



Trolley bus stop in Bhaktapur in 1976.

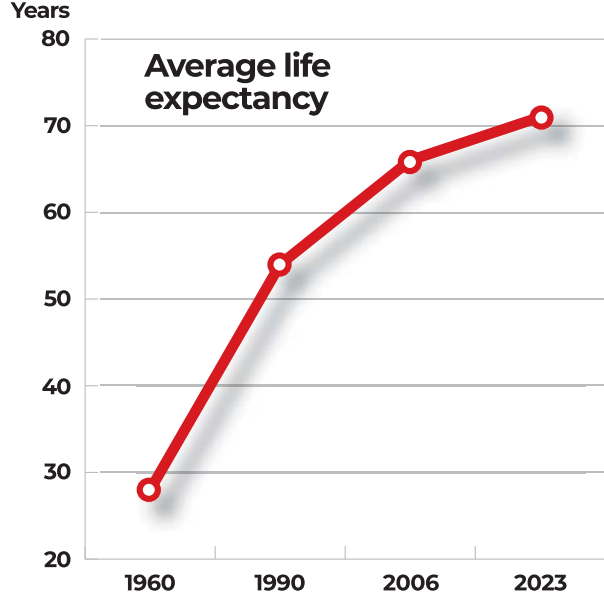
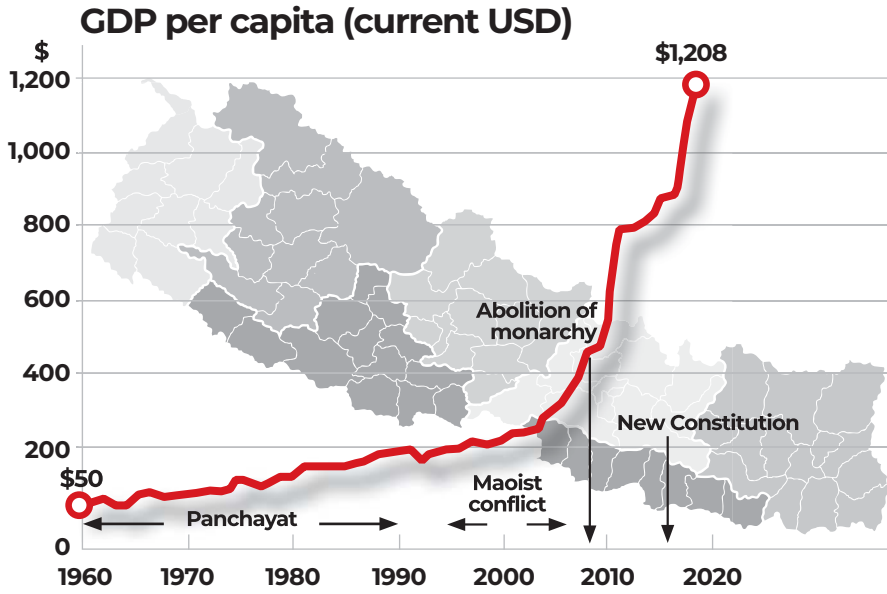
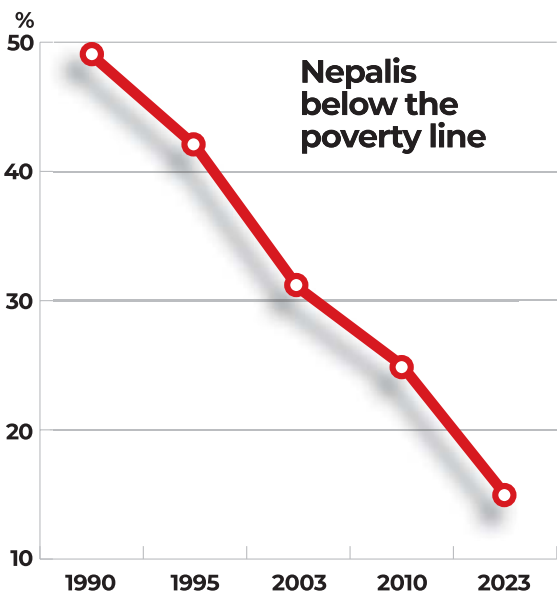
DANIEL W EDWARDS

NOW AND THEN



The same bus stop on Thursday, 29 June 2023.

GOPEN RAI



A Himal Khabar article last week set off a heated debate. Titled 'Was Nepal better before?', it showed that despite all the problems of the past four decades, the country had made remarkable socio-economic progress.

But in Nepal's polarised polity, monarchists argued that the country's present ills can be traced to the failure of multi-party democracy since 1990. Mainstream politicians, on the other hand, seemed relieved that things are not as bad as they look.

Rabindra Mishra of the RPP

tweeted: 'Improvement at the speed of a turtle is only development for a society that is used to the velocity of a turtle. Development should be viewed holistically. Not just on the basis of some indicators.'

Mishra's party is for restoring the monarchy to ensure national unity, stability and development. Former king Gyanendra himself recently said that the country had made great progress during the 30 year Panchayat System, and the country could restore its past glory.

But there were many others who argued that the partyless Panchayat was feudal and held the country

back. Former Maoist ideologue Baburam Bhattarai posted: 'Was Nepal better back then? Of course not, and it is better now. But it can be better still, and must be made better. Let us be future-oriented, not past-oriented.'

A critical look at the past 50 years of development in Nepal tells a mixed story. In 1991, one in every two Nepalis was living below the poverty line. It is down to 15.1%.

The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MDPI) based on health, education and quality of life also shows dramatic improvements. MDPI decreased significantly from

59% in 2006 to 17.4% in 2019.

The Panchayat System was scrapped in 1990 after the People's Movement, and the country replaced its absolute monarchy with a constitutional one. The Maoist conflict lasted from 1996-2006, and Nepal's 240-year-old monarchy was abolished by the elected Constituent Assembly in 2008.

Plotting Nepal's development indicators on a timeline shows dramatic progress, but correlation does not mean causation.

Average life-expectancy could have gone up even if Nepal had retained a constitutional monarchy.

And Kathmandu's rampant urbanisation and air pollution would probably be as bad if we still had a king.

Per capita GDP was stagnant during the Panchayat, but started climbing in 1990, and by the time Nepal became a republic in 2008 it went up steeply (see graphs, above). Since this was mainly driven by remittances, it would most likely have continued on that trajectory whatever system Nepal adopted after 1990. 🇳🇵

Ramesh Kumar

MORE ON PAGE 4



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Nepal Populist Party (Balenist)

Nepal's cybersphere is rumbling with posts by politicians vying to go viral by being ultra-nationalist.

Thrust to electoral victory last year riding Facebook booster rockets, Kathmandu Mayor Balendra 'Balen' Shah is leading the charge. First, he posted a photo of his office with a pre-1816 map of Nepal to counter the Akhanda Bharat mural unveiled in India's new Parliament building.

Then, he went ballistic on rumours (later proven to be untrue) that the Indian movie Adipurush claimed Sita was "a daughter of India". He retaliated with an indefinite ban on all Bollywood movies in Kathmandu cinemas until the non-existent dialogue was removed not just in Nepal but by Indian censors as well. Sound familiar? The Maoist 40-point demand in 1996 also included a ban on Bollywood films.

When the Patan High Court issued an immediate interim order rescinding the movie ban, Balen fired off another salvo from his social media account saying no way was he going to follow the court's order or, for that matter, the Constitution. Safeguarding the national interest and preserving Nepal's sovereignty and culture was far more important, he said.

And he used a similar argument about hanging the Greater Nepal map in his office, despite constitutional experts calling the tit-for-tat anti-Constitutional, irresponsible and over-stepping his jurisdiction as mayor.

Ultra-nationalism in Nepal is not new, it is usually retaliatory India-bashing over some perceived affront. Madhuri Dixit once said that she found Nepal "just like India" and we got worked up about that. But it can also turn deadly, as shown by riots in 2000 over Bollywood actor Hritik Roshan purportedly slandering Nepal in an Indian tv interview.

Nepali politicians through the ages have resorted to nationalism to hide under-performance, to distract public attention from more pressing issues, or for electoral gain. All it does is expose insecurity, and only becomes serious when the flames are stoked by politicians.

To be sure, the Indians add fuel to the fire by taunting Nepalis, knowing fully well how sensitive historical memory here about past wrongs can be, and anything said or done in New Delhi tends to be magnified in Nepal – as with their claim to Kalapani-Lipu Lek.

Nationalism is the last resort of scoundrels, as someone said. Italian media tycoon and 3-time prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, who died last week, perfected the art of populist politics even before the age of the internet. Donald Trump copied the

formula ditto by weaponising social media. Narendra Modi in India has demonstrated how to pulverise pluralism with populism.

The temptation to appeal to raw instinct, intolerance and hidden bigotry is so strong that even politicians who have fought long and hard for democracy succumb to it. After Balen Shah's map went viral, the NC's Gagan Thapa couldn't resist putting in his own two cents.

Former BBC journalist Rabindra Mishra, who practiced objectivity for decades, has also gone off on a tangent. Rabi Lamichhane of the RSP is only held back by saner voices in his party.



Personality cults and populism find fertile ground in Nepal, feeding on public scorn of established parties.

Every politician is entitled to their personal conviction, ideology, and faith. It is when their exercise of freedom impinges on someone else's right to choice that it becomes dangerous. In countries with entrenched discrimination, inequity and social injustice, populism can be turned into a political warhead.

Balen Shah promised a lot during his election campaign, and some cosmetic changes have been made to the streets. To be fair, it would be too much to expect one mayor in one term to solve Kathmandu's multi-faceted

crises decades in the making. Still, hanging maps on the wall and banning Bollywood films serve to distract public attention from failures.

Even the mayor's proactive campaigns have been unjust and excessive: bulldozing squatter settlements without first offering alternatives and his Metropolitan Police upturning fruit and panipuri carts of street vendors. The poor and neediest became collateral damage.

Any critics of these actions are mercilessly trolled by Balen's supporters who are internet avatars of his street gendarmes – as we probably will be for posting this Editorial online.

The challenge for democracy worldwide now is to protect open societies from populist politics. In Nepal, the royal right is crafting a narrative of nostalgia about the glory days of monarchy. But as our coverage in this issue (page 1, 4) illustrates, it is not so simple.

Political changes in Nepal in 1950, 1990, and 2006 have all come about because of outrage over an existing system. But outrage alone does not guarantee a change in the character of the state.

Populists feed on this rage against the status quo, but they offer no solutions except hyper-nationalism. The silver lining is that Nepalis also rejected many serial politicians, and elected some capable technocrats who are now raising hell in Parliament.

ONLINE PACKAGES



STAYING HOME

Sita Pun started a homestay program with help from the local government, and six years later has gained not just financial independence but the confidence to lead community action. Take a tour of Torikhola Community Homestay in Baglung and watch Sita's story online. Read report on page 6-7.



HIGH TEA

Watch video of the production of High Mountain tea, and join us on a tea tasting ceremony that illustrates how orthodox tea is different from ordinary tea – and why Nepali tea is gaining international acclaim. Read story on page 10-11.

CLIMATE CRISIS

My photo of the Cyprus wildfires two years ago went viral –it engulfed the valley of my village–and the amount of people telling me it wasn't climate-crisis related was unreal ('Himalayan icecap melting faster than predicted', #1167).

Andrea Anastasiou

Once all that water is gone then the people downstream will without a doubt suffer droughts.

Love Nature

Water shortage will also mean declining hydropower - an important source of energy.

David Seddon

MUSTANG

This is the sad reality ('Comings and goings in Mustang', Shrijan Pandey, #1167). But I think the migration has been mostly around Lower Mustang. I think there are fewer such cases in Upper Mustang.

Jackie Lhowal

The only difference is that millionaires enter while paupers egress.

Bobby Sharma

SARLAHI MOTHERS

The story of Sajadi Khatun's roadside delivery highlights the persistent challenges faced in maternal and child health in Nepal ('Mothers of Sarlahi', Marty Logan, #1167). The lack of resources, such as ultrasound machines and ambulances, poses significant barriers to safe deliveries. While efforts are being made to improve healthcare services and increase awareness, there is still a long way to go. The upgrade of healthcare facilities and the commitment to creating safe motherhood districts are positive steps towards better maternal healthcare. Continued investment and support are crucial to ensure healthier outcomes for mothers and their children in Nepal.

Rak Hee

BOAT RACE

The Dragon Boat Race in Pokhara gives the rowers something to train for and gives them an opportunity to be a part of a team. It gives them something to aspire for rather than it just being a menial job. I hope there is a mixed group or a women's group as well.

Priya

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING

Eleganza Extravaganza

by Sahina Shrestha

For the LGBTQIA+ community in Nepal, drag has provided a powerful platform to express, explore and celebrate 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. Read more on www.nepalitimes.com

Most reached and shared on Facebook

Comings and goings in Mustang

by Shrijan Pandey

Mustang's original inhabitants are leaving for better opportunities overseas, and they are being replaced by Nepalis from other parts of the country attracted by jobs in the tourism industry. Go online to read more.

Most popular on Twitter



Himalayan icecap melting faster than predicted

Nepali Times

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. Climate scientists warn the mountains will lose 80% of its ice in this century. Get the details on our website.

Most commented

State of the state

by Kunda Dixit

Nepal's macroeconomic situation may look ok, but the economy is a wreck. Cooperatives are folding, banks are in crisis, and the government is cash-strapped. One would have thought the government would be busy addressing the economic crisis. But by visiting shrines, P M Dahal's message seems to be: "May Pashupatinath save us." Join the discussion online.

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

"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."



Ratna Sansar Shrestha @pakanajole

Excellent writeup by @Raw_Ku. "Export" all benefits (positive externalities) of hydropower from project area while inhabitants of project area have to internalize all adverse impacts (negative externalities) Same true nationally: export all benefits & internalize adverse impacts



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

For the LGBTQIA+ community in Nepal, drag has provided a powerful platform to express, explore and celebrate their own identities.



SBhattarai @ShbReel

I'm glad to be part of this. I'm glad drag is garnering interest at home. Space for queer performance art is important.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Yarsa Rush

People of mountain villages this year also moved to higher elevations for the pre-monsoon yarsa gold rush. Even schools in high mountains shut down to accommodate students going to collect the medicinal fungus which fetches up to \$10,000 per kg in China.

Locals do not get much of that money, but even the small amounts they are paid by middlemen makes it worthwhile. It has lifted the living standard of people in many parts of rural Nepal, allowing them to afford basic healthcare and education. But yarsa harvests are getting slimmer due to over-extraction and climate change.

Excerpts of a report on yarsa picking in Dolpo published 20 years ago this week in issue #151 27 June – 3 July 2003:



heads of caterpillars of the Lepidoptera family that live mainly underground. After the fungus buries itself in the caterpillar's body, it works its way out through the unfortunate insect's head. The parasite soaks up the caterpillar's energy until it dies. Yarchagumba can be found when the snow starts to melt between 3,300-4,000m in parts of Tibet, India, Bhutan and Nepal.

It is an intricate network of Kathmandu investors who finance local businessmen who in turn hire subcontractors or buy yarchagumba directly from gatherers. This year the yarchagumba is bought from collectors for Rs 120,000 per kg. Depending on quality and size of the product, the middlemen sell the stuff by the sackload in Thailand, Korea, China and Japan for \$2,800 per kg. Japanese scientists, who first came to Dolpa's mountains in a helicopter, have even tried to grow yarchagumba back home in refrigerators to simulate Himalayan conditions. It didn't work.

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

1,000 WORDS



ALL THE PRIME MINISTER'S MEN: Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal is briefed on the Bheri Babai and the Sunkoshi Marin diversion projects from the Action Room in Singha Darbar.

PRADEEP RAJ ONTARSS



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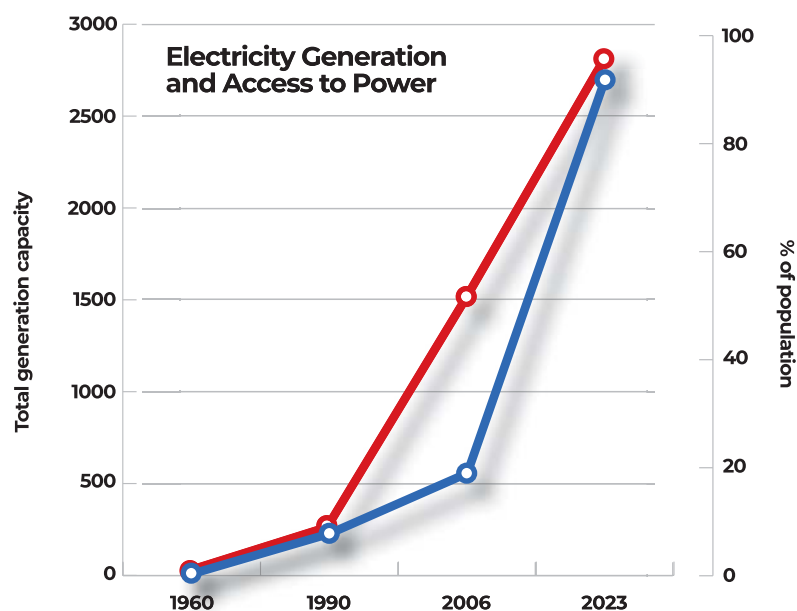
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Were things better in the past?

Imagine how much more progress Nepal would have made if war, corruption and poor governance did not set us back



Ramesh Kumar

Per capita income is not an indicator of socio-economic equity, but it is a general measure of the average wealth of citizens. Nepal's per capita income was \$50 in 1960, when the world average was \$459. Neighbouring India was at \$83 and China was slightly higher at \$89.

In 1990, Nepal's per capita climbed to \$185, and it has now reached \$1,399. What is noteworthy here is that the rate of income growth was very slow in the years before democracy during the Panchayat with an increase of just \$94 (at constant 2015 rates) between 1960-90.

"The argument that Nepal was better in the past is untrue," says former Rastra Bank economist Keshav Acharya. "Nepal is behind many other countries for sure, but we have also seen progress in infrastructure, health, education, human development, communication, perhaps just not in public administration."

But, he adds: "The administration did not exploit people back in the Panchayat days, corruption was not as rampant. The opposite is true now

with bureaucracy and political leaders apathetic to the people's needs, widespread laxity and wrongdoing."

Indeed, even though family incomes in Nepal were lower in the second half of the past century, their needs were much less and most people lived in rural areas and were self-sufficient in food.

However, Nepal's progress in infrastructure was slow during the Panchayat. Although Nepal was the second country in Asia to install a hydroelectric plant in 1911 during the Rana regime, by the end of the Panchayat in 1990, Nepal was only generating 227MW.

It actually took the Electricity Act of 1992 and the advent of domestic and foreign investment in hydropower for generation to take off. Installed capacity has now increased to 2,700MW, and another 3,000MW worth of projects are under construction.

Access to drinking water and sanitation has similarly improved. Only 6% of Nepali had access to drinking water in 1960 which increased to 36% in the next three decades. But it has now reached 95%, even though only a quarter of them have access to quality drinking water.

The defining factors in measuring progress of any country is average life-expectancy, maternal and child health. In some ways, Nepal achieved dramatic gains in reducing maternal, child and infant mortality rates while significantly improving its immunisation, even though the progress has stalled in the last decade or so.

The infant mortality rate is down to 21 per 1,000 births today from nearly 200 in 1960. Maternal mortality is also down from 239 per 100,000 deliveries, down from 850 as recently as 1990.

This represents one of the steepest declines in maternal-child mortality of most countries in the world, and is a direct result of improvement in female literacy, better road access for institutional delivery and the work of Female Community Health Workers.

In 1971, only 14 out of 100 people in Nepal were literate. In 1990 this was up to 40% and now it is 76%. In 1990, the primary school enrolment rate was 76%, now it is at 97%. But the quality of instruction and the disparity between public and private schools is more prominent than ever before.

Back in 1990, there was only one hospital bed for every 9,146 Nepalis. Today, the ratio has improved to 1,821 – even though access and affordability of quality care are still issues. In fact, out-of-pocket medical bills are pushing even middle class Nepalis into poverty.

Nepal's Human Development Index (HDI) last year was 0.602, up from 0.399 in 1990. HDI takes into account several developmental factors including life expectancy, literacy, per capita and quality of life.

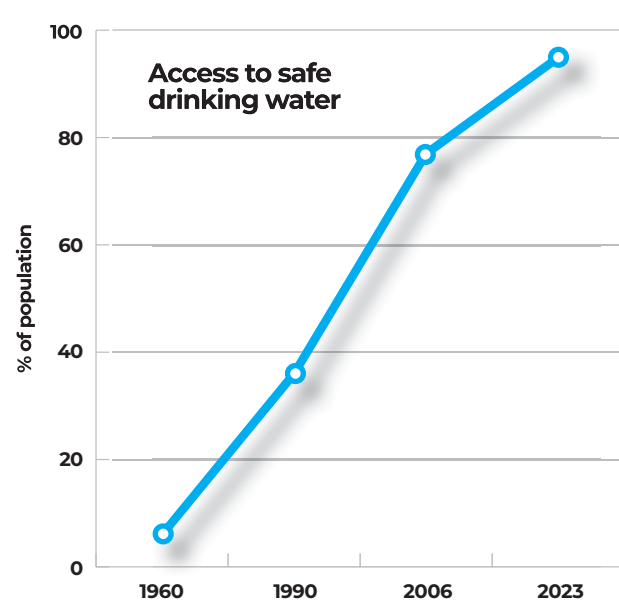
Increasing the representation of women, Dalits and other communities in socio-political leadership granted by the 2015 Constitution is another sign of socio-economic development in Nepal. Women make up 33% of the MPs and most of the deputy mayors across the country are female, even

though many were proportionally elected or represent the quota system. Much needs to be done to achieve inclusion that reflects the true diversity of the country.

One could argue that much of this progress would have happened regardless of which governing system was in place. Some consider the current progress to be a natural result of changes in the global economy and politics, technological advancement and contemporary changes. Economic and political analyst Dipak Gyawali thinks that the reason for the improvement in areas such as education, health and poverty is not the change in the system, but the remittances sent by Nepalis abroad.

"There has been improvement in various sectors due to remittances, which have reached a quarter of the GDP, but political parties have created a false narrative that the improvement is due to the multiparty system," says Gyawali, who served as Water Resource Minister in 2005.

Even so, the contribution of an open society and an open market brought about by democracy cannot be ignored. Foreign employment itself became accessible following the restoration of democracy. During



the Panchayat period, passports were difficult for ordinary citizens to get.

"During the Panchayat period, those who studied abroad used to return to the country. Now the youth have no faith and hope for the country, it seems that only the youth who cannot go abroad live in Nepal," says Gyawali.

Economist Acharya blames it on self-centeredness of Nepal's political leadership, saying that the feckless lack of accountability have led the public to believe that there has been no improvement whatsoever in the country, thus giving rise to populist politicians (see Editorial, page 2).

He adds: "It is not that nothing is happening, but it appears to the public as if the future is hopeless because leaders are not accountable to the people."

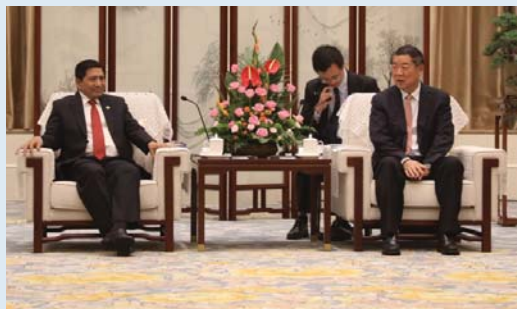
Statistics confirm that Nepal has made progress, but the pace of economic development has been much slower than in the neighbourhood. Nepal's per capita income in 1960 was \$50 while in then-East Pakistan it was US\$85. Today, Bangladesh's per capita income has reached \$2,458. India is at \$2,257. And China has outperformed all others from a mere \$89 in 1960 to \$12,556 today. 🇳🇵



NMB BANK
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Comrades in arms

Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister Narayan Kaji Shrestha met with Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng in Chengdu this week where they discussed opening more trade and transit



points, facilitating traffic on the Nepal-China border as well as collaborating on preparedness for natural disasters. The two also agreed on speedy completion of Chinese projects being built in Nepal.

Imports decline

Imports have declined by 16% according to the Department of Customs. Until mid-June this financial year, import stood at Rs14.8 trillion against Rs17.63 trillion in the same time period last year. The government banned various luxurious items in response to declining foreign reserves last year.

Platinum Nabil

Nabil Bank received a platinum award at the 2023 Infosys Finacle Innovation Award last week. Nabil's mobile banking platform provides digital banking without requiring physical visits to a branch.

Tata electric

Sipradi Trading, dealers of Tata Motors in Nepal, has launched 80% vehicle financing for its electric models Nexon and Tigor. The interest rate is set at 10.05% by Everest Bank, Nabil Bank, NMB, Global IME and Prabhu Bank. It has also started an exchange offer for customers to switch to electric vehicles with an 8 year warranty, free insurance for a year and accessories.

Tax-free Yamaha

Yamaha is offering its two-wheeler customers free road tax for two years after the purchase of every motorcycle and scooter. Customers can also buy their choice of Yamaha two-wheeler by making a down payment at 0% interest.

Monsoon damage

In a stark warning of the worsening climate crisis, the unusually heavy rains in mid-June in eastern Nepal at the start of the monsoon ended up killing dozens of people, and destroying or damaging 30 under-construction and existing



hydroelectric plants. The Independent Power Producer Association of Nepal (IPPAN) estimated the losses at Rs8 billion with the heaviest damage in the Super Hewa Khola and Ingwa plants. Altogether, projects with a generation capacity of 326MW that were under construction have been damaged. In addition, schemes like the Kabeli 1, Kabeli 1B and Hewa Khola already generating 133MW of electricity were also damaged.

Digital Conclave 2023

The Digital Nepal Conclave 2023 organised by ICT Foundation Nepal, Huawei and MNC ended last week with 15 sessions on 6 themes. The two-day program saw participation from parliamentarians, ministers, senior government officials and industry experts, and discussed 5G, AI, and green data centres.



Samsung Insta

Samsung in collaboration with Hulas Fin Serve has launched Insta Finance, 0% interest financing for those consumers purchasing smartphones priced above Rs25,000.

NMB WeChat Pay

Chinese visitors in Nepal can now make payments using their mobile phones. Chinese digital payment service WeChat Pay has partnered with NMB Bank for QR transactions. Nepal had previously banned WeChat Pay and AliPay in 2019.



Ad skills

Meta and Httpool by Aleph organised an event with 200 participants last week where advertisers could learn new skills and listen to experiences from industry experts.



Airfares down

The Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal has reduced airfares by between Rs90-445 in routes across the country after the Nepal Oil Corporation reduced the price of aviation fuel. Nepal has one of the most expensive aviation fuels in the world.

Standard Daycare

Standard Chartered Bank reopened its daycare facility for children of employees aged 6 months to 3 years in its Baneshwar office that was temporarily closed during the pandemic.

DECODING DIVERSITY

Nepal's national census reaffirms diversity, but stokes controversy and intolerance

■ **Shristi Karki**

Since the release of Nepal's 2021 census data on ethnicities, languages, and religions earlier this month, Hindu nationalists, royalists and anti-secularists have been raising a fuss because the number of people who say Nepali is their mother tongue and are Hindus has marginally declined from past censuses.

Clearly, it does not seem to matter that Nepali is still the most spoken language in the country and Hindus continue to make up by far the majority of the population of Nepal.

The 2021 census put the number of mother tongues spoken in Nepal at 124, just one more than 123 in 2011. Twelve foreign languages previously included in the 2011 census were grouped in the 'Others' category this time, and 13 new languages were added: Bhote, Lowa, Nubri, Barangunwa, Nar-Phu, Ranatharu, Karmarong, Mugali, Tichhurong Poike, Sadri, Done, Mudivari and Kewarat.

Nepal first listed languages in its census in 1952, when only 44 mother tongues were documented. The number of languages declined dramatically over the next three censuses, and started to increase again from 1991 onwards after the Panchavat era.

The drop in languages from 1961 to 1991 is attributed to the 'one language, one nation' assimilation policy of the Panchayat regime as well as a lack of ethno-linguistic awareness during those times.

However, Nepali has remained the lingua franca and the most common language spoken throughout this period.

All unknown languages and vernaculars had been lumped together as 'Nepali' during previous censuses, but in 2011 several dialects of Nepali like Doteli, Baitadeli, Achhami, Bajhangi, Dailekhi, Darchuleli, Jumli, Dadeldhuri and Gadhwali were classified as independent languages. This meant the total number of languages jumped from 92 in the 2001 count to 123 ten years later.

Linguistics expert Yogendra P Yadava, former head of Tribhuvan University's Central Department of Linguistics who authored census reports including the language chapter of the 2014 Population Monograph of Nepal, says that the record of the languages was more accurate in this census because enumerators were able to reach almost every village.

In previous counts, lack of roads or war meant that enumerators just gathered data from the District Administration Offices without going door to door.

"It would not have been possible to record a language like Nar-Phu, which is known by very few outside of the community, if enumerators had not reached every household," explains Yadava.

However, the number of Nepali speakers has gone up slightly once again



NEPALI TIMES

for the first time in three decades. While 44.64% of Nepal's population spoke Nepali as their primary language in 2011, 44.86% recorded Nepali as their mother tongue in 2021.

Nepali remains vibrant, and there has been an increase in those who speak the language at home. Of those counted, 0.34% said their mother tongue was Hindi, while 1,323 were English speakers.

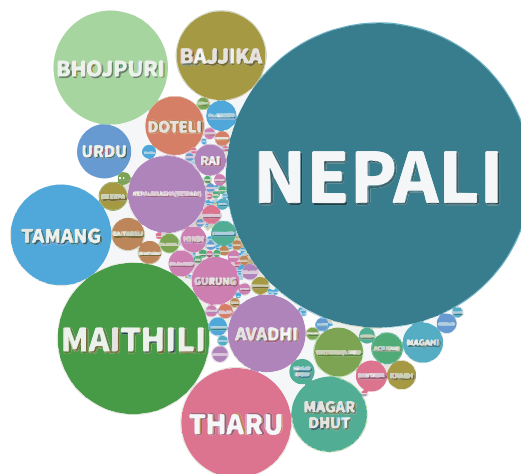
FAITH IN NUMBERS

The census recorded 10 religions in 2021, the same number as ten years ago. Hinduism remains the predominant belief system by far, followed by Buddhism and Islam.

In 2021, 81.19% of Nepal's population identified as Hindu, slightly down from 81.34% a decade ago. Buddhists have also declined slightly from 9.04% to 8.21%, while the Islam, Kirat, and Christian populations have all increased marginally compared to the last census.

Christians make up 1.76% (up from 1.41%) while Muslims constitute 5.09% (compared to 4.38% in 2011).

But Hinduism remaining the majority faith by a large margin has not stopped some groups from spreading alarm



about a perceived increase in Muslims and Christians. They have even accused the government of keeping the true numbers down in order to avoid public backlash.

Interestingly, some Christian groups have also raised concerns about the census not being a reflection of their true numbers. Experts and religious groups have weighed in to say there could be a data discrepancy. There is also the possibility that many Christians, fearing reprisal, told enumerators they were Hindu.

Concerns over data inaccuracy may not be entirely unfounded. While more

than 61,000 people did not state their religion in 2011, data from this census shows that every Nepali counted has ticked a religion box. It is surprising that not a single person refused to mention any other faith than the 10 included in the census.

Prior to releasing the detailed report on ethnicities, languages, and religions, the National Statistics Office admitted it had difficulty in classifying caste, religion and language accurately because many respondents claimed to belong to a previously unknown caste and religion.

Deputy chief statistician Hemraj Regmi defended this, saying: “Groups with different surnames within the ethnicity, which were previously considered to be Rai, Limbu, or Magar, have argued that they do not belong to that ethnic group. Others have complained that their language should be mentioned separately, such as Jhapali or Nuwakote.”

Some said that their religion was Kafirpanthi, Musto, and Yakthung instead of identifying themselves as traditional Hindus and Buddhists, Regmi said.

The confusion has provided fertile ground for Hindu supremacist groups as well as those from minority religions to claim that data has been manipulated.

All this also provides grist for populist politicians (see Editorial) who want to abolish secularism or to ban the screening of movies under the banner of pseudo-nationalism. 🇮🇳

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Staying home to create jobs

A woman gains financial independence, empowers others so they do not have to

■ **Sahina Shrestha** in Baglung

Just about everyone seems to want to go to Pokhara these days, but for an authentic cultural experience, head further west. A 4-hour drive away is Baglung that offers genuine Magar hospitality amidst splendid scenery.

Along the Mid Hill Highway, on the fringes of lush green forests at the height of 1,600m is Torikhola Community Homestay in Ward 2 of Galkot Municipality.

Sita Pun, 42, has been hosting guests at her home for the past six years — one of 12 families in the village of 65 households that run homestays.

Clad in a sarong, cholo and ghalek, she welcomes guests with flowers, before serving them auspicious kodoko sel, makai and gundruk. Lunch and dinner are variations of the organically grown vegetables, with local rice or dhido, dal and chicken curry cooked over firewood.

Guests here come from all over Nepal, and word has spread about the warm traditional hospitality and tranquility of the place.

Besides hosting guests, Sita (pictured, far right) tends to her organic vegetables, milks the buffalos, making curd, takes care of the chicken and distils a powerful home-made liquor. And all of this is offered to guests.

“This homestay has made me financially independent,” says Sita, who says she was earlier just doing household chores, gathering firewood and fodder. “I was not happy. But now I have the confidence to step out of the house and achieve anything.”

Sita was 20 years old when she got married to Rom Prasad Pun who left for Malaysia to work soon after. He hardly wrote, and money was tight.

She had suffered a miscarriage just before her husband left, and taking care of the large family was not easy. But she silently fulfilled her duty, waiting for her husband to return. When he sent money, it all went to the in-laws.

Without mobile phones and the internet, communication was difficult. She had to walk down to the bazar to make long-distance landline calls to Malaysia. It was expensive, and her husband rarely came to the phone.



Home away from home in Nepal

A model of resilience for Nepali tourism in the age of pandemics, conflicts and the climate crisis

■ **Jack Shangraw**

Nepal had just welcomed an all time high 1.2 million visitors in 2019 and was aiming to bring 2 million tourists the following year. Come March 2020 and everything ground to a halt. Thousands of Nepalis lost incomes, and faced an uncertain future.

While foreign tourists have returned to Nepal after three years, tourism entrepreneurs now must consider how best to safeguard the sector from future crises. Covid-19 wasn't the last of the pandemics, and now there are more conflicts and disasters.

One solution is a shift to a sustainable and inclusive model through community-based homestay tourism, which is already spreading across Nepal.

Homestays in Nepal allow visitors to pay for living in family homes rather than in guest houses or hotels, and to eat whatever the

family eats, rather than ordering off a standardised menu. But there is significant diversity in the types of homestays available, ranging from simple rooms in traditional village homes to multi-room outbuildings with attached bathrooms and wifi.

Homestays can be privately run by individual families or belong to a community homestay program, in which neighbours form a governing committee and agree to rotate hosting duties between households and contribute a share of profits to local development funds.

Community homestays started to proliferate just a decade ago with support from government bodies and travel enterprises such as the Community Homestay Network. According to Krishna Chaudhary of the Homestay Federation of Nepal, as of summer 2022 there were around 6,500 registered homestays across 1,500 villages in the country.

Saroj Tamang opened his homestay in Gre village of Rasuwa district shortly before the first Covid lockdown, and believes

many tourists prefer staying in village homes over large guest houses so that they can experience local culture.

“It's more fun for them to stay with families, here the tourists can live how our grandfathers lived,” says Tamang who had no guests at all during the pandemic but is optimistic for the future of homestays and the benefits to his village. “Development will come with the tourists. The town will be clean, we will share the benefits, and income would stay here in Gre.”

Profit-sharing and collective investment by homestay operators now allow development of local tourism infrastructure such as community halls for cultural performances, signposts, and footpaths. The homestay business is by definition integrated into home and family life, so homestays have lower operating costs than hotels and are thus more resilient to economic shocks. The economic impact of the lockdown may



ROOMS WITH VIEWS: Ghandruk in Kaski district with its distinctive Gurung architecture, where traditional houses are built on hillside (left). A waterfall above terraced fields, seen from a homestay in Narchyang village.

therefore not have been felt as harshly for village homestays as they were for hotels.

“In the homestay sector, we own our houses and land, and it's a family business, 99% of homestay job holders are family members,” says Krishna Chaudhary, the Homestay Federation official who is also the chair of Gabhar Valley Community Homestay in Banke district. “But many hotels must pay rent for their land and buildings, and they

have to hire staff and pay them.”

Chaudhary is expanding his homestay and sees some silver linings in the tourism shutdown: “Here we can grow our own vegetables, we have land and jungle. During the lockdown we could rest with our families and do renovations to create more opportunity going forward.”

Additionally, homestay tourism can provide positive spillover effects to the broader community beyond homestay operators. Salik

S

to migrate for work



PHOTOS: GOPEN RAI



“I desperately wanted to see his face and hear his voice,” Sita recalls, adding she had to borrow money to make those calls.

In all of the 10 years her husband stayed in Malaysia, he wrote home only once. Even then, there was no mention of her. Still she read the letter over and over every night after a hard day of farm work.

Rom soon stopped communicating altogether, and Sita was alone and did not have enough money for food and clothes.

“I spent my days in a daze. I very much wanted to do something on my own, but I did not know how,” says Sita. “I had no skills and I did not know anyone.”

Finally seven years ago, when Galkot Municipality and the ward office approached residents with the idea of starting homestays, she grabbed the chance.

Baglung district has one of the highest out-migration rates in Nepal, and Galkot town even has a hill named Japan Danda because every household in the village has at least one or more members in Japan.

There are locked up houses and fallow fields all around Galkot, and at night only a few houses have lights. More youngsters now are migrating to Croatia and Poland. Their elderly parents then move to Kathmandu, Pokhara or Chitwan, living off the money they send home.

The reasoning behind Galkot Municipality’s decision to promote community homestays in Torikhola was to retain young residents by creating jobs, and preserve the culture of the Magar people.

“Torikhola is rich in nature as well as culture. It is also easily accessible and has much to offer, which makes it a good spot for homestays,” says Galkot Mayor Bharat Sharma.

The municipality started with a study tour to observe how other places were running homestays, and Sita signed up. There was only one problem: she would be leaving a day after her husband was set to return to Nepal.

Her husband tried to convince her not to go, saying he would now support the family. But Sita had no intention of depending solely on her husband anymore.

STRIKING ROOTS



“I told him it wasn’t about him coming back, that I had to learn a skill to support myself,” she says. “And he would not have to go to Malaysia again. So I left my husband at home and went on the trip.”

Looking back, Sita has no regrets. She learnt a lot on the trip and a year later, Torikhola Community Homestay was opened for business.

“Homestay tourism is the best way to dissuade our young from leaving by providing them jobs at home,” explains Kumar Pun Gharti, Chairman of Torikhola Community Homestay Committee.

Sita was one of the first five operators, and today there are 12 members. Business took a hit during the pandemic lockdown, but it is starting to pick up again.

Before Covid, the committee earned up to Rs150,000 a month from guests which was distributed equally among members. A night’s stay at Torikhola costs from Rs1,200-1,500, food included.

“The biggest difference between a homestay and a hotel is that at a hotel you serve customers, at a homestay you welcome guests,” says Sita, who is happy she no longer has to rely on just husband for money. She now sends their two children to a boarding school nearby.

“I want them to study as much as possible so that they don’t end up like me,” says Sita, who studied up to Grade 6 and wants to resume studying. “I really want to learn English but I am not sure I can.”

Sita Pun is an inspiration to many, says former ward member and homestay operator Bhakta Bahadur Gharti Magar.


“Whatever difficulties and challenges life threw at her, she did not give up and has reached here,” he adds.

Three months ago, Rom once again left the

country, this time to the UK. Her father-in-law who was in the British Army had resettled there and after he died her mother-in-law asked her son to come to stay with her.

But this time, unlike so many years ago, Sita is not worried or scared. She speaks with her husband regularly on video, and keeps herself busy with her homestay business and other social work.

“There is a huge difference between the Sita of then and now,” she says about herself. “Back then I knew nothing, now I am confident I can look after myself, my family and my community.”

Sita’s goal now is to empower more women financially and socially, just like she did. She says: “In the coming days, I want all the women to become entrepreneurs who don’t have to rely on their husbands. Maybe they can be involved in homestays just like me.” 

This is the eighth in the series Striking Roots, where we feature the stories of entrepreneurs from across the country. If you know someone whose story needs to be shared, email us at editors@nepaltimes.com



Sita Pun started a homestay program with help from the local government, and six years later has gained not just financial independence but the confidence to lead community action. Take a tour of Torikhola Community Homestay in Baglung and watch Sita’s story online.



are being replaced by concrete

Ram Chaudhary, who has operated a homestay in Dalla village in Bardia district for 11 years, says, “Other households in Dalla sell chicken and eggs to the homestays, and vegetable farmers sell food to us too. So other local people also benefit.”

The homestay program in Dalla has also attracted outside funding to build a community hall, and tourism proceeds are used to finance conservation efforts in the village’s community forest, which

is part of an important wildlife corridor on the Bardia National Park.

“There’s a good relationship between tourism and the environment,” he says. “Conservation has improved with homestays.”

Husband and wife Dhanishwar and Janaki Bashyal have run their homestay in Tansen of Palpa district for 12 years. Their homestay was initially a private family business, but five years ago the

Bashyals and a few other homestay operators in Tansen joined hands to form a community homestay group with government support.

In addition, the homestay committee in Tansen collaborates in knowledge sharing and in hosting joint cultural programs for tourists which is educational even to the locals. Says Bashyal: “Young people in Tansen also see the traditional culture and dress... because of the homestays, our culture is preserved.”

There are challenges. Many foreign tourists are unaware of community homestays unless they hire a homestay-focused travel agency while domestic tourists view homestays as a downgrade to hotels.

Additionally, inequality within communities can cause tension, as some homestay operators are able to afford larger investments in guest rooms and facilities, and thus end up with a greater share of revenue than others. Promotion and advertising, which many homestay operators see as a priority for post-pandemic growth, can be costly and difficult, especially for locations not on traditional tourism circuits.

In established tourism hubs such as Ghandruk in Kaski district in the Annapurna Conservation Area, homestays can struggle to find a foothold in a highly competitive tourism environment. “Tourists see the big hotels and stay there, they ignore the homestays,” says one operator.

In contrast to the collaborative spirit often seen in smaller village homestay groups, the homestay

operator in Ghandruk felt that the members of the homestay committee there did not support each other because they were competing among themselves for a limited customer base, especially in the aftermath of the lockdown.

Juma, a homestay operator in Thini village near Jomsom in Lower Mustang, also noted a rise in competition. “The guest houses compete with the homestays here. The guest houses have attached bathrooms and more facilities. Here we have simple, local food. But homestays offer cultural programs and are cheaper.”

The post-pandemic boom in domestic travel filled Thini’s homestays to capacity in peak tourism months, and Juma was planning to recruit neighbours into the program. “In the high season we have to turn back tourists because all the homestays are full,” she adds. “We need more houses to join.”

Seeing the success of homestays in other parts of Nepal, tourism entrepreneur Rabin Karki is seeking to create a community-based homestay tourism program in his hometown of Butwal. “Right now this neighbourhood is only a residential area, it’s not a source of income for anyone,” says Karki. “But homestays could make it a business area as well.”

Karki has seen enthusiasm from his fellow young people in Butwal for developing a community-centric tourism industry in the city, which is a transit hub in southern Nepal with highway links to popular tourist sites like Lumbini, Chitwan and Pokhara.

Homestay operators, especially in rural areas, still must contend with the economic realities that posed difficulties even before the pandemic. In Narchyang village in Myagdi, some residents who had supplemented their income by operating homestays have moved away for better opportunities.

“Before the pandemic, 20 people were on the homestay committee here,” says Hukum Pun, a homestay owner in Narchyang. “But now there are only four or five homestays. It was destroyed by corona. Some people moved abroad for work, some left the village for the city, some have gotten too old.”

Narchyang is close to Tatopani, an established stop along the Annapurna Circuit and the site of many large hotels. This meant that the lockdown’s effects were less severe in Narchyang than in Tatopani. “There were no tourists here, but we are not reliant on tourism. So here it wasn’t hard. We grew vegetables...there is a lot of agriculture here. In Tatopani there is only tourism,” he explains.

Nepal recorded 600,000 arrivals in 2022 and Nepal Tourism Board has a goal of 1 million in 2023. Tourism as we know it is not relevant anymore post pandemic and in the age of the climate crisis.

Now is the time to build a more resilient tourism industry that shares benefits at the community level. Promoting and supporting homestay tourism may provide one path forward. 

Jack Shangraw is a Fulbright scholar documenting the impacts of the pandemic lockdown on community-level tourism in Nepal.



PHOTOS: JACK SHANGRAW

E-VENTS



Bird watching

Ornithophile can take fellow enthusiasts to the bird watching program this week and try to identify the various species of birds encountered.
1 July, 6.30pm onwards, Machhegaun Forest, Kirtipur, 9851129773

Stand-up show

Join a laughter filled evening with Apoorwa Kshitiz Singh, Babin Karki and Sandesh Devkota this week. Bring along family and friends to the comedy show.
30 June, 6.30 onwards, Rs800, Attic, Gyaneshwar



TFN Walkathon

Participate in the Teach for Nepal Walkathon to raise awareness about inequity in education in Nepal and. Walk for 5km to raise Rs1000 and support the cause. Register now.
1 July, 1pm onwards, Bhandarkhal Garden, Patan Museum

Awaiting

View a collection of acrylic paintings by Riti Maharjan at the exhibition AWAITING this week.
30 June-5 July, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal Revisited



Drawing workshop

Join the live drawing workshop 'Portraits in Charcoal' with Sumit Balla and try making a self-portrait. Call to book a spot.
1 July, Kathmandu Art House, Thamel, 9802333471

DINING



Mamagoto

Mamagoto is a Pan-Asian restaurant that serves a variety of Asian fusion dishes. Enjoy Maki Rolls, Satays, Dumplings, Ramen and more, all with a side of various cocktails.
Panipokhari (01) 4446299

MUSIC

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



Prajina & Satish

Enjoy an electrifying night of music with Prajina & Satish this week. Get pre-sale tickets on the Revel app.
1 July, 8pm onwards, Rs730, Rolling Stones Rock Bar, Pokhara

Binit Rana

Enjoy a girls night out and listen to live music from Binit Rana. Get free shots too.
5 July, 6pm onwards, Watering Hole, Bhagawati Marg



Live music

Enjoy live music every day at Reggae Bar, the oldest live music venue in Kathmandu, with a variety of bands and musical artists. Call ahead to know who is performing.
Reggae Bar, Thamel, 9846195216



Monsoon Sessions

Gear up for Monsoon Sessions performances by the bands Space, Nischal Gurung from Over&Out, as well as Pariwartan who will play new songs from their recent album. Buy tickets from Ticketsansar.
15 July, Rs500-1000, Beers and Cheers, Jhamsikhel

Kaiser Cafe

Enjoy fine dining at this quaint restaurant with a nice menu and an attentive service hidden in the corner of Garden of Dreams. Stop by after a relaxing walk around the serene garden.
Kaiser Café, Thamel (01) 4413217



Utopia

Located away from the clamour of Jawalakhel's noisy streets, Utopia features Newa dishes, as well as French, Italian and other continental cuisines.
Ekantakuna, 9849592412

About Town

GETAWAY



Shangri-La Village Resort

Get away for a couple days this summer and head to the idyllic Shangri-La Village Resort. Meditate in the outdoor Yoga Pergola, indulge in a massage in Phewa Spa and take a dip in the refreshing outdoor pool.
Gharipatan, Pokhara (61) 462222

Bandipur Safari Lodge

While Bandipur is mainly known for its rich cultural heritage, it is home to a wide variety of wildlife. Go beyond the temples and explore the jungles of the town with the Bandipur Safari Lodge.
Bandipur, 9449597880



Evergreen Eco-Lodge

Unwind in one of the rustic wooden tree-house cabins with thatched straw roofs and enjoy the tranquillity of the dense surrounding forestry at this eco-lodge.
Chitwan National Park, Sauraha, 9845693879

Newa Chén

The open rooms and courtyards at Newa Chén are reminiscent of the palaces of the Malla Dynasty, while maintaining the dimensions, low ceiling, wood carving and cosy characters of an authentic traditional Newa house.
Kobahal, Lalitpur (01) 5533532



Karma Hotel

Karma Boutique Hotel, located right in the heart of bustling Thamel, is inspired by an amalgamation of Tibetan and Nepali culture. Stay in one of the brightly decorated rooms with traditional artworks and experience authentic Nepali and Tibetan cuisine.
Thamel (01) 4246131



Merhaba Turkish Restaurant

With over 90 items on the menu, Merhaba offers the best of Turkish food. The Iskender kebab, a dish that is piled with tender meat, yoghurt, couscous and flatbread, is a must, as is the Turkish Pizza.
Chakshibari Marg, 9840931141

Nina's

Nina's has been a long-time favourite of those seeking a juicy burger and steak. The service is unparalleled, and the quality of the dishes is unmatched.
Maharajgunj, 9851130043

WEEKEND WEATHER



FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY
 25° 20°	 27° 20°	 28° 21°	 28° 20°	 27° 21°

Monsoon maturing

The southwest monsoon has now well and truly set in over the northern part of the Subcontinent after an initial delay caused by the blocking action of the Arabian Sea Cyclone. The longterm monsoon models still predict below normal total precipitation for Nepal, but this does not rule out above normal localised downpours. There could a slight let up in the daytime rains Saturday to Monday, but precipitation is expected to pick up again midweek. Cloud cover and rains will bring down the maximum temperature further, which will be a relief to the Tarai.

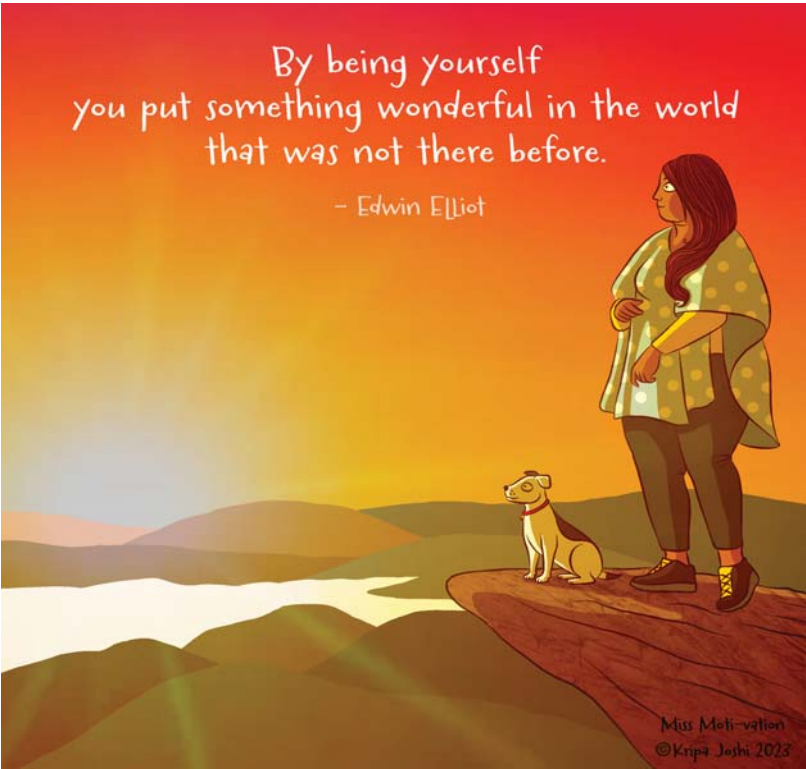
OUR PICK

Mitsuha Miyamizu and Taki Tachibana, two high school students, live completely different lives in separate parts of Japan. One day they suddenly switch bodies when asleep. This continues to happen randomly. While searching for answers to this strange phenomenon, they start searching for one another. Directed by Makato Shinkai, the fantasy romance Your Name is an outstanding example of Shinkai's genius filmography.



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 भेट्नुउने 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



“ चिया खान भो ? ”

The French have their wines, the Scots have whiskey, the Swiss have their chocolates, and Nepalis have tea

■ Shefali Upreti

Just about everything in Nepal happens over a cup of चिया. Generations have grown up with this staple brew that is embedded in the national culture.

The history of tea cultivation in Nepal is more than a century-and-a-half old, ever since Gajaraj Singh Thapa planted the first sapling in Ilam in the 1800s. And while across the border, Darjeeling became synonymous with tea, Nepali leaves did not attain such fame.

Now, tea connoisseurs across the world are discovering the distinctive aroma and taste of Nepal's teas. The Nepali company Jun Chiyabari has branded its High Mountain Tea from the misty mountains of Dhankuta,

From Saudi to Sauji

After 30 years working for other people in the Gulf, Nepali man is his own boss



**DIASPORA
DIARIES 35**

■ Rudra Bahadur Sapkota

This is the 35th instalment of Diaspora Diaries, a regular series in Nepali Times with stories of Nepalis living and working abroad.

A local acquaintance in Baglung went around a village fair promising youngsters like me his son in India would send us to “Arab”. This was the 1980s and back then, for us there was no Qatar or Saudi or UAE, only Arab. And that was where the jobs and money were.

You could earn 7kg of gold per year in Arab, we were told. We

believed the man, and 93 of us from Baglung headed to Mumbai. We were stranded there for 17 months.

The agent's false assurances (“next week, confirm”, “next month, pakka”) stretched to more than a year with no job in sight.

We waited impatiently in Mumbai. It helped that we could work, and I got a job as a security guard in an apartment complex, dreaming of the promised land.

The families in the apartment would ask me to take their children to school, sometimes I would carry ten school bags on my back, but that was extra income.

One day, I saw a sign with the picture of a plane on it. I asked the Indian agent whether he had work visas for Nepalis. He said yes, and after paying Rs20,000 I was en route to Saudi Arabia to work in a bakery.

I did not have much to pack, just three pairs of clothes, slippers and a towel that I quickly stuffed inside my bag. We got to the airport nervous and excited.

In the rush to the airport, I did not have a chance to exchange

money. But I did stitch 500 Indian Rupees into the hem of my trousers. My hunger grew unbearable during the 13-hour transit at Riyadh airport, so I decided to spend it even though it was all the money I had.

I explained to the Sudanese at the counter in broken English that I had no Saudi money, just Indian Rupees. He laughed as he saw me struggle to remove the stitches on my trousers to take out my money.

In exchange he gave me 8 Saudi Riyal. I bought biryani and Coke at an inflated price. The Pakistani waiter serving me was amused when I asked him for chillis. Food never tasted so good.

Day and night, without time off, I used to work at the bakery for 500 Riyal (\$130) a month. Between my boss saying “Tal, tal” (Come, come) to assign me work and my “Money problem, Money problem,” he gave me several raises. By the time I went on my first holiday, I was earning 1,200 Riyal.

I worked at the bakery for about six years, and then at a grocery store

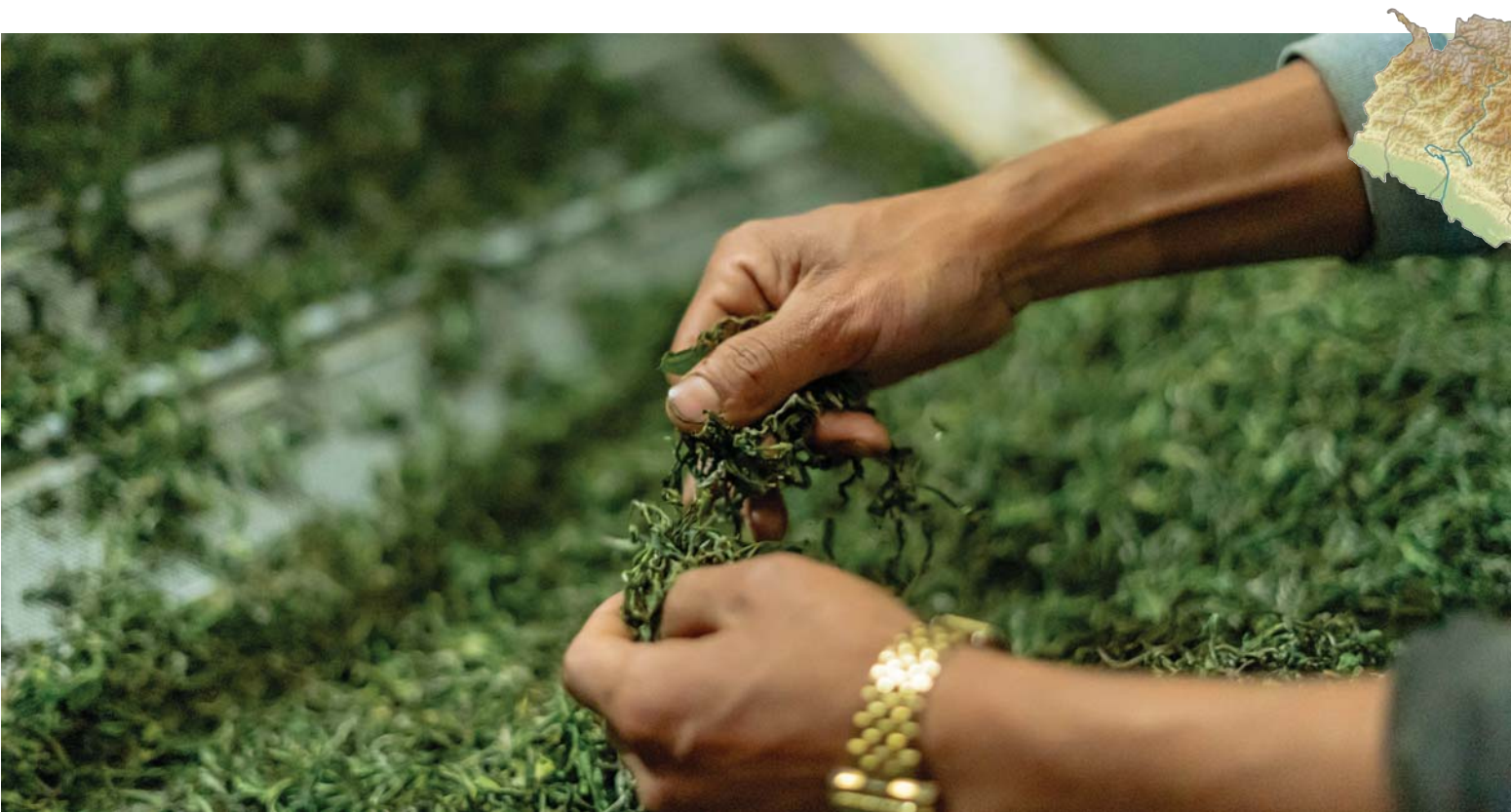


for a fraction of my bakery earnings. It was my naseeb (fate) that I fell into a trap, but had to stick around for 3 years. I had to ask my friends for money to send home.

Finally, I transferred to a laundry shop where I earned 800 riyal per month. This is where my

struggle and hard work started to pay off because I won the trust of my kafeel, and worked my way up to the manager's post with six workers under me.

I soon co-owned the business with him and paid him a fixed monthly fee, higher than what



ALL PHOTOS: NEPAL TEA COLLECTIVE

and its subtle and sophisticated aroma has even found a niche market in countries where tea originated: China, Japan and Korea.

Then there are the more traditional strong dark CTC blends with milk and sugar added to be slurped in the morning, or in tea shops with friends. But it is loose-leaf orthodox tea which is catching on even among Nepalis.

Almost all of Nepal’s teas are produced in five eastern districts – Jhapa, Ilam, Pachthar, Dhankuta, and Terhathum – where elevation, soil condition and weather are best suited for the bushes to thrive.

Most of the leaves are sold wholesale in the Indian market and packaged as Tea. As much as 96.4% of Nepal’s tea export ends up in India. But this means Ilam tea has a hard time establishing its unique brand characteristics.

To make matters worse, Nepali farmers do not get their due and are ripped off by middlemen controlling the supply chain. Nepal’s tea exports are valued at drastically low prices in the Indian market, which means most Nepali tea pickers and workers earn less than \$2 a day.

According to the Nepal Trade Information Portal, tea export valued at Rs834 per kg in the US market only has a price tag of Rs266 in India. Due to the lack of market access, Nepali farmers get only a fraction of that. Nepal exported more than



Rs2 billion worth of teas to India in 2021, but less than Rs9 million to the United States the same year.

But here is the good news: Nepal’s teas have been steadily carving out a brand name on the world stage. Companies like Nepal Tea Collective led by second and third-generation tea makers from eastern Nepal have been blazing a trail for loose-leaf, orthodox teas in

the US market. It has also been working to disrupt the stranglehold of middlemen who have been so detrimental to farmers, as well as the international prospect for Nepal’s teas.

Sourcing teas directly from family-owned, small-holder farms, Nepal Tea Collective connects tea drinkers in the US and across the world directly to farmers in eastern Nepal. Featured in The New York Times and

Forbes as a blueprint for reinventing the tea industry, Nepal Tea Collective also offers the experience of award-winning teas from its catalog of organic, specialty teas.

The Collective is also promoting tea tourism, taking visitors on ten-day trips through eastern Nepal’s scenic tea country, the sweet spot for tea gardens. Visitors can savour the scenery, the tea making process and the one-of-a-kind flavours of white, green, oolong or black teas along the foothills of Kangchenjunga, the world’s third highest mountain. The microclimate of eastern Nepal, where cool breezes from the snowcapped mountains mingle with the warm and moisture-laden winds from the Bay of Bengal, is ideal for tea. Visitors can also meet tea pickers, skilled factory workers and their ingenious and unique methods of producing the exceptional flavours.

Nepal Tea Collective is also hosting corporate tea-tasting programs to build awareness. “Guests can sip on tea together, learn about its rich history, and then engage in team-building activities,” explains founder Nishchal Banskota.

The journey for Nepal’s tea has not been easy. There are challenges brought about by the climate crisis as well as existing problems with outdated machinery, lack of proper storage and the higher cost of organic teas.

“Nepali producers could process teas from Nepal and access international markets with better facilities. We could create an identity for Nepali producers in the global market,” says co-founder of the Collective, Pratik Rijal.

An added challenge for farmers is also bridging the gap between the popular CTC tea culture, loaded with milk and sugar, and the still evolving taste among Nepalis for loose-leaf, organic teas.

Nepal Tea Collective is now connecting Nepali tea drinkers with the range of Nepali orthodox teas. Co-founder Amigo Khadka says, “If the French have their wines, the Scots have whiskeys, the Swiss have their chocolates, can Nepalis not have their teas?” 🇳🇵



previous expat partners had offered, and the rest of the earnings minus the operations costs was for me to keep. For 15 years, I managed to save up to Rs200,000 per month.

In 2017, I decided to return to Nepal despite the good pay and my boss’ insistence that I stay. I had



worked enough and was tired, I just wanted to be home with my family.

I was leaving behind a different Saudi Arabia. All I remember were vast expanses of sand when I first arrived there. When I left, the roads were wide and tall buildings had sprung up. I wondered how the three decades went by.

Earnings in Nepal are enough, if at all, just to make ends meet. Anything more, and I would have to pack my bags to go overseas again or find reasons to stay abroad. And I wanted more.

I had bought a plot of land in Baglung in 1989 after spending a few years in Saudi Arabia. To build a house in that empty piece of land, I had to go overseas.

I relocated my sons to Kathmandu because there was no future in the village, especially

during the Maoist conflict. I now wanted to sell my Baglung land to buy land and a house in Kathmandu. The sacrifices I made during my foreign employment, communicating over letters with my newly married wife that took 28 days to reach, working around the clock without keeping track of time, or missing key milestones as my sons grew up, all paid off for me in different ways.

Despite being from rural Nepal, I managed to build a house in Kathmandu and got extra income from the rent. My sons have both completed their bachelors in IT and have well-paying jobs. They will soon be going abroad for their Master’s.

These are the goals I accomplished by being away. For nearly three years after returning I did nothing. But slowly, the urge

to work returned and I started exploring options in Kathmandu, from starting a party palace to a momo store to a poultry farm.

Given my experience in Saudi Arabia, I also considered starting a bakery or a laundry, but these were high cost investments. I could neither afford the kind of machines I had used overseas nor expected the same levels of returns in Nepal.

Eventually, I found a spot in a vegetable market in Dhumbrahi. My brother and I invested just Rs130,000 initially, and now four years later we sell about a ton of vegetables daily at wholesale prices.

Our days start at 2AM as we collect produce from suppliers from Chitwan, Kavre, Makwanpur and Dhading. We sell the produce until 10AM and resume again at 2PM. From 6-6:30 pm onwards, I start selling off what is left at a cheaper

price, sometimes at a loss.

By evening, I am so desperate to get rid of the entire stock of vegetables that I start hawking to draw customers. It helps to stand out in a crowd of sellers who are all facing the same time pressure to dispose of remaining perishables.

I first had a difficult time understanding the market. Where do we get produce at good rates, who do we sell them to and at what price? At what stage is it better to give away unsold produce at lower prices, sometimes even taking a loss, before they go bad completely?

The stakes are not as high in my current work as in other businesses. So far, when I have made losses and sold produce at low prices, I have managed to recuperate it within a few days. It is a relief that I do not have to worry about back-breaking loans or huge losses that trap many entrepreneurs. And I particularly like being referred to as a ‘sauji’, as I wouldn’t have enjoyed working under someone for a pittance.

Business is good but I do get tired more easily these days. My age is slowly catching up to me. I began my struggle when I was 17, four decades ago.

In a few years, I want to sell my business and take it easy to just rest and travel. I want to take my wife to Mumbai to show her where it all began.

Back to my days as a young security guard in the city, dreaming of Arab and the promise it held. 🇳🇵

