure that business activities minimise negative impacts, foster respect for human rights, dignity and culture of indigenous populations, and promote development benefits in culturally appropriate ways.

The NWEDC was therefore

forced to enter into an FPIC (Free, Prior and Open Consent) agreement with the indigenous Tamang community. Nepal became a signatory to the ILO Convention 169 in 2007, which gave local and indigenous communities the right to have a say in benefits.

This agreement between the NWEDC and the Indigenous Advisory Council that represents the local community, and the local government stated that about



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Pokhara international

The first international flight to Pokhara was conducted on 21 June with a Sichuan Airlines Airbus 319 charter flying directly from Chengdu with a Nepali parliament delegation returning from China and participants of a Dragon Boat Race on Phewa Lake. There is no word yet on regular international flights to the airport inaugurated on 1 January.

Turkish awarded

Turkish airlines has been awarded the Best Airlines in Europe, Best Business Class Catering, Best Economy Class Catering, Best Airline in Southern Europe and Best Economy Class Seat



in Europe at the World Airline Awards. Says CEO Bilal Ekşi, "We are proud to have been honored as the Best Airline in Europe for the eighth time. This award strengthens our flag carrier's leading position in the sector."

MG service

Paramount Motors, the distributor of MG vehicles for Nepal, has opened a service center in Kusunti. The centre features 11 bays, high EV diagnosis tools, three car washing facilities,



hybrid AC recovery equipment, paint booth, Car-O-Liner collision repair capabilities, updated isolation testing tools and DC charger and AC charger.



Mansarovar opened

China has finally reopened visas for Nepali pilgrims to Mansarovar and Kailash after three years, however Indian nationals will still not be able to go. Nepalis have to travel in groups of at least four and get their visas in Kathmandu.



NIU Teku

NIU scooters has opened a new showroom in Teku. Customers can visit and book multiple models of six electric scooter series NQi, MQi, UQi, NIU Aero, Gova, and KQi.

Hyundai offer

Laxmi Intercontinental, distributor of Hyundai vehicles in Nepal, has announced a new financing offer on its EVs KONA and IONIQ 5 at an interest rate of 9.99% (for first year) as well as easy documentation and processing through 17 dealers and 19 service centres across Nepal.



Ncell voice pack

Ncell has launched three new voice packs. Customers can now choose from 1 day unlimited all network pack, 1 day unlimited talk time and 7-day unlimited talk time packs, costing Rs25, Rs30 and Rs150.

Samsung AirDresser

Samsung has released its new AirDresser, an industry-first advanced smart clothing care solution that uses air and steam to remove dust, pollutants and germs, refreshing and sanitising clothes. Starting price is Rs250,000 and available at Samsung Smart Plaza and EStore under Him Electronics.



Pink Glam Night

Marriott Kathmandu and Larios Gin held a 'Pink Glam Night' at the Japanese restaurant Kaku Kaku Shika Jika. The event featured Japanese cuisine by Chef Kyohei from Japan, pink cocktails and prizes for guests.



Rs140 million would be spent on sustainable socio-cultural and economic development projects in five years.

Although it required that the consent of local communities would be needed before land acquisition and resource management began, the request was made only when the project reached the implementation stage.

Says Ashabir Tamang, who is also vice-chair of the Indigenous Advisory Council: “The funding for indigenous development projects that we agreed on has not yet been released, the company is violating the contract and cheating us.”

NWEDC Director Giriraj Adhikari admits the company is yet to release the funds as per the agreement, but adds that the company needs to adhere to the financial protocols of international partners involved in the project. “Funds have already been allocated for local welfare, but procedural issues have meant that they have yet to be sent to Nepal from overseas,” he says.

Upper Trisuli-1 is the first infrastructure project in Nepal to try to implement an FPIC agreement to increase self-employment for local communities and minimise adverse environmental effects.

However, local activists say the agreement applies to only 10 out of 21 areas in the project site, and does not include outlying communities and it also disregards their customs and institutions. Residents also have complaints about lack of compensation for damage to property during construction-related demolition and river diversion. On top of that, forests, rivers, wetlands and traditional grazing areas locals have used for generations are located in areas surrounding the intake and powerhouse.

Ashabir Tamang’s gripe is that the project has not fulfilled a single

obligation to local residents and has essentially bypassed the community on whose land the project is being built.

“With the monsoon soon coming, we live in constant fear that landslides will wipe out our entire village,” says Tamang. “Where do we go to complain? No one listens to us.”

The memory and fear of landslide is real and fresh. Mailungbesi’s 60 households were nearly entirely buried in the 2015 earthquake, and 20 residents lost their lives. Among those killed were nine members of Ashabir Tamang’s own family, including his young grandchildren.

There are 790 other households in surrounding villages that were also impacted by the earthquakes. Many of them never received the promised government grant to rebuild.

Eight years after the earthquake, many homes are still buried in debris. The boulders and soil have still not been cleared. Only half of Mailungbesi’s population remains in the village, while the rest have moved on to other villages in Rasuwa and Nuwakot.

Those that remain face a host of problems, including where to send their children to school, the nearest primary school is a half-hour walk away in Salletar. Parents wait in fear, hoping their children will not be hit by rockfalls on their way to and from school.

“It is like waiting for another disaster to strike,” says Som Bahadur Tamang, another resident.

Project-related demolition work, tunnel construction as well as the constant movement of heavy earthmoving vehicles have destabilised the slopes, the ground shakes constantly, and rocks frequently fall from the cliffs above.

Kanchhi Maya Tamang tells us of her fears. She says, “I do not

worry so much during the day, but I lie awake at night wondering if the river will sweep away our house with us inside or a landslide will bury us alive.”

Inaam Tamang rebuilt his house with concrete after the earthquake, but says cracks have appeared and one of the rooms was carried away by the river when the project diverted the river.

“No one listened to us when we asked that walls be built around our homes to protect us,” he says. “They do not care about us small people.”

Down in Hakubesi and Phulbari, 110 households were displaced by the project and only got partial compensation. Locals are also angry that while there are able-bodied men looking for jobs in the villages, the project is bringing in drivers and construction workers from outside.

Kanchhi Maya Tamang, 55, was hired as a cleaner, but sacked for being too old. “Do you think someone who has carried fodder and firewood from the mountains all her life is not strong enough to sweep the floor?” she asks.

Saraswati Tamang, who owns a grocery store in Mailungbesi, says she has not seen the expected boom in business after the project got going. This despite there being 800 Nepali, Chinese, and Korean technicians living in the area.

“They bring everything from Kathmandu,” she says. “Not just groceries, even live chicken, ducks, goats and pigs. We have not gained much, we were just uprooted.”

Director Adhikari refutes allegations that locals were not given jobs, and says 900 residents were hired and given project-related contracts. However, he admits that even though the company is taking initiatives to ensure benefits to the local economy, not all demands can be met. 🇳🇵

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Comings and goings in M

Locals migrate overseas, and other Nepalis move to Mustang attracted by jobs in tourism

■ **Shrijan Pandey**

■ Photos **Dinesh Shrestha** in Mustang

While much of the discourse about Mustang district concerns its people leaving for better opportunities overseas, what is less well known is that Nepalis from other parts of the country are moving in.

Mustang's population is the second smallest among 77 districts, and it is falling due to out-migration. The resident population in the 2021 census was 14,452, with 5,882 people from other parts of Nepal.

One of them is Nima Lama, 24. He was born and raised in Kathmandu, and migrated to Mustang to work in the service industry three years ago. He had been searching for a job in Kathmandu for months, but finally found an opening at a hotel in Mustang through a placement agency.

"I was skeptical at first, but the job felt appealing and unique, so I decided to come here," says Lama, pointing that the region with its unique topography and weather offers good opportunities.

Mustang is the part of Nepal that juts out into China and is geologically and culturally a part of the Tibetan Plateau. In the past five months, about 60,000 foreign tourists visited Mustang mainly for trekking and pilgrimage to Muktinath. There are many thousands more Nepali visitors.

Some 2,000 foreign tourists also travelled to the restricted region of Upper Mustang by buying a special permit that costs \$500 per person for 15 days. Mustang has a range of hotels that cater to high-end and budget tourists, and everything in between.

Most homeowners have migrated, and have rented their lodges and hotels to new migrants from other parts of Nepal. Bikram BK, 27, who is from Baglung has been a horse guide for Muktinath pilgrims for the last six years. Local Mustang residents own the horses, but employ people from outside to tend to their horses.

"It was difficult finding a job in Baglung, and this was a good offer," BK says. "The work is easy and I like taking care of horses."

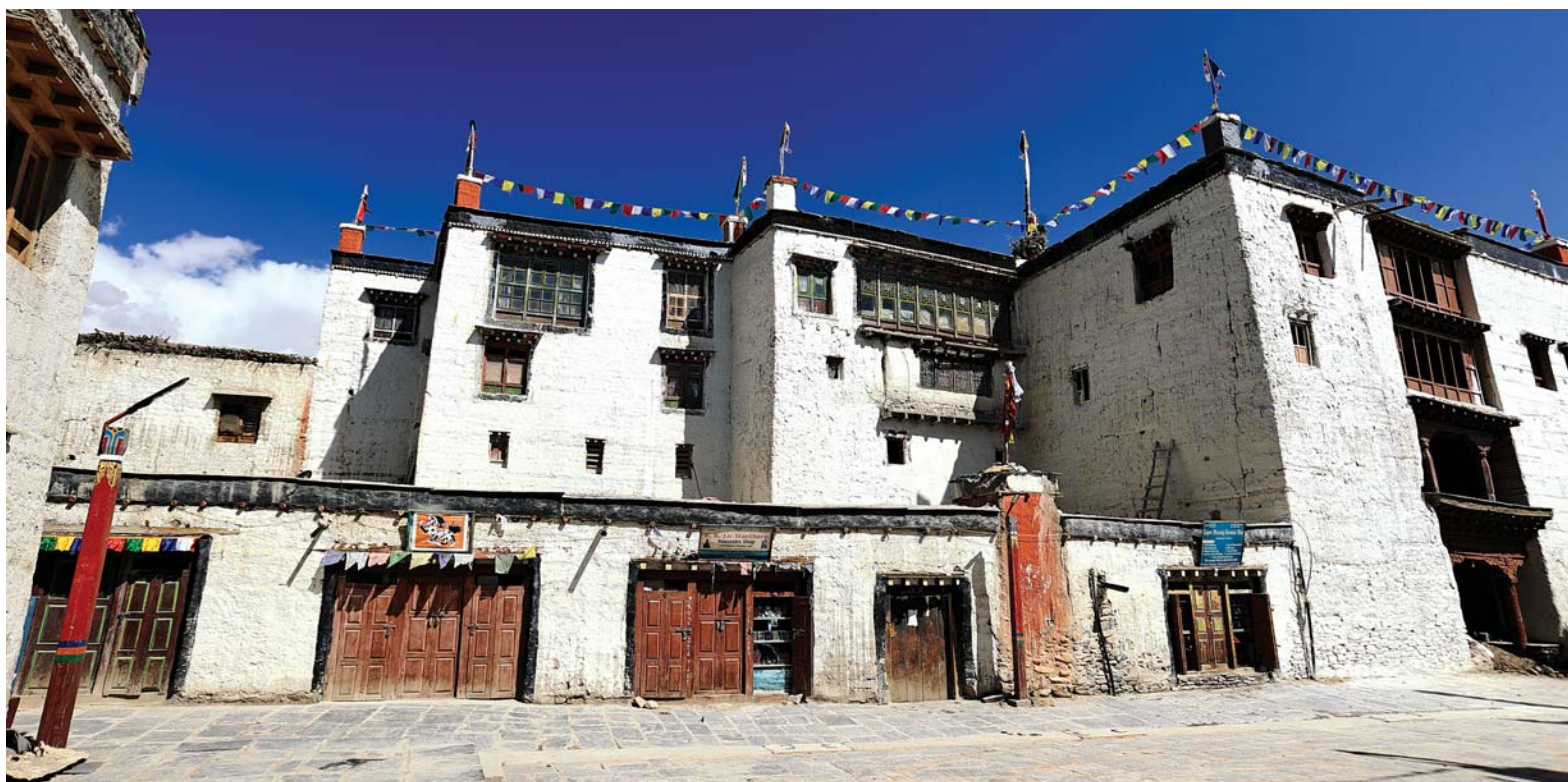
At Paradise Trekker's Home in Kagbeni another worker from Kathmandu says he likes working here because it "is a unique experience". His colleague is from Udaypur and does everything from cooking to ploughing the apple fields with a tractor.

"Locals own the majority of land and hotels but they do not work here," explains Karma Namguyal Gurung, a 28-year-old local who has been running his family-owned hotel for the past four years, and is one of few who have remained behind. (See profile below)

"Few Mustang people remain. Most of my



MOUNTAINS TO THE SOUTH: Lo Manthang is located amidst rolling arid hills of the trans-Himalayan Plateau. Mt Annapurna, Tilicho Peak and Nilgiri in the far distance on the southern horizon.



OLD AND NEW: Many of the shops in Lo Manthang are shuttered because locals moved out, and tourism collapsed for two years due to Covid.



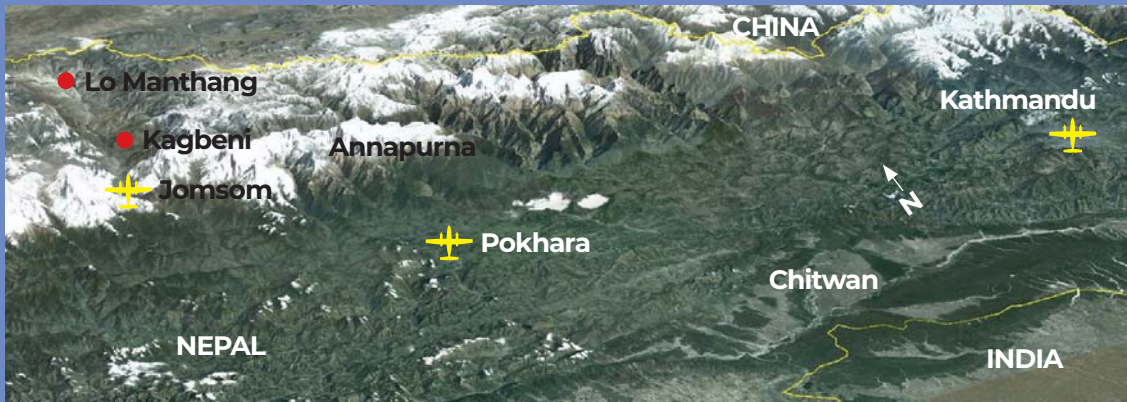
Mustang



friends are overseas, and lease out their hotels to people from other districts,” he adds.

Mustang’s Crown Prince Jigme Bista is also worried about the brain drain from his kingdom, and says this is the reason he opened his up-market Royal Mustang Resort in Lo Manthang.

“Since our young are rapidly leaving Mustang, I wanted to create opportunities here,” explains Bista, who aims to retain them by giving them jobs, equipping them with skills in hotel management, and training them to be baristas and chefs. 🇳🇵



Better connected

Once Nepal’s most isolated region, new road connectivity has made Mustang much more accessible. What used to be a 11-day trek from Pokhara is now an eight hour jeep ride, and this may come down to five hours once the highway along the Kali Gandaki is upgraded.

The river slices through the mountains between Annapurna and Dhaulagiri and is regarded as the deepest gorge in the world. Besides the unstable geology, it also gets heavy rainfall.

“This is very difficult terrain to build and maintain roads,” explains Lokendra Adhikari of the Annapurna Conservation Area project. “The road from Ghasa to Lo Manthang is smooth and intact because there is less rain, and the terrain is gentler.”

Despite the rough road, Mustang is changing rapidly, and accelerating out-migration of locals. But it has also brought people from Pokhara and Kathmandu to set up businesses here.

There is a building spree, and fancy new hotels are coming up to cater to an expected tourism boom. The road has

made it easier for children from Upper Mustang now to join boarding schools in Pokhara or Kathmandu.

Hoteliers in Jomsom say there would have been more tourists if the road condition was better and flights safer and more regular. Two crashes of flights from Pokhara in 2016 and 2022 deterred many trekkers and pilgrims.

“The Tara Air crashes led to a sharp drop in foreign tourists, so if the road were better we would have seen a rebound,” says Tripple P Gurung, owner of Redhouse in Kagbeni. He adds that most of his guests prefer to brave the road.

The monsoon is the lean tourist season in most of Nepal, but it is peak period here in trans-Himalayan districts like Mustang and Dolpo because the weather is milder and drier during June-September. Mustang is becoming especially popular with Nepali tourists who come here to explore the scenic trails on mountain bikes or motorcycles.

Now that there is a motorable road right up to the Chinese border at Korala, many hoteliers say it does not make sense to keep Mustang restricted. The hefty fees and the bureaucratic hassles in Kathmandu to get permits are keeping many potential tourists away.

“The policy about the restricted area and fees was made 30 years ago taking into account Mustang’s fragile ecology and culture to keep visitor numbers low, but that is not an issue anymore with better connectivity,” says Gurung.



Return of a native



SHRIJAN PANDEY

Karma Namgyal Gurung (pictured left) exemplifies the resilient spirit of a young Mustang entrepreneur committed to preserving his family’s legacy and contributing to the development of tourism in his home district.

But Gurung is unique because unlike most local youth, he has not migrated overseas. He moved to Kathmandu as a boy to go to school at a time when he had to walk for a week to get to Pokhara. After getting a hotel management degree, he interned in Dubai for eight months and in Malaysia for three months. Gurung got job offers to stay abroad, but decided to return not just to Nepal, but to go back to Mustang.

“I felt homesick during that whole time abroad,” recalls Gurung, who missed the cool mountain breeze of Mustang while sweating in the tropical heat of Malaysia and the Gulf.

Gurung’s family has been running the Four Seasons Hotel in Muktinath Valley for the past

25 years. But they moved to Kathmandu, and it was getting difficult to run the hotel remotely.

So, he came back four years ago and now manages the family hotel, providing food and lodging especially for pilgrims to Muktinath.

“The natives don’t run things here, they have mostly left,” Gurung says, admitting that he has also thought of going to a bigger place to earn more.

What encourages him to stay is feedback from visitors about his hospitality. “It is really encouraging when guests acknowledge our effort,” he says. Mustang is no longer a village, as it was during my childhood. It is becoming cosmopolitan. This place will never be the same again.”

The pace of change is evident even in Lo Manthang, where Mustang’s Crown Prince Jigme Bista runs the high-end Royal Mustang Resort which fuses traditional and modern architecture.

“We’ve seen tourists leave on the very first day of a seven-day program due to a lack of facilities,” Bista says. “Our goal is to give tourists who come here for our culture, traditions, and location a fascinating experience.”

The hotel sees 4,000 international and local visitors every year, and Bista says the hotel can accommodate many more if the restricted area designation for Mustang is lifted.

Shrijan Pandey in Mustang

Getting there

Now an eight-hour drive from Kathmandu to Pokhara because of highway widening and traffic.

Overland:

Pokhara to Jomsom 6 hours

Jomsom to Lo Manthang 6 hours

Flight:

Kathmandu-Pokhara (overnight)-Jomsom

Upper Mustang beyond Kagbeni is still restricted, and foreign tourists have to pay \$500 per person for the first 10 days and an additional \$50 each day of their visit to the region. Of the nearly 60,000 foreign tourists so far in Mustang, only 2,000 or so continued to Upper Mustang. The fee was reduced in 2005 when Mustang became more accessible, and the restriction on the number of visitors has also been lifted.



nepalitimes.com

More photos online.

E-VENTS



Bunga Dyo display
Artist Padma Kumar Shakya's Machhindranath chariot replicas will be on display at Kaya Studio. Museum of Nepali Art, Thamel, 9802020484

Drag Show
Check out Queer Honky-Tonk's Drag Show this weekend. Also donate to the cause if possible. 24 June, 6pm onwards, Alliance Française Kathmandu Auditorium, Dhobighat



Open Studio
See the works of Artudio resident artists Suchin Shrestha and Kiran Shrestha at Open Studio. 21-27 June, 11am-4pm, Chhauni Hospital Road, Swayambhu, 9823490390

Poetry workshop
Aspiring poets can join Kriti Adhikari to explore emotional expression through poetry during the Bhav Korahne Din poetry workshop. 24 June, Rs600 per person, Tumbahalaya, Thamel



Kiss the ground
Attend a screening of Kiss the Ground, narrated by and featuring Woody Harrelson, which offers perspective on regenerative agriculture to restore ecosystems and combat climate change. 24 June, 6:30pm onwards, Tumbahalaya, Thamel

DINING



Utpala Café
Located within a Buddhist monastery within Boudha, Utpala Cafe offers an all-vegetarian menu featuring locally grown produce. The cafe's mushroom dishes are a must-try. Boudha, 9801978106

MUSIC

Musical evening
Experience the soulful vocals of Bigya Nepali and Suraj Nepali's mesmerising guitar tunes with some good food and drinks. 23 June, 6pm onwards, Watering Hole, Naxal



Happy vibes
Chill out this Friday at Pauline's rooftop with a live DJ session by French DJ @dj8ternity. 23 June, 7pm onwards, Pauline's Rooftop, Lazimpat



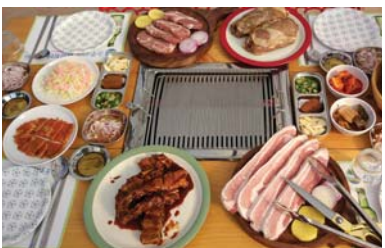
Preeti Kaur
Enjoy an electrifying night of live music with performances by Preeti Kaur N The Boys. 23 June, 8pm onwards, London Pub Kathmandu, Darbar Marg, 986543599



Saturday sounds
Spend your Saturday listening to performances by Aman Karna with special guest Amit Jung. 24 June, Rs300, Beers N' Cheers, Jhamsikhel

Acoustic sessions
Join Prabin Yonjon and his guitar to usher in the weekend with some electrifying live music. 23 June, 7pm onwards, New Orleans Café, Thamel, 9813057100

Vino Bistro
Touted as the hub of French cheeses and imported wines in Nepal, Vino offers cheese platters, charcuterie, pastas and bruschetta, all paired with appropriate wines. Lazimpat (01) 4435982



Gangnam Galbi Barbeque
Gangnam Galbi Barbeque offers Korean barbecue, as well as a wide variety of other Korean dishes. Don't miss out on the stick food. Lal Colony Marg, Naxal (01) 4434780

About Town

GETAWAY



The Pavilions
A luxury boutique eco resort with boutique villas, a swimming pool, an organic farm, and a restaurant lounge and bar, The Pavilions offer refreshing morning walks, therapeutic and relaxing day-ins, an authentic dining experience and quiet nights. Chisapani, Pokhara (061) 694379

Bandipur Kaushi Inn
Bandipur Kaushi Inn is a small, rustic place to stay in the idyllic village of Bandipur, replete with cultural diversity and traditional architecture. Bandipur, Tanahu (065) 520083



Hotel Yukhang
With touches of both the old and the new, Hotel Yukhang embodies the blending of Bhaktapur's medieval Malla history with a touch of contemporary amenities. Thamel (01) 4267358

Sapana Village Resort
At Sapana Village Resort, experience the rich Tharu and Chepang culture, watch elephants lumber through the forest and marvel at the beauty of the lush national park at the heart of Sauraha. Sauraha, Chitwan (56) 580308



Hotel Baha
There is no better way to start the day than at Hotel Baha with a beautiful view of Bhaktapur Darbar Square and the Nyatapola Temple, along with a hearty meal of rice, lentils, vegetables, meat and pickles. Bhaktapur (01) 6616810



Kyubi's Kitchen
For customizable bowls of noodles, platters filled to the brim with dumplings, spicy noodles, kimbap, corn dogs, da-pow and more, Kyubi's Kitchen is the place to go. As an added bonus, rooms at Kyubi's pay homage to popular anime. Jhamsikhel, 9810298050

Tamarind
Tamarind is the place to go for great drinks and delicious food. And if one is in the mood to Salsa dance or watch regulars show their moves, stop by on Tuesday evenings. Jhamsikhel (01) 5522626

WEEKEND WEATHER

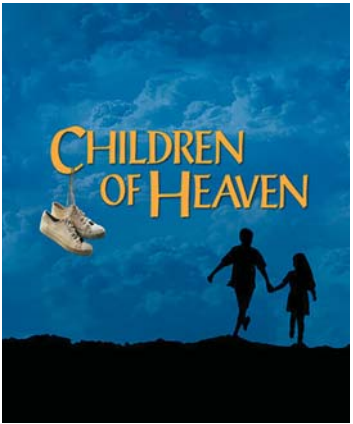


FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY
28° 20°	27° 19°	27° 19°	27° 20°	26° 20°

Fake monsoon
The monsoon arrived, unleashed deadly floods, and then was pushed back by Cyclone Biparjoy which has been moving slowly westwards over northern India after landfall in Gujarat. This system blocked the advance of the monsoon, forcing it to dump 300mm of rain in one night in eastern Nepal on 19 June. But the advance monsoonal trough is now gathering strength again, and will make its presence felt in Kathmandu early next week. Till then, we will see a continuation of hot and humid days with cloud buildup and thunderstorms by evening as moisture rises on convection systems along the foothills.

OUR PICK

When Ali loses his sister Zahra's pink shoes, scared to tell their parents, the two come up with a plan to share Ali's only pair of shoes. Zahra wears them to school in the morning and returns them to Ali at midday so he can attend afternoon classes. But how long can the two keep up? Written and directed by Majid Majidi, this Iranian drama film follows the siblings and their adventures over the lost pair of shoes. Features Amir Farrokh Hashemian as Ali and Bahare Seddiqi as Zahra.



MISS MOTI-VATION

KRIPA JOSHI



आगलागी हुन नदिन चनाखो बनौं

- खाना पकाइसकेपछि आगो, ग्याँस चुलो, स्टोभ वा हिटर निभाऔं ।
- सिलिन्डरको रेगुलेटर, पाइप वा चुलोबाट ग्याँस लिक भए/ नभएको यकिन गरौं ।
- ग्याँसको गन्ध आए बेवास्ता नगरौं ।
- सलाई, लाइटर बालबालिकाले भेट्टाउने ठाउँमा नराखौं ।
- दाउरा बालेर खाना पकाइसकेपछि पानी छ्यापेर आगो निभाऔं ।
- चुरोट, तमाखु, चिलिम, सुल्पा नखाऔं । खाएमा आगो राम्ररी निभाऔं ।
- बिजुलीका तार, प्लग, स्वीच वा वायरिड ठीक अवस्थामा भए/ नभएको जाँच गरौं ।
- घरबस्ती नजिकै पोखरी, ट्याङ्की वा अरू कुनै तरिकाले पानीको जोहो गरिराखौं ।

आगलागीजन्य विपद्बाट बच्न चनाखो बनौं ।



नेपाल सरकार
विज्ञापन बोर्ड

Eleganza extravaganza

Nepalis celebrate their unique identities through powerful performance and art

■ Sahina Shrestha

Foundation: Check.
Contour: On point.
Eyes and lips: Perfect.
A dress, accessories, heels, perfume and confidence to match: Check, Check and Check.

For 23-year-old Peachy Pie, the world is her oyster. She is a little mean but immensely positive, and not scared of anyone. “When she looks in the mirror, she is no less than Miss World,” says Aryan Chaudhary, whose drag identity or drag persona is Peachy Pie. “She is me, but a different version of me.”

Aryan started doing drag in 2017 after coming across RuPaul, arguably the most commercially successful drag queen in the US, on the internet. But he thinks he has been a drag queen in his mind even before he actually knew what the term meant.

“I’d google ‘gay female’ because I did not know the right terms. Doing drag, I have been able to express myself and break free from what the society says I should be,” says Aryan, who is also the first crowned drag queen of Nepal.

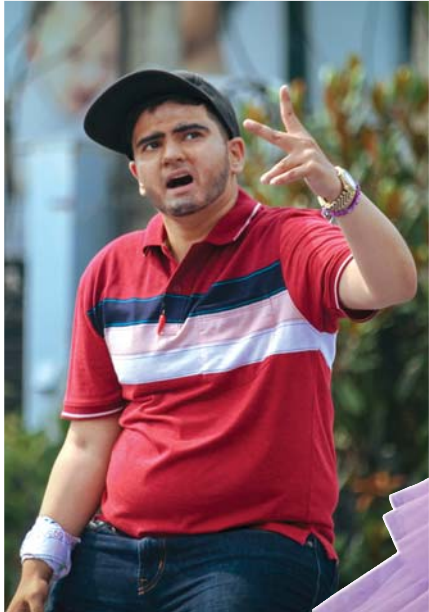
In the recent decade, RuPaul’s Drag Race has not only become synonymous with drag queens on screen, but the competitive show has also helped popularise drag culture all over the world.

For the LGBTQIA+ community in Nepal, drag has provided a powerful platform to express, explore and celebrate their own identities. Although at a nascent stage, Nepali drag queens, kings and performers are taking the culture in stride and using it for visibility and representation.

“It is an expression of self,” says Shuby Bhattarai, who performs as drag king Phoenix Raj. “It is taking characteristics of femininity and masculinity and over-exaggerating them. It is deeply rooted in queer history. It is multifaceted, there’s not just one way to do it,” they add.

While many are familiar with drag queens, who usually dress and perform in feminine attire and makeup, less well known are the drag kings who dress and perform in traditionally masculine clothing and makeup. Then there are drag monarchs and performers who don’t identify as being king or queen and play with gender fluidity.

A common misconception about



PRAMISHA KC

drag is that only cisgender gay men take part in it and/or most drag queens are transgender women. But contrary to popular belief, any person of any gender identity, expression or sexual orientation can do drag. “Drag is for everybody,” says Shuby. “All forms of drag are valid.”

Drag is also part of gender fluidity. Each culture has its own way of looking at what is inherently masculine or feminine. Drag is blurring the gap between what society sees as a man and a woman.

While most drag queens are often queer men, many transgender women and cisgender women also perform as drag queens. Many drag kings are women, but transgender men and cisgender men also explore and connect with their masculinity as drag kings.

Because drag is often a gender bending art form, it is frequently conflated with cross-dressing, but the two are not the same. “Just because one is wearing clothes of the opposite gender and putting on makeup does not mean it is drag,” says Aryan. “Drag is a loud form of art rooted in entertainment and performance. It is a source of empowerment and freedom.”

A typical drag show includes dance, lip-syncing, even singing, impersonations and storytelling among others. Often there are elements of humor, prop, and over-the-top aesthetics.

“Drag does not always have to be about loud

makeup. If the number demands, it is ok to perform without any makeup,” says Shuby, who started doing drag in 2017 after watching performances by the Fake Mustache Drag and Burlesque Troupe while studying in Canada. And for the next two years performed with the troupe.

“The best thing about drag is just the fun I get to have, when I connect with people, when I hear people shouting Phoenix, it is just amazing because in that moment, I’m being seen as myself,” they say. “I am my character whether I do facial makeup or not.”

Drag identity or drag persona is an important aspect of drag. For some, their drag persona is an extension of themselves while for others it can be completely different.

“Phoenix Raj is not different from me. He is an extension of myself, of my masculine self,”

says Shuby, who is a trans-masculine queer person.



extrovert and an introvert.”

As drag shows gain popularity, the queer community in Nepal and the larger community, especially the youth, are becoming more accepting of the drag queens, drag kings and drag performers.

“There was a lot of prejudice when I started, because even many in the queer community did not understand what drag is,” says Aryan. Initially he was called *hilili*, a term used in the queer community to denote someone “who is neither here nor there. They said that eventually I’d become transgender as well. But that was not who I am,” he adds. “Drag gave me an outlet and made me feel powerful.”

Things have come a long way from then as understanding and interest around drag has increased. Drag shows and competitions are also increasingly providing aspiring performers a platform to show their talents and gain recognition.

“Drag is paying my bills,” says Manoj, “I think that shows how inclusive and appreciative the youth are these days. But a lot still needs to be done so that older generations and even people from the LGBTQIA+ community understand what drag actually is.”

Drag is also about building a strong and supportive community, where experienced drag kings, queens and performers mentor and help younger generations often as part of a drag family or chosen family. Drag families are often the biggest support system. This concept is slowly growing in Nepal as well. It has been less than a month since Evan Poudel started performing as drag king Mr Karlos. “I started after being inspired by my drag mother, Peachy Pie,” says Evan. “I learned that drag has no gender boundaries and felt that it was a good platform to show that trans men like me could also do it. I received a lot of help in terms of how to do makeup as well as how to perform and carry myself.”

“It is a safe space where we can learn and share experiences, problems and challenges. Oftentimes we can’t discuss certain things with family and friends but can with our chosen families,” says Manoj. “Sometimes the support is emotional, sometimes financial, but having people who understand you for you is important.”

Being a part of the queer community can still be very isolating. But all of them say that with the right support system, and right environment, everyone can exist as themselves and them performing drag now can help the future generations.

At the end of the day, drag is all about loving oneself. As RuPaul says, “If you can’t love yourself, how in the hell are you gonna love somebody else?” 🇳🇵

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■ Marty Logan in Sarlahi

When Sajadi Khatun felt the familiar pain, she knew what to do: she, her husband, her mother and a neighbour quickly left their house in Laxmipur village and started the 20-minute walk to nearby Sundarpur Health Post. They did not get far. Ten minutes later, Sajadi delivered a baby boy on the roadside.

After delivery, the tired new mother returned to her home on the outskirts of Sarlahi’s district headquarters Malangwa while the rest took the newborn — the family’s fifth child, and third boy — to the health post for a check-up. A nurse visited and found both mother and child healthy.

“I wasn’t worried about giving birth on the roadside,” says Sajadi, stoically, although she and her husband had wanted to deliver the new baby in the health post, like her previous three children. The first was delivered at home as there was no health post in the community at the time.

Ahead of the last birth, Sajadi had gone to the health post for check-ups (known as ante-natal care, ANC, visits) eight times before her due date. Recently, Nepal increased the recommended number of ANC visits from four to eight, but in 2022 just 68.4% of women in Madhes Province did four or more ANCs.

The local Female Community Health Volunteer (FCHV) had also visited her house many times. On the advice of those health workers, Sajadi was eating as healthy as possible to keep up her own weight and that of the baby.

At the health post, Sajadi, who is not sure of her age but is probably about 30 according to the FCHV



FIRST MOM: First time mother Rabena Khatun with her baby in front of her house near Malangwa in Sarlahi district.

ALL PHOTOS: MARTY LOGAN

sitting nearby during our interview, also started taking calcium and iron supplements and got a tetanus/diphtheria vaccination.

Because the facility did not have an ultrasound machine, she and her husband, who do not own a vehicle, paid to go to a nearby private clinic and get the examination. It revealed no problems but staff there estimated her due date 20 days later than the actual delivery day.

We do not know what would have happened if the ultrasound had been done at the health post, and produced a more accurate delivery date, but the roadside birth highlights again how lack of

resources plays a role in maternal and child health in Nepal, despite the best intentions of health personnel and, of course, families. There was no ultrasound machine at the health post, and no ambulance to call when Sajadi’s labour started.

“The problem is that we don’t have an ambulance in the municipality,” says Auxiliary Nurse Midwife Sunita Rai, who

accompanies us to Sajadi’s house. “If we had an ambulance, when a woman has a problem like a roadside delivery, we could send it right away and reduce the number of home deliveries.”

Sarlahi district, and Madhes Province overall, still have a high number of home deliveries. Statistics from the district health office show that 53.5% of births happened in health facilities

in 2021-22. That leaves 46.5% occurring at home or en route to facilities. The Nepal Demographic Health Survey (NDHS) 2022 found that 66.6% of births in Madhes Province occur in a facility versus 79.3% for Nepal overall.

“The health situation in Madhes Province is a little worrisome to us, despite all the facilities there,” said the secretary of the Ministry of Health, Roshan Pokhrel. “We’re

Saving Lives

*STATISTICS FROM GOVERNMENT HOSPITALS ONLY

	2020	2021	2022
% women doing 4 pre-delivery (ANC) checkups	43.5	47.6	56.3
# live births at home	385	100	31
% births assisted by midwives	37.9	43.7	50.4
# maternal deaths	4	9	4

SOURCE: DISTRICT-LEVEL ANNUAL REVIEW OF HEALTH PROGRAMS, SARLAHI.

Promise of a healthier district

The Medical Superintendent of Sarlahi District Hospital in Malangwa, Nawal Kishore Jha, sounded upbeat after hearing in the Madhes Province government budget on 16 June that the facility will be upgraded to a 100-bed hospital.

“I’m very happy with the decision, it responds to all our demands,” Jha said on a call from Malangwa. The larger facility will receive more trained staff, more space, including to provide maternal healthcare services, and more equipment such as a machine for CT scans.

The government also announced it would build two 50-bed hospitals elsewhere in the district, and that all other municipalities would have 15-bed facilities.

The budget revealed that Sarlahi will become a ‘completely safe motherhood district’. Among other things, that means all births will be in health facilities, accompanied by skilled health workers, and all pregnant women will have the required number of pre and post-natal checkups.

“It is possible,” says Jha, “but it will take some time.”



Bumpy ride triggers birth

Anita Kumari Yadav (pictured above) had felt a pain for three days that she thought meant she was going into labour for her first baby. She walked to nearby Sisautiya Health Post, but was always told it hadn’t started.

On the third day, nursing staff referred her to the district hospital because of the delay. When she arrived with her in-laws after a bumpy ambulance ride, she was told she would need a Caesarean section.

“I was scared to have an operation,” says Anita, 20. She called her husband, a bus driver who was en route from Kathmandu. He told the family to wait until he arrived. But they didn’t have to. The baby was born half an hour later, one positive outcome of the bone-jarring ambulance ride, speculates Auxiliary Nurse Midwife Ringku Kumari Raut.

Like the other women interviewed in the Malangwa area, Anita diligently did her ANC

check-ups, once also visiting the district hospital to have a test confirmed. She took iron and calcium supplements (when in stock) and added fortified flour to her diet to gain weight.

Nurse Raut says she is happy with how she and her colleagues managed Anita’s delivery, despite the health post’s limited resources: “Everything is fine now but if something had happened, the hospital had resources and facilities to deal with it.”



HOT HARVEST: Women harvest wheat during the pre-monsoon Tarai heat wave recently in Malangwa.

thinking about giving different targets to different provinces, rather than having a central target,” he added.

Nepal is aiming to reach the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) target of 70 maternal deaths per 100,000 births. The 2022 rate was 151, according to the NDHS.

In Sarlahi, health infrastructure is a key factor affecting maternal health. Medical Superintendent of Malangwa Hospital, Nawal Kishore Jha, told us that the facility has burst its seams. For example, when the Covid-19 pandemic displaced the emergency and in-patient departments, they moved to what was the waiting area, where they remain when we visit in April.

Also, two years ago the hospital delivered one or two babies daily, but today it is closer to 20, including a growing number of

Caesarean sections, yet the facility lacks a gynaecologist, meaning that non-specialists perform the 3-5 ‘C-sections’ done daily.

Reached again on budget day, 16 June, Jha has good news: his hospital will be upgraded to a 100-bed facility. That could mean more buildings, more trained staff and equipment, including a CT scan machine. (See below).

In case of a maternal emergency, accessing the district hospital — the best-resourced health facility in Sarlahi — should not be an issue as it is only a one-hour drive away from anywhere in the district, unless there is monsoon flooding, adds Jha. Yet as Sajadi’s example shows, lack of resources — like ambulances — can still be a barrier.

While Jha and the nurses at health posts all say people’s awareness of maternal health and its potential complications could



be higher overall, in the diverse communities near Malangwa, most women and their families are motivated to use health facilities, both to get as healthy as possible before giving birth and for the actual delivery.

Besides awareness, living conditions are a major factor, says nurse Kanchen Rai at Laxmipur Khodra Health Post: “We can provide education, but the biggest problem is people’s lack of money. There has been some improvement but the poorest people still don’t have clean water and toilets.”

“Pockets” that are away

Maternal deaths deliver lessons

A day before the central government budget was released on 29 May, officials in the Family Welfare Division (FWD) of the Department of Health were resigned to the fact that the status quo was the most they could achieve in programming for the 2023-24 fiscal year.

But Section Chief Gauri Pradhan had her fingers crossed that a verbal promise of more funding would allow the section to expand at least one program — for maternal and perinatal death surveillance and response (MPDSR).

Started in Nepal at the Maternity Hospital in Thapathali in 1992, guidelines were created for the program in 2015 and revised in 2021. Today, MPDSR takes place in 42 districts, both in hospitals and where there are maternal and newborn deaths in communities.

The promised funding, from an external partner, will permit the program to expand to more hospitals and communities. Pradhan displays the WhatsApp app on her mobile, which shows a group for reporting of mother and newborn deaths in hospitals and another for community deaths.

Asked why this one program is likely to be the only maternal and newborn health initiative in the FWD to expand next year, Pradhan says: “It is the basic thing to take action to learn the cause of death. Without knowing the causes, how can we develop activities to make childbirth safer?”

thatch-roofed bamboo home, cradling her son Ehsan, now 37 days old, on her lap.

When Rabena’s labour pains began, she went to the health post with her mother-in-law and two other relatives. After 10-12 hours the baby was born, without complications. Instructed by a nurse, the first-time mother started breastfeeding within 30 minutes.

She tells us that no one in her family or community suggested during her pregnancy that she deliver at home, adding, “All the facilities are there (in the health post) so I felt confident.”

 **nepalitimes.com**
Watch video online.

Himalayan icecap melting faster than predicted

Climate scientists update study, warning the mountains will lose 80% of its ice in this century

Four years after scientists put out a worrying report about the melting Himalayan icecap, they have now warned that the problem is even more serious than earlier thought.

The new study provides what is said to be the most accurate assessment of snow, ice, and permafrost in the Himalaya to date: that Himalayan glaciers could lose up to 80% of their ice mass by the end of this century.

The findings cite grave consequences not just to the mountains but to nearly 2 billion people living downstream in Asian countries that depend on water from the world’s highest mountains.

The Kathmandu-based International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) had published its Hindu Kush Himalaya Assessment in 2019. But the new report says Himalayan glaciers disappeared 65% faster in the 2010s than in the previous decades. At that rate, the melting will accelerate in the coming decades.

ICIMOD’s Water, Ice, Society, and Ecosystems in the Hindu Kush Himalaya (HI-WISE) report draws on recent scientific advances to map out how melting snow, ice, and permafrost in the mountains will affect water, ecosystems, and society along the entire Himalayan watershed.

The peer-reviewed study warns of grave consequences to the region which provides freshwater to a quarter of the world’s population, as well as to four global biodiversity hotspots.

The HI-WISE report projects ‘peak water’ by mid-century after which there will be less and less water available on Himalayan



HIMALAYAN MELTDOWN: Mt Pumori and the ice-less Khumbu Glacier in January.

KONSTANTINOS KONSTANTINIDES

rivers for irrigation, household use, industries and hydropower. Extreme weather due to climate change will also increase the risk of landslides and floods in this geologically and ecologically fragile mountain region.

“Climate inaction is spreading,” warns Saleemul Huq of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development in Bangladesh. “This report shows that the HKH region is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. We must act now to protect this region and its people.”

The report says the impact of the melting cryosphere on fragile mountain habitats is particularly acute, and it will have cascading

impacts on ecosystems and biodiversity.

“With 67% of Himalayan eco-regions and 39% of the region’s four global biodiversity hotspots outside protected areas, the extraordinary biodiversity of this mountain system is particularly vulnerable to climate impacts,” the report warns.

Some 240 million people who live in the Himalaya and another 1.65 billion downstream. Sixteen Asian countries will be affected by water shortages as the Himalayan icecap melts. Farmers in the region are already facing crop loss, fodder shortages and livestock deaths due to extreme weather.

“The hazards are becoming more complex and devastating,” says the report that was prepared by 35 scientists from 12 countries.

The report urges policymakers to prepare for the cascading impacts of climate change which provides freshwater services to a quarter of the world’s population. It calls for urgent international support and regional cooperation for inevitable, near-term loss and damage, and to help communities adapt.

 **nepalitimes.com**
More coverage and links to the climate crisis online



The planet of the apes in Kathmandu

Civilisation and instinct take centre stage in Studio 7's latest adaptation of Kafka's short story

■ Ashish Dhakal

Franz Kafka's Report to an Academy is about conflict on several levels: from the (dis-) similarities between the simian and human, to the three-point tug-of-war between memory, identity and assimilation. Studio 7's adaptation of the story for the Vajra Hotel stage titled Red Peter is directed by Sabine Lehmann, and preserves this motif. She turns the first-person narrative into a theatrical performance where past and present intermingle.

The play begins in a warmly-lit stage awash with blue designed by Ludmilla Hungerhuber. It is at once a ship, a jungle, private bedroom and the academic stage, a space that exists almost as a mental landscape, in fantasy and reality.

Then, behold: Red Peter appears. In tailored pants and a white shirt, the ape puts on a tie for an appearance at the Academy where he is to present a paper on how he 'transformed' into a human. He lets out guttural sounds: aspirated "Hon'ble" which then slowly becomes "ono'ble".

Enter three academicians in gaudy robes looking more like circus performers than the scientists they insist they are. Their air of imperious self-import contrasts strikingly with Red Peter's own restrained disposition. "The report?" they ask pointedly, for that is really all they care about.

"Members of the Academy,"



THOMAS SCHROM / STUDIO 7



says Red Peter, gently bowing. He thanks the National Geographic for a recent cover, and adds, turning towards the audience: "Gentleman, ladies, dear guests."

Immediately, the audience is also transported to the same liminal landscape, metaphysical and postmodernist, as Red Peter breaks the fourth wall, as if to remind us that whatever happens in the story is as much our concern as it is his.

We learn of his past in the West African forest, where he was shot and wounded one day by human employees of a Research Centre + Circus. It is the ensuing bloody scar that earns him his name. He is captured and locked in a tiny cage on a cargo ship bound for Europe. For the first time, he tells the

Academy and us, he was without a way out.

His own apehood dies in the crate. He begins to 'ape', as it were, the crude sailors. He learns how to spit and say 'Hello'. But the transformation begins with cruelty, as the sailors, who have themselves suffered oppression, exercise brutality on Red Peter deeming him of a lower rank than themselves.

Red Peter begins to lose his animal instinct and takes on a strange calmness. On shore, he joins show business because the zoo has no future.

Kundoon Shakya as Red Peter is perfectly cast. His own transformation into an ape is arresting and magnetic. The lines of the academicians are taken from

newspaper headlines and are a searing irony on human behaviour.

In between perfect choreographies, they effortlessly brush off generational colonial atrocities with a wave of their hands and coyly wink at the audience. Here, compassion takes on contrasting meanings. How can children be burdened with blame for the crimes of their parents and ancestors, they ask.

But what is the cost of Red Peter's assimilation? He is now a philosopher who has trotted out of the cave, discovering that performance, domination, self-optimisation maketh man. In the process, he has also warred with his own nature.

Embodying Descartes's 'cogito ergo sum', Red Peter also calls to question identity as performance and the essence of the self if it is to be constantly re-enacted.

In the end, this fiercely existential play closes with an echo to the ending of another story: the creatures look from ape to man, and from man to ape, and from ape to man again. But it is impossible to say which is which. 🇳🇵

Red Peter
A Stage Adaptation of Franz Kafka's
Report to an Academy
Directed by Sabine Lehmann
Studio 7 at Hotel Vajra, Swayambhu
1 hour 15 minutes
22-25 June, 7PM onwards
Ticket Price: VIP Rs 1,000, Standard Rs 700, Student
discount with ID available (limited seating)
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