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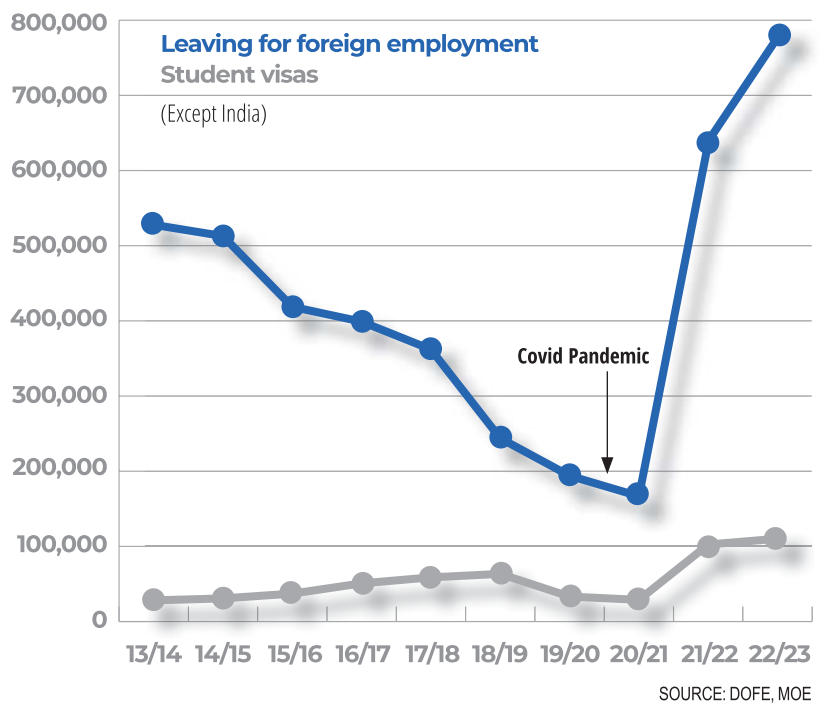
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NT ARCHIVE

PUSH FACTORS



Ramesh Kumar

Last year, 775,000 Nepalis left for employment abroad, and another 100,000 students flew out to study overseas. Nearly a million young Nepalis left in 2021-22, and that figure does not even include those who went to India.

This is the largest mass exodus of young Nepalis in the country's history. No country can sustain such a continued haemorrhage.

"The youth are not keen to stay at home, and their parents do not want them to stay here either," says sociologist Ganesh Gurung. "It seems as if the entire nation is on the move."

Last month, six young Nepalis from Rasuwa left their studies, jobs, and businesses to seek employment in Croatia. "With luck, I can get a PR (Permanent Residency) in some other European country, Croatia is

just a stepping stone," said Bhuvan Neupane, one of the six.

Elsewhere in Nuwakot's Bidur village, Binod Poudel is hoping to go abroad and has handed his passport to a foreign employment agent. "All my friends have left Nepal," he says. "What am I supposed to do here?"

Sociologist Dinesh Prasain notes that a lack of employment and meaningful earnings are the primary reasons for the young to leave. Basic items have become unaffordable even in fixed-income households.

But there are other push factors as well: peer pressure, falling living standards, and a growing hopelessness that the future will be worse because of corruption and political disarray. Even worsening air pollution in Kathmandu is pushing people to emigrate.

At end of the Maoist insurgency

in 2006, there was expectation that stability would yield a peace dividend. But Nepali politics remains in the stranglehold of tried, tested and failed leaders. Volatile and populist behaviour of new elected leaders has disappointed many young people, while some parties resort to religion and bigotry.

Young Nepalis enthusiastically voted for alternative candidates in the 2022 local and federal polls, but mayors Harka Sampang and Balen Shah have been more adept at posting

inflammatory comments on social media than actually delivering on election promises.

This week Shah made outright threats to burn down Singha Darbar because the car carrying his wife was stopped for speeding. The post got millions of shares and likes before he took it down. Many also

took the outburst as a sign that the Kathmandu mayor offers no real hope of reform.

A series of corruption scandals from fake refugees, the Baluwatar land scam, gold smuggling and politicians trying to protect each other by transferring police investigators has added to the public disillusionment.

"Nepali society has lost faith in politics and the leadership to make things better," explains sociologist Dinesh Prasain. "Nepali parents would rather their children go somewhere better, and youngsters do not want to remain on what they see as a sinking ship."

This movement is helping keep Nepal's economy afloat. Remittances contributed significantly to lowering Nepal's poverty rate to below 17%, but over the long-term, the cost of losing such a large proportion of working age population is incalculable.

Some 65% of Nepal's total population is in the 15-64 age group, and the country is losing its demographic advantage. Sociologist Dinesh Prasain calls the exit of young Nepalis a moral crisis: "It is a failure of the political leadership. A country without its youth has lost its soul."

Meanwhile, Nepal's politicians are just mouthing platitudes. Finance Minister Prakash Sharan Mahat last week urged young Nepalis to "change their mindset", even arguing that Nepali students should be barred from studying abroad.

Economist Pushkar Bajracharya says that there has to be a step-by-step strategy to create opportunities for Nepalis at home in order to prevent a brain and brawn drain: "If out-migration continues to grow at this pace, we are not only looking at a socio-economic crisis but also a threat to our sovereignty." 🇳🇵



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Cleaner air, longer lives

Last week, a report on Air Quality Life Index (AQLI) issued by the Energy Policy Institute of the University of Chicago revealed the shocking fact that particulate pollution in the air is reducing life expectancy by up to four years in Kathmandu Valley and 6.5 years in the Tarai.

But more shocking than that is the lack of political will to reduce air pollution. Politicians who do not act on increasing their own life spans cannot be expected to tackle Nepal's other development problems.

Air quality in Kathmandu this week is the healthiest it will be this year before the onset of winter when thick toxic pollution makes the air unbreathable. This is the biggest public health crisis of our times, killing more people than smoking, alcohol, diabetes, malaria, road traffic accidents (see page 10-11), natural disasters and other causes.



SUMAN NEPALI

The main domestic polluters are well known: vehicular emissions, garbage burning and soot particles from brick kilns. Trans-border pollution from India contributes to the bad air, especially along the Tarai.

This week the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) issued a report directly linking climate change-induced heat waves to wildfires which in turn increased air pollution risk around the world. Wildfires and crop residue burning in India have been blamed for most of the pollution between November-April in northern India and Nepal.

Dirty air has become severe enough to be a factor in the outmigration of young Nepalis who seem to be literally fleeing for their lives (page 1).

We know what the problem is, we have the solutions. What we do not have is the political will to implement them.

Electrification of urban public transport and two-wheelers will clean the air, it will reduce Nepal's trade deficit since petroleum makes up 23% of Nepal's imports, higher than all exports combined. Reducing diesel and petrol use by just 10% will save the country Rs30 billion a year. This means investing in transmission lines on a war footing to ease distribution of surplus electricity.

At the Nepal International EV Expo in Kathmandu last week, private sector investors, researchers and energy planners

discussed how best to promote electric vehicles in Nepal. There was a resounding conclusion: focus first on the two-wheeler market.

Motorcycles and scooters make up 79% of all registered vehicles in Nepal. Kathmandu Valley alone has over 1.2 million of them. In contrast, local distributors imported only 1,500 battery operated two-wheelers last year but better financing options would increase sales of battery-operated scooters.

Electric city buses would not just reduce diesel imports, but also improve air quality with their zero emission and displace private vehicles. But battery-powered buses are five times more expensive and need government subsidy.

Nepal's new Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) Implementation Plan has provisions to promote clean energy, including allocating 25% of the pollution tax to expand electric vehicles in Nepal.

At local levels, wards and municipalities must get to work immediately to discourage open burning before winter sets in. Public awareness, strict punitive measures, and better solid waste management have to all go together.

Lalitpur has already taken the step to allow residents to formally file a complaint of neighbours and institutions burning garbage via its app LMC City Police. The sub-metropolis has also set up an Environmental Police Unit.

Likewise, Kirtipur and Chandragiri are planning to enforce vehicle emission tests in their jurisdictions to control air pollution. Indeed, if breath analyser tests can reduce drunk-driving cases by 80% in Kathmandu, why can vehicle emission checks not be enforced?

Ghorahi municipality in Dang has started to turn trash including kitchen waste, farm residue and livestock dung into methane gas for cooking. They also reuse and recycle what they can and only a small portion is disposed of at a landfill site. This reduces LPG use and open garbage burning, improving air quality.

These local governments are leaps and bounds ahead of Kathmandu Metropolitan City where Mayor Balen Shah is more busy uploading incendiary posts on social media than fulfilling his electoral promise of reducing air pollution and garbage.

We cannot wait for winter to set another record for the worst air quality, or for Kathmandu's hospitals to be overwhelmed by patients with pneumonia, asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases.

Proactive action by local and federal governments can reduce air pollution. Other cities have done it, we can too. If politicians wait too long, they may not be alive to solve the problem.

Air pollution is reducing the lifespan of Nepalis, and we know how to clean it up.

ONLINE PACKAGES



ANALOGUE PHOTOGRAPHY

Before photos went digital, there were film reels, darkrooms and prints — technology that had not changed since photography was first invented 150 years ago. But analogue photography is staging something of a comeback worldwide, and there are aficionados in Nepal also trying to keep the technique alive. Watch the video and follow the Nepali Times YouTube channel for more original multimedia content.



LIVES ON THE LINE

Road fatalities are Nepal's other pandemic. More people die on Nepal's highways every year than in all natural disasters combined. Most of the accidents are preventable, and the causes are mainly poor road conditions and reckless driving. Watch this sobering video online and read the story on page 10-11.

NURSES IN NEPAL

Nursing in Nepal, a place where you sometimes are forced to ask family and friends for blood donations when you give birth ('Saving one Nepali other at a time', Naresh Newar, #1177).

Maria Vesterlund

GEOPOLITICS

Total disregard for nature will prove costly for our future generations ('India, Nepal ignore climate crisis in river talks', Ramesh Bhushal, #1176). There is enough in this earth for human need but not for human greed. While we build dams, airports, highways and smart cities, let us try to protect our environment.

Prabir Rana

■ It doesn't matter how big or small the neighbours are ('A survival strategy for Nepal', Kunda Dixit, nepalitimes.com). Nepal's survival rests on voters electing honest, capable politicians and the country's ability to stop the mass exodus of youth.

Krishna Joshi

VULTURE CONSERVATION

The decline in some species was catastrophic as the article points out - some of the most severe population declines of any species, and fairly unique in being attributed to an almost singular cause ('Nepal is a model for vulture conservation', Karun Dewan, nepalitimes.com). I like how the article also highlights the ecosystem services value of vultures and the contribution they make to carcass removal. We forget as a society how many valuable services nature provides for free. Pollination is the other classic example.

Hadden Turner

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Hindutva neo-fascism is spreading like a virus in Nepal and the 'communists' are doing very little to stop it ('Faith in tolerance', Editorial #1177).

Aleksandr Verkovsyn

TOXIC AIR

Sadly, nothing has been done for decades and little to nothing will be done in the future ('Epicentre of pollution', Sonia Awale, #1177).

Roger Ray

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING

Tsherin Sherpa returns home

by Aayusha Pokharel
At the centre of the resurgence in Nepal's art scene is Tsherin Sherpa, the internationally renowned artist known for his distinctive fusion of traditional and contemporary. Sherpa has now returned to Nepal to open Takpa, Kathmandu's newest art gallery. Read the profile and watch the video on our YouTube channel.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

Epicentre of pollution

by Sonia Awale
Nepalis will soon be exposed to the season of lethal air pollution, but the government has done precious little to protect them. Air pollution kills more people than just about every calamity afflicting Nepalis, cutting 4.6 years off the average Nepali's lifespan. Visit nepalitimes.com for the analysis.

Most popular on Twitter



Saving one Nepali mother at a time

by Naresh Newar
Anju Chaudhary leads a team of nurses who are on duty for 24 hours a day, seven days a week, caring for patients at the government hospital in Katari in eastern Nepal. Chaudhary has helped deliver over 1,000 babies and prevented the deaths of many mothers and newborns. Full story on our website.

Most commented

Faith in tolerance

Editorial
With the end of ideology in Nepali politics and winds of intolerance blowing from the South, politicians are falling back on populism and bigotry. But Nepal's ethnic, cultural, and religious mosaic is our strength. Diversity is the basis of our national unity. Freedom of religion also means respecting the faith of others. Join the discussion online.

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Even after the provinces were carved out in 2015 to devolve decision-making, families on the margins in Nepal still do not count. They are not powerless, they were never given any power. They are not voiceless, they are not allowed a voice.

Mark Pickett @DrMarkPickett
Important article giving voice to the voiceless.

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Over the generations, most people in the village of Mulpani have moved out. They have retired from foreign military service and live in Pokhara, Hong Kong or London. Younger people work in the Gulf. Amrit Gurung has done the opposite. He has come home.

avecNava @avecNava
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PRESIDENT'S OFFICE

FAIR PLAY:

President Ram Chandra Paudel discussing the intricacies of cricket with his wife, Sabita Paudel while watching a live broadcast of the Nepali team playing Pakistan on 30 August in Multan. Pakistan won by 238 runs, and Nepal later lost to India in Sri Lanka.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Back to war

Just a week after Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' declared the end of the ceasefire on 27 August 2003, 80 Nepalis had been killed. Maoist brutality was back but it had also intensified. It would take a few more years before peace finally prevailed in 2006 and a couple of thousands more Nepali lives.

But peace didn't mean prosperity or stability. Nepal is perhaps more divided and polarised than ever, and much of the blame lies on its failed political leadership of which the Maoists are a part.

Excerpts of the report published 20 years ago this week on issue #161 5-11 September 2003:

Sub-inspector Kuseswor Morbaita and constable Manoj Bhujel could no longer fight the Maoists who had surrounded their police station at Lahan on Monday. Hoping they would not get killed if they surrendered, the two laid down their weapons. The group of 15 young Maoists shot them dead anyway, while their hands were still up. According to a field report by the human rights organisation, INSEC, about 300 Maoists attacked the police station on 1 September and the battle raged for two hours.

Four survivors, constables Prahlad Chaudhari, Bishnu Kumar Shah, Dil Bahadur Basnet and Gyan Bahadur Shrestha



managed to escape and are now at Lahan hospital. "If we had more modern weapons and a larger force, we could have saved the others," one of them says, his voice curiously devoid of a thirst for victory.

On the same day, soldier Bishnu Bahadur

Thapa Magar, who had gone home on leave to Fujung in Tanahu to meet his family, was sleeping when Maoists dragged him out of the house in the middle of the night. His family heard gunshots, and later they found his bullet-riddled body

In rural Nepal, the fear has returned. Innocents are dying again, like 20-year-old Bir Bahadur Chaudhari of Rampur in Kailali who was blindfolded and taken to a nearby jungle by a squad of Maoists on 29 August. He was brutally beaten and left for dead. At Lafagaun in Udaypur, Maoists abducted Jit Bahadur Basnet on 27 August and killed him, after they hacked off his arms and legs.

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





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Who's WHO?

Nepali and Bangladeshi candidates vie for regional UN post, pitting experience vs expedience



Shambu Prasad Acharya



Saima Wazed

■ Aayusha Pokharel

The World Health Organisation (WHO) will be nominating its South East Asia Regional Office (SEARO) Director at its 76th session starting 30 October in New Delhi.

Nepal's candidate Shambu Prasad Acharya has emerged as a clear favourite among international public health practitioners. But vying for the same position is Saima Wazed, a psychologist and the daughter of Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Many see this as a contest between a professional with decades of experience in health against a political appointee.

The global health community is keeping a close watch, especially given that the region has a high disease burden and is a hotspot for both new and emerging infections as well as chronic illnesses.

Former UN Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF Kul Chandra Gautam believes Acharya is the more qualified candidate, and not just because he is a fellow-Nepali.

"The most important qualities for an incoming WHO regional director are a strong background in public health, a deep understanding of global and regional health challenges with the ability to prioritise

them," Gautam told Nepali Times.

"Sambhu Acharya has a strong track record and high credibility in dealings with global health leaders, academics, funding agencies, and national decision-makers, a proven ability to advocate for health as a key component of sustainable development, and a good understanding of WHO's strengths and weaknesses," he added.

Acharya has a PhD in public health and has over three decades of experience in Nepal, Bangladesh, and other countries. He was instrumental in developing health systems at the local, national, and regional levels in maternity and child health, family planning, population, infectious and non-communicable diseases.

He also led World Bank-funded health and population programmes in Bangladesh and helped establish the WHO Asia-Pacific Health Economics Network.

"For a region that has a quarter of the global population, selecting the right candidate is imperative, and Dr Acharya is the best candidate for the position," says Bishow Parajuli, a former UN Resident Coordinator as well as UNDP and WFP representative in many countries.

Acharya himself told us that if elected, his top priority would be to improve health and well-being approaches by guiding countries toward a fundamental shift in health promotion, disease and

injury prevention, and planetary health, by addressing their root causes.

"This region is home to 45% of all TB cases, but my priorities also include non-communicable diseases like diabetes and cancer," he said, adding that he would also bolster real-time surveillance and mobilising new resources for the development of diagnostics, drugs, and vaccines, while combating antimicrobial resistance.

Acharya was born to a farming family in rural western Nepal where he saw first hand the lack of basic health and essential services. Even as a boy, he had made up his mind to someday improve healthcare at the national, regional, and global levels.

Acharya is committed to accelerating universal health coverage with strong, inclusive primary health care by innovating and digitising the system for equity and solidarity in the region. He also wants to enhance education so that diseases can be mitigated or prevented altogether.

On the other hand, Wazed's educational background is in mental health. Since 2019, she has been an adviser to WHO's director general intuit field. She is a Canadian citizen, and has worked as a school psychologist in Florida.

"She is undoubtedly a bright, articulate, and versatile personality," says Gautam. "However, her qualifications are somewhat limited when it comes to serving as a public

health leader of global or regional stature."

In the lead-up to the 153rd Executive Board meeting that follows the 76th World Health Assembly, 53 public health experts from around the world have issued a statement demanding more transparency and scrutiny regarding regional director elections.

'Considering the challenges faced by WHO and the need for effective health multilateralism, regional office leaders have a critical task of persuading national political leaders to prioritise public health evidence and resolve differences at regional levels,' the statement says. 'To fulfil this role effectively, Regional Directors must possess the necessary technical and managerial competencies and exhibit political astuteness in navigating health diplomacy.'

Parajuli, who has also served the UN in Dhaka, says Wazed's candidacy has also disadvantaged other qualified candidates from Bangladesh. He fears that experience may be overshadowed by politics.

Nepal's international lobbying effort will be important for Acharya's candidacy. Candidates for WHO elections are proposed by member states and then nominated by the Executive Board. The World Health Assembly then votes by secret ballot to elect the Director-General. Says Parajuli: "Member states must select qualified candidates capable of delivering results. This should be the guiding principle." 🇳🇵



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Post-quake rebuilding

Indian Ambassador Naveen Srivastava and Lalitpur Mayor Chiri Babu Maharjan inaugurated the new building of the Napichandra Mahavihar. The Rs 30.5 million grant is part of the Indian government's post-earthquake reconstruction scheme to preserve 28 cultural heritage sites across seven districts, and reconstruct 50,000 private houses in Gorkha and Nuwakot, 71 schools and 132 health facilities.

ICPD Commitments

UNFPA, in partnership with Nepal's Federal Parliament and National Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development, hosted a consultation in Kathmandu on the role of



parliamentarians in fulfilling Nepal's International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) commitments. Despite progress in policy and services, challenges persist, including child marriage, maternal deaths, and gender-biased sex selection.



Hello Sarkar

Ncell is partnering with the government to operate Hello Sarkar's toll-free 1111 service 24/7, offering free access for Ncell customers. The government has set up a Rapid Response Team to improve Hello Sarkar's effectiveness, offering citizens multiple channels, including email, social media, and a dedicated portal, to lodge complaints and suggestions. Hello Sarkar is a public grievances redressal mechanism that the government has been operating for the past 12 years.

Power export

The Indian cabinet has granted approval for the purchase of 10,000MW of hydroelectricity from Nepal in the next 10 years. The agreement was proposed during Prime Minister



Pushpa Kamal Dahal's Delhi visit in June. While the deal has been hailed as a high point in Nepal-India bilateral relations, experts have said Nepal should prioritise domestic consumption. India has refused to buy power from projects with any Chinese involvement.

StanChart CFO

Standard Chartered Bank Nepal has appointed Md Yasir Arafin as Chief Financial Officer. An MBA graduate from the University of Dhaka, he has over 15 years of experience in Bangladesh. Arafin specialises in budgeting, forecasting, analysis, KPI monitoring, RWA optimisation, and RoTE decisions.



Toyota Utsav

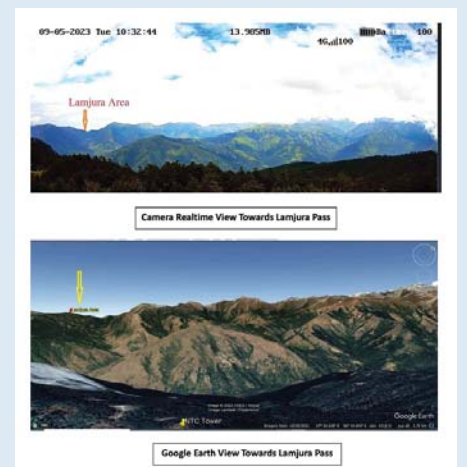
The annual Toyota विजय उत्सव returns from 8-16th September, blending tradition and modernity. Explore the 3S facility, enjoy test drives with exclusive rewards, nightly lucky draws, and an enhanced exchange program with more partner options. Toyota Vijay Utsav offers a host of benefits, including referrals and banking partnerships with Nabil, Everest and Global IME for convenient financing options.

Cash depositor

Global IME Bank has launched cash and cheque depositor machines, offering customers a convenient way to deposit funds into their accounts. The bank has deployed 5 cash and 5 cheque depositor machines across various branches in and outside Kathmandu Valley.

VScan Air

Wipro GE Healthcare launches Vscan Air in Nepal, a wireless, handheld ultrasound system with SignalMax technology, enabling accessibility to remote locations. Vscan Air allows for whole-body scanning at the point of care, aiding in faster, confident decision-making in healthcare. This innovation addresses Nepal's perinatal mortality challenges.



Aviation safety

Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN) in collaboration with the National Innovation Centre has installed en-route weather cameras northeast of Phaplu for safer flight operations on the Kathmandu-Lukla route which have seen frequent crashes. Webcams are already operating on the Jomsom-Pokhara route. Preparations are ongoing to install more cameras on some of the riskier domestic aviation routes.

Songs from Chomolungma

Sherpa folk music predate climate change in sanctifying protection of the mountain environment

The Sherpa people who live below Mt Everest are so famous globally as intrepid mountain guides that their surname has been expropriated by SUV, lounge chair, pet accessory, momo restaurant brands.



ON THE MARGINS
Sewa Bhattarai

But their cultural history of being the custodians of the world's highest mountains and intimate relationship with the mountains is reflected in their folk songs. The lyrics point to the Sherpa reverence for nature, and their innate ecological consciousness. Today, the climate emergency is impacting on the Himalaya through no fault of the inhabitants. Rising temperatures are accelerating the melting of glaciers in the Khumbu region, with the threat of glacial lakes bursting. Flora and fauna in the region have been disturbed by weather extremes.

But awareness about protecting nature has been Sherpa folklore for generations, long before climate scientists coined the terms greenhouse effect and climate change. Syar Thinche Nima, a song by Rinjin Lhamo Sherpa, a teacher and member of Himalayan Sherpa Cultural Centre in Khumbu, goes like this:

*The sun rises in the east
If the sun doesn't rise, the mountains will not glow bright
The mountains will not remain
If there is no snow on the mountains, there will be no rivers
There will be no green water
If water does not flow, the fish cannot live
If there are no fish, there can be no forests
Plants cannot grow
If plants cannot grow, there will be no birds
There can be no life, creation cannot exist.*

Explains Rinjin: "This song is proof that our community was conscious of the ecology since they have been living here under the mountains." The song not just portrays the importance of the mountains, but also vocalises the need for their conservation, on which the fates



PHOTOS: SEWA BHATTARAI



of the very existence of human civilisation depends. This song is also an example of the role of traditional cultures in combating the climate emergency which threatens to destroy the Himalayan ecosystem, and is caused by the overexploiting

of nature. In contrast, indigenous cultures like Sherpa culture, reveres and respects the earth and considers it holy. Many Sherpa songs passed down from generations carry this ethos. Another song shared by Pasang Chhiring Sherpa of the Himalayan Sherpa Cultural Centre, Khangdi Thombi, views the mountains as awe-inspiring and sacred:

*Look at the mountains to the North
How tall they are
The heart is glad to see them
There is a tall, golden wall here
Inside the wall are our priceless treasures
Our sages reside there*

"The song talks about the mountains protecting our most precious possessions, priceless things which we cannot buy with money," explains Pasang. Sherpas, who know their

mountains better than most outsiders, regard them as symbols of purity, greatness, and mystery. These metaphors can be found in much of South Asian literature and religious scriptures like the Rig Veda which regard the icy summits as the abode of the gods. Another song of the Sherpa links the mountains with spirituality and spiritual practices. Another song created by the revered religious leader Thuchi Nyima Rinpoche goes:

*There is a peak called Kelung
Domirila in Tibet
It is powerful and sacred
We must make many prayer wheels there*

"Prayer wheels are very important in our religious practice. However, the song does not talk about prayer wheels literally, it implies that we must do good deeds and practice our religion," explains Pasang. "This song is sung on auspicious occasions and gives a good message." With modernisation, global travel, tourism and monetary

upliftment of the Sherpa people, many songs and traditional practices are also in danger of being lost. "Our children are more familiar with English songs and discos, so we made an effort to teach these sacred songs to them," says Rinjin, who helps with Sherpa culture classes once a week. Activists have also set up the Himalayan Sherpa Cultural Centre to teach the new generation about different types of Sherpa songs, among other activities. There are many songs in Sherpa culture, sung on different occasions and in various settings. 'Lu' means song, and there are songs of sorrow (Kyo-lu), songs for weddings (Janti-lu), courtship songs (Ja-lu). Shyabru-lu are sung while dancing around in a circle. Pasang adds: "Until now, we have educated more than a thousand children about these songs, and taught them to sing and dance the old way." Sewa Bhattarai is a freelance journalist. Her series, On The Margins, focuses on folk music, folklore, and mythology of Nepal's diverse communities.

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PICTURES OF WOMEN TAKING PL

Here's a boo

Unwrap The Public Life of Women: A Feminist Memory Project, and then slide the book out of its maroon case. An olive photo book with black pages reveals itself to me.



SUBURBAN TALES
Pratibha Tuladhar

My palms and fingers close around it in an embrace — the texture of a book always tells you something. I flip through the pages and want to turn to the only other person on the terrace-pub, a stylishly-dressed young woman, to say: What a gorgeous, wholesome book!

Flipping through the pages, I am swept by gratitude for the women who came before us, for making sitting alone in public places in Nepal possible for women.

When my friend shows up, I nudge the book in her direction. She says: “The white letters against black pages are symbolic, like light in the dark, showing us the way forward.” Valentina Abenavoli’s aesthetics will not just pass you by — the design carries the depth of the content, even if the book might need a stronger binding.

This collection by Nepal Picture Library is based on an archival campaign representing women from all backgrounds from all over Nepal. The acknowledgement, as acknowledgements should be, is generous and not at all rushed.

...

Mamu receives the book, flips through it and says: “This is the book for every Nepali woman. Many thanks to whoever made this.” She sits down at the dining table and starts turning the pages right away.

She pauses at the photo of urban Nepali women in Moscow in 1963. Yes, they did represent a certain class of Nepali society. Still, it makes me wonder if my mother, growing up, gained hope from women like them. And even though she has spent her own life in and around the kitchen, perhaps knowing that there were women out there, who were trying, gave her hope for her unborn daughters? The thought makes me weep.

I wish Mamu had a moment like Prativa Subedi, standing coy of the ocean in a 1994 image, a reminder of The Awakening by Kate Chopin.

“We will save the book for my unborn daughters,” I say. Mamu nods.

...

Throughout history, invisible lines have been drawn around women. This book is about those who have taken us beyond those lines.

The first images in the book are of women at public events. Strangers stare back from the images. They feel familiar, because which woman is not familiar to another? They were women who cooked and cleaned alongside their public or

political lives. Some operated as flag bearers for the men they loved. Long after I have put the book down, the image lingers of Rashmi Shah pillion riding on a motorbike with her husband, and her poem where red becomes the colour of revolution, the colour that binds them.

The book is a collage of arrested moments in some stranger’s camera or perhaps that of acquaintances, mostly male. It is a representation of the gaze, all of them very different from one another, just as the women we see in the images, who tried to change the idea of belonging in class or caste.

Sushila Shrestha’s ‘party marriage’ to Ashok Rai, which breaks the social convention is one such example, where marriage is also a political project. There is also mention of an ‘arrest warrant’ but no details divulged, making Shrestha’s story one of the many incomplete anecdotes in the book.

Shanta Manavi is also ‘compelled’ to work as an underground operative after she met Modnath Prasrit in Banaras. And the un-captioned mugshots collected by Parijat and Punaya Prabha Devi Dhungana. So, they become an enigma.

In the mystery of the intersection of the private and the political, are the very public images of Nani Maiya Dahal at the election victory rally in 1981. The photos are probably the first such we see of a woman leader woven into the fabric of her supporters. They depict what Nepal might have had to offer to its women politicians.

And yet, their political careers have always been short-lived, mostly oligarchic in nature, many of them operating from backstage, emerging time and again and then, exeunt.

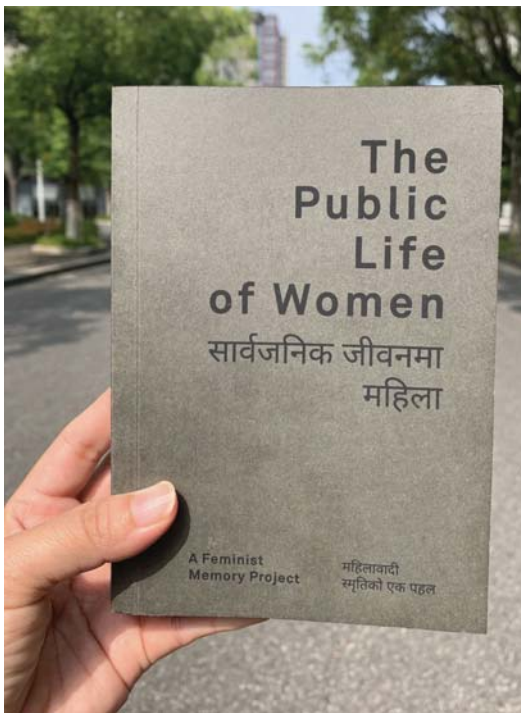
Women are beautiful. And the most beautiful are those who have fought like images of the Tharu women from Karjahi of Dang who led the peasants’ revolt in 1980 against local landlords. We shine brightest when it is dark.

The photos of women in education are the most important for obvious reasons — they trace the trajectory to women’s becoming. There is the fierceness of conviction in Chandra Malla establishing a school for girls in Makhani, circa 1935. Two high school teachers in Tehrathum in 1970: something remarkable about the light in their eyes. Female students prepare for Kathmandu education in an image from Doti in 1966. Little girls stand around them, watching, a moment so familiar to me. Seeing my Nini go to TU as a child was how I first decided that someday, I too would go to university.

Images of ladies’ handbags and shoes and no-shoes are representations of status and economic independence. The book is more than just images, it is a repository of scraps and letters, articles, interviews, records, copies, journals, and notes and legal documents tucked in neatly, each revealing something about lives known and unknown. The images are flanked by texts in both English and Nepali, the Nepali version reads better and provides better context.

The book follows no chronology,





The Public Life of Women: A Feminist Memory Project
photo.circle, 2023
558 pages
Rs1,200

PICTURES

book for every daughter of Nepal

but segments act like the stream of consciousness, flowing from one thing that stands out to another. Some recent photos appear in black and white, as if to give them a dated feel. Probably aesthetics.

So many lives: their aspirations, suffering, dreams, period cramps, menopausal mood swings. Who knows what they were experiencing at the time they were facing the camera. It is as much for the audience to feel as for the subjects of the images. Like Nayantara Gurung Kakshapati says in the curator's conversation section, where one is in their lives when they engage with the images impacts how one interacts with images.

And she raises an important question: What about those who were not photographed?

More archiving, then? 📷

Suburban Tales is a monthly column in Nepali Times based on real people (with some names changed) in Pratibha's life.



EVENTS



Art Exhibition
Umesh Shrestha's exhibition From Mundane Friction To Self Flow is a visual voyage through culture, tradition, and self-discovery. 8-29 September, Siddhartha Art Gallery, BaberMahal Revisited

Painting Exhibition:
Artist Bishal Maharjan's exhibition Resonance of Nepal: A Journey Through Tradition & Culture, has been extended. Stop by and see the paintings. Till 13 September, Kathmandu Art House, Thamel



Threat Con 2023
Threat Con 2023, Nepal's ultimate hacking and cybersecurity showdown, will bring together experts and aspiring white-hat hackers from across Nepal's cybersphere. 11-13 September, 10am - 9pm, Rs4000-10000, Hotel Yak and Yeti

WordCamp Kathmandu
WordCamp Kathmandu is a two-day workshop where tech enthusiasts can explore ways of innovation and collaboration on WordPress. 8-9 September, 10am-5pm, Alice Receptions, Kathmandu



Marathon Walk
Lace up those sneakers for the Blue Dragon Marathon Walk and raise funds for marginalised children in Vietnam. 10 September, 7:30 am , Das Tower, Lazimpat

DINING



Fire & Ice
Fire & Ice's pizza is beloved by both Nepalis and tourists alike. But the lasagna and Penne Al Forno are dishes that deserve more recognition. 8am-10:30pm, Thamel (01) 4250210

MUSIC

1D Night
Revisit and sing along to the greatest hits of One Direction during the upcoming musical evening that will pay tribute to the band. 14 September, 7:30pm, Mandala Street, Kathmandu



Himalayan Music Festival
Get your groove on for a greener world and be immersed in the rhythmic beats of nature at the Himalayan Music Festival. 16 September, Hotel Himalaya, Lalitpur



Acoustic Evening
Unplug and unwind with musician Sandhya, who will serenade the audience at the Acoustic Evening. Don't miss the soulful melodies. 8 September, Moksh, Jhamsikhel (01) 5438362



Kanta dAb dAb
Experience a fusion of East and West as Kanta dAb dAb takes listeners on a soulful musical journey through Nepal's rich heritage. 9 September, Beers N' Cheers, Jhamsikhel

Teej Night Event
A night of culture, cuisine, and celebration await at Teej Night. Listen to live music and get a chance to win the best dressed person at the event. 15 September, 5pm-9pm, PC Complex (1st Floor), New Baneshwor, 9803074666



Cafe Soma
For a sunny spot to grab brunch and mouthwatering desserts, head to Cafe Soma's Baluwater location. Meanwhile, the Jawalakhel location is perfect to catch up on work. Jawalakhel (01) 5528732/Baluwater (01) 4415792

Bayleaf
Drop by the garden restaurant for Burmese dishes such as Burmese Tofu Thoke, Khao Swe Thoke, Mohinga (fish noodle soup) and other signature pork dishes. Tangal (01) 4437490

About Town

GETAWAY



Bodhi Suites
The Bodhi Suites Boutique Hotel offers a wide variety of classy luxury amenities, and is the perfect place to unwind after a long day of exploring Lakeside. Lakeside, Pokhara (61) 467657 / 58

Sapana Village Resort
Experience the rich Tharu and Chepang culture at the Sapana Village Resort at the heart of Sauraha, and also witness elephants lumbering through the forests. Sauraha, Chitwan (56) 580308



Peacock Guest House
Located within a World Heritage Site, this three-storied Newari-style building provides splendid views of the Dattatreya Square and the Bhimsenthana temple. Bhaktapur (01) 6611829

Newa Chén
The open rooms and courtyards at Newa Chén are reminiscent of the palaces of the Malla Dynasty that once ruled the city. Kobahal, Lalitpur (01) 5533532



Kantipur Temple House
With its red brick walls, wood carvings, floor seating and traditional courtyard, Kantipur Temple House, right at the outskirts of Thamel, resembles the palaces of old Nepali kings. Thamel (01) 4250131

Jatra Cafe
Jatra Cafe & Bar has an extensive menu that spans sandwiches, pasta and curry. Try the authentic Samaya Baji Newari khaaja set. Thamel (01) 4256622



Phalano Coffee Ghar
This casual eatery serves great coffee, filling sandwiches and special baked goods, and is known for its timely and attentive service. Pulchok (01) 5534555

WEEKEND WEATHER



FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY
29° 19°	28° 20°	28° 19°	28° 20°	28° 20°

Monsoon Revival
Below normal precipitation across the Subcontinent in August, is followed by a resurgent monsoon late in the season. This is triggered by a northward push of the Intertropical Convergence Zone that has brought moisture elbowing out dry westerlies. Most of the monsoonal trough is south of the border, but the Nepal Himalaya and foothills will get rain from convection systems. Kathmandu will get between 5-10mm of rain daily in the coming 5 days.

OUR PICK

In Brad Ingelsby's 2023 crime drama, Marianne "Mare" Sheehan, a police detective in the Philadelphia suburb of Easttown, must investigate the recent murder of a teenage mother even as she is haunted by another cold case -- the disappearance of another young girl one year prior. Meanwhile, Mare must confront her past with her son, her fraying relationships with her daughter and her mother, as well as a growing doubt within members of her community about her competence as an investigator. Stars Kate Winslet, Julianne Nicholson, Jean Smart, and Angourie Rice.



MISS MOTI-VATION

KRIPA JOSHI



गर्मी मौसममा संक्रामक रोगबाट बचाउँ र बचाऔं

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



नेपाल सरकार
विज्ञापन बोर्ड



SHASHANK SHRESTHA

Documentary films come of age

There is already an enthusiastic audience for non-fiction film, but more can be done to widen reach

■ Smriti Basnet

In June, Rajan Kathet and Sunir Pandey's *No Winter Holidays* premiered at the Sheffield DocFest, one of Britain's biggest documentary festivals. The film was supported by South Korea's DMZ Docs Industry Project Fund and the Hong Kong Asia Film Financing Forum.

In feature films, Fidel Devkota's *The Red Suitcase* was nominated for world premier at the Venice International Film Festival and Nabin Subba's *A Road to a Village* got into the Toronto International Film Festival.

Nepali films and filmmakers are going places, and many have been able to find their way into international labs, forums, pitches and events. Documentary films have also been doing well, but the challenge is to run and sustain the market for non-fiction film.

That was a theme of a brainstorming last month of film festival organisers, government bodies, international agencies and independent filmmakers. The conversation first explored the lack of resources and probed ways in which the government and private institutions could promote the film industry.

The two hour discussion at the British Council did not just highlight problems, but also identified possible solutions to push the Nepali documentary market to a new direction.

While Nepal enjoys good reputation internationally, participants felt it was time for private and government agencies to foster a market for documentary film within Nepal.

Despite noteworthy non-fiction films in the past few years, every

documentary maker has had to work from scratch. For this, international fora have become the go-to for funds, due to their ease of access.

The catch: competition is stiff and there are many who vie for the few prizes. Success depends on what international viewers want to see and can relate to. This audience is not familiar with the nuances of the Nepali world, and the fate of films thus is determined by its relevance to a world far removed from Nepal.

International funds and programs have played an important role in encouraging Nepali documentary makers, but the time has come for Nepali support for Nepali filmmakers.

Kathmandu Metropolitan City recently handed an application for the UNESCO Creative Cities Network with 'film' as its main component. If the city gets the title, that would be perfect timing.

But even if it does not, it proves that the government is serious about investing in films and filmmakers. This could translate into grants for film production.

Even Nepal Tourism Board, with its active social media presence and sizeable contributions to film festivals in Nepal, sees opportunities in films. *14 Peaks*: Nothing is impossible on Netflix was an example of how the combined interests of several agencies can be pooled to create an adventure documentary that played a big role in boosting tourism in Nepal.

The broadcast media remains a largely untapped medium to encourage documentary makers. Internationally, it has been tv networks and their digital subsidiaries who actively commission documentaries.

Al Jazeera Witness's *What's behind caste violence in Nepal?* and BBC World Service's *Nepal: The battle for souls* are examples of how these commissions have come closer to home.

The broadcast media is sustained by advertising. But, while revenue is important, content is still king when it comes to building brands and identity. *Herne Katha*, for example, is proof of how personal stories not only captivate but move audiences.

Viewers are now seeking content online, and film commissioning could also make the most of this opportunity to re-brand and fund documentaries that resonate with Nepali audiences.

Nepal's tv channels could lead the way by producing content for the diaspora who are hungry for stories from home. Tv, with its access to a network of in-country journalists with powerfully distinctive stories could be drivers of audio-visual content.

Investing in creative storytellers to create viewership could persuade advertisers to see value in investing in non-fiction film which will ultimately enrich the ecosystem for Nepali documentaries.

Participants at the brainstorming included representatives from the Film Development Board, Film South Asia (FSA), Human Rights International Film Festival, Independent Filmmaker's Society, Kantipur Television, Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival, Kathmandu Metropolitan City, Nepali Female Filmmakers, Nepal Tourism Board and the US Embassy.

The group concluded that there is willingness to fund content and buy content, but what is lacking

are linkages between filmmakers and viewers.

Watching habits are shifting to reels made for TikTok and YouTube. Should supporters of films give the audience what viewers want, or what they need? It has become imperative to understand what the audience wants, and to be where the viewers are.

Perhaps not enough is being done to create avenues for audiences to explore documentaries. 'Dumbing down content' is an ongoing discussion, but it may be time to encourage culture of documentaries with its point-of-view human interest approach.

The enthusiastic participation of Nepalis at documentary festivals is proof that there is already a critical mass of viewers interested in the non-fiction film format. Film education schools and societies can be mobilised for an even wider audience engagement.

As pointed out in the discussion, this could be achieved through showings and documentary appreciation sessions, where film organisations can inculcate a sense of a community of documentary lovers. The Film Development Board should now work to create these linkages between local commissioners and filmmakers. They could support bigger film grants and ensure that financing is hassle-free. This could be a viable way to give Nepali documentaries a boost within Nepal in a flavour that audiences here understand best.

The future for films lies in local government bodies, film organisations and the industry working together to support and create a platform to sustain a culture for documentary viewing. 🇳🇵

Smriti Basnet is a filmmaker and runs Kathaharu, a production company based in Kathmandu.

Nepali films in Busan Fesitval

Three Nepali films have been selected for the Busan Festival in South Korea from 4-13 October.

Gaun Aayeko Bato (A Road to a Village) directed by Nabin Subba is being screened for the first time at the ongoing 48th Toronto International Festival. The film featuring actors Dayahang Rai, Pashupati Rai and Prasan Rai tells a story of how a new road in the village changes father-son relations.

Gaun Aayeko Bato will be screened under the 'Window on Asian Cinema' category at Busan. "I believe this will help in globalising our films," says Subba.



Guras directed by Saurav Rai has also been selected for Busan. First screened at Karlovy Vary International Film in the Czech Republic, *Guras* is a story from the perspective of a 10-year-old girl who sets out in search of her missing hen against the economic and social backdrop of Darjeeling. Tulsi Khawas and Kagendra Lamichhane play the leads.

"Our films being selected for international films means they like our unique identity. We are being screened at prestigious film festivals like Venice, Busan and Toronto, this is a matter of great pride," says Lamichhane.

The *Witness Tree*, a documentary by Nirajan Bhetwal, has been selected to be screened under Busan's Asian documentary category.

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COMING SOON

SIPRADI

Highway accidents are no



SHANKAR SHRESTHA/RSS

Reckless driving, poor engineering, and a lack of emergency response make Nepal's highways deathtraps

■ Shristi Karki

- A Beni-bound bus veered off the Prithivi Highway on 23 August and plunged into the Trisuli River, killing eight passengers and injuring many more (pictured above).
- Less than 24 hours later a bus carrying Indian pilgrims from Janakpur to Kathmandu swerved off the road in Bara district, killing seven passengers.
- A week earlier a jeep heading towards Butwal was hit by a rockslide in Palpa. Three people were killed.

- On 3 September, a jeep heading to Mugu from Jumla fell off the road, and rolled 300m down the steep mountainside. The driver and a passenger were killed.

These deadly accidents all took place within a fortnight across Nepal, and do not include pedestrians killed by vehicles. They have become so frequent that the mishaps do not even make headlines anymore.

Road Traffic Accidents (RTAs) take more lives annually in Nepal than floods, landslides, plane crashes, and other accidents and natural disasters combined.

A total of 2,320 people lost their lives in road traffic accidents between April 2022 and April 2023, while 28,856 people were injured, many of them impaired for life.

In that same time frame, floods killed 19 people and injured 17, while landslides took the lives of 96 people and injured 88. There were two aircraft accidents in that

period that killed 79 passengers and crew.

Most RTA are concentrated in the Kathmandu Valley and the Tarai, where urbanisation and better quality roads and expressways have led to over-speeding and reckless driving. But in accidents in the rural mountains it is usually the poor condition of the roads that is the main factor.

Nepal's topography and weather make it difficult to build and maintain roads. Highways and rural roads wrap around mountains, traverse cliffs, follow narrow river gorges. Entire sections of Nepal's arterial highways are in a permanent state of disrepair during the monsoon, like the landslide-prone Mugling-Narayanghat Highway.

Poor highway engineering is a major factor in deadly accidents, says transport expert Chandra B Shrestha, now a consultant with the Asian Infrastructure

Investment Bank. The rockslide in Palpa, he notes, was caused by an inability to properly stabilise the slope.

"Most accidents happen when the curves on the road and the speed of vehicles do not match," adds Shrestha. "We also have a lot of blind spots along our highways which makes driving difficult."

Nepal's motorable roads are classified into Strategic Road Networks, which include major highways under the purview of the Department of Roads, and Local Road Networks which are built and maintained by local governments.

While the main highways have to follow engineering parameters to be approved for construction, local roads are built without adequate engineering, making them more dangerous.

"Local governments have taken charge of the construction of rural roads without fulfilling any of the required technical criteria," says transport expert Madhusudan

Acharya, adding that they are built without an understanding of road geometry or slope geology.

Shrestha agrees that rural road networks are not only sub-engineered, but are being dug across fragile slopes by excavators at breakneck speed on a massive scale without oversight. "Such roads have become death traps," he warns.

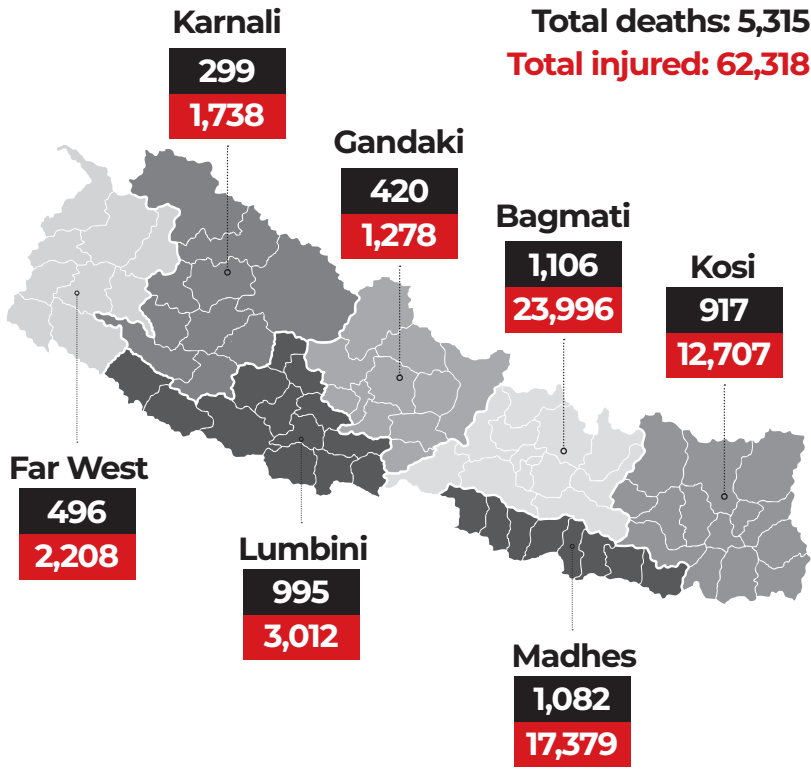
Political interference and collusion between local contractors and their governments (in many cases the same person) to haphazardly build roads near private property has not helped matters.

Some major highways face similar problems. The Nepal Road Standard 2013 stipulates that highways, feeder roads, and district roads must have a Total Right of Way of 50m, 30m, and 20m respectively, but that rule has not been followed.

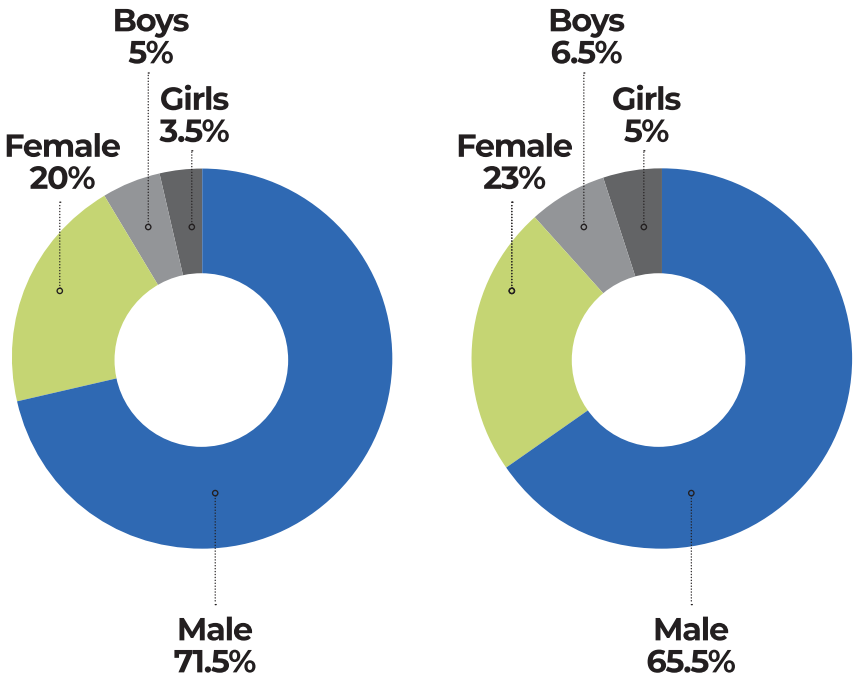
As land value increases, encroachment along Prithivi, Siddhartha and Arniko Highways

accident

Road accident deaths and injuries between 16 July 2021-17 July 2023



Deaths on roads and injuries during the same time period



SOURCE: NEPAL POLICE

by buildings is rampant and that increases the chances of human-vehicle collisions.

“Nepal’s highway network does not have Right of Way, and the concept is not even discussed during the construction of projects,” says Shrestha. “There should be extensive study into the road and land-use interface, and guidelines must be followed.”

Yet, driver negligence and poor vehicle maintenance play a bigger role in road accidents than climate, weather, or the way Nepal’s highways are constructed. Reckless driving on poorly built roads then turn things deadly.

Acharya is part of a seven-member task force created by the Ministry of Physical Infrastructure and Transport earlier this year to study vehicular pollution, safety and accident reduction.

He says, “Nepal’s highways would be much safer if drivers were properly trained or if vehicles were better maintained. But they have little understanding of highway traffic rules, reading signage or basic mechanical knowledge.”

The Land Transportation agency has also been lax in licensing and training drivers, especially those who seek to operate trucks, buses and long-haul four-wheelers. Fines for speeding and other traffic infractions, especially for two-wheelers, have not brought down the fatality rate. Motorcycles cause most of the road accidents in Kathmandu Valley and the Tarai.

In a recent example in Kathmandu, two people died and 12 were injured when a speeding bus collided with a Bolero as it swerved to avoid a motorbike coming from the opposite direction.

“Nepal’s existing road safety practices and protocols make it pretty clear that transport management authority is unable to govern properly, and needs massive overhaul,” Acharya explains. “The result is that the wrong people are behind the wheel.”

Treating trauma

A motorcycle was hit by a car along the East-West Highway one recent evening, and the driver was writhing on the road, bleeding profusely.

Bystanders gathered, taking videos of the injured man with their mobiles to post on TikTok. No one helped for fear of being involved. Police took an hour to arrive. The driver bled to death while being taken to hospital.

In a similar case, a motorcyclist was hit by a car on his way to work and he felt pain in his arms, legs, and neck but it did not seem too severe. Bystanders gathered and carried him to hospital on their back.

Well-meaning as they were, they were not trained in handling the injured. The patient was eventually examined by Raju Dhakal of the Spinal Injury Rehabilitation Centre in Sanga, but the rescue attempt itself worsened the trauma and he will now suffer life-long physical complications.

Trauma care is inaccessible to a larger number of Nepalis as the road network expands across the country. Specialised surgery and emergency treatment are centralised in Kathmandu or main cities, and the cost of rescue, ambulance, airlifting and treatment are too costly for most.

But even at hospitals, there is a lack of trained rescue and emergency first responders, which means untrained bystanders step in and inadvertently make injuries worse.

“There is a weakness in the life-saving mechanism that brings patients from accident sites to hospitals, and there are not many trained emergency responders,” says Dhakal. “Even not-critical injuries become life-threatening because police and rescuers do not reach accident sites on time.”

Traffic authority Sitaram Hachhethu agrees that the role of traffic police and police personnel in case of road accidents on highways is limited to reaching the site which itself takes time due to distance and road conditions, adding to the number of casualties.

Moreover, the police do not even have proper equipment to rescue those who have been in accidents, such as metal and seat cutters. Says Hachhethu: “We use whatever we have to get them out, all the while not knowing the protocol of rescuing an injured person.”

He adds: “90% of RTA deaths would be prevented if we had proper emergency and first response services and trained medical professionals on standby. Until then traffic police, police and rescue personnel need to be trained to provide first aid and basic emergency medical care.”

The state needs to identify which hospitals are primary, secondary, or tertiary to help doctors to direct trauma patients to relevant hospitals. That way, first responders can triage so that the resources of tertiary hospitals can be directed towards the critical patients. Additionally, basic first aid and emergency training can also be provided at the local levels so that people seeking to help accident victims have a basic knowledge of what to do and what not to do.

A 2023 study by the Emergency

Department of the College of Medical Sciences and Teaching Hospital over a six-month period from January to June 2022 revealed that 9.58% of the 7,654 patients had been admitted to the emergency unit for Road Traffic Accidents, and 65% of the cases had occurred along highways.

The study in the Journal of the Nepal Medical Association found that 38% of total patients admitted for RTA had soft tissue injuries, while 31% had suffered head injuries.

The situation is dire in the remoter parts of Nepal where medical facilities are few and far between, and the roads are all sub-standard. At Achham’s Bayalpata Hospital, orthopaedic surgeon Mandeep Pathak has seen an increase in mass casualties from bus and tractor accidents.

“Hospitals along highways need trauma centres and ICUs so serious patients do not need to be referred to the city,” Pathak says, adding that many do not survive the long bumpy journeys in poorly equipped ambulances.

People are also not aware that the healing process does not end after hospital treatment. Rehabilitation is just as crucial to ensuring there are no long-term complications.

Says Dhakal: “Deaths, critical injuries and long-term disabilities can be prevented provided emergency services and trained professionals reach accident sites on time, identify what level of care victims require, and there is rehabilitation after hospital treatment.”

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Saraswati casts net wide for justice

A Dalit activist from Nepal gets global recognition for her struggle against systemic discrimination

■ Dhanu Bishwakarma

Dalits were still strictly prohibited from entering the places of worship, but in 2001 were defying the ban in Baitadi district in Nepal’s western mountains.

They tried to forcibly enter a temple, and were beaten back by people who considered themselves of a superior caste. One of those agitating was 20-year-old Saraswati Nepali, and ever since it has been a lifelong struggle till her receiving the US Department of State’s Global Anti-Racism Champions Award in Washington DC last month from Antony Blinken (pictured).

“It was a surprise and an honour,” says Nepali, now 42. “It also made me realise that discrimination is present all over the world, be it ethnic, racial, or caste-based. It is our duty to keep on fighting for justice and equality.”

The irony is that not many people have heard of Saraswati Nepali within Nepal and her relentless activism.

In 2017, Nepali was a Maoist deputy mayor candidate of Dashrathchand Municipality. Despite getting 3,100 votes, she lost to Meena Chand of the Nepali Congress.

“I lost because of my last name,” recalls Nepali. “Baitadi people were not ready to see a Dalit



woman as deputy mayor. People were concerned that temples would be inaugurated by a Dalit if I won.”

Not one to give up, Nepali stood again for deputy mayor in 2022. She lost again but got more votes than the previous time. “The locals accepted me as a leader but not my leadership,” she admits.

Nepali was born the youngest child to a Dalit family in Baitadi in the isolated far-western mountains

of Nepal, one of Nepal’s most under-served districts and one where caste-based discrimination is still deeply entrenched.

Growing up with discrimination at every step, rebellion was not a choice for Saraswati Nepali but the only way to survive. The social ostracisation she faced from a young age left a lasting impression and ignited a passion for activism that would later define her life.

Her father Nanda died when she was only six months old, but her three older brothers became her guardians and encouraged her to pursue education. She was eight when she started her formal education.

At night, she used to tag along with her youngest brother Prakash who took to painting slogans against caste-based discrimination on walls and other surfaces in the village.

When she was 15, she met Dalit activists like Puran Singh Dayal who had initiated a movement to enter eateries that prohibited Dalits. Back then, Dalits had to drink tea outdoors and wash the glass themselves.

By 22, Nepali was already affiliated with the National Dalit Network and Dalit Development Society.

Having witnessed and sometimes experienced first-hand the worst of caste-based discrimination including bonded labour, landlessness, and Dalits being forced to scavenge on carcasses of animals, Nepali took her activism to the streets.

Under Nepali’s initiation, Baitadi outlawed bonded labour in 2007, a year before Kathmandu did so nationally.

“She is a rebel with a cause

that her own country has not recognised yet,” says fellow activist Puran Singh Dayal, remembering Nepali joining him at the temple agitation more than two decades ago.

Nepali had previously also won the Darnal Award for Social Justice in 2018. The US State Department said in its citation: ‘Saraswati has played a crucial role in Dalit social justice movements to acquire land rights, gain access to education, and obtain equal justice from the courts.’

But there is only so much activism can do, matters of discrimination and inequality like many other problems in Nepal are political in nature and need political solutions. Which is why Nepali has chosen electoral politics.

“All my life, I have been on streets shouting, now I want to be in a decision-making position,” says Nepali. “If given the chance I can bring about social reform.”

Nepali hasn’t given up on Baitadi which she calls her ‘janmabhumi’, (birthplace), her ‘gyanbhumi’ (the land where she was educated) and her ‘karmabhumi’ (her place of work).

“One day, I will surely win the hearts and minds of voters,” says the ever-positive activist. “I will then use political power to eradicate our country of social ills.”



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