



## KATHMANDU'S POLYCRISIS

SUMAN NEPALI

■ Sonia Awale

Kathmandu Valley's rivers have always been in full spate during the monsoon, but their wide floodplains allowed the water to spread while fertilising the banks with nutrients.

But in a process that accelerated after the multiparty system was restored in 1990, and especially since the Maoist conflict began in 1996, the Valley's population exploded. The real estate mafia and their political partners gradually encroached on the riverine flats.

Some of the tributary streams

of the Bagmati now have roads and houses built over them, others have been squeezed into narrow canals. With just 90mm of rain in 24 hours, these waterways easily overflowed this week, submerging the banks.

"It was not a lot of rain, but it fell over a short period and there was nowhere for the river to go," watershed expert Madhukar Upadhyay explained to us.

Rainfall patterns have changed with frequent torrential microbursts or prolonged drought due to climate change, but the main reason is that we have constricted the rivers and streams.

"This should be taken as a

warning," Upadhyay added. "This week's floods could have been as bad as they were in Uttarakhand or Beijing if rainfall was heavier. We should have had strict zoning laws about not building along floodplains."

Kathmandu's urban heat island effect meant that this year's pre-monsoon maximum was up to 5°C higher than average. Trees that would have cooled things down are gone, concrete and asphalt trap the heat.

In winter, the Valley's air quality is unbearably and off the charts. Inability to control vehicular fumes, garbage burning and brick

kiln emissions means suspended particles are trapped under an inversion layer. The city has now given up trying to control vehicle emissions, and subcontracted it to the private sector.

Emissions can be curbed with a systematic push towards electric public transport and battery-powered vehicles. This would also mean using surplus clean hydroelectricity that is going to waste. Instead, the government has increased taxes on electric vans.

In his election pledge, Mayor Balen Shah promised to clean up Kathmandu's air and trash. But there has been no effort to segregate

**RIGHT BANK:** Even a moderate monsoon downpour this week caused the Bagmati to overflow, submerging the banks. Kathmandu is not prepared for a convergence of crises that has made the capital unliveable.

waste, leading to chronic problems at the landfill site. A foreign investment proposal to manage waste and generate power through incinerators is stuck in red tape.

None of this can be blamed on the climate crisis. Media headlines call floods 'monsoon havoc', but they are actually 'human havoc' — a result of regulatory failure, poor planning, corruption and individual greed.

Yet, there is a climate dimension that is making existing problems worse. A new report by the Integrated Centre for Mountain Development (ICIMOD) shows that Himalayan glaciers shrank 65% faster between 2010-2020 compared to the decade before. At this rate, 80% of the ice mass will be gone by 2100. In addition, springs are going dry and the water table has receded.

"We are now past adapting to climate-induced calamities, we have to talk about mechanisms to pay for loss and damage," ICIMOD Director Pema Gyamtsho told a webinar this week hosted by Climate Analytics South Asia. "But while the global community debates loss and damage, climate-induced disasters continue to render many people homeless and hopeless."

This July was the hottest ever globally, and some weather extremes that climatologists had predicted would take place by 2050 are already happening. World leaders will meet in Dubai at COP28 in November and discuss reparations for climate harm.

"Loss and damage funds may or may not happen, but we in Nepal must take preventive action with local participation immediately," says Madhukar Upadhyay.

That advice is most relevant for Kathmandu, where federal agencies and mayors must work in close coordination to tackle the Valley's polycrisis. 🇳🇵

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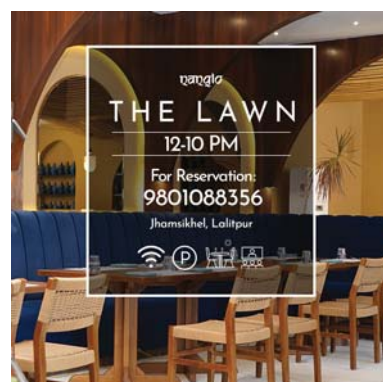


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# In the Line of Fire

Few things could be more incongruous for a country that prides itself in never having been colonised than for its citizens to fight in foreign armies. Yet, the tradition of recruiting Nepali soldiers that dates back to 1815 during Nepal's war with the East India Company continues to this day. Nepal's leaders like to bash India and rouse the public with ultra-nationalist populism, but the fact is that thousands of Nepalis have fought and died for India in its multiple wars. Nepal's soldiers in the Indian Army are at the frontlines against two neighbouring countries with which Nepal has friendly relations: Pakistan and China. Nepal should be grateful our neighbours do not hold that as a grudge against us. More than 45,000 young Nepali men lost their lives in the First and Second World Wars. Since the British Army recruited from only five 'martial races' in Nepal, entire villages in the mountains were devoid of young men during the last century.



SALUTE GORKHA

After India's independence in 1947, Nepal, India and the UK signed a Tripartite Agreement allowing the continued recruitment of Nepalis into the Indian and British militaries without them being labelled 'mercenaries' even though, strictly speaking, that is what they were.

The first choice for many young Nepalis is to join the British Army, and while 25,000 apply every year only 200 or so are picked. The Nepal government also bafflingly still allows the British to recruit on behalf of the security forces of Singapore, Brunei and Oman.

How desperate must the search for jobs be when society and the state find it perfectly acceptable for its young men to lay down their lives for someone else's country. That fact alone represents the single most glaring failure of the Nepali state to protect and provide for its citizens.

For the past two centuries, Nepal's rulers have found a convenient safety valve in sending citizens away so they do not have to take responsibility for their welfare by providing decent livelihoods and a chance for

a dignified life at home. Ironies of ironies: one of the 40 demands of the Maoists before launching their armed struggle in 1996 was for the government of Sher Bahadur Deuba to immediately terminate recruitment of Nepalis into foreign armies. Nearly 30 years and a decade-long war later, Deuba is now propping up a Maoist prime minister who has long forgotten about that demand, and the proposal to make a permanent Nepali UN peacekeeping force. The issue of foreign armies recruiting soldiers from Nepal has once more come up with New Delhi's Agnipath scheme, and a halt to 'Gorkhas' joining the Indian Army, as we note in a field report in this issue (page 10-11). Indian Gorkha regiments today are a continuation of a service that Nepali soldiers have given for more than two centuries. Six of the 10 British Army Gurkha brigades went to the Indian Army because newly-independent India did not want to lose its Gorkha troops. They went into battle immediately after Partition in a confrontation with Pakistan.

Thousands of Nepalis have been killed and wounded since. But last year India launched Agnipath reforms under which only recruits aged 17.5 to 23 years old can be enlisted for four-year periods, after which they are discharged with a lump sum but not eligible for a pension. Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal had said he raised the Agnipath issue with Narendra Modi during his state visit to India in May, but neither mentioned it jointly. And there the matter rests: Nepal too timid to bring it up, and India too preoccupied with itself.

There has been ambivalence about allowing Nepalis to fight in foreign armies, balancing the need for household and national income with the morality of exporting soldiers as state policy. For the present, the contribution to Nepal's economy outweighs ethical concerns.

The 42,000 Nepalis who serve across 46 battalions in seven Gorkha Rifles regiments in the Indian military, and the 125,000 pensioners earn Rs60 billion a year. Indian Gorkha servicemen have expressed concern over Agnipath's impact on pensions of future recruits as well as their own pensions.

Agnipath would provide Nepal the route to phase out mercenary mercantilism. However for now, Nepal's strategy should be to lobby with New Delhi for the status quo under the Tripartite Agreement until it can provide alternative prospects. The economy of one country, and the security of another are at stake.

Kunda Dixit

## Allowing its citizens to fight in foreign armies is the most glaring failure of the Nepali state to provide for and protect its citizens.

## 20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

### When it rains, it pours

Following only 90mm of rainfall in 24 hours, parts of Kathmandu were underwater this week with constricted rivers overflowing and submerging roads and settlements built on their floodplains. Elsewhere in eastern Nepal which gets more than 3,000mm of rain a year is Nepal's largest river Kosi which also has the heaviest sedimentation load for any river in the world. This was a story in Nepali Times in 2003 that accurately predicted the devastating 2008 embankment breach that submerged parts of the Tarai and Bihar.

Excerpts of a page 1 report on the 2003 Kosi flood published 20 years ago this week on issue #157 8-14 August 2003:

In 1964, India built the Kosi Barrage near the border to control the floods and to provide irrigation to farms in both countries. But standing atop of one of the towers looking out at this sea-like expanse of water, it is clear the Kosi is a river that is about to go places.

The gray-brown river surges out of the mountains of eastern Nepal to join the Ganga in India, depositing some 120 million cubic metres of silt along the basin every year-twice as much as the Nile and five times more than the Sutlej. The river is now flowing several metres



above the surrounding land, and only slender embankments in Nepal and Bihar keep the mighty river in check. This week, the water flow is 200,000 cubic metres per second (cusec). Alarm bells rang last month when the flow reached 400,000 cusecs and the flood waters nearly topped the barrage. Sedimentation has raised the river bed by three metres, and even during a normal monsoon the barrage is in danger.

Experts now fear a mammoth flood, like the 800,000 cusec discharge in 1968, that could sweep away the barrage itself, unleashing devastating floods in Nepal and India. Because the river bed has been raised by sediment, even a 500,000 cusec flood, similar to the one that came down in 1987, could threaten the barrage. Since then the sediment has choked the river even more.

For archived material of Nepali Times of the past 20 years, site search: [www.nepalitimes.com](http://www.nepalitimes.com)

## ONLINE PACKAGES



Nepal is all set to log Nijgad forest to build another unwanted airport. Instead of this economically and ecologically suicidal project, the native forest could have been declared a national park on which inter-generational equity, and new economic opportunities can take flight in Madhes Province. Watch the video and subscribe to our YouTube channel for more original multimedia content.



Music does not just entertain, but also has the capacity to plumb the depths of human emotions. An example of one such song is a bhajhan that is sung to console people after the death of a beloved one. Singer Basanti Chaudhary brings us this and other Tharu songs from Dang. Go online for the podcast.

### NIJGAD

This will be another white elephant that is going to cripple the nation's economy ('Fight or Flight', Guest Editorial by Kashish Das Shrestha, #1173). Or maybe it will be built by borrowed Chinese money giving Beijing a tight grip on the struggling country.

Ben-Erik Ness

■ No need for yet another international airport in Nepal.

Ramesh Shrestha

■ The forces driving global deforestation are systemic, but forest loss and gain is always local.

Andrew Revkin

■ This is an unnecessary catastrophe bred from corruption.

Ed Douglas

■ There should not be more airports for Nepal when we are unable to manage existing ones.

Nabin Shankar

■ Very well put, this is an abuse of authority of the highest level. I fear the lodging will happen and the airport project will just get stalled for one reason or another.

Ashish Parajuli

### ANIL SHAH

The problem is, 99% of the startups fail ("We are a political start-up", #1173). I hope RSP is in the 1% that make it.

Krishna Joshi

■ It would have been a more substantive interview if questions were asked on critical social, economic, or political issues facing Nepal. Rather, this was more about high-profile individual personalities. Nothing on international relations, federalism, or the new fiscal budget.

Keith D Leslie

### FOOD INSECURITY

Expect water shortages, and droughts but also more flooding and landslides ('Grain drain', Chandra Kishore, #1172).

David Seddon

### MOUNTAIN ARCHITECTURE

This is totally great, and word of this needs to spread all over the country ('Architecture for mountains', Sonia Awale, #1173).

Renate Schwarz

## Times.com

## WHAT'S TRENDING

### Home away from home

by Durga Rana Magar  
At Dhampus Niwas in Pokhara resides 98-year-old British Army Colonel (Retired) John Philip Cross, a self-proclaimed Nepali who has found solace, love, and an unconventional family in the mountains. Read about his life and times on our website.

Most reached and shared on Facebook



### "We are a political startup"

Nepali Times  
Banker turned politician Anil Shah joined Rastriya Swatantra Party last month as the head of its training department. Shah spoke with Kunda Dixit about what inspired this turn in his career. Watch the Nepali Times Studio interview on our YouTube channel.

Most popular on Twitter

### Fight or Flight

by Kashish Das Shrestha  
Few 'development' projects have been as controversial in recent years as the proposed Nijgad International Airport (NIA), set to be built after 7 years and 3 prime ministers by logging thousands of hectares of forest. Join the discussion online about this Guest Editorial.

Most commented

### Architecture for mountains

by Sonia Awale  
There is a growing movement in Nepal towards construction using locally available materials, buildings suited to the climate, houses that are carefully designed to reduce energy use. Visit nepalitimes.com and find out more about ongoing building projects more capable of withstanding earthquakes and the impact of the global climate crisis.

Most visited online page

## QUOTE TWEETS

**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
Nepal is on the verge of witnessing its greatest organised eco-crime led by the highest political powers. Pushing Nijgad, an economically and ecologically suicidal plan during a climate emergency and economic crisis will push Nepal towards a failed state.

**Amit Aryal @KtmActivist**  
A naked collusion among leading Nepali political parties to clear-cut a forest to grease their pockets with timber sales. #HELP @stae\_elephants

**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
We are a political startup, says banker turned politician Anil Shah as he speaks to Nepali Times about what inspired his turn in his career and about giving back to the country. Read full interview or watch video:

**shd I get a mob psycho tat? @neesh\_chal**  
Pretty young people become influencers on IG and tiktok. Rich middle aged people get into politics

**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
Tales of valour and a serendipitous family bond of a British Army colonel who made Nepal his home.

**Jehudi Blom @Mesmaeker**  
If Nepal had a type of visa which would allow indefinite settlement as a retiree I would do it!

## 1,000 WORDS



PRADEEP RAJ ONTARRSS

**ETHNIC CARD:** Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal beating a traditional drum at a ceremony to mark the International Day of Indigenous Peoples on 9 August in Kathmandu. In a speech, he remarked that all of Nepal's provinces should be named after ethnic homelands.



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# Dang turns dung into energy

A town in Nepal sorts its trash to turn biodegradable bits into biogas for fuel and fertiliser

■ **Santosh Dahit** in Dang

While Mayor Balen Shah is finding it difficult to fulfil his election promise to solve Kathmandu's garbage crisis once and for all, it might be prudent for him to visit Dang where a town has shown that it is possible to turn its trash into energy.

Nearly 90% of the garbage in Dang's semi-rural Ghorahi is biomass that includes kitchen waste, farm residue and livestock dung that can be turned into flammable methane gas. The rest is plastic, metal or glass that can be recycled, and only a small portion of it is left to be disposed of at a landfill site.

Laxmi Chaudhary's family is one of 32 households in two wards of Ghorahi that get gas piped in as a utility by the Sub-Metropolitan City with technical support from the Alternative Energy and Nepal Energy Development Company. Families used to depend on firewood, and then imported LPG cylinders for cooking.

"When we were younger we used to forage for firewood in the forest after a long day in the field, then we switched to gas cylinders, but now I can just use the piped gas and it works even better," says Chaudhary (pictured right).

She used to be afraid of cylinders because there had been incidents where they exploded, but with piped gas there is no such fear. "It is as easy as turning on a faucet," she says.

Her neighbour Sushila Chaudhary is also delighted to have a gas pipe going straight to her kitchen. "Cooking is so easy now, and the kitchen is smokeless," she says.

If Ghorahi can do it, there is no reason other towns and



PHOTOS: SANTOSH DAHIT



cities cannot do the same. Indeed, there are more than 350,000 household biogas plants in Nepal, and the cheap and maintenance-free underground dome digester designed here in the 1980s has been copied all over the world.

In addition, there have been attempts to produce biogas on an industrial scale. Gandaki Urja, a private company, is producing Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) and selling cylinders to hotels in Pokhara. A similar plant in Jhapa also supplies gas to parts of a town.

If scaled up to all seven provinces, industrial scale biogas would bring down Nepal's LPG import, which has been growing rapidly in recent years. In the last fiscal year alone, Nepal imported

nearly Rs60 billion worth of LPG from India.

Ghorahi Mayor Narulal Chaudhary has been strongly backing the biogas program, and says, "We are producing biogas from the city's waste and piping it directly to stoves in people's homes. We can share this knowhow with others."

The Rs22 million project aims to ultimately distribute methane gas to 1,500 households after this pilot phase is over. Once meter boxes are installed, households will be charged based on their consumption. The project will be expanded to 750 households in the second phase.

"We can produce up to 2,000 cubic meters of gas daily when the gas plant operates at full capacity. For this, we need 30 tons of garbage per day," says project coordinator Sharada Sharma. "When the waste from Ghorahi is not enough to feed the digester, we source additional farm waste from the district."

Mayor Chaudhary is so encouraged by the progress so far that he thinks Ghorahi can soon be declared garbage-free. The town even imports garbage generated by the other Sub-Metropolitan City in Dang, Lamahi.

And it is a win-win for the town, which is now well on its way to managing its waste, generating gas for its inhabitants and also producing fertiliser from the effluent. Organic fertiliser sells for up to Rs50 per kg and there is a perennial shortage of fertiliser in Nepal. The effluent has higher concentration of phosphates and nitrogen, essential for crops.

Kathmandu's garbage all ends up in Banchare Danda in Nuwakot, and locals have stepped up their opposition citing unkept promises. But if Kathmandu sorted its waste, recycled plastic, glass and metal, and generated gas from the biodegradable portion, very little of the trash would end up at the landfill site.

Perhaps the mayors of the dirtiest cities in Nepal should go on a study visit to Ghorahi to see how they do it. 🇳🇵



**NMB BANK**  
एनएमबी बैंक

## Ncell flood alerts

Ncell's early flood warning SMS alerts have saved lives and property in many flood-prone areas. Over 4.4 million alerts were sent in the last two monsoon months with the Department of Hydrology and Meteorology providing updates of river levels on the Narayani, Babai, and others.



## WorldLink with PUBG

WorldLink, in partnership with PUBG, digitally launched its Gaming Plan last week in Nepal's first gaming collaboration. The highly anticipated package promises minimal latency for PUBG gaming. Testers also leaked details about a new pro gaming Wi-Fi 6 router.

## Kids Himalaya

Himalaya Airlines contributed Rs396,000 to Lova Prasad Bal Griha's renovation as part of its 'Step Towards Education' campaign. The airlines also donated kitchen cutlery sets, sketchbooks and various sports equipment for children in the shelter.

## Hyundai exchange

Hyundai Nepal has introduced Wheels of Change exchange offer in which customers can trade in any brand for a new Hyundai model, with benefits including up to Rs500,000 cash discount, an exchange bonus of up to Rs150,000, Rs25,000 worth of accessories, on-spot valuation, and test drives.

## StanChart women

Standard Chartered Bank Nepal donated Rs5 million to Shequal Foundation's 'Silpa: Shaping the Future' project to empower underprivileged young women with blue-collar skills. It is an extension of 'Project KISHORI', also supported by the bank, and aligns with the global 'Futuremakers by Standard Chartered' initiative.



## New Aloft Gym

Aloft Kathmandu Thamel soft-launched its new Re:charge Gym on its premises on 1 August. The new gym features top-of-the-line equipment from American company Life Fitness as well as a wet area with a Jacuzzi, sauna, and steam room. Guests can choose from a wide range of workout options, including cardiovascular machines, strength-training equipment and free weights, and will be assisted by experienced staff.



## More people fly Turkish

As of July, Turkish Airlines has carried a total of 8.6 million passengers in 2023 which is an increase of 9% compared to the same period last year. While the international load factor was 84.8%, the domestic was even higher at 94.2%. Similarly, the number of international to international passengers carried increased by 11.6% from 2.4 million in 2022 to 2.7 million. However, cargo/mail carried decreased by 2.4% to 142,500 tons from 146,000 tons in the same period of 2022.

## #212 BYD

The leading Chinese EV giant BYD has surged to #212 on the Fortune Global 500 list for 2023. With \$63 billion in revenue and \$2.47 billion profit this year, the company boasts a market cap of \$104.32 billion and a workforce of 570,000. BYD sold 1.86 million passenger vehicles in 2022 and 1.25 million EVs in 2023.

## KU and CIHE

Kathmandu University and Australia's Crown Institute of Higher Education (CIHE) signed an agreement for dual-degree programs in Nepal and Australia. The collaboration fosters academic exchange, with 2 years each in Nepal and CIHE. The agreement also facilitates joint research, faculty, and student exchanges, and addresses youth migration.

## Power play

Nepal Electricity Authority is waiting for approval for export of 671MW more of surplus power to India. Earlier this year, during Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal's visit to Delhi, Narendra Modi gave a verbal assurance to buy 10,000MW of power from Nepal in the next 10 years. But India is excluding projects with Chinese involvement, leading to power spillage in Nepal. About half of power generated in 20 plants is wasted causing Nepal potential losses of Rs2.5 billion this year.



## Bilateral ties

Gaurav Agarwal, Managing Director of Kathmandu Marriott Hotel, has been appointed Honorary Consul of the Dominican Republic for Nepal. Agarwal will facilitate consular services and build connections to enhance bilateral relations as well as nurture cooperation, foster growth, and promote trade, culture, and tourism exchanges.

# Nepali bonds with racing camel in Qatar

But his skills in training camels and fluency in Arabic have not been much use back home



DIASPORA  
DIARIES 40

■ Mohan Pandey

*This is the 40<sup>th</sup> instalment of Diaspora Diaries, a regular series in Nepali Times with stories of Nepalis living and working abroad.*

Sanaya is the industrial area of Doha, and is home to the majority of foreign workers in Qatar. But for me, it was in the desert in Al-Shahaniya where I lived for seven years since 2009 training race camels.

My days used to start at 3AM, and I made sure the camels were well-fed, hydrated, and prepared for race day with exercises, including walks and runs at various speeds and lengths.

During practice race days I rode a non-race camel in between two race camels to guide and train them. Known as galaisha, these were well-trained, retired race camels that had never won in competitions during their glory days.

When we were practicing for a race, my employer would drive in parallel outside the track, instructing me to slow down or go faster depending on the camel's endurance. The robot jockey would be charged overnight, placed on the camel's back and the employer spoke to it through the speakers in the jockey. He even used the automated whip if necessary when the camel wasn't paying attention, or to urge him to go faster.

The intensity and passion for this sport and what it meant to his family both financially and prestige-wise was evident in his voice as the robot blared "ghap, ghap" through the speakers.

My employer owned 15 camels, and I was attached to all of them. But one race camel, Riyaj, stood out. He was special, an underdog. I once left Riyaj at the starting point of a 4-km race in Qatar. There were 40-50 other camels. The trainers honked and cheered from the vehicles with "ghap, ghap" on speakers.

Listening to the live and animated commentary on the radio, I overheard a Sudanese person telling his friend that Riyaj was leading. I could not believe it, and my heart pounded with excitement.

A wrap with the number one was placed on Riyaj's back, and the judges put saffron all over him as part of the celebration. Everyone wished each other "mobarak" although we still had to wait for lab tests to ensure no performance enhancement drugs were used.

When Riyaj won, nothing else mattered to me. Not the struggles I had gone through, not my status in a foreign country, not the uncertainty of what lay ahead. All that mattered was that Riyaj had won and with it, I too felt like a winner.

My bosses, his family members and friends, clapped my back and hugged me, and I was a hero among other workers from Rajasthan, Pakistan and Sudan with their own camels. Today was Riyaj's turn to win. It was my day.

Baba, my employer, could not be prouder. I was given 5000 riyal (Rs190,000) as baksheesh. This was a lot of money for me, although it was peanuts compared to the prize



## HOME AND AWAY:

Al-Shahaniya Camel Racing Track where Riyaj with a robo-jockey came first.

Mohan Pandey with a trophy after the win.

Pandey is now in Nepal and his recent venture as vegetable seller has been mostly profitable.

money which ran into millions.

This win also changed my status in Qatar, as I won the trust and dare I say, respect, for my skills in training the camels. Baba started relying on me for all things related to his camels, he wanted my input and involvement. Who could have said that someone like me who was afraid of camels when I first arrived in Qatar would one day be a natural with them?

It was not a hobby or passion that brought me to camel racetracks. Nor did I have any natural inclination towards camel rearing like colleagues from Rajasthan or Sudan. Actually, it was the only job I could get.

Perhaps life would have never brought me to Qatar to take care of camels had my father, a garment worker in UAE, not met with an accident and returned to Nepal for good. Till then, our family was faring just fine. His return and inability to provide for us forced me to grow up.

Had my father continued working normally, I would have completed my studies in Nepal. I see glimpses of what my life could have been like from where my friends are today, earning handsome salaries in Kathmandu.

I first went to India to help my cousin who was a truck driver in India. My body could not take the heat and pressure of the job, and I fell sick. My cousin found me a job

as a domestic worker.

"Chotu, do this. Chotu, do that." That is how my days passed for 350 Indian rupees a month, running around the house trying to be helpful. I used to send money home occasionally and when I went home for my first vacation, I took with me a pickle jar and Rs2,600 to hand over to my mom. Moving to India at an early age had changed me. I spoke with a Hindi accent, and my mother used to laugh at my "haaji" whenever she called out my name.

My father was also in India, but he had a tendency to disappear for years and show up randomly without any money. We heard he was in Goa. The accident in the UAE had taken a mental toll on him and he was never the same again. From a family that was doing okay for ourselves, we had lost more than my father's stable earnings.

After working as a helper in several houses, I found a job at a gym where a customer later poached me to work in his electric company. The highlight of my job at the gym was serving sandwiches to Bollywood stars Hritik Roshan, Saif Ali Khan, Ajay Devgand and Isha Deol who were at the opening ceremony of the Barbarian Power Gym. I wish I had that moment captured on camera.

I knew that for real progress, I had to go to the Gulf. An

acquaintance arranged a visa for me for Qatar and I only found out later that it was to race camels.

I had no idea how to take care of camels that were much taller and stronger than me. The heat in the desert was also unbearable. And I did not speak any Arabic. Everything was so unfamiliar that I considered quitting right away. But I had already paid recruitment fees to get there, and leaving was not an option.

Slowly, I started understanding these unfamiliar creatures, and learnt the tricks of the trade. I started feeling more comfortable with the animals, and they with me.

While other camels could eat however much they wanted, I had to be careful about how much I fed the racing ones. It could neither be too much nor too little and had to be timed well so they were at peak performance on race day. We fed milk and ghee to the race camels.

Our camels usually came third or fourth and even 15<sup>th</sup> in the races. Such losses ended with "Insallah", hoping for a win the next time. Except when Riyaj won. On that day, all barriers came down with my employer's family, as we celebrated. I still smile fondly when I think of that time.

I came to Qatar completely unfamiliar and unprepared, but left knowing all there was to know about camels. The only problem was that those skills were useless in

Nepal, where there are no camels. I also picked up Arabic, which is not much needed in Nepal.

My employer did not want me to leave, but I left assuring him that if I ever were to re-emigrate, it would be back to take care of his camels. In school, I was a bright student but did not get to study after my father's accident, and I had to earn to ensure that my siblings could continue their studies. Indeed, my brother is now in Japan and works in IT.

Back in Nepal, I had to start from scratch and life has not been easy. I tried my luck in marketing, being a butcher, I ran a canteen, dabbled in real estate, learnt driving, and unsuccessfully attempted to re-emigrate.

My latest venture as a vegetable seller has worked out. The earnings are enough to cover household expenses, and some losses are manageable. I want to ensure a comfortable life for my wife and daughter. But it is not easy even after all these years and experience, just like it was not easy when I went to India to find work as a 13-year old. 🇳🇵

*Diaspora Diaries is a regular column in Nepali Times providing a platform to share experiences of living, working, studying abroad.*

*Authentic and original entries can be sent to editors@nepalitimes.com with Diaspora Diaries in the subject line.*

# Saving Dragonflies to save Pokhara

Along with a dragon boat race, Pokhara now needs to also protect its dragonflies

■ Durga Rana Magar in Kaski

Mahendra Singh Limbu was retracing his steps up the Mewa Khola in 2018 when he and fellow lepidopterist Karen Conniff saw what looked like a new species of dragonfly sunning itself on a leaf.

It was a female, but to ensure that it was indeed a new species they also had to find a male. So, they returned a few months later to the same spot with a scenic waterfall in the middle of a forest alive with songbirds and an orchestra of crickets.

They took separate tracks along the brook, minutely inspecting leaves and pools. Limbu spotted a dragonfly and quickly took a photo, and gestured to Conniff to come over. They both examined the distinctive stripes on the dragonfly's back: it was the same species, but more importantly, it was a male.

Conniff submitted her paper to the German scientific journal, *Odonatologica*, where after peer review it was published and the *Microgomphus phewataali* was officially recognised as a new dragonfly species endemic to Nepal.

Its scientific Latin name is derived from Pokhara's famous lake near where the dragonfly with the distinctive green and black patterns on its back was found. There are more than 5,000 species



Phewa Lake in Pokhara.

YUVARAJ SHRESTHA

of dragonflies and damselflies, of which 140 have been recorded in Nepal -- some of them found nowhere else in the world like *Microgomphus phewataali*.

Conniff has now returned to the United States, and Limbu continues to research butterflies, moths and dragonflies in Shivapuri, Phulchoki and other forests around Kathmandu Valley. He often comes to Pokhara to exchange notes with another butterfly expert, Colin Smith, who has made Nepal his home and is known by his friendly

nickname Putali Baje.

In his last trip to Pokhara, Limbu returned to Mewa Khola to see how the dragonfly habitat was surviving against the city's rapid urbanisation. What he found was worrisome.

"It was much dirtier than five years ago," Limbu said. "There was no water tumbling over boulders. The waterfall in the middle of the jungle had dried up."

The slope was a tangle of pipes extracting water from further upstream to supply houses and

lodges below, and Mewa Khola was dead.

He made a desperate and futile search, but not only could he not spot the *Microgomphus phewataali*, but there were very few other butterflies and dragonflies in the undergrowth.

In an interview with *Nepali Times* in 2018, Karen Conniff had already predicted: "The habitat of the dragonfly faces extreme stress from water overdraft for Pokhara's rapidly growing tourism centre. The habitat could vanish in a few years if



Mahendra Limbu with moth expert Toshio Haruta in Godavari in 19

people do not stop drawing water from there."

For Limbu, the elation over the discovery of their new species is now overshadowed by a sense of dread about what lies ahead for Nepal's endangered, and yet undiscovered, butterflies and dragonflies.

Much of the dragonfly's life cycle is spent underwater as larvae after hatching from eggs that are laid in clear still water near streams. Some larvae live for up to seven years underwater before



A female *Microgomphus phewataali*.

PHOTO: MAHENDRA SINGH LIMBU



i in 1992.

maturing into winged adults. They live only a few weeks during which time they fly around to mate and procreate.

In its brief life, the dragonfly eats mosquito eggs and larvae, but does not survive if there is no water, or if it is polluted. Researchers have also found that dragonflies found in Nepal migrate over unbelievable distances to and from Japan and Africa, riding prevailing winds.

“Dragonflies are indicator species,” explained Limbu. “If

you see fewer of them you know that the ecosystem is in danger.” Worldwide, insect populations have dropped drastically due to pesticide use, habitat destruction and the impact of the climate emergency.

Pokhara Valley is an example of how unmanaged urban expansion can harm delicate ecosystems. The city is now repeating all the mistakes that Kathmandu made with similar consequences. In fact, Pokhara has even more biodiversity than Kathmandu because of its higher annual rainfall and greater elevation range from tropical valleys to alpine meadows below Annapurna.

Pokhara’s numerous lakes, water bodies and wetlands also make it an ideal habitat for various insects, including dragonflies. Mewa Khola and its waterfall are flowing again after recent monsoon rains, but dragonflies need the stream to flow even in the dry season.

On his recent trip, while stepping carefully through the undergrowth Limbu could not stop himself from exclaiming excitedly: “Watson bush brown.” This was the new species he had discovered in Pokhara’s Banpale Danda in 2017, and he was happy to make its acquaintance again.

Besides the 140 species of dragonflies so far classified in Nepal, there are 660 species of butterflies and moths. Limbu worries that many more unknown species will be extinct even before

they can be classified because of the destruction of their fragile ecosystems.

Limbu has been interested in insects since his school days in Godavari, and pursued entomology during higher studies in the UK. In 1992, he worked with Japanese biologist Toshiro Haruta to collect Nepal’s moths and publish five books on the subject. Haruta was working on his next moth book, when he died in 1996.

After that Limbu worked with Colin Smith ‘पुतली बाजे’, and is working on a book on the butterflies of Nepal. Meanwhile, he still visits Phewa Tal in search of the elusive *Microgomphus phewataali*, but the trail is getting cold.

After a fruitless search last month, Limbu was sitting dejected on a boat to be ferried to the other side of the lake. Just then, a dragonfly fluttered by and sat on his companion’s shoulder. He told his friend not to move, and took out his camera to take a series of photos.

Immediately, he recognised the insect. It was none other than the *phewataali* that had flown over to say, “Looking for me?”

Limbu broke into a wide smile, feeling that all was not lost. But he is still worried about dry streams and unregulated destruction of the natural habitat surrounding Pokhara. In a voice trembling with relief and trepidation, he said: “There is not much time left.” 🇳🇵

# New banana republic

A wild banana species endemic to Nepal rediscovered after 200 years needs preservation

■ Kamal Maden

Two centuries after it was first classified by botanists, *Musa nepalensis* has been spotted again in the country that bears its Latin name.

Ram Prasad Ghimire, 54, from Pytar in Lalitpur took a closer look and said, “That’s ghyampe kera!” According to Ghimire, until a few decades ago the plant was widespread in the forest near his village. But it had declined sharply in recent years because of over harvesting for its purported therapeutic properties.

People in the village boil the middle portion of the pseudo stem, also known as the peduncle, and eat it to relieve stomach discomfort. Although the ripe fruit has little flavour, it is used to treat diarrhea. Similarly, leaf base latex is used for ear infections.

There were a dozen of these banana plants growing in Godavari. According to Gaurav Parmar of the National Botanical Garden, the banana blooms once in three years, and when the fruit is fully ripe, the plant dies.

The fruit bunch is compact unlike in domesticated banana. Birds and animals consume the fruit and spread its seeds to germinate. The pseudo stem is nearly one metre tall but its fringed leaves can reach a length of two metres.

*Musa nepalensis* was first described by Nathaniel Wallich in 1820 during his expedition from Amlekhganj to Thankot on the old foot trail to Kathmandu from the plains. During the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Danish surgeon served as superintendent of the Royal Botanical Garden of Calcutta, which had 142 genera and almost 8,000 plant species. He also traveled to Kathmandu Valley in 1820-21 in search of botanical specimens.

In Kathmandu, Wallich gathered wild banana samples and sketched them, identifying them as a brand-new species in 1824. The *nepalensis* in the name signified that the plant was endemic to Nepal.

But after that one observation, no one else had ever seen the wild banana, prompting many to believe that Wallich’s observations of the specimen and its drawings were mistaken.



Ensete nepalense

KAMAL MADEN

*Ensete glaucum*, a species of banana from Southeast Asia, was discovered in 1948 and its morphological make was more or less comparable to *Musa nepalensis*. Between 1963 and 1977, a Japanese plant exploration team found *Ensete glaucum* in east Nepal and assumed that the Wallich collection from Nepal was that plant and not *Musa nepalensis*.

A year later a book with a checklist of Nepali plants was published which also stated that the banana Wallich had gathered is today known as *Ensete glaucum*. In 1862, the genus *Ensete* was separated from *Musa*.

The rediscovery of the wild banana species was made by a team consisting of Gaurav Parmar, Dipak Lamichhane, Hem Raj Paudel and Anna Trias-Blasi. They found Wallich’s description of *Musa nepalensis* and the specimens from Godavari locality to be identical.

Throughout Wallich’s working period, there was only the *Musa* genus. Monocarpic pseudo stem bananas are now included in the genus *Ensete*. Multiple pseudo stems in the *Musa* genus develop from a single underground true stem.

The seeds of *Ensete nepalensis* are spread by birds and mammals. They thrive on rocky moist, somewhat open areas and have a higher rate of germination in natural condition. When freely sown, some 60% germinate.

Grazing is one of the biggest threats to the conservation of wild banana plants. Cattle love feeding on the plant’s leaves and branches. Humans also unintentionally harm the plant when they fall down because of its peduncle. The plant also has ornamental purposes.

For many ethnic communities in India, *Ensete glaucum* is an important herb used to treat a variety of illnesses. Flower juice has reportedly been used to treat dysentery and excessive bleeding in young girls during menstruation. Very young inflorescence is used locally in a variety of tribal recipes, and youngsters play traditional games with its seeds.

More exploratory investigation should be conducted for this species, research its medicinal properties, and community forestry user groups should be made aware of a species named after Nepal. 🇳🇵

Kamal Maden is a botanist and biodiversity researcher.

EVENTS



**Amalgam**  
At ‘Amalgam’, experience a fusion of artwork from established and emerging artists showcasing the vibrancy of contemporary Valley art.  
*Until 27 August, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Babarmahal Revisited*

**Poetry Evening**  
Be part of an evening of poetry and theatre this weekend at Shilpee. Also featuring live music topped with a Happy Hour at Cafe Shilpee.  
*11 August, 6pm-8pm, Shilpee Theatre*



**Kathak Bhela**  
Discover ‘Stories with Bharatnatyam at Nriya Aagan’s Kathak Bhela, and explore the history, techniques, and tales of the dance form with Yubraj Gurung.  
*11 August, 5pm-6pm, Rs500, Gyanmandala, Jhamsikhel*

**Prakriti**  
Embark on an artistic odyssey at ‘Prakriti-where the gods reside’, an exhibition showcasing unseen paintings, abstract art, and captivating digital animations.  
*7-21 August, 12pm-6pm, Kupondole*



**Le Sherpa Market**  
Support small and local businesses. Shop for fresh and organic vegetables, fruit, cheese, bread, meat products, honey, and much more at Le Sherpa farmers market.  
*Saturdays, 7:30am-12:30pm, Le Sherpa Maharajgunj*

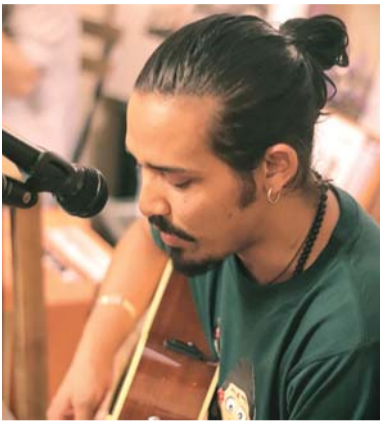
DINING



**Imago Dei**  
Imago Dei’s menu includes comfort foods, specialty course meals, and authentic British bakes including the signature Imago cheesecake – all in a dog-friendly setting.  
*Do Cha Marg, Pani Pokhari*

MUSIC

**Taylor Swift Night**  
Get out for the weekend and Shake It Off at Taylor Swift night – fit for die-hard Swifties and fans of music alike.  
*11th August, 9pm onwards, Rs500-1000, Treasure Lounge, Pokhara*



**Spanish & Latin Tunes**  
Grab some drinks, feel the rhythm and heat up this Friday night with sultry Spanish and Latin tunes.  
*11 August, 7pm onwards, Pauline’s Rooftop, Lazimpat*



**Anuprastha**  
Get ready for Folk Rock night with Anuprastha, with an additional live act by Aawartan.  
*11 August, 7pm onwards, Club Fahrenheit, Lazimpat*



**Pulchok Music Fest**  
The Pulchowk Music Fest 2023 by the college’s music club is set to be an unforgettable experience. Mark your calendars.  
*18 August, 1pm onwards, Pulchok Campus*

**Saturday Melancholia**  
Embrace the soulful vibes of Saturday Melancholia with Karma Sherpa and Nischal Gurung for an evening of music and memories.  
*12 August, 8pm onwards, Rs300-500, Beers N’ Cheers, Jhamsikhel*



**Wunjala Moskva**  
Although Russian and Newari dishes being served together might sound peculiar to some, those who have tried it know that it works surprisingly well. Try the Russian Piroshki and the Newari Nyakhuna Wunjala Moskva, and get some new dining experience.  
*Naxal (01) 4415236*

**Overeasy**  
Enjoy fluffy pancakes, refreshing smoothie bowls and healthy Buddha Bowls in the minimalist setting of this all-day breakfast place.  
*Bansbari, 9803011679*

About Town

GETAWAY



**Jal Mahal**  
Hotel Jal Mahal lives up to its name, boasting three large swimming pools in its sprawling property. A dip in one of the pools is a must to ward off the summer heat.  
*Gharipatan, Pokhara, 9851054404*

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



**Hotel Country Villa**  
From the top of Nagarkot Hill, the hotel provides spectacular views of sunrise and sunset. A natural and relaxing retreat for those wishing to escape the pandemonium of the city.  
*Nagarkot, 9851192106/ (01) 4700305*

**Grand Norling**  
Take a trip to the outskirts of Kathmandu to the scenic nature of Gokarna. A stay at the Grand Norling, with its spacious bedrooms, eclectic huts, golf course and garden, will leave one feeling rejuvenated.  
*Gokarna (01) 4910193*



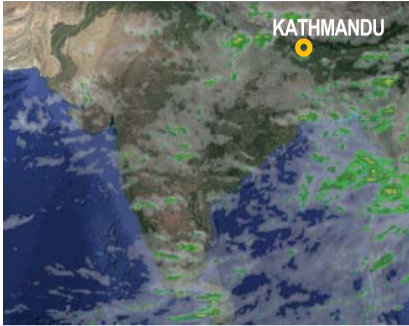
**Buddha Maya Garden Hotel**  
Wake up to the sounds of birds in the mornings and relax in the beautiful garden. A major bonus: the Maya Devi Temple is within walking distance from the hotel.  
*Lumbini, 9801033114/ (71) 580219*

**Hankook Sarang**  
Taste the best of Korea and discover the taste of expertly prepared dishes. Also try various Banchan (Korean side-dishes) with Korean BBQ.  
*Tangal, Naxal (01) 4421711*



**Ventures Café**  
Stop by for the best fusion menu and local favourites, and enjoy the breezy outdoor seating perfect for summer. A great venue for beer connoisseurs.  
*Thirbam Sadak, Baluwatar, 9851228014*

WEEKEND WEATHER



FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY
28° 21°	27° 21°	25° 20°	25° 19°	27° 19°

**Heavy downpours**  
Kathmandu Valley must brace itself for more heavy downpours this weekend, with risk of flooding along the Bagmati and its tributaries. The top soil is already saturated, increasing surface runoff and danger of landslides. Sunday will have the heaviest rain, with 100mm forecast in 24 hours -- more intense than the rain that led to flooding on Tuesday. There will be a slight let off midweek, but this monsoon is not done yet.

OUR PICK

In this 2002 British science fiction horror, Clilian Murphy’s Jim is a bicycle courier who wakes up from a coma in an abandoned hospital in a deserted city as he finds out later. Searching for any semblance of life, he comes across a church inhabited by zombies. It turns out an accidental release of a highly contagious, aggression-inducing virus has caused the breakdown of society. As a handful of survivors try to find sanctuary, they realise that they are fighting much more than the mysterious, incurable virus. A cult classic considered a pioneer of post-apocalyptic zombie movies as well as credited for a resurgence of the genre, 28 Days Later is a Danny Boyle directorial.



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

■ Shrijan Pandey in Rishikesh

As the most populous country in the world, India's democracy is tangled up in politics, religion, and the economy ahead of next year's elections.

India's mainstream media has equated Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) with prosperity, and a majority of the public in north India seems to buy that line.

Indeed, India's GDP has grown by 6.3% over the past nine years since Modi took office, its annual economic growth rate is the envy of the world. But the Modi government is also accused of strategically promoting crony capitalism, systematically tolerating attacks on minorities, and controlling the mass media.

All this is already beginning to have a profound impact on Nepal's own polity, with parties espousing Modi-style Hindutva becoming more vocal, their call for restoring the Hindu state sitting uneasily with the demands to also bring back the monarchy.

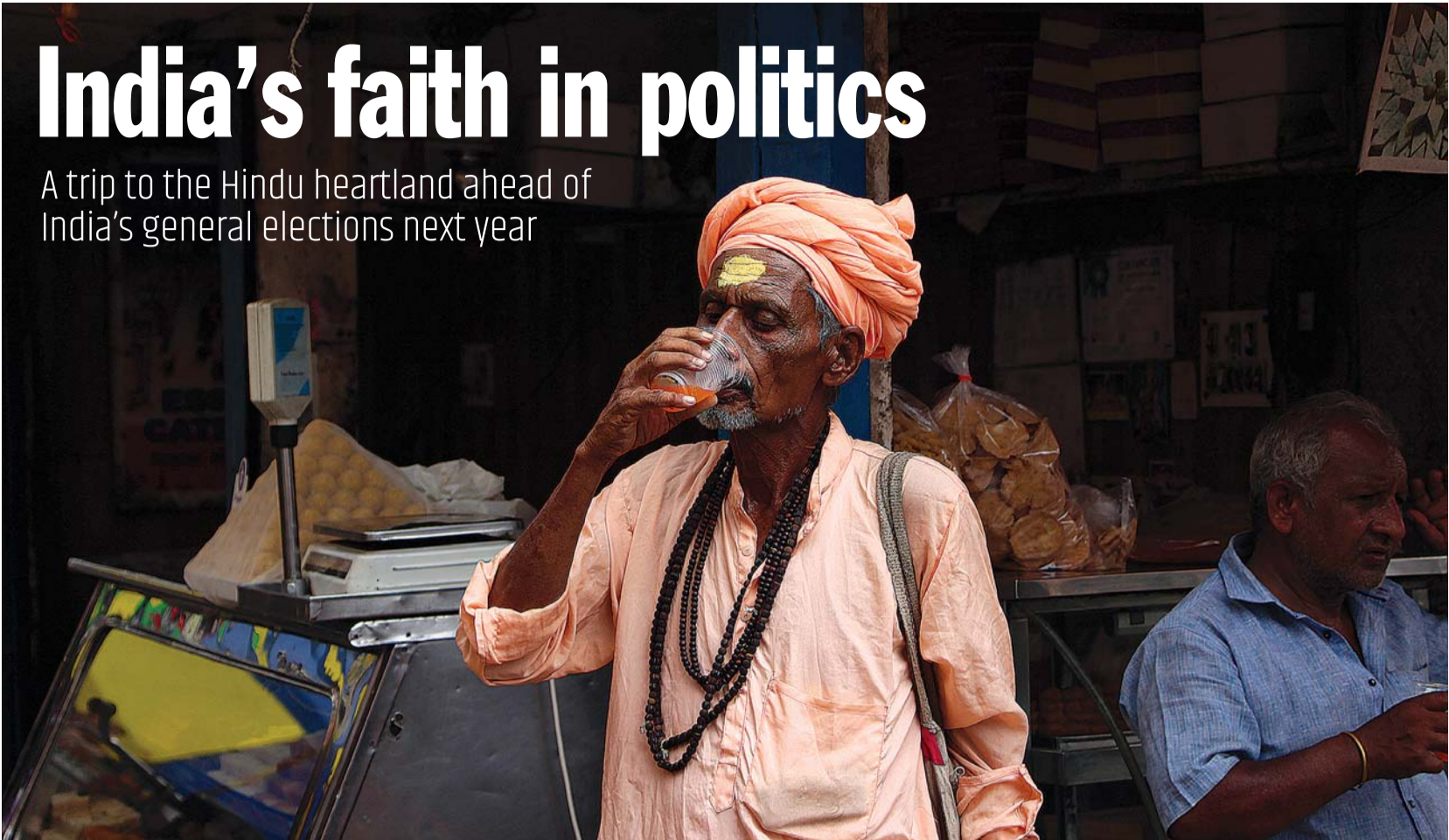
This trip by a Nepali journalist across the stronghold of the Modi government ahead of the 2024 general election and coinciding with the Kanvar Yatra revealed both faith-driven politics as well as deep misgivings about India straying from its secular path.

The Himalayan state of Uttarakhand was busy with the annual Bol Bom pilgrimage with hundreds of thousands of pilgrims walking to the source of the Ganga to collect its holy water for their own local Shiva shrines.

Along a stretch of highway, devotees wore t-shirts emblazoned with the symbol Om as they ordered meals at a dhawa eatery. Their motorcycles were festooned in saffron flags with images of Hanuman. Unsurprisingly, they were vocal in their support for the Hindu nationalist BJP, their religious devotion having translated into political preference to strongly identify with Hindutva.

"India should be a Hindu country, and protect its religion and culture. After all, there are one too many Christian and Muslim nations in the world," said one young pilgrim.

At a tea shop in Rishikesh, devotees praised Narendra Modi and Uttar Pradesh Chief



SHRIJAN PANDEY

Minister Yogi Adityanath for their commitment to promoting Hindutva.

"India has become a better place with Modi cracking down on crime and corruption," affirmed one devotee in saffron attire.

A group at a table lectured a visiting Nepali about how India needed a strongman with the "correct" ideology that asserted India's greatness on the world stage. They credited Modi for giving India international recognition and respect it did not have before.

The highways to Rishikesh were ablaze in saffron banners and posters of Modi and Yogi Adityanath on walls of highway bridges and the backs of buses. The roads were packed with convoys of trucks with loudspeakers belting out devotional music to which the pilgrims danced.

In between, there were also songs exhorting people to vote for the BJP in next year's elections. The BJP has tried to brand itself as the protector of Hinduism, facilitating, amplifying and even radicalising their beliefs.

Bol Bom pilgrims looked visibly uncomfortable when asked about the attacks on Muslims across Northern India. Most dismissed the question entirely, with some suspicious about that line of questioning.

We also tried to gauge the political pulse of the general public away from the religious processions. What did India's Dalits and Muslims think of Modi and his saffronification of politics?

Even Indians who do not identify with Hindutva politics are Modi fans because they credit his two terms since 2014 as being the reason for India's rapid economic growth. A businessman from Gurgaon who runs an export business in India and Nepal praised Modi's leadership for business expansion, providing better loan schemes for startups, and attracting foreign investment.

Even so, while Cyber City Gurgaon or Noida on the outskirts of New Delhi offer glimpses of prosperity, the rural reality for much of the population is a different story.

"I feel cheated, Modi did not deliver on his promises," said a bookstore owner in Delhi, explaining that an increase in GDP didn't necessarily translate into higher living standards for many.

Along the pavement near Delhi's railway station are rows and



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

rows of homeless. Unemployment is still high, and young men inject themselves with drugs in the shadows of underpasses of the capital and ghettos near Jame Masjid.

The world's largest democracy may have elected this Prime Minister, but his party has used populism, fear-mongering and censorship to consolidate its support. But no one dares speak out for fear of retribution.

"If you point a finger against Modi, they will raid your home," said the bookstore owner in a hushed tone. He voted for Modi's BJP in 2014 and 2019, but says he is unlikely to do so in 2024.

Media critics like journalist Ravish Kumar face constant harassment and death threats from government supporters. Adani Group buying out NDTV is viewed as a further move against the last remaining democratic voices.

"No media channel is critical of the government," said another interlocutor. It is an indication of the pervasive paranoia that none of the critics of the BJP wanted their name used. "The media is used for hate speech against minorities, to distract attention from the real problems, and to glorify India's Hindu past and its future."

One has to turn to social media to find out the truth about lynchings, bulldozing of Muslim neighbourhoods or attacks on holy sites. The mainstream media either does not mention those attacks, or provides a distorted account.

It is easy to be impressed with India's dramatic investment in infrastructure, the gleaming towers in its cities and the traffic jams on its roads. India might have taken a step forward in economic growth, but its democracy has taken two steps back. 🇮🇳

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# Recruitment of Nepalis into

Agnipath scheme would no longer make it attractive for Gorkha soldiers to join the Indian military

■ **Jibraj Chalise** in Butwal and **Durga Rana Magar** in Pokhara

This time of year last year, the phone at the headquarters of Salute Gorkha Training Centre in Pokhara was ringing off the hook. Callers wanted to know if recruitment of Nepali soldiers into the Indian Army had started.

This year, the phone has not rung at all. The office is quiet.

Many young men from the mountains who had spent more than six months in training in Pokhara to be recruited as an Indian Gorkha soldier have given up. They are now trying their luck to find jobs in the Gulf.

Even so, whenever retired Butwal-based Indian Army soldier Laxman Shrestha gets calls from his village in southeastern Gulmi, the most frequently asked question is: “Dai, has the recruitment process begun?”

Shrestha retired four years ago after having served for more than 17 years in the Indian Army’s Gorkha Rifles, and currently operates a business in Butwal.

He also supports young people from his home village in the mountains who want to follow his footsteps. But with the uncertainty about India’s military reform plan called Agnipath, he is not able to give them a clear answer.

The Indian Army suspended Gorkha recruitment for two

years from 2020 to 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. But even afterwards, there are new conditions for applicants.

Introduced last July, Agnipath only allows recruits aged 17.5 to 23 years old to be hired as soldiers for four-year periods, after which they will be discharged with a lump sum of Rs1.8 million, but will not be eligible for a lifetime pension. Only 25% of trained soldiers will be offered a 15-year extension after the initial four years.

Recruitment did start in Butwal and Dharan, but the selection process was halted soon after by the Sher Bahadur Deuba-led government, saying that Nepal needed further study into the scheme.

The decision was a blow to young Nepalis who wanted to be selected to the Indian Army. Some 306 applicants from the mountains of central Nepal had already enrolled at Salute Gorkha Training Institute in Butwal. Most are now trying to get an overseas job, and some want to try for the British Army. There are currently 4,100 Nepali Gurkha soldiers in the British Army, and 205 were selected this year from about 25,000 applicants, despite a long-running dispute over pensions. The British Army also recruits Nepalis on behalf of the Singapore, Oman and Brunei security forces.

“The selection for the Indian army is easier than the British Army and the Singapore police. That is why many trainees who

enrol in our institute tend to try for the Indian military,” explains Lokesh Thapa, director of Salute Gorkha Training Institute who has been training aspiring recruits for 13 years. “But with the future uncertain, we cannot enrol a new batch.”

Trainees pay fees up to Rs80,000 each at the institute’s branches in Butwal, Kathmandu, Lalitpur, Dang, Chitwan, and Dharan, and it is among 30 other similar centres.

“The fees they have paid has gone to waste,” says retired Indian Army Junior Commissioned Officer Kul Bahadur KC. “They have nowhere to go and no one who can answer their questions.”

In February, India’s Foreign Secretary Vinay Mohan Kwatra paid an official visit to Nepal to discuss Agnipath among other things, but no outcome was made public. Former Indian Army Captain Chok Bahadur Gurung has made up his mind about what it means: “Agnipath has shown that India is ignoring the Nepali government.”

Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal said he raised the Agnipath issue with Narendra Modi when the two met in New Delhi in May, but there was no joint mention of it. Even retired Indian Army major general Ashok Mehta who has served in the Gorkha Brigades is outraged.

He told Nepal Times: “The existing recruitment system was overturned without notice



or consultation with a strategic Himalayan neighbour with whom India claims special relations. India-Nepal relations are like between daju and bhai, but this was not very big brotherly.”

A Tripartite Agreement in 1947 allowed the continued recruitment of Nepalis into the British and

Indian Armies, but Nepali fighters went over to the British side even before the end of the 1814-16 war with the East India Company following which Nepal signed the Sugauli Treaty.

By the end of World War II, there were 10 Gurkha regiments in the British Army, and six of them

## Love thy neighbours

Nepalis studying, working and living in India not part of migration discourse

■ **Shrijan Pandey** in New Delhi

When landslides struck a pilgrimage route to the Kedarnath shrine in the Indian Himalaya last week, 13 of the 19 people killed were Nepalis. All of them were migrant workers from Jumla in western Nepal.

Largely ignored in Nepal’s migration statistics are the estimated 4 million Nepalis who are studying, working and living in India. They are undocumented as Nepalis do not need visas or passports for India, just as Indians do not need those travel documents to travel to Nepal.

Nepal has an 1,808km open border with India to its east, south and west, and recorded migration between the two countries can be traced back to the Treaty of Sugauli between Nepal and The East India Company in 1816 which allowed the recruitment of Gurkha soldiers into the British Army.

But following Indian independence in 1947, while the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles became part of the British Army, the rest stayed with the new Indian Army. Even today, there are nearly 42,000 Nepali soldiers in the Indian Army.

A large portion of Nepalis making their way to Uttar Pradesh and other Indian cities are seasonal workers from historically neglected far western Nepal looking for jobs to augment family expenses.

For people in the remote mountains of Nepal or Tarai towns, India is much closer than faraway Kathmandu. Dehradun is only seven hours by bus from Mahendranagar while Kathmandu can take up to 17 hours.

“I work for 12 hours a day for 12,000 Indian rupees a month,” says a native of Mahendranagar who has been working in a dhawa roadside restaurant in Haridwar for the past 10 years. He initially went to Saudi Arabia but the recruiter robbed him of his salary, and he was forced to come back. When



SHRIJAN PANDEY

he couldn’t land a job in Nepal, he left for India.

He adds: “Going to India was a more convenient option than coming to Kathmandu. I don’t make much but I get to see my wife and son once every few months.”

Nepalis make it to India via five main transit points: Kakabhitta-Siliguri, Biratnagar-Jogbani, Bhairahawa-Sunauli, Nepalgunj-Rupediya, and Dhangadhi-Gauriphanta. But there are no exact figures on the total number of Nepalis in India, only rough estimates.

The Asian Centre for Human Rights says that some 350,000 to 400,000 Nepalis were internally displaced from their villages during the Maoist conflict, and many more crossed

over to India to escape the violence. Many never returned.

While increasingly many Nepalis are making it big in the IT and management sectors in India, many more are still security guards and domestic workers. As unskilled workers, most earn only a little more than they would in Nepal.

Even so, according to the Nepal Labor Migration Report 2022, Nepal received Rs43.16 billion in remittances from India, just behind the top contributor Qatar. Even that could be a gross undercount since much more money comes in through informal channels.

There are also Nepalis who have lived in India with their family for years. “My parents came here long ago and are now settled here,”

says a 20-year-old Nepali worker in a restaurant in Srinagar. There were many others like him in Dehradun, Mussoorie, and Delhi with their families who first came looking for a job but are now settled in India.

Many lodges and restaurants in Delhi are run by Nepali migrants. “I sold my camera to come to Delhi for work,” says a 21-year-old working in Krishna Rooftop Cafe in Pahadganj. The staff is all Nepali and the whole establishment was buzzing with dohori folk songs.

Labour migration to the Gulf and Malaysia is rife with stories of exploitation and abuse. Things are as bad if not worse in India, with a near absence of safety mechanisms and legislation to protect the workers.

Since Nepalis in India are largely undocumented, most cases go unreported, are un-surveilled and out of social policy. This poses an additional security risk for those involved in unregulated sectors such as sex trade and domestic work.

The National Human Rights Commission in 2019 estimated that 1.5 million Nepalis are vulnerable to human trafficking. The traffickers often target young girls from financially weak families belonging to marginalised communities. The open border between Nepal and India and lack of documentation make it virtually impossible to track these instances of crime.

Growing intolerance of minorities in recent years means Nepalis also sometimes face hostility.

In an era of right-wing nationalism, Nepali migrants can also face the heat. In fact, even Indians of Nepali descent were treated with much scrutiny when the dispute over much-contested Kalapani-Limpiyadhura territories broke out between Nepal and India in 2019. 🇳🇵

# Indian Army paused



PRESS INFORMATION BUREAU INDIA

**THE WAY FORWARD:** The 39 Gorkha Regiment marching contingent passes through the Rajpath during the 62<sup>nd</sup> Republic Day Parade-2011, in New Delhi on January 26 2011.

anyone want to go off and fight for somebody else's land?"

Sushant Singh, who served in the Indian Army for 20 years and is now the consulting editor of Caravan magazine in New Delhi, said in a recent podcast that a scheme like Agnipath erases the self-identity of retired soldiers.

"Until now, those who joined the army served for 17 years, and left with experience and honour afforded by the training and the pension received," Singh recently said on a podcast. "That honour makes all the difference between having been a soldier or a hired killer."

Nepal's former ambassador to India Deep Kumar Upadhyay says India employed "crude diplomacy" by failing to discuss Agnipath with Nepal before its implementation as it involves soldiers from Nepal.

"India should not have taken a unilateral decision on a recruitment process that does not justify terms set in the Tripartite Agreement," says Upadhyay. "India must reach out to Nepal's political leadership as well as ex-servicemen networks."

Maj Gen Ashok Mehta echoes this sentiment: "It is clear that India's handling was presumptuous, and the government has opted to make Nepal-Domiciled Gorkha (NDG) recruitment not as

were assigned to India and four to Britain after Indian independence. India has since added another Gorkha Regiment. (India refers to its Nepali soldiers as 'Gorkhas', while the British prefer 'Gurkhas'.)

Former soldier Mukta Prasad Shrestha from Gulmi served 21 years as an Indian Gorkha soldier

and still sees young people in his village training to do what he did as a young man. He agrees that the Agnipath scheme puts the livelihoods of Nepali soldiers at risk.

"Well-to-do people do not join the military, those who have the responsibility to take care of families do," says Shrestha. "Why else would

a foreign policy imperative but a domestic employment issue. Now, India and Nepal must begin talks on Agnipath urgently to save the Indian Gorkha Brigade and the vital Gorkha connection with Nepal."

The seven-point Tripartite Agreement ensures the rights of Nepali soldiers, including their salaries, pensions, financial compensation, as well as facilities for families. The fourth point of the agreement in particular stipulates that Gorkha soldiers should be allowed to serve for sufficient time to qualify for pension, a point former soldiers have said Agnipath goes against.

Retired Indian Army Captain Raj Bahadur Thapa says that the 1947 agreement is outdated and must be replaced by a new agreement with conditions that are in the best interests of Nepal's soldiers in foreign armies. "Otherwise, why send your young men to kill and die for a foreign land?" questions Thapa. A former serviceman who was with the Indian Army for over 20 years says Nepalis will not be included in the 25% who will be permanently retained by the military. "Nepali soldiers are always on a razor edge in the Indian military, they remember even our smallest mistakes," he says. "We will be the first ones to be sent back."

Nepali soldiers have other concerns about what young Nepali men with military training can do when they return to Nepal in four years when the money they saved runs out eventually.

Recruits within India seem to have similar qualms, and there have been protests there against the scheme after it was announced. Recruits from the first batch of 'Agniveer' had reportedly dropped out of training, and the Indian Army is said to be considering raising the permanent retention

quota from 25% to 50%, and the length of engagement from 4 years to 7 years.

The Modi government introduced Agnipath to reduce military expenditure and redirect the budget to modernisation of the armed forces. Critics in India itself have said that the scheme was introduced without any previous risk assessment or study into its impact on the Indian military structure. Bhakta Bahadur Bucha, who spent 22 years in the Indian Army, says Agnipath will push India's Gorkha regiments into crisis since they are the military's largest and most prestigious units. The seven Gorkha Rifles regiments have 46 battalions, 60% of whom are Nepali. Furthermore, there are 125,000 Indian Gorkha retirees who receive a pension.

Says Bucha, "India must not forget that its Gorkha units are on the frontlines in Kashmir, Pakistan, Ladakh, Arunachal and Bangladesh. And a four-year limit to military service will affect their morale and commitment. Soldiers will not be willing to fight wars if the job is temporary."

Ethics and nationalism aside, recruitment into the Indian Army is also in Nepal's economic interest. Nearly 18% of the country's population is working and living abroad because of the lack of meaningful jobs back home, and the interest of young people to join foreign militaries stem from this desperation.

Dhan Bahadur Thapa of the United Federation of Ex-Servicemen and Police Welfare who was once a Colonel in the Indian Army explains: "If recruitment into the Indian Army is stopped, it will have a direct impact on Nepal's economy, where jobs are already scarce. If recruitment is not resumed, ex-servicemen are prepared to take to the streets." 🇳🇵

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# Ex-guerrilla’s revolution in rural Nepal

Battle-hardened former Maoist fighter turns to entrepreneurship to change society

■ Bhadra Sharma in Rolpa

As a former company commander of the Maoist militia, Niraka Gharti Magar used to raid banks and government offices. But 18 years after the end of the conflict, she now has to work regularly with bankers and bureaucrats to expand her handicraft business.

Despite being good in studies, Niraka dropped out of school and joined the Maoists to undergo guerrilla training, and soon saw action attacking police posts, army bases and government installations across Nepal. She firmly believed in the cause, and the Maoist goal of establishing a ‘New Nepal’.

The supreme commander of Maoist guerrillas Pushpa Kamal Dahal is now Prime Minister for the third time in Kathmandu, and three decades after the start of the conflict, much has remained the same here in the rugged mountains of central Nepal.

Niraka has found that perhaps peacetime struggles are more difficult than waging revolution.

After the ceasefire in 2006, Niraka joined nearly 20,000 former guerrillas in UN-supervised demobilisation camps. The Maoists came down from the mountains to win elections. She could have been inducted into the national army, but stayed home to take care of her daughter and husband, also a former guerrilla who was wounded in battle.



It was too late to resume where she had left off with her education, and she returned to her husband’s ancestral village in Rukum, where she got involved with a community

forest users group. But she found it difficult to get a job because of the stigma of her Maoist past.

The family moved to Musikot of Rukum district for a fresh start in 2016, and Niraka enrolled to be trained as a weaver. Business grew, and soon she could not keep up with demand for handcrafted

woollen mats and blankets, cloth bags and garments, some of which are exported to Singapore and elsewhere.

Today, her Prem Dhaka Udyog

in Musikot is not just a successful business but also provides income to hundreds of women in the district which in turn empowers them with financial independence.

“It was just one training to be a weaver that opened the door for me,” Niraka says. “It changed my life, and look at where I am today.”

Niraka is not reluctant to share what she has learnt, and constantly trains and supports women who wish to learn handicraft skills. She often travels to surrounding districts to work with trainee weavers through her own cooperative.

Women previously confined to domestic chores are now more self-reliant, many of them joined the trade and are supporting each other by sharing resources and collaborating on products.

Weaving is a labour-intensive craft that demands patience and perseverance, a perfect fit for Niraka, who has honed those qualities through war and peace. She sees a weaver’s job as not just a means of livelihood for herself and others, but as an effective way to challenge societal norms and provide freedom to fellow women.

Niraka herself is modest about her achievements, crediting the resilience and inner strength of Nepali women: “In rural areas, women are often confined to cooking and household chores. They have proved that they can achieve much more.”

Niraka’s transformation from fighter to educator is a tale for the ages. Despite her tumultuous journey, it is a story that change is possible when determination meets opportunity and proof that empowerment does not always have to come out of a barrel of a gun.

Niraka has carved a niche for herself in the handicraft industry while also paving the way for other women to become self-reliant, and has become a respected member of her community.

She says: “Self-awareness is the first step, and with the government as guardian, we have shown we can provide confidence and support to Nepali women.” 🇳🇵

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