

■ **Sonia Awale**

The fake Bhutan refugee scandal and the organised crime behind the Lalita Niwas real estate scam have shown that Nepal's media, investigation agencies, law

“Politicians have made a mess of our legal and judicial system, they are strategically making and amending laws to suit their purpose,” says

Not a single senior Maoist figure has so far been implicated in either

Hari Bahadur Thapa, author of the 2017 book *Rajgaj* which examines corruption cases in Nepal's recent history, says both the fake refugee scandal and the Lalita Niwas scam are manifestations of a corrupt bureaucracy that is rotten to the core and has contaminated the polity. 🇳🇵

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#1
DIGITAL WORLD

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Free and unfair

We can sit here all day, moaning and groaning about everything that is wrong with Nepal. But what are the solutions?

One place to start would be electoral reform. Just about every malaise in Nepali politics starts with flaws in the voting process. Despite periodic elections giving a candidate mandate, it rarely translates into performance legitimacy. As a result, crooks get re-elected over and over again to engage blatantly in crimes like the Lalita Niwas land grab and the fake refugee scandal (page 1,4).

It has become fashionable these days to blame democracy for lack of accountability. Some like the current prime minister are battling for an executive presidency to ostensibly streamline decision-making.

The malfunction is not in the democratic system but elected officials who populate it. In many parts of the world, democracy has been hijacked by populists who fan ultra-nationalism, religious intolerance and xenophobia to get elected, and proceed to dismantle the very institutions that got them elected in the first place.

The stench of decomposing democracy is now overpowering in a neighbouring country. In Nepal we need to remain vigilant to prevent the election of demagogues, but our problem is different: politicians who have struggled, suffered and sacrificed their lives for the restoration of democracy are the ones undermining it.

Democracy runs on adult franchise, so we have to ensure that all citizens have a say in selecting the most honest and efficient managers to govern for a given period.

The electoral system in a democracy lays down the rules about how those candidates are chosen. If the rules are relevant and are followed, we get a representative government and the people can reward elected officials with a second term in office.

Nepalis have historically shown great enthusiasm at election time, with turnouts usually exceeding 65% in most constituencies. The voting is relatively peaceful, free and fair. The 2015 Constitution made elected assemblies more inclusive in terms of gender and minorities.

However, there are serious concerns about illicit election financing and the high cost of campaigning. Vote buying, cashing in on caste, ethnic or party vote banks end up narrowing the choice for voters.

A candidate who has to first pay the party boss for a ticket, then spend a fortune on wholesalers of bulk votes will (if elected) try to recoup that investment many times over.

This politics of patronage means that campaign financing comes from business cronies who will demand their pound of flesh in licenses and contracts from the representative they helped elevate to office.

That is why we now have so many businessmen who are MPs, mayors and ward chairs. Captains of industry figured that instead of giving money to someone else, why not run for office themselves? This has

politicised crime and criminalised politics.

On Monday, Nepal's Election Commission came out with a new integrated draft bill based on several laws that will now be debated in the current session of Parliament.

The bill contains some radical reforms which, if implemented, could change the electoral system for the better. The First Past the Post (FPTP) system is the root of corruption, and the bill would disallow those who have lost an election from contesting from another constituency.

The Proportional Representation (PR) system was supposed to promote inclusiveness, but has mostly promoted nepotism. The bill would bar serial MPs elected under the PR quota from contesting more than twice.

Since the FPTP system has not ensured gender balance, the bill binds parties to ensure that 33% of candidates for direct voting are women. The bill also seeks to add 'None of the Above' on the ballot paper, and if 50% of them are no votes, the election is null and void.

Perhaps the most welcome point in the bill is a provision that we have been hammering away at in this space for years: absentee ballots. Mailing and early polling would ensure that the 15% of Nepalis living abroad can exercise their constitutional right to vote.

Successive governments have blocked absentee ballots despite a Supreme Court ruling in 2018 because they fear diaspora votes will be anti-incumbent.

What the Election Commission does not go far enough in its proposed bill is to make campaign financing more transparent. We realise this

is notoriously difficult to enforce, but rules should at least be laid down.

There is rampant abuse of the PR system as a fig leaf for inclusion, why not scrap it altogether and instead require parties to field more women and minorities in the direct ballot.

Elections work if the political parties themselves have internal democracy, and the voters can make informed choices about candidates. Otherwise we will keep on having free and unfair elections that deliver the same tried, tested and failed candidates to office.



SMORUP NHAJUU

The Election Commission's bill can ensure electoral reform. Parliament must pass it.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Poverty over brutality

Back in 2003, amidst a ceasefire and the appointment by king Gyanendra of Surya Bahadur Thapa as prime minister Nepalis hoped that this would end the Maoist conflict. The ceasefire ultimately did not hold.

Elsewhere in rural Nepal, the young had fled the violence. Terrace farms left fallow, empty houses, no dogs barking. Pipey village in Jajarkot was one such place. Nepali Times 20 years ago this week 4-10 July 2003 in issue #112 carried this field report. Excerpt:

Pipey is a Maoist stronghold and there used to be 200 families here before 1996. The sound of a plaintive cry from a nearby house is magnified by the silence. We find Bal Bahadur, a sick 60-year-old man on the floor bed. He has been bedridden for nearly a year, and his wife is taking care of him. The district hospital is a long and hard walk from the village. There are no health posts nearby. There is no where he can go. People here are used to misery.

In the next house 50-year-old Pahiley Nepali and his wife stare blankly at us. Since their daughter's death before



the ceasefire, all they do is just stay home quietly, trying to forget what happened that day. "She was just 18," the mother says about her daughter, a Maoist activist who had come home after a long time to meet her parents. The army patrol arrived and spotted her. She changed her clothes and ran as fast as she could but in vain. The villagers and her two brothers found her body a few days later. She has

sent her other three daughters and two sons to India and told them never to return home.

Pipey is two hours of hard walking from the Jajarkot district headquarters, in Khalanga bazar. We asked a family with only female members whether they receive any help from Maoists or the army. "We don't want their help. It only means trouble," says the eldest female member. "We can deal with poverty, we've always lived with it. But we can't deal with this brutality."

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

ONLINE PACKAGES



In 1974, Peace Corps volunteer Broughton Coburn arrived in Kolma village in Syangja and was hosted by a 70-year-old widower. Aama died in 1991, but Coburn ended up writing two books about her. Most recently he returned to Kolma after 37 years in 2018. Watch video story depicting the changes he saw. Read another volunteer Daniel W Edwards' account of his journey to a school in Dhading in 1966 on page 6-7.



Hippies flocked to Nepal in the 1960s and '70s, drawn by the freedom to buy and smoke pot. But today, tourists are attracted by t-shirts, shawls and jackets made from the marijuana plant. Learn all about the nature-friendly hemp fabric and how it can be made into at least 100 types of high-end products. Subscribe to our YouTube channel for more original multimedia content.

NEPAL'S PAST

The 'growth' in GDP is mostly remittance, whereas 'the system' did next to nothing driven ('Now and then', Ramesh Kumar, #1168).

Samaya

With up to 500,000 Nepalis leaving Nepal every year - remittance is the main driver of progress- regardless of how much the GoNe Mafia Dons would like to take credit.

Aleksandr Verkovsyn

TARA PARIYAR

Stories like this tear me up, resolve in the face of adversity makes one a great leader ('Tara Pariyar's Karnali', Anita Bhetwal, #1167). But despite the happy ending, what's beyond me is that merely 20 years ago, considering we already had modern technology, education and means of awareness at our disposal, she was marginalised and ostracised in her own society through no fault of hers. Maybe she and similar others are our modern-day Sita that we need to protect rather than getting all passionate and banning movies.

Bobby Sharma

SHAMANS

The Dharmi and Dangri institutions in Nepal provide a unique and valuable connection between the physical and spiritual realms ('The mysterious world of Nepal's shamans', Tshewang Lama and Nabraj Lama, nepalitimes.com). These shamanistic traditions hold significant cultural and religious importance for the indigenous people in the Himalaya. Despite the challenges posed by modernisation, their resilience highlights their continued relevance in preserving traditions and guiding community life.

Rak Hee

NEPALI TEA

I didn't realise almost all the tea produced in Nepal came from Eastern Nepal ('चिया खानु भो?', Shefali Upreti, #1168).

Lex Limbu

HOMESTAY

This was a very informative read on homestay tourism and gender empowerment that I enjoyed ('Home away from home in Nepal', Jack Shangraw, #1168).

Shirley Fisher

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



चिया खानु भो ?

by Shefali Upreti

Just about everything in Nepal happens over a cup of चिया. The French have their wines, the Scots have whiskey, the Swiss have their chocolates, and Nepalis have tea. Generations have grown up with this staple brew that is embedded in the national culture. Read the full story on our website.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

Nepal Populist Party (Balenist)

Editorial

Nepal's cybersphere is rumbling with posts by politicians vying to go viral by being ultra-nationalist, with Kathmandu Mayor Balendra 'Balen' Shah leading the charge. Personality cults and populism have found fertile ground in Nepal, feeding on public scorn of established parties.

Most popular on Twitter

Now and then

by Ramesh Kumar

Despite all the problems of the past four decades, Nepal has made remarkable socio-economic progress. But in Nepal's polarised polity, monarchists argue that the country's present ills can be traced to the failure of multi-party democracy. Mainstream politicians, on the other hand, seem relieved that things are not as bad as they look. Join the discussion online.

Most commented

Home away from home in Nepal

by Jack Shangraw

Community-based homestay tourism, which is already spreading across Nepal, is a model of resilience for Nepali tourism in the age of pandemics, conflicts and the climate crisis. Visit nepalitimes.com for details.

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Nepal loses a true music icon and a towering figure who nurtured the rock scene in the country.



Nimesh Dhungana @NimeshDhungana
A moving tribute to Robin Tamang, who rose to fame during Nepal's turbulent times and how his music represented the anxiety and hope of our generation and beyond.



TTeacher @TaraTeacher1
Such a loss. A truly wonderful man; kind and humble with a good amount of rockstar thrown in. He will be missed by so many.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Himalayan icecap melting faster than thought
Climate scientists update study, warning the mountains will lose 80% of snow and ice in this century.



Terhi Teiskonlahti @t_teiskonlahti
Worrying news from Nepal. The melting of the Himalayan glacier will affect 2 billion people.

1,000 WORDS



POLITICAL FOOTBALL: Home Minister Narayan Kaji Shrestha hands over a football to the referee after the finals of the Chitwan Championship in Bharatpur on Wednesday.

KRISHNAACHARYA/RSS



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One scandal every week in Nepal

Big heads roll for the first time in corruption crackdown, but bigger heads are being deliberately spared

The twin scandals rocking the highest levels of the Nepal government come at a time when the nine-party coalition of Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal is looking increasingly fragile.

Prime Minister Dahal is facing flak for an unscripted remark at a book launch this week in which he said a Sikh transport tycoon had gone to New Delhi to try to make him prime minister.

A video clip of the remark lit fireworks on social media that led to opposition parties disrupting Parliament on Wednesday and demanding Dahal's resignation.

All this brouhaha distracts from ongoing investigations into the two scandals. Most of those charged appear to have been involved in varying degrees of wrongdoing.

After last year's elections in which independent and alternative candidates made a strong showing, the Maoists have read the writing on the wall and want to clean up their image to distinguish themselves from other established parties in the coalition and the opposition.

It was the media that first exposed the fake refugee scam and has been uncovering some of the sordid details in the Baluwatar land scam. The Nepal Police and the Central Investigation Bureau (CIB) also appear to have been given a free hand in pursuing the cases.

"Home Minister Narayan Kaji Shrestha has said no one involved in the scam will be spared. Let's give him the benefit of doubt, at least he is cracking down on the culprits," says former government secretary Khem Raj Regmi.

He adds: "This gives the public a real hope that other corruption cases will also be investigated. But we have to keep prosecuting corruption cases right till the end, we can't be complacent."

However, this has not absolved Home Minister Shrestha from allegations that his party is pursuing political vendetta, and at the same time trying to limit the investigation



ALL SMILES: Prime Minister Dahal and Madhav Kumar Nepal of the CPN (US) at a function this week Bhaktapur. Nepal has been implicated in the Baluwatar land grab scam.

to mid-level political figures.

When the police dragnet started to widen in May, the three top leaders of the Maoist Centre, Nepali Congress (NC) and the UML circled their wagons, holding lengthy meetings in Baluwatar in what was seen as a damage control exercise to absolve themselves.

For example, Arzoo Deuba, the wife of NC president Sher Bahadur Deuba, has not been investigated despite being implicated, as others who were arrested were, in testimonies on the fake Bhutanese refugee scandal.

Likewise, former prime ministers Babauram Bhattarai and Madhav Kumar Nepal have also been spared so far in the Lalita Niwas scam even though their Cabinets allowed ownership of government land to be transferred to private entities.

"If they do not go after people like Arzoo Deuba, Baburam Bhattarai and Madhav Kumar Nepal, they cannot accuse those lower down who were just following orders," argued senior advocate

Balkrishna Neupane in an interview with Everest News. 'All this shows the involvement of politicians in organised crime since 1990.'

The two scandals have also bolstered the argument of monarchists who have been engaged in a heated debate in the public sphere about whether Nepal was better governed during the Panchayat days. They say the fake refugee scandal is high treason, and the real estate scam is indication that the rot goes right to the top.

It can also be argued that the scandals are being exposed and investigated precisely because of Nepal's free media and rule of law.

The concern now is the politicisation of the judiciary and the CIAA (Commission on the Investigation of the Abuse of Authority) and whether they are investigating only selected bureaucrats and

Indeed, the CIAA in 2020 had under political pressure quashed an investigation into the forgery of land titles of Lalita Niwas, and

the CIB revived the case only after Shrestha became home minister.

"In Nepal, we have national unity only in high level corruption cases where the top leadership are hand in glove with each other," says Khem Raj Regmi who also served as president of Transparency International Nepal.

The Lalita Niwas case has files with signed documents by ex-prime ministers Bhattarai and Nepal but the CIAA cited a legal provision that policy decisions by the Cabinet are out of bounds.

"We have now reached a point where corruption is taking a dangerous form of organised crime," says investigative journalist and author Hari Bahadur Thapa. "There are also indications that political rivalry is driving some of the investigations."

The CIAA also spared those who returned Lalita Niwas property, including senior UML politician Bishnu Poudel. But others who also returned land they bought were not accorded the same concession,

and are in the CIB dragnet. Those who innocently bought property from real estate agents but were not otherwise involved are also being investigated.

Explains Regmi: "Not all Cabinet decisions are policy decisions, the CIAA should have allowed the court to decide that. The fact that they did not means that there was political interference."

There have been many complaints over the years that the CIAA has been used by politicians to go after rivals and for extortion. Calls for it to be headed by independent and credible individuals have never been heeded.

Pradhananga of Transparency International agrees that politicians want to call everything a 'policy decision' so that no one can challenge them. She says: "This is the same as saying we are not allowed to question them once they are elected. In that case, what is the use of the CIAA? Policy decisions are supposed to be for the public good, not for personal gain."

Prime Minister Dahal has been using the anti-corruption crusade launched by his home minister as proof that his party is committed to root out corruption. He has vowed that senior political figures will not be spared. Even critics give Dahal and Shrestha credit for re-opening the corruption files.

The fake refugee scandal has further dented Nepal's international standing and the Lalita Niwas land grab has shown that Nepal has been hollowed out by corruption.

"Nepal has lost the goodwill and trust of the world," adds Pradhananga. "We have damaged our reputation for loyalty and bravery. It will have consequences for Nepal's development and for Nepalis everywhere."

The investigations into the two scandals demonstrate that there is political will to set things right – but only if the probes are free from political interference.

Sonia Awale



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Tourism revival

In the last six months, Nepal welcomed 476,000 tourists according to the Nepal Tourism Board, matching pre-pandemic figures and showing a double increase from last year. Tourists from India, the US, China, Bangladesh, UK, Australia, Malaysia, South Korea, Japan and Bhutan topped the list.

Turkish goes green

Turkish Airlines has been named 'Most Sustainable Flag Carrier Airline' by World Finance Awards for its carbon offset platform CO2 mission, use of sustainable aviation fuel, and



in-flight sustainable products. The airline saved 57,581 tonnes of fuel in 2022, eliminating potential greenhouse gas emissions.

Esewa with Al Muzaini

Esewa this week partnered with Kuwait-based foreign exchange company Al Muzaini. Nepali workers in Kuwait can now send money home through 118 branches of Al Muzaini to any Nepali bank account or Esewa wallet. Beneficiaries will also receive Rs77 cash bonus upon loading remittances onto Esewa.



Namaste Pay

Fonepay has launched Nepal's first government-operated digital wallet Namaste Pay, promoted by Nepal Telecom and Rastriya Banijya Bank. Customers of Fonepay and Namaste Pay can now make transactions through QR codes.

JICA volunteers

The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has resumed its Japan overseas cooperation volunteer work in Nepal after the Covid hiatus. The 1965 program allows Japanese volunteers to work with Nepalis for two years. So far, 1,436 volunteers in total have been dispatched by JICA in Nepal.



Prime Tiles

Rautahat-based Prime Ceramics, Nepal's first and largest manufacturer of tiles, has released 'Prime Tiles with Stile' for the Nepali market.

Nabil Green Week

Nabil Bank's 'Nabil Green week' marked its second year of sustainable banking. Nabil has been involved in rainwater harvesting, paperless banking and less paper usage. The bank has also introduced eco-friendly solutions for farmers.

NMB Kheti

NMB and Kheti Farm app have agreed to provide digital loans to farmers without collateral in Nepal. Farmers can apply on the 'NMB Kheti Karja' on the bank's app. NMB has also launched free interbank fund transfer services through the eNMB app, as well as free issuance of debit cards to customers until the end of the month.



Lahan Ncell

Ncell opened a new centre in Lahan's Shahid Chok to provide customer services ranging from general enquiry to SIM card subscriptions. Services will also include



conversion from SIM to e-SIM, modification of CUG numbers, biz plans, international roaming, bill payments, as well as balance recharge and transfer.



Highway reopens

The Narayangadh-Mugling road has resumed operation after the road office division removed debris from two landslides from both sides of the highway for most of last week.

Small is possible at Godavari park

ICIMOD's Living Mountain Lab demonstrates appropriate technology for farming sustainably in the Himalaya

■ Pinki Sris Rana

The cows look like the kind of local cattle found in Nepal. But these are no ordinary cows, they are the Siri variety from Bhutan specially adapted to local conditions. They are hardy, experts at grazing on steep slopes, and crossbreeding them with native livestock makes their offspring prolific milk producers are resistant to disease.

The cows live in specially designed sheds made of woven bamboo, their slurry feed digesters to produce biogas, the urine going into a jholmal organic pesticide pit.

Everything is recycled, nothing goes waste here at the Living Mountain Lab in Godavari, a living breathing biodiversity-rich ecosystem of its own.

The Siri cows are part of a demonstration park for appropriate technology for mountain farms run by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD). The lab is visited every year by thousands of farmers, students and government officials from across Nepal, but also from other Himalayan countries who replicate the technologies on display back in their regions.

Located at 1,500-1,800m amidst 30 hectares of steep forested mountains below Pulchoki, the area was degraded and devoid of trees when the government gave it to ICIMOD in 1994. The Living Lab is itself proof of how quickly indigenous flora and fauna in Nepal can bounce back in just 30 years if protected.

There is no need to plant trees in these mountains, just protecting the slopes from overgrazing allows indigenous species to grow back within a few monsoons. There are now 100 species of birds, 280 types of butterflies, 14 mammals in the area.

“Our motto is seeing is believing for



nature-based sustainable solutions and adaptation methods to climate change,” says Yona Khaling Rai of the Mountain Living Lab. “We showcase working examples of green and resilient solutions to agricultural problems while keeping in mind the affordability and accessibility of the techniques.”

Many springs are going dry across Nepal’s mid-mountain districts due to the climate crisis and over-extraction of ground water, so the Lab shows how vegetation protection, rain water harvesting, and ground water recharging can make them flow again.

A pond made from locally available semi-impermeable clay breeds carp and other fish, and the overflow feeds terraces of a water-intensive kiwi plantation down slope.

Biodynamic compost from the cowshed fertilises the grove. A hydraulic ram pump

that does not need any electricity or diesel forces water 100m up from a stream to ponds of Japanese rainbow trout.

To prevent soil erosion, the Lab uses dense rows of thick shrubs that act as a living barrier, fix nitrogen into the soil, and trap sediment so the gently sloping terraces can be used to plant vegetables. The technique is especially useful for steep slope farming in Nepal.

“We are inspired by E F Schumacher’s ‘small is beautiful’ philosophy, and want to prove that small is also possible,” explains Killian Weber, a German researcher at the Lab. “These are simple, cheap solutions that farmers can easily adapt to increase yield without damaging their slopes, or irreversibly changing the ecosystem.”

With its focus on simplicity, the technologies, techniques and approaches are



easily adaptable to Himalayan farmers who can enhance their existing methods.

The Lab is also experimenting with more complicated technologies like hydroponics, to grow plants without soil and tiny regulated drops of water containing nutrients. An aquaponics site uses water from a fish tank already rich in nutrients.

The Living Lab has trained women and farmer groups from all over Nepal who have successfully applied some of their techniques and approaches.

Indoor pollution in cold highland settlements in the Himalaya means many children die young from acute respiratory infection. This can be prevented with a simple smokeless clay stove that uses locally available material and knowledge.

Just half-a-day’s training is all that is needed to make bio-briquettes from farm residue to fuel clean and high-heat stoves.

Says Rai: “Visitors who come here take away knowledge and skills that they directly transplant in their communities across the Himalaya. This plants the seed for better farm practices, and adaptation to new challenges.” 🇳🇵

To book visit for institutions, go the ICIMOD Mountain Living Lab site: <https://www.icimod.org/living-mountain-lab/>

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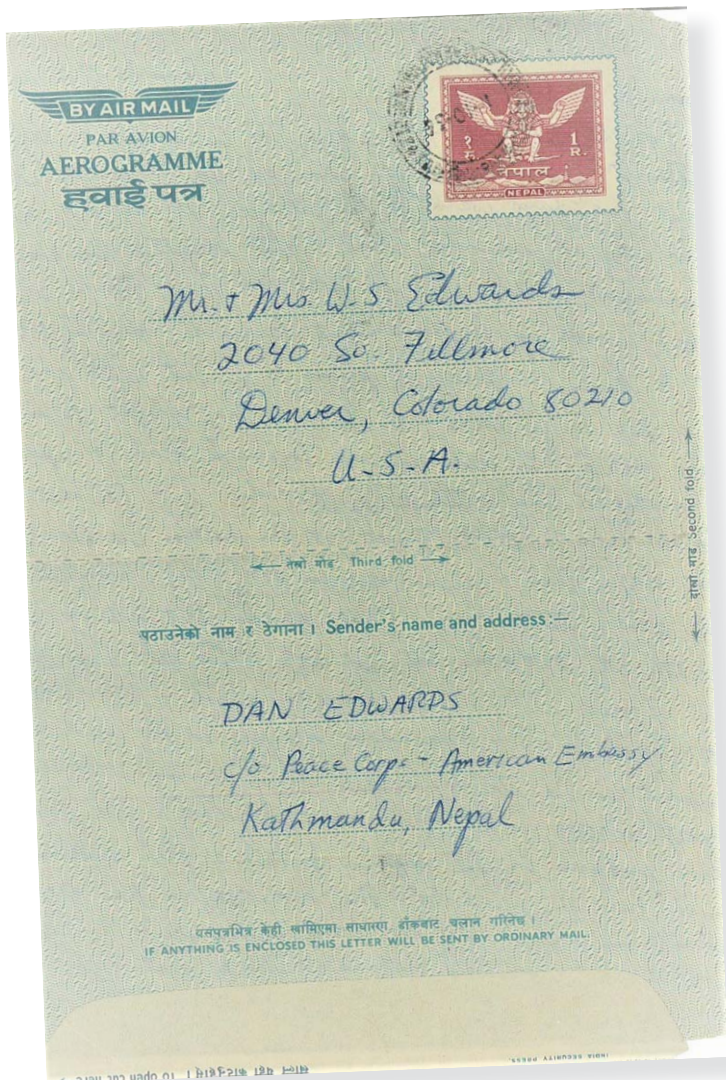
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Long before Instagram were Rs1 Aerogrammes which took 2 weeks to reach America from Dhading.



Tinkune and Kathmandu Valley in 1972, from a plane about to land at the airport.



Sunaula Bazar, the headquarter of Dhading District in 1966.

DHADING JOURNAL 1966

■ Daniel W

The 208th group of 21 American men and women arrived in Nepal last month, the first since 1960. The 4,000 young Americans have since become new volunteers will find a very different Nepal than their predecessors experienced nearly two decades ago. The entries of Daniel W Edwards after he flew to Nepal and walked to Dhading district where he lived for a year and a half years.

17 OCTOBER, 1966

The day of departure from Kathmandu to Dhading was inauspicious. I awoke at 3AM with “intestinal disturbances”, managed breakfast, and by the time Peace Corps regional director Al Dieffenbach appeared at 9:00, I decided to consult the doctor before leaving.

We had loaded my gear into the jeep station wagon and had driven into the Snow View Hotel in Lazimpat when the clutch gave out. I grabbed my medical kit and hurried back to bed. Then came the chills and fever. I felt quite sick and had a colleague summon the doctor. He was a long time in coming, but in the meantime I was bothered by a solicitous but an overbearing Anglo-Indian woman who ran the hotel.

Al returned and said the trip was scrubbed for the day. The doc believed I had a virus, not dysentery. I was moved upstairs to a “sick ward”, and the fever was 102.6. Finally managed some sleep about 4:30PM. A well-dressed gent stopped by to check on me at 8:30. I returned to bed with more drugs and wondered what tomorrow would bring.

18 OCTOBER

I woke up at 6:15, felt much better, and heard a truck outside trying unsuccessfully to start. A delegation of volunteers was leaving by plane that morning. The struggles of the truck seemed amusing, until it dawned on me that the same truck was likely the one I

and Butch Amundson would need. That was the case. At 8:30 Al showed up ... still the truck would not start. So finally a USAID jeep pickup came out, we drove to the PC office to load up and set out about 11:00. Alas, just as we were leaving town at 25mph, a great shimmy commenced toward the front of the vehicle, as if the wheels were about to come off. Back to the PC office, then to AID headquarters at Rabi Bhawan to exchange vehicles. Another jeep wagoner, we drove to the Embassy to fill the tank. There I noticed the right front tire had a nice hole in the tread. After lunch at Mr Wong’s Peace Restaurant in Lazimpat, we again set sail, piled high with baggage.

We passed Balaju and headed up a winding dirt road through a beautifully green landscape. About 15 miles out, at Ranipauwa located at 6,000 feet at the top of the pass, while pulling over to let a truck pass, there was a loud bang: our left rear tire had exploded. Butch went back to Kathmandu in an old 1940 passenger touring car when we discovered our spare tire likewise had a large hole in the tread, the jeep also had no jack.

Butch subsequently told us that a woman in the car (which was carrying 9 or 10 people) became ill and vomited in the back seat. The car ran out of gas outside Kathmandu, so Butch walked the rest of the way into the city.

We had a nice dal bhat dinner at Ranipauwa and bedded down inside a shop that turned out to be an all-night cigarette-concession stand. When there was no knocking from without, the old lady was singing from within to a small child.

Promptly at 4AM an inconsiderate rooster started crowing, a goat started bleating, and the woman and child began an unintelligible conversation. At 6:00 I got up to see the mountains, but it was still cloudy. Gradually the clouds broke, and the majestic Ganesh Himal loomed pinkish in the sky. Then a group of three or four summits appeared in the clear air.

By 11:00 we were getting restless, when another AID jeep finally appeared. Butch had brought three tires, so two tires were changed, the old jeep reloaded, and we set off down toward Trisuli. There were sharp drops to the right and the terrain was such that the road went in and around all the hills. Trisuli was hot and we stopped at volunteer Allen Lundberg’s comfortable house by the side of the river. Saw the newly opened hospital with an x-ray machine just installed. Plus the hydroelectric plant and a row of bright lights around the generators in the middle of rural Nepal.

20 OCTOBER

Al left early returning to Kathmandu. We searched for porters, but as Dasain had just started, not even one was available. We looked at the school, the bazar and decided to set out on the morrow for Dhading, for it seemed very indefinite (“bholi parsi”) when we could get porters. Another volunteer teacher in Trisuli, “Mr. Bob” had taught all his students to say “Howdy” so as I walked through the bazar, kids kept calling out “Howdy” to me.

21 OCTOBER

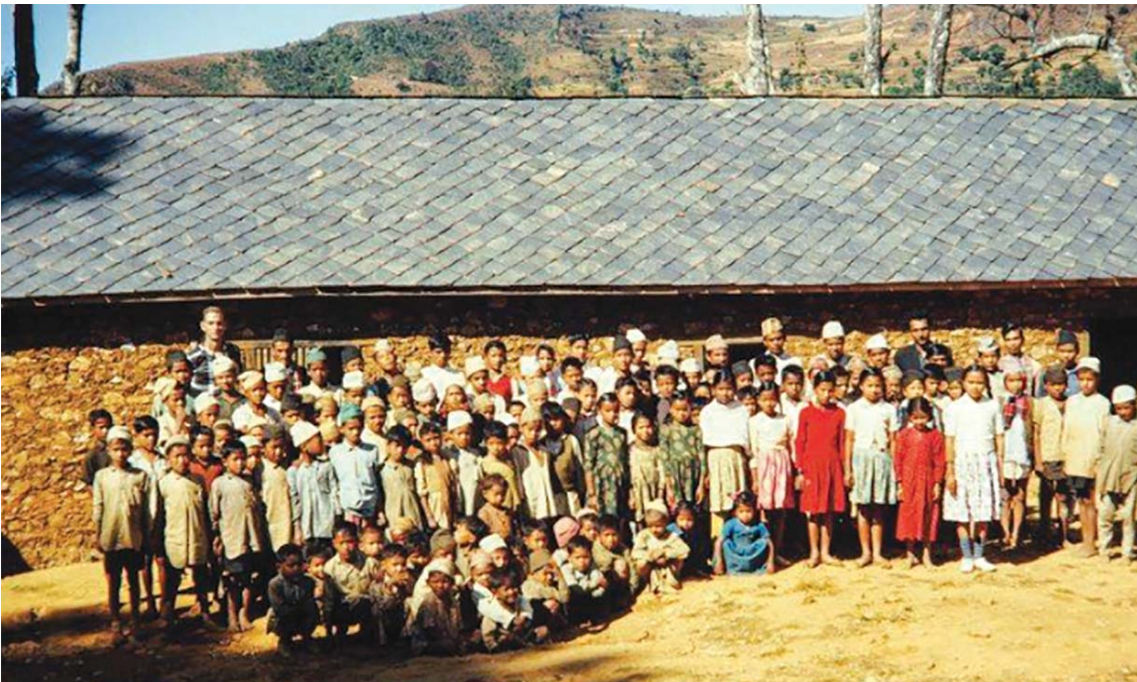
Four of us, two Trisuli volunteers, Butch and I set out. About four miles out of town we crossed the Trisuli River via cable and bucket (tuin), my Kelty backpack and I lurching out across the river and being transported to the opposite shore by a man pulling a rope. The Trishuli volunteers turned back and shortly thereafter, we came to a good-sized stream with no apparent bridge to cross. In retrospect we already had lost the right trail. As it was, every ten minutes or so there were forks in the path going in two or three directions. We guessed the route which led along the river. Asking directions was of little help, because we always got in reply a stream of (to us) unintelligible Nepali accompanied by vague gestures. Someone would say Dhading was four kos distant (eight miles), while hours later someone else would say six kos (12 miles) remained. So we just kept walking.

We definitely were going the round-about way: we waded across streams, tramped through front yards of houses, and walked between rice paddies, balancing on narrow strips of earth which separated the levels of the fields. We meandered along a footpath that was at the top of a steep river bank, which was fast eroding away. We followed the river a long time, steadily losing elevation before turning up into the hills.

We reached the top of the closest ridge, but Butch’s knee was giving him trouble, and as it was nearly 3:00, we dropped down to a stream and rested. There we met a fellow who told us we could not reach Dhading until the



The Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV) office in Kathmandu.



The author in 1966 at the Bhairavi School in Dhading built with volunteer labour.

DHADING JOURNAL

1966

Daniel W Edwards

When Peace Corps volunteers arrived here for the first time since the Covid evacuation. Nearly 50 years have served in Nepal since 1962. But the country is very different from what their parents knew nearly 60 years ago. Excerpts of diary from 1966. I flew into Kathmandu in October 1966. I had been there where he taught at a village school for one

the next morning, but he (kind soul!) would take us to the village we had seen from the first ridge.

Dada-Gaun (village on the hill) was its name, and we were led into a yard. On the front porch sat a grizzled-looking man who puffed on his hookah and listened stoically while our guide explained our predicament. Soon was brought out what I think was dahi (curd), but the PC doc had hammered into our heads the rules not to eat anything raw that hadn't been peeled or to drink liquids that hadn't been boiled or water that at least was treated with tincture of iodine. While I was trying to explain why we couldn't accept the dahi although we greatly appreciated the gesture, I remembered my package of biscuits and promptly passed them around. Butch brought out cigarettes, and then it turned out that bhat was available. But what a sight it was: a dirty white most unappetising-looking mass and served with it, goat's meat in bony chunks with hair liberally floating around in a brass bowl. But we were hungry and ate most of it with our fingers. By this time quite a crowd had gathered, and all were frankly curious and speculating who we were and why we were there. I doubted the women and young girls had ever seen two tall white guys, certainly never in their small village. Taking out my razor and small mirror, I decided to shave, and that created quite a spectacle.

I saw a very elaborate Dasain swing (ping) under construction, which had been nicely designed. About 8:30 I bedded down in my sleeping bag with a wad of cloths for a pillow on our host's front porch.



The temple where animal sacrifices were made, with Ganesh Himal in the distance. It came down in the 2015 earthquake.



The house in Dhading, where the author rented a narrow room on the upper floor.

22 OCTOBER

Managed to swallow a little more of that cold, unsightly food and departed at 8:00. Our impression that we could reach Dhading in two hours turned out to be sadly mistaken. Noticed some huge spiders in webs along the trail. Then we began to climb. After ascending that ridge, we followed the contours of the hills, going round and round and sometimes up, sometimes down. It was a beautiful valley, but fatigue and weakness were having their effects. By noon we had waded across a spectacular cascading stream, gone into a village only to backtrack and head up yet another hill. We really felt done in by now, and rest stops were becoming longer and more frequent. About 1:30 we were about to fade out when, at an iodine-flavored water stop, another Nepali, taking pity on us, gave us some oranges and boiled milk, a great lift to morale and typical of the generosity Nepalis show to foreigners about whom they know nothing.

Up the last ridge we struggled, then to see down below our destination at last: Dhading Bazar. There, a contingent of the curious stared at us as we reached the one and only unpaved street, and we were taken to the headmaster's place. Soon Mr Badri appeared, a youthful and good-looking fellow, 22 years old, still intending to finish his BA. He had almost given up hope, as I was three days late, yet expecting my arrival, he had not gone to his home in Baglung for Dasain.

[Update: Two months later, Mr Badri left the village in the dead of night ("Bhagyo" I was told) with a Grade 7 girl. I never saw him again. Nepal had lots of surprises in store for us!]

My energy restored by a fairly good meal, I set off for the temple [Bhairavsthan] on top of the hill. A good steep climb, and what a sight upon arriving. A couple of hundred people (including many Magar dressed in their festive best) were crowded on that knoll anticipating the animal sacrifices. In short order a goat, water buffalo, and several small pigs were beheaded as offerings to Durga. So this is "culture shock" I thought, while watching this amazing ritual. Not five months before, I was living on a beautiful university campus in northern California, with no knowledge of such happenings

on the other side of the world. Mr. Badri gave us a full account in English of the history of the temple and its gods, and he wanted to make sure we had a good view of all the blood-letting. On the way back to the bazar, I was introduced to a few local dignitaries, who greeted the new foreign teacher respectfully. Then to bed in an attic across from the shop where Mr. Badri stayed.

23 OCTOBER

Went over the hill for morning tea with Mr Sharma, the Sanskrit and Nepali teacher and former headmaster. Watched the men play cards, the family puja ceremony at which tika were put on their foreheads, and then sat down in the middle of the courtyard amidst hundreds of flies to lunch. The food wasn't bad, though a lot of uncooked stuff gave me pause, but nothing I was served was wasted, as a goat finished off whatever was left on my plate.

In the afternoon I began reading English Philosophy Since 1900 which had no relevance to my current situation in Nepal, but in my pack I had brought only that one book, no language material and one change of clothes. It was dark by shortly after 6:00, strange to see no lights. I am writing this account by kerosene light. A young boy, Shiba, began cooking for us. Got him to wash his hands, but of course we can't clean or prepare food the way we'd like to. The only thing we can do is to put iodine drops into our water bottles and wait 30 minutes before drinking. It's a wonder we don't get sick, though this morning my stomach is a bit uneasy. Back of our place is a stream and a hill, which is the communal latrine for men. Roving domestic animals nearby add their contributions as well.

24 OCTOBER

Woke up very sore. The wooden bench I slept on was flat and hard. Only a thin straw mat for a mattress. I have no international 1-rupee aerograms with me, so can't catch up on my US correspondence. Mr. Badri expects living quarters will be found in a few days ("bholi parsi"), but local porters to go to

Trisuli and bring my luggage will not be available for a couple of days.

In the afternoon I went to see the school. Well, what can you say! From the outside it has a nice appearance—newly constructed walls of stone and mud and a slate roof. But inside there is virtually nothing. One section has three classrooms and an office. There is a walled partition in between, about seven feet high, not extending to the ceiling. On the dirt floor rest a few worn benches.

I ended up teaching outside on a level plot of ground away from the school, since it was impossible to teach over the din of chanting students in the school building. The school office contains a few old maps, charts, three small portable blackboards, a table, a few chairs, and a carrom board which provides teachers entertainment. I was sitting there trying to digest the situation before me, as the breezes blew through the glass-less windows (no doors either).

The other section of the building has no partitions—it's like a big shed, with 70 first and second class students at one end, the third-through-fifth students at the other. The attendance figures I was first given turned out to be grossly exaggerated. Apparently many students registered but few attended regularly. Perhaps 20 first and second graders were present on any given day. My Grade 8 class had only seven or eight regular attendees. There were very few girl students.

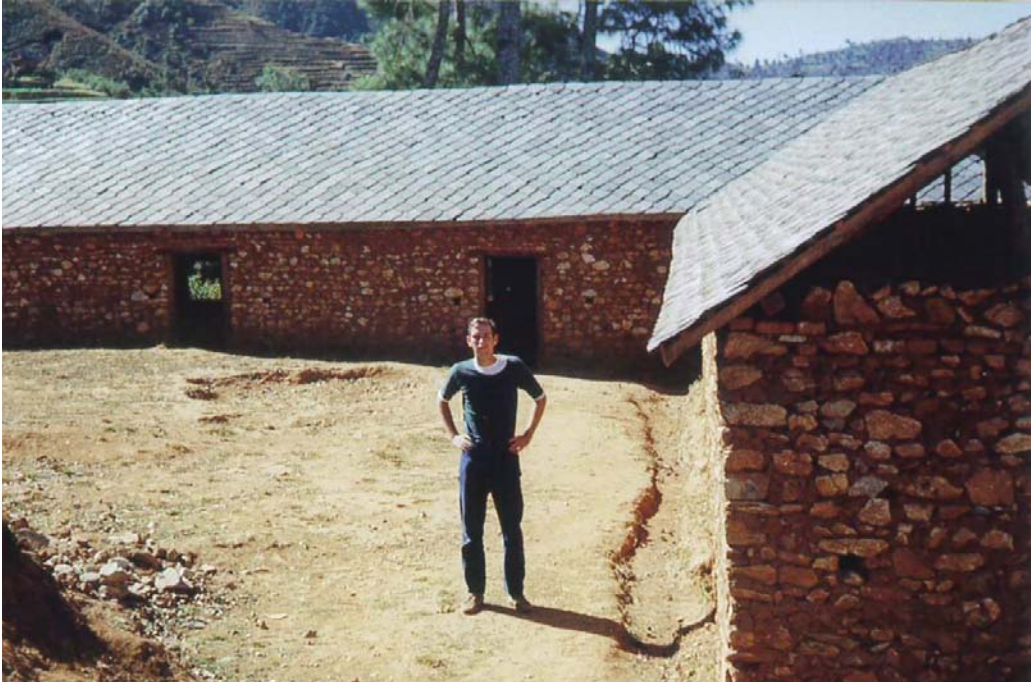
Mr Badri also mentioned a local faction that opposes the school, fearing that their own interests would somehow be threatened. As it is, Badri has received no salary for some time, and the government is supposed to provide the school only Rs2,000 rupees a year. The rest of the budget must be met by student fees and contributions. My work as an English teacher is definitely cut out for me.

28 OCTOBER

Four porters, carrying our suitcases, a few supplies and PC-issued goods in their doko, arrived from Trisuli. I paid them a total of 70 rupees; Butch had given 10 rupees advance in Trisuli. Each porter thus earned 20 rupees for carrying a load from noon the day before until this evening for one and a half day's work.



Grade 4 students in English language class. It was warmer and quieter in the open.



The author Daniel W Edwards in front of the school building in Dhading in 1966.

PHOTOS: DANIEL W EDWARDS

E-VENTS



Blood for life
Provide a lifeline to those in need. Donate blood and advocate against animal sacrifice.
8 July, 8.30am onwards, Bhuvaneshwari Parking, Pashupatinath temple

Harmony and hues
Celebrate works of art at the Harmony and Hues event organised by the Kathmandu University School of Arts.
7-9 July, 10am-5pm, Nepal Academy of Fine Arts, Bhupi Sadak



Anime movie screening
Indulge in the world of anime with other like-minded individuals this weekend. Bring along other anime enthusiasts and enjoy.
8 July, 5pm onwards, En Space, Chundevi

Rajasthani food festival
Indulge in a blend of flavours and culture with Chef Girish Singh Rajwat of the rich culinary heritage of Rajasthan.
7-15 July, 6.30pm onwards, Zind World of Flavours, Hyatt Place Kathmandu, Red Cross Road



Karunamaya storytelling
An engaging storytelling session with Dil Kumar Barahi, head of Bhungaya chariot making and winner of the prestigious Jeonju International Award for preservation of intangible cultural heritage of woodwork.
8 July, 9am-1pm, Machhindra Bahal, Patan

DINING



European Bakery
Is a loved one's birthday coming up, or need a just-because cake? Order from European Bakery. Or get freshly baked doughnut, muffins, and bread.
Baluwatar (01) 4522047

MUSIC

Beer festival
Listen to Jazzboat and DJ Sunnyjay at the beer fest this week.
8 July, 12pm onwards, Moksh, Jhamsikhel



Monsoon session
Nischal Gurung from Over & Out, Pariwartan and Space will be playing at Beers N' Cheers next week. Don't miss the show.
15 July, 6pm onwards, Rs500-1000, Beers N' Cheers, Jhamsikhel



Abhaya Subba
Head over to the premier of Abhaya Subba's Baasko Ghari with live act from Aawartan and a special guest Legend Dip Shrestha.
14 July, 6pm onwards, Club Farenheit, Thamel



World music session
Witness the beautiful collaboration between Jhuma Limbu and Moa Edmunds Guevara at the first edition of World Music Session.
13 July, 7pm onwards, Rs600-800, Moksh, Jhamsikhel

Bollywood beats
Dance to the beats from Bollywood with instructors guiding one through high-energy dance routines.
8 July, 5pm-7pm, Hardik Fitness Club, Patan

Jimbu Thakali
Not in the mood to cook? Head over to Jimbu and enjoy a healthy, tasty and traditional Thakali meal.
Jhamsikhel (01) 5544011



Tip Top
In the mood for Indian? Enjoy sweets, South Indian cuisines and other meals at Tip Top. The Chola Bhatara is a must-try.
New Road (01) 4240470

About Town

GETAWAY



Hattiban Resort
Hattiban Resort is the perfect getaway for the weekend. Grab breakfast from the hotel's buffet, lounge by the sunny courtyard overlooking the mountains, get a massage at the spa and take a tour of nearby Pharping, Champadevi Temple and Khokana Village.
Hattiban (01) 6916140

Kinjjala Spa
Established as a healing centre 15 years ago, Kinjjala Spa now offers a variety of massages and facials alongside their therapeutic treatments.
Jhamsikhel (01) 5532630



Chandragiri Hills
Chandragiri Resort sits atop lush green hills overlooking Kathmandu Valley. Enjoy the vistas of snow-capped mountains and stunning sunsets all the while taking a dip in their infinity pool before the summer ends.
Thankot (01) 4312515

The Pavilions Himalayas
This resort has Nepal's first lake-side tented luxury eco-villas that offer every amenity that one could possibly need. The hotel spa also has some of the best treatments that guarantee rest and relaxation.
Pokhara (975) 600 8117



Gaida Wildlife Camp
Bordering the rhino zone in the Chitwan National Park, the camp is a place to reconnect with wildlife. Drive to Sauraha, and the Camp folks will take care of all from there.
Chitwan, (01) 4215409/ 4215431



Haadi Biryani
Haadi Biryani's slow-cooked biryanis are seasoned with a secret spice blend and the clay pots that they come in enhances the experience.
Dilli Bazaar (01) 4438444

Le Trio
The vintage-esque posters that line the walls and rustic wooden tables all give the impression that one has stepped into a 1960s Parisian café but the menu is very much local in taste. Try grilled chicken cheese burger for a happy lunch.
Jhamsikhel, (01) 5521674

WEEKEND WEATHER



FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY
 27° 21°	 28° 21°	 27° 21°	 26° 20°	 25° 21°

Monsoon pulse
We have now entered the phase of the rainy season where the monsoon arrives in pulses. July started with one such trough, bringing nearly 100mm of rain from 1-4 July in Kathmandu. Compare that to 300mm in the whole of June. The characteristic of monsoonal pulse is that there is more daytime rain, although most of the heaviest precipitation is still at night. There may be a slight respite from the squalls in the coming days, but heavy downpours could resume on Sunday as another pulse arrives. Expect bursts of very heavy rain across the Himalayan foothills early next week.

OUR PICK

The much acclaimed 2017 semi-fictional historical political thriller The Post is based on the publication of the Pentagon Papers on The Washington Post. The papers dealing with the United States' political and military involvement in Vietnam and the ultimate cover-up spanning four presidents has Meryl Streep as the publisher Katharine Graham and Tom Hanks as the longtime executive editor Ben Bradlee engaging in an unprecedented battle between press and government.



MISS MOTI-VATION

KRIPA JOSHI



सर्पदंश (सर्पको टोकाइ) बाट बच्न...

- घर वरिपरि सर्प लुक्न सक्ने सम्भावित स्थानको खोजी गरी त्यस्ता ठाउँहरूको व्यवस्थापन गरौं ।
- घर वरिपरि सफा राखौं, प्वालहरू टालौं ।
- खुला स्थानमा शौच नगरौं ।
- खाली खुट्टा नहिँडौं, जुत्ता वा गम्बुट लगाऔं, लट्टी लिएर हिँडौं ।
- सम्भव भएसम्म खाटमा सुतौं ।
- सुत्दा झुलको अनिवार्य प्रयोग गरौं ।
- सुत्ने वेलामा ओछ्यान राम्ररी हेरौं ।
- राती हिँड्दा टर्चको प्रयोग गरौं ।
- पराल, दाउरा आदि निकाल्दा होशियारी अपनाऔं ।



नेपाल सरकार
विज्ञापन बोर्ड

China opens Kailas-Mansarovar pilgrimage...

...But only for Nepalis, and conditions apply

■ Shrijan Pandey

It has been three years since Hindus have been unable to make a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to the holiest places in their religion: Mt Kailas and Lake Mansarovar. This is because of the pandemic, and the fact that the sacred sites are in Tibet.

But China is gradually re-opening and has indicated that pilgrims will be allowed to visit Kailas-Mansarovar again — but at the moment only for Nepalis.

Mt Kailas (6,638m) is a granite monolith and is regarded by Hindus across the Subcontinent as the abode of Lord Shiva, his consort Parvati and the elephant god Ganesh. It is also revered by Buddhists of the Vajrayana tradition and Bon Po followers.

The glaciers of Mt Kailas feed Lake Mansarovar (4,590m) where Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims take a ritual dip for spiritual cleansing. Most of the Subcontinent's major rivers, including the Sutlej, Indus, Ganges, Karnali and Brahmaputra have their origins within 100km of the mountain and lake.

Aside from its geological and religious significance, Mt Kailas and Lake Manasarovar also lie along geo-strategic fault lines. Relations between China and India are strained, and their militaries clash frequently along the disputed Himalayan border.

The area also lies just north of the Kalapani-Lipu Lek region of northwestern Nepal which is presently occupied by India, and is at the tri-junction of China, India and Nepal borders.

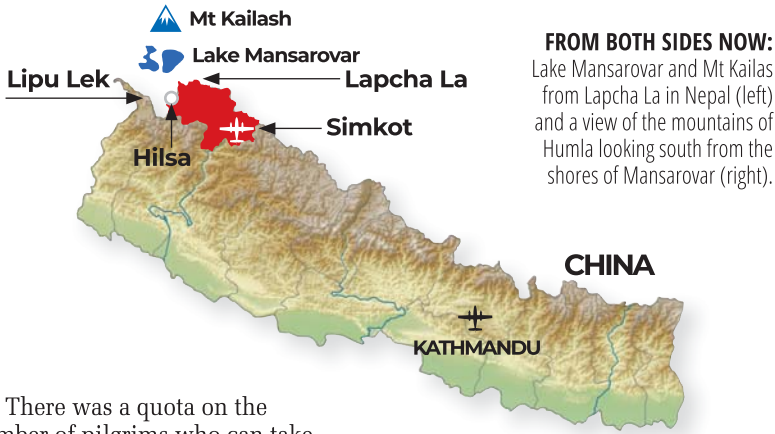
Indian pilgrims have traditionally taken a 5-day trek up to Lipu Lek Pass to cross over into Tibet. But in 2020, the Indian Army built a road nearly to the top of the pass, reigniting the border dispute with Nepal.



NEPALI TIMES ARCHIVE



RUPA JOSHI



There was a quota on the number of pilgrims who can take this route, which is why many Indians flew to Simkot in Nepal's Humla district to take helicopter ferries to the border at Hilsa, then driving 45km to Mansarovar by car.

A more expensive route was to fly to Lhasa and drive across the Tibetan Plateau for four days to reach the lake. Lhasa is now also connected to a new airport at Ngari Gunsa, 5-hour drive from Mt Kailas.

On 1 May, China reopened the Rasuwa-Kerung and Hilsa-Purang checkpoints, closed since early 2020, to revive overland trade.

It also announced that Kailas-Mansarovar pilgrimages would be allowed for Nepalis, but they needed to travel in groups of at least four and had to come to Kathmandu

to get visas and biometrics at the Chinese Embassy.

Nepal Tourism Board said over 250,000 Indian tourists visited Nepal in 2019, and that one-third of them were booked on tours to Mansarovar and Kailas paying up to \$3,000 each. The number of Indian tourists visiting Nepal has already exceeded 167,000 in the first six months of this year.

Since many Indian pilgrims are not allowed into China, they visit another pilgrimage destination at Muktinath, or fly to Simkot to take a helicopter to Lapcha La in Humla from where both Mansarovar and Kailas can be seen to the north on a clear day.

The Lapcha La viewpoint was popularised by the Indian spiritual influencer Sadhguru when he made a well-publicised trip there in 2022.

“We have not received concrete information from the Chinese side, so there is confusion as to whether the border is properly opened,” Ujir Rokaya, Humla's Chief Administrative Officer, told us over the phone. “We are planning to go to the border to seek clarification.”

Once the Lipu Lek route is opened and the Chinese lift their quota restrictions, Indian pilgrims will prefer to travel directly, bypassing the routes through Nepal.

Even if the Chinese restriction on Indians continues, pilgrims can go to Lipu Lek Peak from where Mt Kailas and Lake Manasarovar can be seen from the disputed territory.

“The Hilsa route is still the most convenient one,” explains Mani Raj Lamichhane at the Nepal Tourism Board, which has been trying to sell the Pashupati-Muktinath-Mansarovar package via Nepal to Indian pilgrims.

But for that to happen, highways have to be upgraded, flights need to be more reliable, proper hotels need to be built along

the route and there should be no hassles at the border.

“When the Hilsa border was open, it was tough to handle so many tourists. But now, the hotels are empty,” adds Bijaya Lama of a hotel in Simkot. “We expected at least 2,000 pilgrims this year, but it looks like we will not get any.”

Basu Dev Thapa of Himalayan Glory Travels and Tours has specialised in Indian pilgrim traffic for the past 20 years, and says the fact that Hinduism's holiest sites are in Nepal or can be reached through Nepal is a big advantage.

“Since Nepal is culturally close to India, our services and hospitality are a plus,” adds Thapa. “Despite the new Lipu Lek road through India, the Nepal route is more convenient and pilgrims can visit multiple holy places on one trip.” The process in India to visit Mansarovar is also tedious because besides a lucky draw quota, pilgrims have to undergo training, biometric and health checks, which can take up to six months. The Nepal option is cheaper and has fewer restrictions.

Add Thapa: “If we improve connectivity and facilities, the Nepal option still holds more advantage.” 🇳🇵

More porters sick on Everest trail

Why was the 2023 spring season so dangerous for trekkers, mountaineers and their guides on Everest?

■ Buddha Basnyat

Spring 2023 was the deadliest season on Mt Everest, with 17 climbers killed or missing on the world's highest mountain. But the trail leading to the base of the mountain also saw record numbers of trekkers and porters falling sick due to altitude sickness.

An unexpectedly high number of people had to be treated at the Himalayan Rescue Association (HRA) aid post at Pheriche (far right) and at the Everest ER (right) at Base Camp for HAPE (high altitude pulmonary edema). In an average year, the HRA aid post used to get only about 15 cases of HAPE, but this spring season alone there were an alarming 50 cases. Only five of the 50 patients were foreign trekkers, the rest were Nepalis and mostly porters. Medical personnel in Pheriche are scratching their heads to figure out the reasons for this high patient load.

One reason is the post-Covid backlog of trekkers and mountaineers as Nepal's climbing industry saw a surge on the 70th anniversary of the first ascent of Everest by Hillary and Tenzing.

There were 50 companies guiding nearly 500 clients on Mt Everest alone, with more expeditions on Lhotse, Ama Dablam, Nuptse. More expeditions meant more guides and support staff. There were nearly 2,500 people in May living for up to three months in the tent city at Everest Base Camp.

There has also been a steady shift to other ethnic groups working as guides and porters in the Himalaya. Instead of Sherpa, who are genetically adapted to high altitude, the Rai, Tamang, even Chetris and Brahmins are



more susceptible to high altitude sickness.

The other reason for the dramatic increase in HAPE this season could be that there was a greater disregard (possibly due to lack of awareness) for the most important risk factor for altitude illness, the rate of ascent. Many porters may have spent just one night in Namche Bazar (3,440 m) instead of 2 nights on their ascent to Pheriche and higher.

Many scientific studies have clearly shown that spending only one night in Namche Bazar dramatically increases the risk for altitude illness. Other reasons for HAPE predisposition could be colder temperatures this spring with heavier snowfall, which meant greater physical exertion at high altitude. Whatever the reasons, this enormous increase in HAPE patients strained the resources of the HRA. Private clinics in the

Khumbu region generally do not see these very sick, uninsured patients for free, so most of the 45 patients turned up at the HRA.

“Many of the sick porters had no friends or support,” said HRA's Gobi Bharyal. “They were kept for at least a night for observation with careful nursing care and oxygen from bottles or concentrators at the clinic.”

Most were discharged after two days. None of the patients had health insurance and they had to rely on kind helicopter pilots who would give them a lift down to Lukla for free provided there was a western client who was paying to be rescued.

“We not only had to look after the patients in the clinic but also find willing helicopter pilots who would allow the patient to piggy back on a paid ride,” said Thaneshwar Bhandari, HRA's health assistant.

The high incidence of altitude sickness was also reflected in the rise in rescue helicopter traffic in the Khumbu this season. Heli medevacs are life saving for many patients where the most important treatment is descent.

But helicopters were also being used indiscriminately for commercial purposes in the Khumbu for dubious indications, like for a patient with diarrhoea or just fatigue.

There were more than 50 daily helicopter flights in the Khumbu this season from 6AM to 6PM. This in turn had a detrimental effect on the wilderness experience for many trekkers, and could in the long term impact on future tourism prospects. 🇳🇵

Buddha Basnyat, MD, is Medical Director of the Himalayan Rescue Association (HRA).



The Karnali's hunger emergency

The government's fortified flour scheme is not a longterm solution to the region's chronic food insecurity

■ **Anita Bhetwal** in Karnali

Raju Rawal gave birth to twin boys 18 months ago, but one of the babies died soon after being born. The reason was that the 23-year-old mother was doing household chores throughout her pregnancy and did not have adequate nutrition.

The other son survived, but was seriously underweight and the hospital kept him under observation. Mother and baby were finally discharged with a few months' supply of ready-to-use therapeutic food for the baby and fortified flour for herself.

The baby now weighs 9kg, but the last packet of the fortified flour is finished and



Rawal herself is undernourished.

"We had just enough rice to last until this morning, and we will have to depend on our neighbours," Raju's husband Karna Bahadur says in a resigned voice. The Rawals are subsistence farmers who grow just enough food to last four months, and do not have regular income. (Pictured, above)

This is the tragic reality behind the stereotype of the remote Karnali being a chronically food-deficit region of Nepal. Despite a reduction in Nepal's national poverty rate and improvements in the national nutrition level, in these remote mountains hunger still stalks the land. Sangita Damai is a 20-year-old mother

Artificially intelligent medicine

Mixing AI with telemedicine could allow Nepal to leapfrog in providing healthcare to all

■ **Yugweshwor Koirala**

Nepal's health sector continues to suffer from an equity gap: even when families have access to medical care, it is either unaffordable or of poor quality.

Enter: a combination of artificial intelligence and telemedicine that could allow the country to leapfrog technology and reach people so far deprived of medical treatment.

Over a tenth of Nepalis are forced to live with disease and disability because they cannot afford medical services. In government hospitals where treatment is supposed to be free, quality of care is poor. Many lose their lives simply because they do not get the right treatment in time. "Creating and using AI models may not sound like top priority for a country where even the most basic healthcare is still inaccessible," admits Bishesh Khanal, co-founder of the NepAI Applied Mathematics and Informatics Institute (NAAMII). "But those that can benefit from AI are precisely countries like ours."

NAAMII's research integrates AI, computing and robotics in healthcare and agriculture. By creating computational models, researchers use machine learning to devise tools to address medical conditions.

With support from IISH (Institute for Implementation of Science and Health) NAAMII is working on an AI-guided screening tool for cervical cancer, which uses smartphone-captured images of the



BP EYE FOUNDATION

CARING REMOTELY: Community health workers use an otoscope to detect ear disease in patients at a primary health care centre, and communicate the diagnosis directly with a group of ENT specialists at the base hospital (left).

Researchers at NAAMII (right) discuss options for using AI for medical diagnosis.

cervix to visually inspect and detect the condition even remotely.

"With visual inspection, gynecology experts can diagnose patients of cervical cancer within minutes," Khanal explains. "The problem is that Nepal's socioeconomic and geological conditions make it difficult for such medical expertise to get to places."

With AI tools and telemedicine, caregivers in remote regions can identify disease in consultation

with specialists in the city.

Another project NAAMII is working on is an AI-assisted tool that allows a smartphone to act as a microscope to detect diarrhoea parasites in contaminated vegetables, stool, and water.

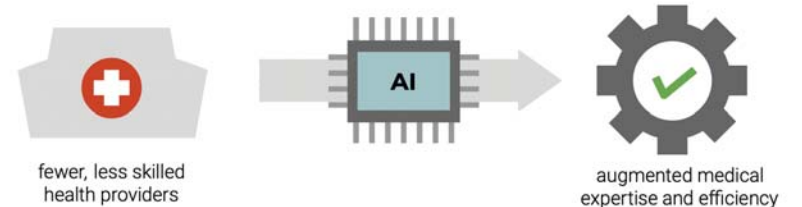
AI models can also detect defects in the intestinal tract, and an algorithm for patients with a muscle disorder called dystonia and can classify what type of the disease a patient has, are some of the other NAAMII boasts.

NAAMII's work in the health sector aims to add to existing care providers so that even in remote regions, advanced medical procedures can be carried out personnel with less expertise.

NAAMII's AI models are already deployed at the Hospital for Children, Eye, ENT and Rehabilitation Services (CHEERS)



NAAMII



in Bhaktapur, under the aegis of the non-governmental BP Eye Foundation. The centre developed a learning-based model integrating telemedicine with AI that allows non-skilled health workers to predict if patients have certain eye, ear, nose, and throat diseases.

Two AI models to predict diabetic retinopathy and glaucoma, both of which are common causes of vision loss, were developed by feeding thousands of photographs to the AI system. These diseases are often overlooked or missed by

doctors at clinics, but with both of these models diagnosis was more than 90% accurate.

This disease prediction support is now provided at the Foundation's outreach clinics across the valley, and also at the health camps organised by CHEERS.

A 52-year-old patient from Lele came to a mobile clinic recently and although diabetic, was not on medication. She thought glasses would correct her vision loss.

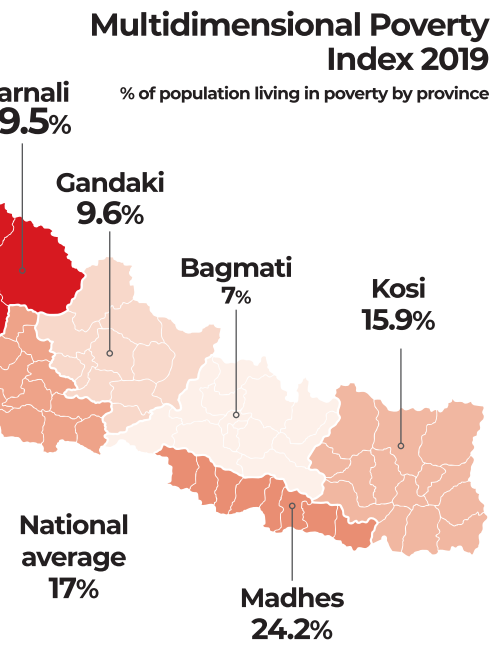
An image of her eye, analysed by the AI model at the camp,



PHOTOS: ANITA BHETWAL

who waited in line at the local health post in Tila Rural Municipality with 50 other women to receive their monthly packet of state supplied fortified flour (above, left). “The harvest is all gone, so our children depend on this flour,” says Damai, whose six-month-old daughter was born malnourished. Her husband is in India for

half the year to support their family of eight. Dilmaya Sarki is also in the queue, having made the half-day trek to the health post along with other mothers holding stunted and wasted babies. “There is no food at home,” says the 25-year-old listlessly. The fortified flour is being provided by World Food Programme (WFP) since 1996,



and the government distributes 3kg of fortified wheat flour per household each month for mothers and children between the ages of 6-23 months in Mugu, Jumla, Kalikot, Humla, and Dolpo districts of Karnali province. The WFP says the program benefits 29,000 pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers and infants in the region every year. And the government procured 575 metric tons of fortified flour for this year. “Fortified flour has helped a lot of households who lack adequate food, but it is just enough to feed the children,” explains Balika Rokaya at the health post in Jumla’s Hima Rural Municipality. Female Community Health Volunteer Pulti Khatri agrees that without the nutritive flour has helped a lot of impoverished families. “Mothers come with their children to the health post to get flour, and get health check-ups at the same time,” she says. Karnali is the most food deficit part of Nepal because of historical neglect of this remote region by successive governments in Kathmandu. Lately, it has been made worse because of droughts induced by the

climate crisis. The province required 338,935 metric tons of food grains against availability of 319,818 metric tons. The shortfall had to be sent to the region by the state. The Nepal Demographic and Health Survey 2016 showed stunting in children under five in Karnali Province was 36%, higher than the national average of 25%. “These are just statistics, but you have to look at how hungry the children are to get the real picture,” says Man Bahadur Kunwar, provincial coordinator of the multi-sector nutrition plan till this year. “Our priority has been to provide enough food, we have not yet paid attention to what kind of food.” More than other parts of Nepal, Karnali families suffer from multidimensional poverty, which is measured in terms of access to healthcare, education, drinking water, cooking fuel, nutrition, and sanitation. (Map, left) But just distributing fortified flour year after year may not be enough to fight hunger in the Karnali. The province needs a plan to increase local food production. “There has been food scarcity here for decades, but no sustainable solutions,” says Mangal Rawal of the Karnali Academy of Health Sciences. “More than distributing food or money, people must have access to improved education, healthcare and sanitation, and be informed, self-reliant and independent earners.” Yet, the Karnali Province has no choice but to provide emergency food aid to families. It sets aside Rs10 million annually for the fortified flour distribution program. “The situation in Karnali cannot be turned around by distributing fortified flour forever,” says public health worker Madhusudan Kafle. “The problem is chronic malnutrition caused by poverty.” Yogandra Bahadur Shahi, vice-chair of the Karnali Province Planning Commission, insists that women and children need fortified flour and financial support for the time being. He adds, “But in the longer term, we have to improve connectivity, tourism, industry, hydropower, as well as apple and herb and farming and marketing to raise incomes.”

revealed that she had proliferative diabetic retinopathy. She was referred to a virtual consultation from an ophthalmologist at the CHEERS Hospital in Bhaktapur. Her eyesight was saved. “Telehealth and AI prediction is a model that can reach specialised diagnosis and treatment more easily to people who do not have to make an expensive trip to a hospital,” says Pranita Upadhyaya an IT professional at CHEERS. She adds: “Patients in remote villages can now receive virtual consultation with specialists. The AI models further ensure they are treated correctly for the exact condition they have.” AI also helps community health workers to build capacity and skill, as they can compare and confirm their own diagnosis with ones made by AI and at city hospitals. But there are also technological hurdles in implementation because of the scarcity of data in rural settings. Upadhyaya explains: “AI models rely on sizeable, varied datasets. These models lack the ability to contextualise like humans, and so when deployed in rural areas where medical records are sparse and datasets are biased, it affects the precision and dependability of AI forecasts.” To bridge this data gap the 2019 Digital Nepal Framework has provisions for a national digital health mobile application, a centralised telemedicine center, a comprehensive electronic health record, mobile health units, and the provision of e-maternal care. Like with everything else in Nepal, although this blueprint looks impressive on paper, implementation is almost non-existent, even after the government allocated Rs22 billion for it over the past four years. “Ultimately, how AI

enters healthcare is through individualised, specific services,” says Khanal. “There will have to be separate AI tools and products for each niche within healthcare. We will always have to rely on the private sector to keep spurring the development of new AI products. The government’s role should be in formulating and regulating.” As of now, clear regulatory frameworks governing the use of AI or automated systems in Nepal’s healthcare are practically non-existent. The National Ethical Guidelines for Health Research 2022 sets the standards for research practices in health, but omits any implications of digital technology. The National Science, Technology and Innovation Policy 2019 mentions AI only in passing. “AI in and of itself cannot be operated without concrete ethical guidelines in place,” cautions Upadhyaya. “When coupled with healthcare, especially in unique contexts like rural Nepal, a whole new array of special ethical considerations arise. Regulations should strike a balance between facilitating innovation and ensuring responsible use of AI technologies.” Thanks partly to the pandemic, Nepal’s healthcare is shifting into the digital sphere, and this will make deployment of AI in the health system easier. This shift has been accelerated by public-private partnerships such as Nyaya Health Nepal in Achham, which works with the Ministry of Health and Population to set up Electronic Health Records (EHRs) to remotely coordinate care between doctors and patients. Says Upadhyaya: “We should move forward by involving government agencies, private sector, academia, and healthcare professionals to drive AI innovation in healthcare while safeguarding patient rights and societal well-being.”

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Robin Tamang 1963–2023

Nepal loses a true music icon and a towering figure in the rock scene

■ Kashish Das Shrestha

Even when Robin Tamang started out in the late 1990s, it was immediately clear he was a rock and roll force to be reckoned with. He spent the next two decades leading the rock music scene.

His sudden death at 60 on 4 July left friends and fans in Nepal and across the world in shock.

In 1990s, the Maoist insurgency was spreading like wildfire, Nepal's infant democracy was engulfed in violent conflict. But the country's Gen Y was coming of age.

In the cities, people benefited from an open economy and were relatively sheltered from the war. Younger Nepalis were growing up with satellite tv, the Internet and music on FM radio.

It was a time of discovering grunge and rock, inspiring many youngsters to form bands in gradually globalising Kathmandu.

It was in this landscape that Robin teamed up with the band Looza: to form Robin N' Looza: and opened Bamboos, a live music club in Thamel.

Its debut album Nepal in 1998 was brash, political, gleefully blues-rock, seamlessly bilingual. A sound like this had never been heard from a Nepali band before.

The title track Nepal became an anthem, with its lyrics about the state of the country resonating deeply with a generation which knew their country was troubled, but had never been told why.

In concerts, the song was a form



of release, a shared conversation with the band as the audience screamed the chorus, "Nepal, Nepal! Mero Gulab ko Kada [the thorn in my rose]."

On stage, Robin was a looming, topless rock and roller, while Looza: members were refrained. It was the first time a Nepali band sounded as good as any international rock god, delivering the same divinity on stage.

The Bamboos Club was among the best live music venues in its time, and a place to watch Robin N'

Looza: on weekends.

'Robin dai and Looza were the first to give us a break as we started to perform,' bassist Avaya Siddhi Bajracharya of Albatross wrote in an Instagram tribute.

Robin N' Looza: released two more albums, Aadhunik Angaanma (2000) and Bhool Ma Bhulyo (2001). In 2006, Robin And The New Revolution released Keta Keti (2006), Hamro Desh (2010), 13,000 (2011) and Muglan (2019).

In the last decade, Robin also established himself as an actor,

starring in a series of movies, starting with Chhadke in 2013. He was also in its sequel, Chhadke 2.0, released earlier this year.

He had taken to using his drone on hikes, and spent summers with his daughters in France.

Robin's father was in the British Army and served in Singapore, Hong Kong, Brunei. He died in 2020. The youngest of five siblings, Robin could not be lost in a crowd. At 6'5", he had a towering presence, but exuded humility and warmth.

A trained mechanical engineer



who later switched to psychology before running a night club, Robin returned to Nepal in 1996 after spending 17 years in Canada.

In a new year's eve Facebook post on 31 December 2021, he wrote: 'Keep things simple, follow the righteous path, seek the truth, treat everyone equally, don't bitch about your life do something about it..... Karma comes back to you ten folds.'

Kashish Das Shrestha once performed in Bamboos Club in 1999, and hosted several concerts featuring Robin N' Looza: between 2000 and 2005. He last met Robin on 30 April 2023.

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