



JIYALAL SAH



SULAV SHRESTHA / DESH SANCHAR

Crimson, saffron and green

It looks like the whole country is demonstrating on the streets. Ex-king Gyanendra has been attending rallies for the restoration of a Hindu monarchy in Kathmandu (above, right), teachers are on the warpath against federal control, striking doctors are protesting



BORDERLINES
Chandra Kishore

gang attacks on hospitals, activist Iih stood for 11 days outside Kathmandu City Hall protesting the mayor's high-handedness.

Meanwhile, on Monday in Birganj there was a different kind of street demonstration – for tolerance and harmony (above, left).

The municipality took out the rally to douse communal clashes that flared up in Malangwa of Sarlahi district for four days this week, serious enough for a curfew

to be clamped.

In Birganj, businesses, intellectuals and politicians including Mayor Rajeshman Singh and Deputy Mayor Imtiaz Alam rallied for religious coexistence. Instead of saffron or green, they waved Nepal's crimson double triangle.

Madhes Province borders the Indian state of Bihar, and bonds of kinship, language, culture and trade bind communities in the two countries together. As India prepares for general elections next year, growing persecution of minorities there is starting to infect Nepal as well.

Hindus and Muslims in Nepal have lived peacefully for centuries. My own ancestral home is in the village of Balara near Malangwa. My 80-year-old mother still lives there and remembers the Muslim woman who sold her glass bangles.

Despite untouchability at the time, she was allowed right inside the house to fit bangles and give

blessings to the family.

Malangwa itself derives its name from Malang Baba, revered by both Hindus and Muslims. The frontier town is therefore a symbol of the age-old solidarity between the two communities. Its message: do not spread division and strife.

I have just returned from Malangwa which is limping back to normal. But the clashes have opened new fears that the attempt to ignite religious tension could spread to other border districts.

We know from other sectarian conflagrations that the initial spark is from rubbing religion and politics together to create friction. This is a volatile mixture, and can be fanned by exclusionary populism -- especially in the age of social media. Sadly, no religion has a monopoly on extremism, even ones that preach compassion.

The strategy of religious zealots is to propel themselves to power by neutralising symbols of tolerance, and discredit those who stand

for togetherness. The tactic is to weaponise social networking sites to drive a wedge, and divide society into 'us' and 'them'.

Economic problems, joblessness and disillusionment with politicians is prompting new forces to stoke religious animosity.

The wind is blowing from the south this monsoon, and it is infusing ideas of majoritarian communalism. Let those who are fanning these flames be warned that they may well reap the whirlwind.

The press should be playing a moderating check-and-balance role, but local media is itself spreading hate speech and extremism.

In every crisis, there will be some brave souls who will act on their conscience. But we did not hear those voices amidst the extremist din in Malangwa.

An ideological vacuum is turning Madhes Province into fertile ground for the religious right, and a laboratory against federalism and secularism. Nepal with its

FLAG-WAVING: The rally for peace and harmony in Birganj on 25 September (above left) was well attended by local luminaries and the public, and followed days of inter-religious clashes in Malangwa last week.

A rally in Bhaktapur on 24 September was also attended by a flag-waving crowd, but in contrast, was for restoring Nepal's Hindu monarchy. Ex-king Gyanendra attended the event.

diversity cannot be a theocracy--the state has to be a protector of all peoples and faiths. Secularism means the freedom of each Nepali to practice their religion.

Such acceptance is anathema to those who want to mix religion and politics: they want us to distrust and hate each other.

There is a lot of flag-waving going on, but at least the rally in Birganj showed that crimson is the new saffron and green. 🇳🇵

Chandra Kishore is a Birganj-based journalist who writes this monthly column Borderlines in Nepali Times. @kishore_chandra

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If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there

■ Bihari Krishna Shrestha

The so-called experts referred to in the article Business As Unusual (by Ramesh Kumar, #1180 Nepali Times, 22 September) do not seem to have used their 'expertise' in making observations. Their comments are thus simplistic and mutually contradictory.

If they were using a set of commonly accepted indicators and related verifiable data, their opinion could not be so mutually disparate. I know of no economist in Nepal worth the name who has defined the characteristics specific to Nepal's economy, and has come up with a theoretically defensible set of prescriptions for investment and economic development.

Many of them masquerade as economists based on having acquired a degree, maybe, a PhD sometime in the past, and others after spending some time in the Finance Ministry as part of the musical chair of inter-ministry transfers in the bureaucracy.

Like most 'observers' in Nepal, these economists too dare to make profound-sounding observations based on what immediately meets their eyes.

For instance, this year they seem to be impressed by the size of the crowd visiting the NADA auto show to claim that despite the sense of national despair, the economy is not really in a slump.

They are mob economists who gauge the state of the economy by the size of the shoppers at New Road or Asan Tole.

Nepal's tragedy is that governments headed by corrupt politicians have spent all their time and energy in defrauding the state and gullible citizens.

Examples: massive scams like the Fake Bhutanese Refugee (KPO and SBD governments), Lalita Niwas (MKN and BRB governments) and the recent gold smuggling (PKD government).

Meanwhile the so-called 'Planning Commission' and other think tanks recycle what is already in writing. There is no accountability for their total lack of delivery from their writings.

Even at the cost of modesty, I must state that during my tenure in the government as a karmachari, I have had the distinction of innovating three major policy reforms: the institution of user groups, the forest user groups and the mothers' groups and their Female Community Health Volunteers.

Together, these policies changed the face of our nation. As the saying goes, if you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there. That seems to

be the fate of our planners, policy makers, self-styled economists and of course, corrupt politicians.

As per a recent agricultural survey, 62% of households remain in agriculture. A decade earlier in 2011, it was 71% whereas the sector's contribution to national GDP was only 34.3%.

The fact that only 12% of farm households have had access to agriculture credit, a prime mover for development, and only 7% to agricultural grants remains the most lethal of neglect to a sector on which so many people still depend.

This clearly suggests massive deprivation of a vast majority of the country's population through unemployment and underemployment, lack of sufficient land and their vastly unequal distribution.

While four million Nepalis plus a vast but unknown number working in India have migrated for income and employment, a 2018 survey showed that 900,000 people were actively looking for employment, and nearly 70% of them were in the age bracket between 15-34 years.

While Nepal's industrial sector remains minuscule, the irony is that sunflower, palm and soyabean oils remain the major export items.

Since none of those oilseeds are produced in Nepal, it only shows that our investment regime remains totally divorced from even the rudimentary rule of economic development — the principle of comparative advantage.

The size of the crowd visiting the NADA auto show is more the manifestation of the artificial nature of our industrial sector and remains the handiwork of corrupt and incompetent politicians, bureaucrats and an unscrupulous business community working in cahoots to profit from loopholes.

Nobel laureate economists Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo wrote in 2020: 'Although no one knows when the growth locomotive will start in a given country, if and when it does, the poor will be more likely to hop on the train if they are in decent health, can read and write, and can think beyond their immediate circumstances.'

Which kleptocrat politician, bureaucrat, unprincipled economist, or hardcore politician disguised as civil society leader has thought of our problems in these terms?

Bihari Krishna Shrestha is an anthropologist and a former government secretary.

NEPALI EDUCATION

I wish more parents realised that their children are being taught nonsense ('Learning rubbish, memorising gibberish', Yugottam and Yugeshwor Koirala, #1180). The most important thing I learned in school was that I should learn how to think, not what to think.

Willem L Alma

■ I occasionally taught English while trekking, stopping over for a week or so here and there. The students are ill-served by the teachers and the teaching programs. It is all repetitive nonsense. Their actual ability to think, understand, and respond was far less than their ability to regurgitate nonsense. They repeat canned answers but do not think about and use the language in a specific context. It is a tragedy for the students.

Roger Ray

■ Yes, the computer studies exams are a joke. They need to know how to stay safe online. Many other subjects ask useless outdated questions, which have no benefit for students or society.

Shiriin Barakzai

MAKALU COFFEE

Nepal really does have amazing coffee ('Make way for Makalu Coffee', Hanna Wells, nepalitimes.com). I'm glad to see it becoming a more popular crop here.

Tony Thompson

ECONOMY

The middle and upper class buying home appliances and cars don't mean that the people are not suffering ('Business as unusual', Ramesh Kumar, #1180).

Rana Sansar Shrestha

BHUTAN

Madhukar Monger was released after 29 years - jailed for distributing political literature. So much for the land that celebrates gross national happiness.

David Seddon

CARE LEAVERS

This an informative article raising the voices of the voiceless and those who grew up to adulthood having faced many hurdles in their upbringing ('Better care of care leavers', Elisha Shrestha, #1179).

Seetaram Subedi

ONLINE PACKAGES



ON THE ROAD

Kangchenjunga Conservation Area, established in 1997 and spread across easternmost Nepal, is undergoing change due to outmigration, new infrastructure and the climate crisis. Join us on this road trip from the lowest point in Nepal in Jhapa to Taplejung near the world's third-highest peak, Kangchenjunga. Watch video on our YouTube channel.



ARCHIVING IN NEPAL

In a career spanning 30 years, Baram Chitrakar, 82, helped microfilm 182,000 manuscripts, inscriptions, copper plates, and other objects of archaeological significance. The valuable microfilms are now beginning to deteriorate. Subscribe to our YouTube channel for more original multimedia content.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

The Price of Conservation

Nepal's conservation successes are now being threatened by greedy and short-sighted politicians who want to log forests or auction tigers for trophy hunting. There are new highways, irrigation canals, transmission lines and even a railway crisscrossing natural reserves. Alton Byers writes about roads in untouched Kangchenjunga in recent years (page 6-7).

Twenty years ago this week Nepali Times published a report about how authorities were working in cahoots with powerful people to smuggle timber from Sagarmatha National Park. Excerpts from #164, 26 September- 6 October 2003:

Sagarmatha National Park is a conservation success story, and a model for eco-tourism. The stately lichen-covered spruce and hemlock around Tengboche Monastery that had all but disappeared 25 years ago, are sprouting back. Juniper bushes near Pheriche show regeneration even though plant growth is extremely slow at these altitudes.

But the Sagarmatha's success has come at a price. The growing affluence of the Sherpa villages, and the growth of tourism has boosted demand for timber. But the ban on logging inside the park has meant that the forests outside the park boundary have fallen under the axe. The rest of Khumbu's forests have become the victims of the park's success.

Local villagers say the security forces are in cahoots with "powerful and influential people" to smuggle timber up to Namche Bazar. Park officials are aware that the deployment of additional security forces to guard the airport has increased consumption of firewood. But trees are being cut for construction timber.

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

1,000 WORDS



EMILY HESER

WHAT'S TRENDING



Navigating Nepal with new digital maps

Navigation in Nepal is trickier than in other countries—the streets and houses are not named or numbered. But new navigation applications have set out to provide localised maps to get around. Read full story on our website.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

Trekking in the time of climate change

Seasonal weather patterns in Nepal are complex to begin with, and climate change has made them even more unpredictable. Trekkers to Nepal should now consider this. Visit nepalitimes.com for details.

Most popular on Twitter

Learning rubbish, memorising gibberish

Quality of instruction is bad in most of Nepal's schools, but textbooks and test contents are even worse. They are sloppy, unrevised, and filled with content that ranges from comical to outrageous. Join the online discussion.

Most commented



Nepal's Maoist leader visits China

Maoist party Prime Minister Dahal's visit to China takes place at a time when Nepal's governmental and administrative apparatus is perhaps the most fragile and fungible they have ever been. Follow us for the latest updates.

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Is Nepal's economy on the mend, or on the verge of disaster? Experts cannot seem to make up their minds. Business as unusual | @Raw_Ku



Narendra Khadka @NKhadka
So nothing has changed then over last 50 years



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
The government's proposal to auction tigers for hunting is another gross illustration of greed, incompetence and malgovernance.



'Gaijin' - A Pessimist! @Gaijin_Ram
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What the movie Oppenheimer missed

After watching the film, a Japanese journalist reflects on long-term human suffering due to nuclear weapons

■ Katsuhiro Asagiri

I watched the film *Oppenheimer* in Astana, the capital city of Kazakhstan where I was going to cover a regional conference to commemorate the International Day against Nuclear Testing. The movie is still not released in Japan due to its sensitive nature.

Countries like Japan, Kazakhstan and those in the South Pacific still suffer severe health after-effects of nuclear bombings and testings. For us, the film is disturbing because it only hints at mass deaths and radioactive sickness that the bombs unleashed.

Christopher Nolan does a remarkable job in laying bare the politics behind the making and detonation of the first atomic bomb, and the moral dilemma faced by physicist J Robert Oppenheimer.

I only wish he had done more to describe the human dimension of the effects of nuclear weapons ever since the Trinity Test in 1945, the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the danger of unthinkable global nuclear conflagration that persists to this day.

The movie does not even address the health impact and suffering from radioactive fallout on 15,000 Americans living downwind from Los Alamos in the Nevada desert.

The US government's official explanation remains that the test site was in the middle of nowhere, a statement which the movie chooses not to delve into.

Remarkably, the Soviet Union employed a similar justification, dubbing the Semipalatinsk test site in the Kazakh steppe as also being 'in the middle of nowhere' to rationalise its 456 nuclear tests, many of them atmospheric, despite nearby towns.

Intriguingly, the Soviet Union's gigantic thermonuclear test, Tsar Bomba, conducted in the Arctic in 1961, led its chief scientist, Andrei Sakharov, down a path of dissent and persecution by the state, mirroring Oppenheimer's own trajectory.

Today, the tragic aftermath of nuclear testing persists in northeastern Kazakhstan, near the vast Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test Site, a testing area equivalent in size to Belgium. Children continue to be born with health



issues, including cancer and deformities, offering harrowing proof of the inhuman consequences of nuclear weapons. Over 1.5 million Kazakhs endured fallout exposure from 1949 to 1989.

On 29 August, 1991 the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test Site was closed by Kazakhstan, even though it was still a part of the Soviet Union. Kazakhstan subsequently became independent and was the first country in the world to voluntarily turn itself to a non-nuclear weapons state from one with nuclear weapons by abolishing its nuclear arsenal, the fourth largest in the world at the time.

In 2009, at the initiative of Kazakhstan, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution, designating August 29 as the International

Day Against Nuclear Tests, emphasising the significance of this historic closure.

The nuclear tests have had a serious impact on the lives of the Kazakhs to this day. The famous painter Kalipbek Kuyukov was born without hands after being exposed to radiation in his mother's womb.

Kuyukov is involved in the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Movement, which played a vital role in closing down the site. His paintings convey the horrors of nuclear tests.

Dmitriy Vesselov, a third-generation survivor of Semipalatinsk's nuclear tests, suffers from a physical deformity in which his hands are connected by only a few ligaments due to the absence of collarbones.

His poignant words serve as a stark warning against those who support the use of small tactical nuclear weapons and limited nuclear war.

The cumulative power of nuclear detonations at Semipalatinsk dwarfed the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima by a staggering 2,500 times. Against the backdrop of the Ukraine conflict and Sino-US tensions, the ominous tick of the Doomsday Clock edges closer to midnight.

In Asia, three countries that are not friendly with each other (China, India and Pakistan) all have nuclear weapons. Even a small-scale nuclear exchange between them would take radioactive fallout to the Himalaya and contaminate Asia's water.

It is imperative that humanity remembers the grave consequences of military nuclear use and testing. The threats posed by an all-out global nuclear confrontation will be much more serious for life on the planet than the projected impact of the climate crisis.

Participants at the regional conference in

Astana, organised by Kazakhstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, delved into the humanitarian aftermath of nuclear weapons.

This dimension, conspicuously missing in *Oppenheimer* the movie, took centre stage, alongside disarmament discussions among nuclear-armed nations at the Preparatory Committee for the 2026 Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) held in Vienna.

Hirotugu Terasaki, Director General of Peace and Global Issues at Soka Gakkai International (SGI), a co-host of the regional conference, emphasised the ongoing discussions within the international community surrounding Articles 6 and 7 of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).

These articles call for state parties to provide aid to nuclear victims, remediate affected areas, and promote international cooperation. Kazakhstan has been appointed, alongside Kiribati, as a co-chair of the working group at the heart of these crucial discussions.

While the nine nuclear-armed nations continue to disregard the TPNW and attempt to convince the public of the necessity of nuclear deterrence, it is imperative to recognise that no matter who may use a nuclear weapon next time, it will be ordinary people like us who will be at the receiving end of this inhumane weapon that has inter-generational after-effects.

We have to pay attention to the human dimension of the effects of nuclear weapons on the 'Global Hibakusha', or victims of nuclear use, testing and productions including the USA, Russia, Kazakhstan, Australia, Algeria, South Pacific Islands, China, North Korea, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

As the second Meeting of States Parties of the TPNW approaches, set to convene at the United Nations Headquarters in New York between 27 November - 1 December, the world faces the looming threat of nuclear weapons use. 🇯🇵

Katsuhiro Asagiri is a Japanese journalist with International Press Syndicate (INPS) Japan and project director of 'Towards a World without Nuclear Weapons' and 'SDGs for All'.



NMB BANK
एनएमबी बैंक



Renewable StanChart

Standard Chartered Bank signed an agreement with the Central Renewable Energy Fund (CREF), the financial mechanism of Alternative Energy Promotion Centre (AEP), for Loan Loss Guarantee under the Sustainable Energy Challenge Fund to finance renewable energy.

NMB Buddha Debit

NMB Bank and Buddha Air announced the launch of the NMB Buddha VISA Debit Card, which will allow card holders to get 10% discounts on airfares.



Cardholders can also bring an extra five kg of baggage over the standard weight allowance when flying Nepal's largest domestic carrier. Additionally, cardholders can receive refunds of up to 100% on ticket cancellations.

TATA Ace EV

Sipradi Trading has launched the new TATA AceEV, a zero-emission, four-wheel Small Commercial Vehicle (SCV) that offers a range of 154km, an advanced battery cooling system and regenerative braking system, and is powered by a 27kW motor with 130Nm of peak torque. The Ace EV is customised for Nepal's road and transport requirements.



Tata Motors last week also launched its new showroom in Bharatpur, beginning the sale and distribution of the recently-launched Tiago EV and TATA from the outlet. Additionally, the entire range of Tata Motors cars will be available at the showroom.

Galli Jatra

Galli Maps has debuted its new Indra Jatra feature that enables precise tracking of the ongoing events during the eight-day chariot festival in Kathmandu. Galli app users can pinpoint the exact location of the chariot and take part in the festivities.



Global IME + Bottlers

Global IME Bank, Bottlers Nepal and Bottlers Nepal Tarai signed an MoU to provide channel financing facility to distributors to purchase products of Bottlers Nepal and Bottlers Nepal Tarai. Distributors can also

get loans from any branch of the Bank under the financing program.

Meanwhile, Global IME Bank announced its credit card holders will get a 25% cashback on the first transaction with its card. Offer is valid until 20 October.

Honda holiday

Syakar Trading Company, distributor of Honda two-wheelers in Nepal, launched its Dashain Ma 10 Lakh holiday scheme under which customers will receive a scratch coupon upon the purchase of any Honda two-wheeler through which lucky winners can receive Rs1 million. The scheme also offers up to Rs10,000 in cash prizes or a five-year Annual Maintenance Contract (AMC) package worth Rs12,500.



GSP Seminar

The Royal Norwegian Embassy in Kathmandu in cooperation with Norwegian Customs, the Government of Nepal, and the International Trade Centre held a Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) seminar for Nepali exporters with representatives from the Nepal Trade and Export Promotion Center, the International Trade Centre, and the Delegation of the European Union.

Green Ncell

Ncell has planted 200 trees along both sides of the Bagmati Corridor Road in Ward 1 of Lalitpur Metropolitan City to mark its 18th anniversary. The service provider also hosted four friendly football matches titled Purple Kickoff at the Lainchaur Ground, featuring Nepali celebrities, veteran football players, and representatives from the Nepalese Young Entrepreneurs Forum (NYEF), Nepal Sports Journalists' Forum (NSJF), and Lainchaur Youth Club.

Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge at 25

A haven of sustainable hospitality in Nepal sets a benchmark for ecotourism

■ Lisa Choegyal

Twenty five years ago, Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge was inaugurated by Sir Edmund Hillary, his tall frame stooping to light the traditional votive lamp on the recently-laid slate veranda. That moment on 2 October 1998 was a culmination of many years of planning and imagining by many people. The hand-cut honey-coloured stone structures were made by local craftsmen and designed by Harvard architect Philip Beck, and landscaped to retain their natural wildness. Our stringent environmental ethos and sustainable tourism practices was ahead of its time. Tiger Mountain was designated the best ecolodge in the world by Conde Nast Traveler. “The most beautiful mountain lodge I have ever seen,” wrote Swiss Nepal expert Toni Hagen in the guest book.

One key person who was not at the opening event was Lt Col Jimmy Roberts, to whose foresight and vision Pokhara Lodge owed its origins. He never saw the finished result, having died the previous year. Col Jimmy’s stark black and white photographs still adorn the lodge walls. His mountaineering library occupies a cosy corner behind the reconstructed bar.

Col Jimmy was a Gurkha officer, early explorer and renowned mountaineer who bagged many Himalayan first ascents. He was shortlisted to lead the British expedition that climbed Mt Everest in 1953, and his team reached within 150 feet of the sacred summit of Machapuchre.

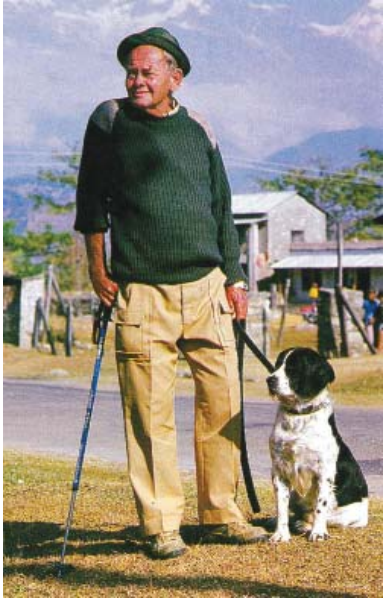
Lauded as the founder of trekking, Col Jimmy established Mountain Travel in 1964. He coined the word ‘trek’ for walking in the Himalaya — derived from a South African Boer dialect meaning ‘an arduous journey on foot’.

It was Col Jimmy who first recognised the unique qualities of the hilltop site: unimpeded views sweep from the lakes of Pokhara Valley to the soaring white summits that pierce the skyline from Dhaulagiri to Manaslu.

Col Jimmy was a crusty British colonel, unmarried, shy and solitary by nature, the only son of a Welsh headmaster in Gujarat. He followed an army career in India, Malaya and Singapore with a stint as Defence and Military attaché at the British Embassy in Kathmandu from 1958 to 1961.

Retiring to Pokhara after failing health and arthritic hips curtailed climbing and made even walking painful, he supervised the trekking teams, bred rare pheasants in his garden, produced quail eggs for Kathmandu restaurants, and was never without a succession of spaniels at his heels.

In December 1980, Mountain



ROOMS WITH VIEWS: Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge marks 25 years next week, and is located on a forested hilltop with a sweeping view of Pokhara's lakes and a panorama of the Annapurnas.

The spot for the hotel was chosen by Col Jimmy Roberts (above) who organised a trek for King Charles (then Prince of Wales) in 1980 (left).

Travel organised a four-day hike for King Charles III, then the Prince of Wales. Col Jimmy selected a pristine circuit passing along the Kandani Danda ridge and returning by boat across Lake Begnas. I recced the route with Pertemba Sherpa, one of Nepal’s leading sirdars.

The trail was lined with former-Gurkhas, villagers, and security. Since then, many visitors have traced the Royal Trek footsteps. Col Jimmy saw the potential of the first night stop as the perfect spot for guests to enjoy before or after an Annapurna trek, and for non-trekkers to soak in the ambiance of a Himalayan hill village.

He and Jim Edwards of Tiger Tops quietly purchased seven acres of terraces from local farmers. For many years the land lay fallow, far above any water supply, occasionally used for picnics or camping.

Construction started in 1997, and the original design ensured that local artisans were employed using adapted vernacular architectural styles, slate and stone from nearby quarries, and locally produced crafts and textiles.

Decor featured claret cloth of monk’s robes for bedspreads, dhaka cushion covers, hand woven carpets and local marble bathrooms. Rooms were bunched in bungalows resembling a Nepali village, with attached bathrooms, private verandas and Himalayan views. At various stages of work, monks and priests blessed the hilltop site.

Although the idea of hot tubs was abandoned as being too costly to the environment, the iconic salt-cleansed swimming pool has proven a perennial favourite with guests, mirroring the grandeur of the Annapurnas on its shimmering surface, providing drinks for birdlife and as a protection against fire. It has been voted in the UK Sunday Times’ top five cool pools.

Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge has hosted yoga weekends, meditation workshops and tantric retreats. Celebrity guests have included Reinhold Messner, Orlando Bloom and Ralph Fiennes.

King Birendra came on a day visit and Princess Anne spent several days as president of Save the Children. JK Rowling brought her family for breakfast in two helicopters. Isabella Tree stayed for several days and Alexander McCall-Smith came to write.

British Gurkhas bring their more discerning generals, and during Everest70 New Zealand prime minister Helen Clark came with her ornithologically-inclined husband who spotted numerous species, including Nepal’s sole endemic bird, the Spiny Babbler.

Pokhara Lodge has twice been threatened with alarming forest fires and has survived earthquakes, lightning strikes and dramatic mountain storms.

I endured the Millennium eve with no digital crash on the stroke of midnight, and we weathered the tragic decade of insurgency and one

of the first Maoist encounters with foreigners.

No one was harmed, or even much alarmed by their presence as resident guests confused the red bandanas, brandished khukris and flags as a cultural show. The Maoists carried off the terrace telescope, staff cameras, and the bulging contents of the end-of-season tip box.

To ensure a high quality guest experience, trained staff were initially shared from Tiger Tops as well as recruited locally, and today over three quarters of the original team are still with us.

As the adventure capital of Nepal, Pokhara offers mountain biking, horse rides, paragliding, micro-lighting, zip-lining, and visits to temples, museums and lake attractions.

Despite these temptations and lulled by views from the Lodge, many guests prefer to relax, read, use the wifi and be massaged beneath the snowy summits.

Wildlife populations have flourished within the extensive grounds. You may wake to the yelp of barking deer, birdsong from 361 species recorded on our bird list, and the silent flutter of 281 different butterflies.

Thesus and langur monkey, squirrel, mongoose, bats, yellow-throated marten, civets, jungle cat, can be sighted and even leopards who occasionally visit from the adjacent community forest.

Naturalists support wildlife

research with bird counts, monthly butterfly monitoring, and data collection for the Pokhara Valley.

Marcus Cotton, managing director since 2009, passionately upholds and expands on the eco-legacy and cultural integrity. He has ensured uncompromising preservation of wild nature, meticulous mentoring in the kitchen, wellbeing of the lodge team and their families, whilst holding forth to guests on the state of the universe.

The recent refurb and repositioning reinforce local styles and traditional materials with a fresh approach to light and colour, and sustainable standards that have characterised the lodge and appealed to guests for so long.

Col Jimmy Roberts never lived to see his dream realised in Pokhara Lodge, but he was prescient about forthcoming changes in mountain tourism. It might have seemed like a more innocent age but, even in the 1990s when Nepal’s visitors numbered a fraction of today, he lobbied for the advantages of quality high-value tourism: “Why are we selling our beautiful mountains so cheap?”

Trekking first brought me to Nepal and the spirit of the Himalaya is lodged deep in the hearts of my two sons, woven into the fabric of their childhood. Without Col Jimmy, and his stubborn persistence to realise his vision, things would not have been the same. 🇳🇵



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SAVING KANGCHENJUNGA

The biodiversity treasures of eastern Nepal are at risk from new roads, outmigration and climate change

■ Alton C Byers in Taplejung

REMOTE ROADS:

The imposing Kangchenjunga massif as seen from the North Base Camp region (main pic).

Steep switchbacks on a new road from Nepal over the Tiptola Pass up to Tibet. (above, left).

Four dzopkio carried the author's camping equipment, food, and research gear (above, right) with Mt Jannu soaring in the distance.

The Kangchenjunga region is where modern tourism first started in Nepal. As early as the mid-1800s, the region below the world's third-highest mountain had started seeing foreign expeditions.

The English botanist J D Hooker traveled throughout the Tamor, Ghunsa, and Yangma river valleys in 1849. 'Pundit' Sarad Chandra Das, one of the indigenous spies trained by the British Raj for clandestine mapping and intelligence work in Nepal and Tibet, visited the region in 1879, following the Chabuk Glacier north to cross into Tibet.

In 1884 Rinzing Namgyal completed the first recorded circumambulation of the Kangchenjunga massif. In 1899 the British mountaineer Sir Douglas Freshfield replicated Rinzing's journey with him, Italian photographer Victorio Sella, Sella's brother, and other notable mountaineers of the time.

But it was not until 1955 that Kangchenjunga was first climbed by George Band and Joe Brown. Since then, more than 350 climbers have made it to Kangchenjunga's various summits.

Trekking tourism began in earnest in 1984 when the region was first opened to foreign

groups and has averaged only a few hundred tourists per year since 2010. Till last year, most trekkers said they decided to come here because it was the last mountain area in Nepal without a road. That is changing.

The region is actively undergoing more environmental, socio-economic, and cultural changes during the past 10 years, more so than anytime previously in Nepal's 250-year history as a unified nation.

The alpine shrub juniper and dwarf rhododendron throughout the Kangchenjunga Conservation Area (KCA) are in surprisingly good condition, in spite of the hundreds of years of harvesting by yak herders and villagers for fuel, incense, and to increase pasture area.

This is largely reflective of low tourism, decreasing livestock numbers, and extremely wet environments found in the KCA.

Humid environments tend to be more forgiving of human and cattle disturbances while promoting the rapid re-establishment of protective ground cover such as herbs and grasses.

Populations of yaks, dzopkio, and other livestock are rapidly decreasing, as they are throughout much of the Nepal Himalaya

due partly to labour shortages because of the outmigration of young people, and also herds being sold for meat in Tibet as well as changing lifestyles.

Young people have been leaving the KCA for jobs in Kathmandu and overseas since the early 1990s, a process that intensified during the Maoist insurgency between 1996-2006. Most of the remaining inhabitants in villages such as Ghunsa are elderly, with the exception of a few younger lodge owners who can make their living from tourism.

Climate change and warming trends are accelerating the glacier melt, processes already noted by Hooker in 1849 and Freshfield in 1899. Since then, the problem has become more acute and potentially catastrophic. Glacial floods, rockfalls and ice-debris avalanches have increased the vulnerability of local populations.

Villages need to start thinking about mitigating and preventing the impact of floods by building gabions along river channels, moving structures away from vulnerable areas and monitoring threatening glacial lakes and other dangerous features.

Himalayan fir (*Abies spectabilis*), an IUCN Red List species, is being overharvested, as





ALL PHOTOS: ALTON C BYERS

are many other rare and medicinal alpine plants. This trend will be exacerbated by the construction of the new proposed roads and the easier accessibility to formerly remote regions which they provide.

The most striking change in the KCA, and one with social and environmental impact, has been the construction of new roads throughout the Taplejung district during the past 10 years which are now beginning to encroach into the KCA.

The perceived benefits of roads have typically included increased access and connectivity for rural populations, employment opportunities and health benefits.

Hastily bulldozed roads are also now encroaching into national parks and protected areas, with little concern for old growth forests, wildlife, local economy, traditional cultures, and the future of adventure tourism.

Many of these changes are happening throughout Nepal. New highways, transmission lines, irrigation canals and even new railways are crisscrossing national parks and protected areas.

Poaching is reduced, but infrastructure is the new threat to Nepal's conservation.

But it is still not too late for Kangchenjunga. The region differs from others because there is still time to assess the feasibility of new roads and their environmental and socio-economic impacts.

KCA could choose to remain a 'traditional' protected area only for foot and beast of burden travel, thus making it unique in Nepal's rapidly diminishing roadless protected areas.

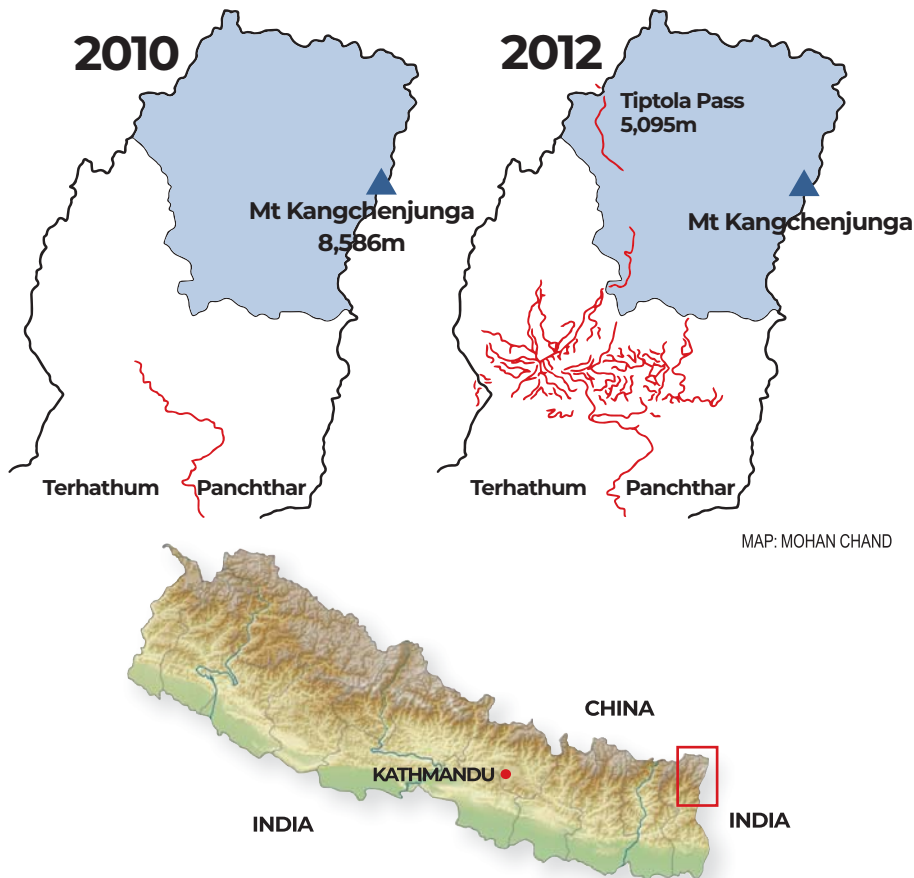
Increased visitation would directly benefit local cottage industries like handicrafts, fresh vegetable production, milk and dairy products, pack animal rental, and others.

A functioning natural history museum and interpretation centre in Ghunsa and elsewhere could educate visitors about the rich and unique flora and fauna of the region. 🇳🇵

Alton C. Byers, PhD is a senior research scientist at INSTAAR, University of Colorado at Boulder in the United States. In 2022, he and his botanist wife Elizabeth spent six months in the KCA documenting and quantifying contemporary threats to the KCA's alpine zone under a Fulbright project. Byers has been involved in other initiatives that are still running in the Everest, Makalu-Barun and Peru's Cordillera Blanca funded by the National Geographic.

KANGCHENJUNGA CONSERVATION AREA

The spread of the road network (red lines) in the last 12 years has been rapid, threatening the region's rich biodiversity.



MAP: MOHAN CHAND

Land above the trees

The Kangchenjunga Conservation Area (KCA), established in 1997, is spread across 2,035km² of protected area in easternmost Nepal. It was turned over to local communities in 2006 as Nepal's first community-managed protected area.

It is home to the world's third-highest mountain, Kangchenjunga at 8,586m, once thought to be the highest in the world because of its massive summit ridge and visibility from Darjeeling.

The region is also believed to conceal a beyul, or hidden valley of treasure and immortality containing sacred teachings that will be revealed to the devout in times of trouble.

Elevations in the KCA range from subtropical forests below 1,000m, the fir/birch/rhododendron forests in the subalpine, dwarf vegetation of the alpine zone, to the 8,586m summit of Kangchenjunga, all within a horizontal distance of less than 30km.

KCA is one of the last remaining refuges for the rare Red Panda, whose remnant populations live in remote conifer-bamboo forests. Himalayan Black Bear, Common Leopard, Red Dog, Palm Civet, and Yellow-throated Martin are more common, inhabiting both forest and farmland where they can often be a problem for local farmers and their livestock and crops.

Large populations of Blue Sheep can be found in nearly every side valley encountered and are a good indicator of the presence of Snow Leopards.



EVENTS



Wedding Album

Katha Ghera’s play will bring to life Indian actor and film director and playwright Girish Karnad’s Wedding Album—translated by Akanchha Karki—to the stage. Till 14 October, Kausi Theatre, Teku

Art Exhibition

Stop by Nepal Art Council to see Kathmandu Valley represented in the latest exhibition, Hamro Ramro Upatyaka on the occasion of Indra Jatra. 29 September, Nepal Art Council, Baber Mahal



Weekend 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, Le Sherpa Maharajgunj

Cultural Carnival

Rotaract’s Cultural Carnival at Patan Museum will celebrate Nepal’s culture and heritage, as well as showcase local treasures. 30 September, 9am, Patan Museum



Biennale Jogja 17

The Biennale Jogja 17 2023 will include art and artists from across South Asia, including several from Nepal’s art community. 6 October onwards

DINING



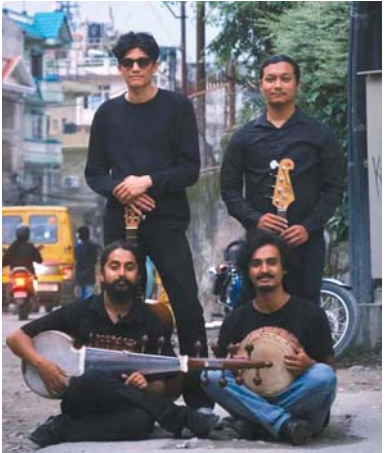
Achaar Ghar

At Achaar Ghar, get home-cooked meals along with the various choices of pickles prepared using recipes passed down from generations. Kamalpokhari (01) 5916968

MUSIC

Rock n’ Roll anniversary

Celebrate 50 years of rock n’ roll in Nepal with The HeartBreakers live at Hard Rock Cafe. Call to book a table. 29 September, Hard Rock Cafe, Darbar Marg, 9801986771



Sonāgi Blues

Sonāgi Blues’ draw creative inspiration from folk, rock, and shastriya sangeet to tell stories through traditional rhythms. Watch the group perform this weekend. 30 September, 8pm, Jazz Upstairs, Lazimpat



Killmandu Deathfest

Killmandu Deathfest 2023, a celebration of Death Metal, will see bands from India, Nepal, and Bangladesh including Karmant, Secrets of Silence, Krur, Sharabha and more. 30 September, Beers N’ Cheers, Jhamsikhel



Trio no Treble

String trio Trio no Treble from Norway, is set to tour Nepal with four concerts. The group will also play school concerts, a concert with Annapurna Chamber Orchestra, and one concert with musician Rachana Dahal. 1-8 October

Acoustic Music

Grab some drinks, and spend a musical evening with friends and loved ones this weekend as The Clean Tone play live acoustic music. 29 September, 7pm onwards, Jatra Cafe and Bar



Chez Caroline

Tucked away from the street noise and fumes, Chez Caroline is the place to visit for authentic French and continental cuisine in Nepal. Try the Profiteroles au Chocolat and Choux pastry filled with vanilla ice cream and hot chocolate sauce. Baber Mahal Revisited (01) 4263070

The Coffee Shop

For a good cup of coffee and freshly baked goods on white linen, The Coffee Shop is the place to be. Try their croissants the next time you’re there. Annapurna Hotel, Darbar Marg (01) 4221711

About Town

GETAWAY



Hotel Country Villa

A natural retreat for those wishing to escape the pandemonium of the city, Country Villa provides views of greenery, sunrise and sunset, and showcases mountains on clear days. A natural and relaxing retreat for those wishing to escape the pandemonium of the city. Nagarkot (01) 6680127

Himalayan Front Hotel

Sarangkot’s Himalayan Front Hotel overlooks the Annapurna range and Phewa Lake. With luxury rooms, and sunset views, it is the ideal place to unwind. Sarangkot, Pokhara, 9801166350



Borderlands Eco Resort

Eco-adventures await in the wild nature of Borderlands Eco Resort. Getaway for the weekend to embrace your inner daredevil. Sindhupalchok, 9802025888

Godavari Village Resort

Spread over 14 lush green acres, the resort offers mountain views and traditionally-styled cottages and buildings overlooking rice fields. Godavari (01) 5560675



Kasara Resort

Kasara offers a luxurious, comfortable stay in the lush natural setting in the heart of Chitwan National Park. Guests can engage in activities including cycling and wildlife viewing. Pathani, Chitwan National Park (01) 5909980

Fire and Ice

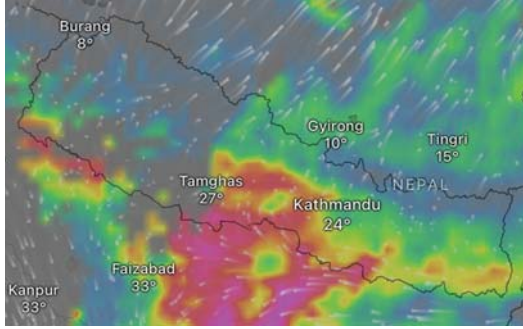
One of the first pizzerias in Kathmandu, Fire and Ice offers genuine Napolitana pizza and dozens of variants to choose from. Try the paesane, a combination of mozzarella, spinach, courgette and bacon. Thamel (01) 5350210



Kyubi’s Kitchen

For customisable bowls of noodles, platters filled to the brim with dumplings, spicy noodles, kimbap, corn dogs, da-pow and more, Kyubi’s Kitchen is the place to go. Jhamsikhel, 9803484452

WEEKEND WEATHER



FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY
 29° 18°	 29° 18°	 29° 19°	 29° 18°	 27° 18°

Still wet

The monsoonal trough that traversed central India this week is now being blown back by a nascent jetstream. While this should usually mean dry weather, the system has a lot of moisture which will then be dumped as passing showers along the Himalaya mostly during the weekend and early next week. After that we should have more normal Dasain weather. It will be hot and muggy when the sun comes out due to high humidity levels.

OUR PICK

One Piece, the live action adaptation of Eiichiro Oda’s acclaimed manga series of the same name, follows young pirate captain Monkey D. Luffy and his Straw Hat Pirates as they explore a world of dangerous and mysterious oceans and islands in search of ‘One Piece’—the ultimate treasure that grants its finder the title of the next Pirate King. But as Luffy and his crew set out in search of the treasure, so do another crew, The Marines, and other nefarious characters that the Staw Hats must race to the finish. Stars Iñaki Godoy, Emily Rudd, Mackenyu, Jacob Romero Gibson, and Taz Skylar.



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

Katha Ghera’s latest adapted play reflects modern marriages and family dynamics in Nepal

■ Ashim Timalisina

A couple enter the third decade of marriage even as their eldest daughter finds herself trapped in a failing one. The son doesn’t want to be hitched, while the youngest daughter is enthusiastic about her upcoming arranged marriage. On the stage of Kausi Theatre this is a microcosm of marriages in contemporary Nepal, acted out in a two-hour play. Bidushi (Ranjana Bhattarai), the youngest daughter of Rukmani (Loonibha Tuladhar) and Krishna Koirala (Aashant Sharma), is getting married to a US-based man who she has never met before. The family has come together for the wedding, with Hema (Kenipa Singh) making the trip from Australia to be part of the celebration. Her husband, still in Australia, is not in touch with her. Amid wedding preparations, their sibling Rohit (Sudam Ck) tries to reconcile his own relationship with his girlfriend to the other marriage proposals coming his way. Meanwhile, Rukmani and Krishna’s own 30-year marriage is tainted by Krishna’s past abuse of his wife. There is added tension in the home because of the strained



KATHA GHERA

relationship between Rukmani and Kusum Didi, the Koiralas’ housekeeper. Wedding Album is directed by Katha Ghera co-founder Akanchha Karki, who also adapted the play into Nepali from Indian actor and dramatist Girish Karnad’s 2011 play in Kannada, which Karnad translated into English himself. Against the backdrop of the various conjugal conflicts, director Karki gets the cast to tackle issues including mental health, misogyny, domestic abuse, sexual violence, self-worth, and the female psyche.

As individual stories and hidden truths of each of the family members unfold, Karki weaves these issues through their interaction with each other—showing how each personality constantly contradicts itself. For instance, Bidushi is headstrong, outspoken, progressive, sexually liberated. She confronts men who assault her in a cafe. Yet she is ready to be married off to someone she has never met. She is unable to understand why her sister is in an unhappy marriage. Hema lives with her family

in Australia but is not more tolerant. She still disapproves of her brother’s Christian girlfriend. She is aware, but silent about her father’s abuse of her mother. Even as she tells her sister it is ok to leave the relationship if she is not happy with her soon-to-be partner, she struggles to comprehend that she could leave her own crumbling marriage. Middle child Rohit plays the ideal, responsible, long-suffering son fending off unwanted marriage proposals. But his personality is transformed once out of the



Director Akanchha Karki

home. He also agrees that his sister Bidushi should leave her husband if the relationship breaks down, but mistreats his own girlfriend. The Koiralas are educated and ‘liberal’, but still willing to marry off their daughter to someone they have not met before. They are not impervious to the wastefulness and spectacle of extravagant South Asian weddings meant to show off wealth, rather than a contained celebration of love. The strength of the play is in its cast. Loonibha Tuladhar and Aashant Sharma are brilliant as Rukmani and Krishna, while Kenipa Singh, Sudam Ck, and Ranjana Bhattarai hold their own as the three siblings. The supporting cast is solid, if a bit melodramatic. The clever staging and set design enhance the production. Director Karki does not employ unnecessary movement, props and music have been used sparingly. At the end of the play, there are a lot of loose ends in the stories of the siblings and parents. Perhaps as in life itself. 🇳🇵

Wedding Album will play at Kausi Theatre in Teku until 14 October.



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“Money is not everything, but you



DIASPORA
DIARIES 41-42

A Nepali geologist’s career takes a new turn after years flipping burgers in Dubai

■ Rohit Shrestha

This is the 41st edition of Diaspora Diaries, a regular series in Nepali Times with stories of Nepalis who have lived or are working abroad.

I still remember the blast of hot air that enveloped me when the airport door slid open at Dubai airport that afternoon 20 years ago.

I was immediately worried whether it was the right decision to go to the UAE for work. I was there to flip burgers, much to the dismay of my parents who had invested in my education.

But my Master’s in Geology from India did not amount to much in Nepal. Oil companies in India prioritised locals, so I had to return to Nepal.

I still remember entering the

premises of the Department of Geology and Mines in Kathmandu with the hopes of getting a job. But the lethargy and broken furniture there put me off, I did not want to work in such a place.

I then took on odd jobs, teaching math and science. My father suggested I could be a lecturer in geology, but how could I inspire people to join a field in which I saw no potential for myself?

They say money is not everything, but you need money for everything. So, after two years, I found myself interviewing for a job at Burger King in the UAE.

The country manager had come to Kathmandu himself for the interview. He told me that I could achieve the same success as another Nepali he had employed in the UAE if I worked hard. My educational background and language skills would be an advantage, he said.

But he told me to be realistic about my expectations. I would have to be ready to do even menial tasks, like cleaning restrooms.

Foreign workers are usually housed in labour camps in the UAE’s industrial areas, segregated from the rest of the population. I was lucky to be put up in a flat in the middle of the city on the 16th floor of a high rise.

In the morning after my arrival in Dubai I marvelled at how high we were, and watched the cars below that looked like toys.

At Burger King, everything was by the book. There were specifications and instructions for all functions, from how to wash hands to how to thaw condiments. As a science student I was intrigued.

It was not easy, especially in the early days. Standing for nine hours



a day as a crew member in a fast-paced environment can be stressful, especially if you are not used to working at all.

Once the restaurant opened for business, customer flow was constant. In the beginning, I could barely stand by the end of the day and my hands would be stiff. It felt like every cell in my feet was hurting.

Even on my days off, I visited the restaurant to read the Burger King manual like a textbook. I

found it fascinating how specific it was about standards covering practically every aspect of the burger making process.

Perhaps my science degree came in handy after all, helping me grasp details faster than the average employee. I soon became the go-to guy at work. I got 100% in all internal exams required for the job.

Doing well in these exams or getting awards in the company positioned me for quicker promotions, but once you hit

managerial posts, certificates and training did not matter as it was all about the outlets’ performance and numbers.

I once caught a cold as my body wasn’t able to handle the frequent changes between the AC inside and the outside heat. Back in Nepal, this would have been enough to keep me in bed.

There, I somehow made it to work and got so busy that by the time I was done with my shift, the cold would be gone. I worked

From retail to selling

Most migrants buy land with their earning but a Dubai-returnee came back empty handed to launch a tea business

■ Gautam Guvaju

This is the 42nd edition of Diaspora Diaries.

Even as a kid, I could feel my family’s standard of living improve when my father left for Iraq after his trucking business in Nepal failed.

It crept up in small ways. Instead of five rupees for lunch money, I now got ten. Or the clothes my mother bought me were of a better quality. Birthday celebrations got more elaborate.

Immediately after Iraq, my father hopped on a plane to the UAE to work at an Abu Dhabi-based hospital as a supervisor of security guards. It was a relatively easy job, and the money was good.

I am not sure why, but the UAE has fascinated me ever since. I suppose part of it has to do with familiarity, as I watched YouTube videos from a young age to learn more about the country where my father was working.

When family members encouraged me to go to Australia or the UK for further studies, I figured the UAE was a better option as I did not want to spend my father’s hard-earned money to go elsewhere. I was well aware of his struggle and sacrifice, and the UAE felt like a better fit.

After my 12th, I headed to the UAE on a family visa that my father arranged. On my second day in Dubai, I passed a walk-in interview for a salesman job at a retail store. I also did my Bachelor’s in Business Administration over weekends.

I was hired as a salesman at a clothing company, but most of my responsibilities were of a stock boy. One day I got the chance to showcase my salesmanship to the higher ups at a sales event at the World Trade Centre in Dubai. Impressed, they pushed me to take on more front-desk and sales related tasks.

I outperformed my peers, but I was still not satisfied. My next goal was to become a store manager. I took it upon myself to learn various skills including bookkeeping, merchandising, setting schedules of staff and preparing sales reports.

To learn these skills, I arrived at the store before opening and left after closing. Those extra hours did not translate to overtime pay, still I left the store only to sleep.

I saw the fruits of my labour when my sales numbers landed me



need money for everything”



myself and my cold to death. My hard work paid off. When I was promoted to Assistant Manager in two years, I was described as the fastest-developing crew member to assistant manager in Burger King Middle East history. I still recall reading that email in tears right before my shift started. It helped that there were managers who were genuinely invested in my growth. Duty meals were free for

employees, so I ended up eating burgers every day from 2003 to 2009. I once calculated that I must have eaten about 2,028 of them — but the hard work kept me from gaining weight. Burger King gave me more than just a good job. It is where I fell in love with my wife, who was also making a future for herself in the same restaurant. I then jumped ship to Subway where I worked as an Area Manager for two years. This experience was

different because Subway did not have the same strict specifications as Burger King, and gave me room to apply what I had learnt there. I was then hired by the Swedish chain Max Burger to establish a presence in the UAE. Its operating style relied on common sense rather than strict specifications. It had the same feel as grandmothers who run kitchens using intuition and common sense, which I quite liked. I had experience handling high volumes, including full destination

restaurants with drive through, delivery and takeout. I was also a certified restaurant trainer. As someone who had started out with a monthly salary of AED900, I was now making over 12,000. I had the savings and the skills, but like all migrant workers, I was working for someone else and had started questioning myself — till when? Whenever we came to Nepal on breaks and satisfied our momo and chow mein cravings, we would be on the lookout for burgers. But we

were never satisfied with the burgers here, which is what gave us the idea of starting a burger place in Nepal. My parents were getting older, and my father's health had started failing. As an only child, I decided to head home. My wife and son returned first, and I followed. I got on the plane to Nepal with no regrets about leaving the place I had worked in for 11 years. I set up Burger Shack in Nepal in 2014. My parents, who had initially questioned why I was going abroad to make burgers, now started expressing concern about why I wanted to sell only burgers and not momos. Despite my experience in three fast food restaurants overseas, running a restaurant in Nepal was a different proposition altogether. Even finding the right kind of buns and patties was a challenge. I had to improvise every step of the way. Fortunately, business is doing well and we now have three branches including one franchise. Customers say we are the closest thing to McDonald's in Nepal. Had I not gone overseas for work, I would probably still be doing something on my own — perhaps a small grocery shop or a momo restaurant. But the experience in the UAE gave me capital and skills. I am the first person in my risk-averse family to start a business. I learnt in those few years abroad more practical lessons than I did from my formal education. It was important to pick up technical skills, and use them to build a niche for myself in Nepal. Going overseas means access to a platform and new possibilities, but in the final analysis it boils down to what you make of it. Dubai feels like a dream now. 🇦🇪

chiya



opportunities to train new hires at the company headquarters. The networking allowed me to get a store manager job at our branch at the Ibn Battuta Mall. Nepalis are indeed a hard-working, honest bunch--there is a reason why we have built a strong reputation abroad amongst employers. I did not get to meet my father often as he was based in Abu Dhabi and I was in Dubai. His schedule was more flexible, so he would sometimes come to see me and we would go eat at Nepali restaurants. I did not share my struggles in the UAE with my father, I just wanted him to know the happy bits. Life in Dubai was not easy. There were eight of us from five nationalities crammed into a small room. I decided with a fellow Nepali to get our own place. It was a tiny room that had just enough space for a bunk bed and a small fridge. We lived frugally, a large chunk of my earnings went on rent and school fees. Living paycheck by paycheck meant starting off the month strong and running dry as it ended. Towards the end of the month, I would have to resort to loans from friends, and had to stop eating out and innovate to make food last longer by adding water to fried lentils bought in the market for one dirham, or live off white rice and fried sausages, which cost peanuts. After the store manager job, I started to dream bigger. I was transferred to the head office and had my eyes on the area manager role. But I also had other aspirations that would interrupt my career progression. I started toying with the idea of returning to Nepal.

I was in my mid-20s, and there was pressure to get married and have children. With those added responsibilities, I would not be able to make a risky career path like entrepreneurship, my calling. I had witnessed what was possible with hard work in Dubai during my 3.5 years there. I figured if I failed in Nepal, I could always return. It was not easy to convince my family, they wanted me to head to greener pastures like the US or Australia and not return to Nepal. Many returning Nepalis who muster the courage to call it quits and come home are usually backed by savings accumulated abroad. Not me. I had no savings, only courage. I had learnt to work hard in Dubai, and had built the confidence to deal with people from diverse backgrounds. Even as I took my Nepal-bound flight, I knew that I would be coming back to Dubai one day, either as a tourist or for a job. I knew this wasn't the final goodbye to the place that had been home. In Nepal I tried my hand at two different clothing lines, given my retail background. On a trip to India to buy fabric for our clothing business, Jama Store, I remember waiting in line for tea every morning at a tea stall. Chhotu, the young tea seller, drew quite a crowd every morning. Intrigued, my friend Ritu Karmacharya and I spoke with Chhotu who excitedly demonstrated how he prepared his tea, and what made it so special. This struck a chord, and we considered the possibility of starting a tea place in Nepal. We also noticed many classy tea cafes in India as we walked around. Once we returned, we visited places in

Nepal and realised that there was scope for this venture in Nepal too. Ritu's sister, a US returnee, also suggested that there were such elegant tea places in New York with vibrant Moroccan decor and floor seating arrangements, encouraging us to pursue something similar. We had no money, so I reached out to my family members in Kuwait and the UAE who agreed to become part investors. We found a vacant place in Kumaripati and renovated it. Chiya Spot was born and we started selling tea. Our speciality? Chhotu's tea in honor of the boy from Delhi who inspired us. At first, we made do with three or four packets of milk every day to serve our customers. But unbeknownst to us, the famous food vlogger Mr Foodie Nepal featured our café. It blew up on social media and we started getting loads of customers. We could not keep up and had to expand our space to accommodate more customers. Most recently, we have also opened a new branch in Boudha. While the Kumaripati branch is inspired by Moroccan/Jaipuri decor, the cafe in Boudha reflects Middle Eastern design, in particular from Dubai. I remember going to Dubai Gold Souk whenever I had a few hours off to relax in the market and grabbing a bite with a friend at a Nepali restaurant. Now, I have brought a little piece of Old Dubai back home to Nepal at the new café, to be enjoyed with karak chai that is famous there. While the vlogger Mr Foodie Nepal's post helped draw customers to Kumaripati, my sisters' social

media posts on the Boudha branch accidentally went viral on TikTok. We got so many customers that it got unmanageable, and this even translated to angry posts and reviews as people were not happy with the wait. We were expecting our customer base to increase organically over time, not overnight. Such is the power of social media. For both good and bad. We quickly added staff and are learning every day to improve our service. I had never, in my wildest imagination, thought I would be leaving retail to sell tea one day. But both branches are doing well, Inshallah. We try to create a space for people to relax over tea, conversations, or board games without putting pressure on them to leave or order more items. As long as people are happy, the customer volume or finances will automatically work themselves out, as they have over the past three years. We want to fill the niche left by restaurants that either offer great ambience or reasonable prices, which we don't believe have to be mutually exclusive. Many migrants spend a large chunk of their remittances to buy land or build houses in Nepal. I returned to Nepal empty-handed. But with my earnings here, I have managed to contribute significantly to my parents' new house, and I could not be prouder. 🇳🇵

Both pieces are translated from a conversation with the author. 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



Nothing artificial about his intelligence

Researcher devises affordable scientific applications for Nepalis



■ **Yugottam Koirala**

During his postdoctoral research in London, Bishesh Khanal (pictured, right) was trying to build a robot to perform automated ultrasound scans. He remembers thinking Nepal could not afford such expensive robots, how about a simple device for non-experts in remote areas to do ultrasounds?

This was not a new idea for Khanal. While pursuing his PhD in a research lab in France, he had tried to find appropriate healthcare solutions for low and middle income countries.

"We saw powerful countries racing to make Covid jabs after the virus threatened them, but other

lethal diseases like dengue and malaria that affect poorer countries are neglected," Khanal says.

As an engineering student in Kathmandu, Khanal already knew Nepal was ill-equipped in research and development. Even the Institute of Engineering lacked opportunities for students to foster innovation.

Khanal returned to Nepal, and established NAAMII (Nepal Applied Mathematics and Informatics Institute for Research) to explore areas where technology, specifically Artificial Intelligence, could help make a difference.

In Europe, Khanal had friends and colleagues who shared his belief in using technologies like AI models to help solve some of Nepal's most basic problems from

access to healthcare to governance and cyber-security.

"We all agreed that harnessing that potential in research could change things," Khanal recalls.

Nepal's universities lack opportunities to institutionalise STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) research. Khanal and his team knew that trying to bring change at the university level would lead nowhere. So they settled on a second option: starting a small and focussed centre to catalyse change.

NAAMII is a private, not-for-profit research organisation with the mission to build a foundation of scientific research in Nepal in informatics, applied math, and AI.

NAAMII's research integrates

AI, computing and robotics to tackle some of the most pressing challenges in healthcare, agriculture and governance.

One ongoing project helps the public get reliable sexual, reproductive and maternal health information through ChatGPT.

Another project is developing an AI system that can take x-ray images from different angles to accurately reconstruct 3D bone structures, enabling proper diagnosis and treatment planning. Unlike a CT-scan, this technology can be a more accessible and affordable option in Nepal.

"We dissect every problem to see exactly where technology and AI can fit in, and we put accessibility and affordability front

and centre," explains Khanal.

As Nepal jumps on the AI bandwagon, the NAAMII team is also engaged in outreach and educational programs to help young Nepalis build foundational knowledge in AI, mathematics and machine learning.

Its Annual Nepal AI School is a dynamic forum that brings together global experts, researchers, and enthusiasts to review AI advancements (pictured, above).

Over the past four years, NAAMII has seen more than 500 participants from more than 25 countries come to Nepal to learn from experts. Says Khanal: "Nepal is already a hub for AI learning." 🇳🇵







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