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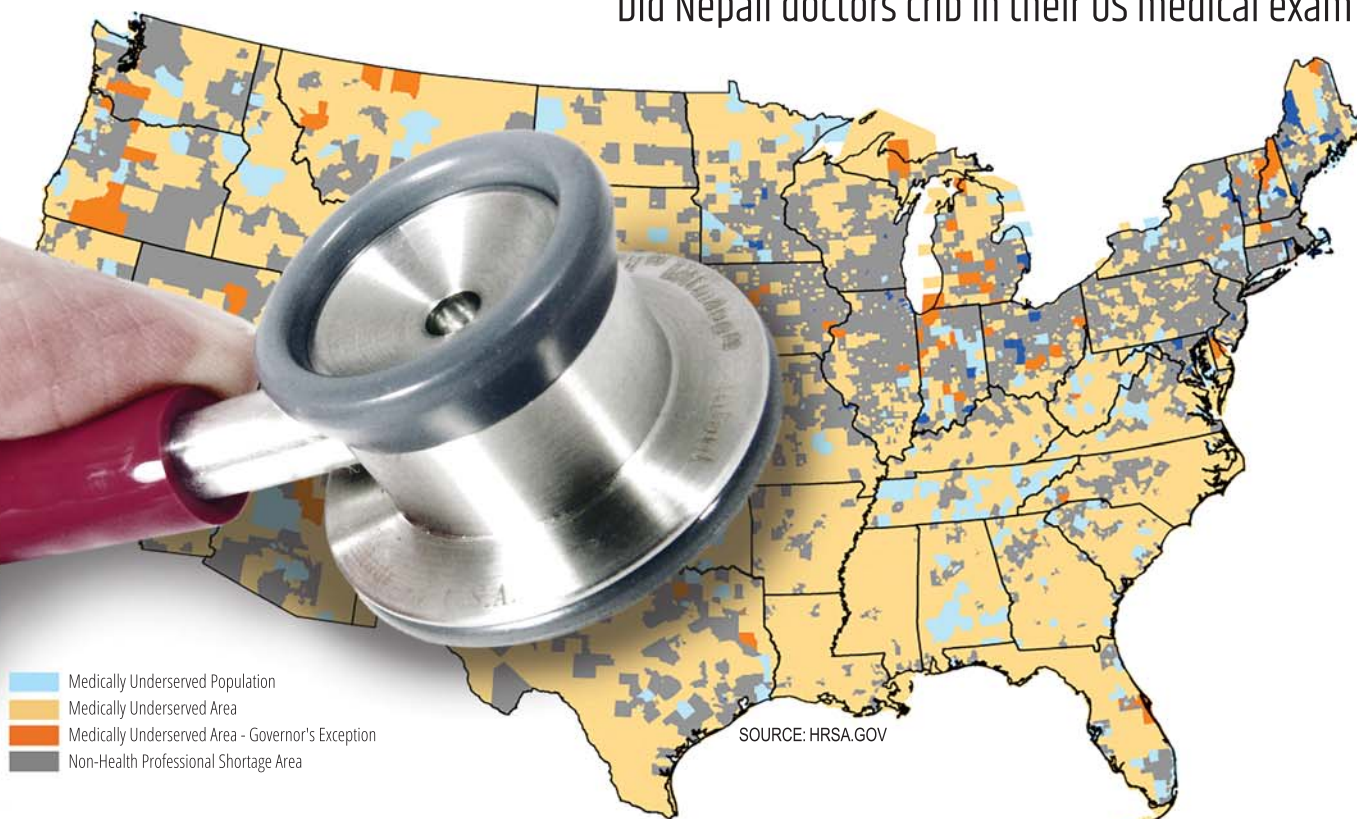
9 - 15 February 2024

12 pages

Rs 50

Cheated out of the American Dream

Did Nepali doctors crib in their US medical exam?



■ Medically Underserved Population
■ Medically Underserved Area
■ Medically Underserved Area - Governor's Exception
■ Non-Health Professional Shortage Area

SOURCE: HRSA.GOV

■ Sonia Awale

The United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) is a test that those who want to practice medicine in America have to pass. A growing number of Nepalis have been taking the test to emigrate to the US.

Last week, USMLE invalidated test results of some 800 Nepali doctors because of 'unusual score patterns or variations'.

"The USMLE program has identified a pattern of anomalous exam performance associated with Nepal, which challenges the validity of test results for a group of examinees," its statement said.

Essentially, USMLE was accusing Nepali doctors of having prior knowledge of questions. This sparked outrage among Nepalis in the United States who say it tainted the country's image, and besides there is no way the test questions can be 'leaked'.

Ramu Kharel is an emergency medicine physician and assistant professor at Brown University. He told us, "We care for the integrity of the program, and do not condone cheating in any form but the decision is not backed by strong evidence and creates biases when there is already a lot of brewing anti-immigrant sentiment."

Kharel reached out to the

USMLE director who told him it was 'an ongoing investigation'.

"And yet they put out a blanket statement that has tarnished an entire country's image as well as the credibility of practicing Nepali doctors who have done a lot of good work in the US."

Several international doctors in the United States back this up, saying irregularities should have been addressed individually instead of singling out a whole country.

Kharel started a petition calling on USMLE to redact or change the statement, and has over 2,500 signatories already. He has approached the Nepali physicians' group in the US as well as the America Nepal Medical Foundation seeking legal counsel.

"The damage is already done, but USMLE at the very least needs to immediately revise its statement and issue a formal apology," says Kharel. "The truth is that Nepalis are generally well-liked here."

A week before the USMLE statement, Nepali Times published a report about doctors emigrating to the US, UK, Canada, Australia and the Gulf, leading to a shortage of specialists in Nepal and weakening an already fragile medical system.

Nepal has an annual turnover of nearly 2,500 MBBS graduates, yet the country faces a severe shortage of doctors. The Nepal Medical Council says 36% of doctors have emigrated, but that seems to be an undercount.

Between April-December 2023, 1,025 physicians left Nepal. Since 2020, 1,578 doctors have emigrated to the UK, and 888 to the US.

There are many push factors, but the lack of professional fulfilment in Nepal is the biggest. Equally strong is the pull of the American dream, with even unskilled Nepalis paying up to Rs6 million to human traffickers to take the illegal backdoor to the US.

Emigrating doctors may earn more than in Nepal, but international medical graduates in the US often do not get to practice specialised medicine of their choice, and are relegated to long hours as general physicians.

"Nepali doctors are emigrating essentially for thankless, blue-collar jobs," says Bishal Dhakal, cardiac surgeon and founder of Health At Home in Kathmandu. "They do not make a lot of money by American standards and are doing jobs that American doctors do not want to do. Which is why Nepalis being accused of cheating is so tragic."

Even so, the Medscape medical news website on 1 February states that selling and buying USMLE questions online have become rampant with test questions selling for anywhere from \$300 to \$2,000.

An Indian doctor Ahmad Ozair at Johns Hopkins says his suspicions were aroused when he saw several students from one medical school in Nepal, posting on social media about scoring up to 280-plus.

"The statistical probability that you would have three or more candidates in the same year, scoring in the 99th percentile worldwide, from a small geographical area is extremely low," Ozair said to Medscape. Others say the USMLE recall of Nepali test takers was not an ordinary one, and there is photographic evidence of questions leaked at exam centres.

The fact that Nepal's university exams have regular scandals of 'question outs' gave credence to accusations of Nepali cheaters.

Medical educator Conrad Fisher of MedQuest Test Prep questioned in an X post the high performance of Nepalis: 'Of 138 with >275 applying to my program, 86% are Nepali. Of the top 100 applicant scores 92% are Nepali.'

But Bishal Dhakal says Nepalis are used to practicing for exams based on past tests, and it is unfair for USMLE to call it cheating just because of high scores. "If there is an issue with exam centres, that should be dealt with separately without dragging the whole country into it," he adds.

An increasing number of Nepali doctors passing USMLE tests with high marks seems to be making some international graduates in America insecure. He adds, "We are sending our smartest doctors to America, and that didn't sit well with those benefiting from the Subcontinent quota. A small country is being singled out."



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Nagmati won't clean Bagmati

Over the last three decades, Nepal's national government has spent Rs2.1 billion to beautify the holy river that flows through the capital. The Bagmati is still a cesspool. Now, the government wants to take a big loan to build a 95m high dam inside the Shivapuri-Nagarjun National Park to flush the river.

As we reported in this paper last week (Dam Dangerous), it is an expensive bad idea. The reservoir carries seismic, ecological and financial risk.

So far, attempts to rehabilitating the river have resulted in constricting its flow into narrow canyons, building walkways and planting trees along its banks. To be fair, the Bagmati would be uglier without these half-complete measures. But storing monsoon water to regulate the flow of the Bagmati will not clean it up if we keep on dumping the city's sewage and garbage into it.

The new Rs25 billion project funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to build the dam is being justified because 'there is no other viable option to preserve the Bagmati civilisation'.

The proposed dam on the Nagmati stream which is a tributary of the Bagmati in the dense forest of the national park (pictured) will be just 18km upstream from the city centre. It will create a reservoir 50 hectares in area.

When released in the dry season, the stored water is supposed to wash away the waste, flush the stench of sewage, and raise the level of the aquifer. However, no amount of water released into the Bagmati will clean it as long as it continues to be a sewage canal and a dumping ground for solid waste.

Even the project's Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report concedes that the quality of water in Bagmati can only be restored by blocking the direct discharge of sewers into the river.

We talked to engineer and former joint secretary at the Ministry of Drinking Water Rajan Pandey. He has calculated that even when 450 l/s of water is released from the reservoir, it will only raise the water level in the river by 3cm.

Officials directly involved admit that water released from the dam will not be sufficient to purify the Bagmati, but argue that it will "dilute the pollution" and buy time to divert sewers to wastewater treatment plants. But the construction of that system has already been delayed by more than 30 years.

As Nagendra Sitoula of Tribhuvan University Institute of Engineering Studies told us, "The Nagmati dam is like pouring a bucket of clean water into a tank full of dirty water in an attempt to clean it up. It is pointless."

Pollution in water bodies is measured with a unit called Biological Oxygen Demand (BOD) representing the amount of biodegradable organic matter in the water. The higher the BOD, the more polluted the water.

Drinking water has a BOD of 1 ppm (parts per million). At Sundarijal, the Bagmati has a BOD of 2 ppm, and a dry season measurement of the river after it has flowed through the city at Chobhar last year showed 340 ppm. It is clear that no amount of water released from the proposed dam will dilute the Bagmati's contamination.

The Nagmati Dam will be a white elephant nearly as expensive as Pokhara airport, and similarly will have no immediate economic return. The Rs25 billion (\$189 million) loan to finance this project will increase the inter-generational debt burden of Nepal.

Rs25 billion could build 500km of two-lane black-topped highways connecting Nepal's remote districts, or irrigate one-third of Nepal's arable land increasing food production. Instead, the money is being lavished on an already pampered capital.

The disaster in 2021 that nearly destroyed the \$800 million Melamchi project supplying drinking water to Kathmandu should have been a lesson that such mega schemes are at increased risk from the impact of climate breakdown in the Himalaya. Weak governance and unreliable construction practices make large-scale development projects even more risky.

A collapse of the Nagmati Dam would wash away Pashupati, roads, bridges and houses all the way down to Chobhar directly impacting 500,000 people in Kathmandu Valley. Then there is the ecological cost of submerging a large area of the carefully protected Shivapuri watershed.

The Nagmati Dam also exposes the inequity of yet another expensive Kathmandu-centric project when less than 25% of Nepalis have clean drinking water, and much of the Karnali suffers chronic food insecurity. It also lays bare the misguided priority of international lenders just out to expand their portfolios.

Ramesh Kumar



KUNDA DIXIT

An expensive reservoir upstream is not the way to clean up Kathmandu's polluted river.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Diagnosing Nepal

20 years ago this week, *Nepali Times* carried a guest column by visiting medical doctor Stephen Bezručka who had been coming to Nepal annually for the previous decades to improve surgical care in remote hospitals.

Bezručka pointed out that private 'disease palaces' were booming in Kathmandu even as doctors remain under-employed. Not much has changed 20 years later, as our page 1 story shows.

Excerpts of the article published on issue #182 6-12 February 2004:



diagnose, endoscopists who look around, urologists who probe and neurosurgeons who suck out brain jelly. The construction boom in hospitals, nursing homes and research centres ensures that medical harm will become a leading cause of death in Nepal, as is the case in developed countries.

...So what kinds of solutions might be considered? To begin with, the massive concentration of wealth is not conducive to justice. Then perhaps an emergency needs to be declared to provide basic needs as enunciated by

King Birendra decades ago. The focus of such programs have to be in Mugu, Bajura and Kalikot, the three least-healthy districts. The average length of life in Kathmandu is 30 years more than in remote Mugu.

Nepal can take cues from Kerala state in India or Sri Lanka and pursue social-welfare led development. Both countries have a health status close to America's.

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

ONLINE PACKAGES



Three months after the 3 November earthquake in western Nepal, survivors are grappling with the harsh reality of rebuilding their lives. Follow us as we travel to villages in Jajarkot and hear from survivors themselves as they take us to their shelters. Local children have also come up with a song about earthquake. Watch the video on our YouTube channel and read story on page 6-7.



The sixth descendant of 1814 war hero Bal Bhadra Kunwar, Viking Kunwar, set up the Heritage Knives Nepal to hand-craft khukris. On display are antique khukris, some dating back to the First World War. Watch video and read story about this Swedish-Nepali with a passion for knives on page 3.

DESTRUCTIVE DEVELOPMENT

A 15km replica of the Great Wall of China in Helambu ('Development = Destruction', Editorial, #1197)? Seriously? Whose idea was that and who paid for it?

Varvåra H.

■ Nepal will have to use better building materials to build upwards.

Sigmund Stengel

GÖTZ HAGMÜLLER

An era ends. Fond memories of learning of his works in Patan Museum and then working with him on the Garden of Dreams Project.

Sujeev Shakya

■ While his enthusiasm for traditional architecture is undeniable, the restoration of the Patan Museum caused quite a stir. His incorporation of many foreign ideas and colonial facade to the museum as opposed to Newa architecture were criticised, including S R Tiwari.

Upendra Sapkota

■ This is such tragic news. Have fond memories with him. Been to his home to watch Gai Jatra.

Niraj B

AL READ

Rest in Peace, Al Read ('Mountain man Al Read, 87', Lisa Choegyal, page 4). What a star in what a firmament. Another sad but splendid Nepal-centric first-hand account told like only Lisa Choegyal knows how.

Tony Jones

MOTHERS & DAUGHTERS

Thanks for this lovely reality of life and society in Kathmandu in the 21st century ('Mother, who creates', Pratibha Tuladhar, page 9).

Netashwa

DEBT TRAP

What are the solutions to get out of this ('Soaring Debt', Ramesh Kumar, #1197)? As we are promoting ourselves from LDC to Developing Country status soon, will that mean more debt?

Neil Pande

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



Other Annapurnas in the lives of women

by Kunda Dixit
Arlene Blum led the first all-women expedition to the world's tenth-highest mountain in 1978. A bigger challenge than mountaineering for her, however, was overcoming gender discrimination. Visit nepalitimes.com for her profile.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

Dam dangerous

by Ramesh Kumar
The Nepal government is set to launch a Rs25 billion project to build a dam inside Shivapuri National Park to flush the Bagmati. But the proposed Nagmati Dam carries more risk than reward, critics say. Join the discussion online, and read Editorial, left.

Most popular on X

Development = Destruction

Editorial
Not building is also development. We should know where or what not to build. Megalomania and kleptomania go hand-in-hand as kickback-driven construction destroys Nepal. Visit website.

Most commented

Kathmandu's legacy is Götz Hagmüller's legacy

by Kunda Dixit
Götz Hagmüller, the Austrian architect who made the preservation of Kathmandu Valley's cultural heritage his life's work died on Friday in Bhaktapur, the town he helped restore. Tribute on page 5.

Most visited online page

QUOTES

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Nepal's religious leaders this week have expressed concern about the weaponisation of social media by religious extremists to disrupt Nepal's social harmony.

Chandrakishore चन्द्रकिशोर @Kishore_chandra
I thank them for their kind words on the development trajectory of our nation.

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Not building is also development. We should know where or what not to build.

Hem Sagar Baral @WorshipNature
Very true! Leave some open spaces for breathing, will you sarkar!

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
The proposed Nagmati Dam inside Shivapuri National Park carries more risk than reward, critics say. Dam dangerous | Ramesh Kumar

Arnico Panday अर्निको पाँडे @arnicopanday
A Rs 25 billion loan to build a risky 95 meter dam that threatens Kathmandu? Really @ADB_HQ? Have you done sufficient due diligence on climate risk? How is the public to trust you after Melamchi?

1,000 WORDS



WALKING THE TALK: Rabi Lamichhane leading a march that started from Melamchi on 4 February to draw attention to unfinished and delayed development projects throughout the country.



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Viking's khukri passion

Viking Kunwor takes his Gorkha heritage forward crafting khukri knives

■ Alisha Sijapati

Bal Bhadra Kunwar commanded the Gorkhali defenders of Nalapani Fort as they faced a month-long siege by troops of the British East India Company in 1814.

Vastly outnumbered, the 600 Nepali soldiers, women and children inside were bombarded by British cannons. Hungry and thirsty, 70 of them finally broke out, leaving the dead and dying behind.

For his brave defence of the fort against overwhelming enemy numbers, Bal Bhadra Kunwar is regarded as Nepal's national hero to this day. Now, his sixth-generation descendant, Viking Kunwor (pictured, right) is making a living out of crafting the famous Gorkhali knife, the khukri, wielded in battle by his ancestor.

In a narrow alley behind Boudha tucked between restaurants is the The Heritage Knives Nepal store selling hand-crafted khukris. On display are antique curved knives, some dating back to World War I and one of them bearing the inscription of Prime Minister Chandra Shumsher Rana.

After escaping from Nalapani Fort in 1814, Bal Bhadra Kunwar fled to Lahore and commanded a Gorkhali regiment under Punjab king Ranjit Singh. He was killed in action near Peshawar during the Sikh-Afghan war in 1822.

Viking Kunwor was born to a Swedish mother and a Nepali father, and divides his time between Sweden and Nepal, drawn



PHOTOS: SUMAN NEPALI

by his deepening fascination with Nepal's rich history in which his ancestor played such a heroic part.

In Sweden, he is involved in the hospitality industry, and to remain rooted to the country of his brave forebears, Viking set up the khukri store in Boudha in 2019. Viking has toured Garhwal and Kumaon, visiting Nalapani and other battlefields from the Anglo-Nepal War two centuries ago to find out more about Capt Bal Bhadra.

There was not much except oral history about him, but many of Viking's forebears ended up fighting in the British and Indian Armies, except Viking's father.

Because of the Gorkhali connection, Viking developed a strong passion for the craftsmanship that went into forging khukris,



and the history of the iconic knife that struck fear into the hearts of enemies in historic battles around the world.

"I initially pursued my passion for history and heritage studies, but shifted gears and became a chef in

Sweden," Viking told us during a recent visit to Nepal.

His fascination with khukris, particularly their roles in the two World Wars and the variations used by different regiments intrigued him. He found that khukris issued

to soldiers and those privately purchased were different. A khukri scabbard has pouches for smaller knives for more delicate cutting as well as a sharpening utensil.

Examining their blades, styles and patterns, Kunwor discovered that modern knives did not match the quality of khukris made centuries ago. He wanted to find the lost process of making the perfect khukri by metalsmiths in the mountains of eastern Nepal.

"Beyond their practical use, I was captivated by the cultural significance of the metalwork," Viking said.

He went to Dharan, renowned for its khukri makers, and tried to blend the scientific approach from his Swedish half with the traditional workmanship of his Nepali side.

He opened his shop, but nearly lost hope during the Covid lockdown. Now his khukri business is gaining traction, and Kunwor's knives are exported to Europe and the United States.

Besides khukris, he also makes kitchen knives for which there now seems to be healthy demand in Nepal itself. Kunwor has also noted a shift in people's attitudes towards heritage preservation in Nepal.

Many Nepalis are reaching out to him to clean and seek advice on maintaining ancestral swords that have adorned their prayer rooms. He helps willingly, because it involves cultural preservation that is an integral part of Nepal's heritage. 🇳🇵



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Mountain man Al Read, 87

Remembering the pioneer of Himalayan rafting, trekking and mountaineering

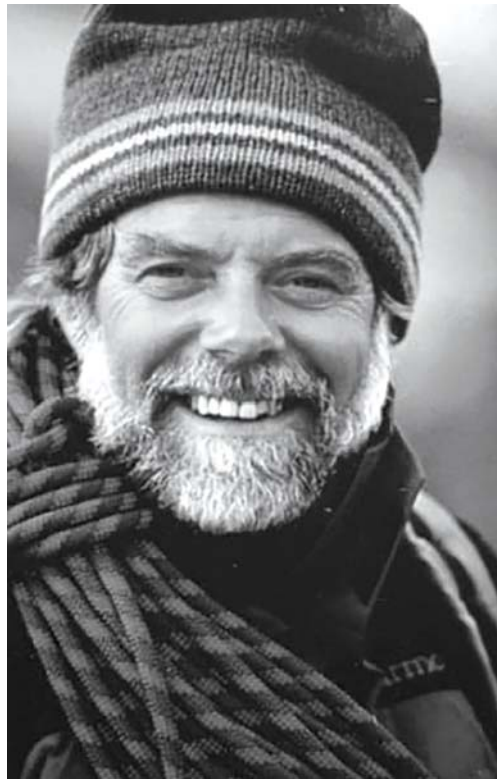
■ Lisa Choegyol

Our Mountain Travel office was located in the grounds of Gen Samrajya Rana's splendid but crumbling palace in Naxal. The walled garden bustled with activity, bright tents and sleeping bags spread on the grass to dry in the Himalayan sun.

This was the domain of Al Read, Managing Director of Mountain Travel from 1973 to 1984. With craggy good looks, bearded and burly, (he later became affectionately known at the Great Yak of Moose, Wyoming), Al brimmed with a contained energy and the calm confidence of a crisis manager. The consummate mountain man, Al brought to Mountain Travel a background of first ascents, ski instructor roles and mountain guide qualifications.

Perched on a hard chair in his imposing office, I felt like he would rather be striding towards a Himalayan peak with rope coiled over his shoulder or navigating a white water rapid in one of Nepal's lesser-known rivers. A typical visit from my own office in Darbar Marg might mean running into hairy trek leaders, celebrity climbers, record-holding speed-skiers, record-seeking balloonists, world-class kayakers, high altitude medics or National Geographic filmmakers.

Or Al might be briefing one of the superstars who flocked to Nepal's trekking trails in those



days: Robert Redford, Goldie Hawn, Kurt Russell, John F Kennedy Jr., Diana Ross, Mick Jagger, Bruce Chatwin and of course King Charles III on the 1980 Royal Trek with Prince Dhirendra.

Al spent three years at the American Embassy in Kathmandu following a posting in Calcutta before he was persuaded to take over the management of Nepal's first trekking company which had just joined forces with Tiger Tops.

He arrived wreathed in rumour of CIA connections at a time when

all foreign residents were routinely alleged to have spook associations. Although in his case, history has revealed them to be true.

It must have been a courageous decision to leave the security of State Department life to run Mountain Travel for its pioneering but quixotic owners Col Jimmy Roberts and AV Jim Edwards.

But Al was never short of courage. His established mountain integrity, people skills, solid safety protocols and entrenched US networks strengthened and expanded Mountain Travel at a period when 40% of all clients came from North America and only a handful of trek companies were registered in Nepal.

With his flair for logistics, Al led the Mountain Travel team of Col Jimmy's highly trained Khumbu Sherpas and skilled Nepali office staff to organise expedition support for climbers such as Chris Bonington and Reinhold Messner, and to deliver fully equipped treks throughout Nepal for as many as 300 trekkers at any one time.

As a child Al had accompanied his father, a respected paleobotanist and geologist, on horseback to the Navajo Nation Reservation of northern New Mexico. Brought up in Colorado, his enduring love

of mountains bloomed in Denver whilst at the University of Colorado in Boulder. A Master's degree at Georgetown in international relations was followed by a stint with the Peace Corps in Puerto Rico, Colombia and Nicaragua.

Al Read's US climbing record included the first ascent of the East Buttress of Denali in Alaska and many Teton summits in Wyoming. As new peaks became permitted in Nepal and later Tibet, Al relished this period of Himalayan exploration.

As deputy expedition leader, he survived the ill-fated 1969 attempt on the challenging South East Ridge of Dhaulagiri in which five Americans and two Sherpas were killed by an avalanche on the upper slopes.

Al's Nepal "adventure-life" as he called it, involved not only arranging logistics for Mountain Travel clients, but as base camp manager he personally coordinated Dhaulagiri in 1973, Gauri Shankar in 1979 and the first ascent of Cholatse by the southwest ridge in 1982. He led some of the first treks to Tibet, and managed expeditions to Minya Konka in Sichuan in 1980 and on the north ridge of Everest in 1986.

One of Al's most enduring achievements was the exploration and establishment of river running in Nepal. I remember him vanishing for weekend jaunts to investigate rivers in newly-imported rubber rafts with other thrill-seeking expats that included Johan Reinhard, Skip Horner, Gabriel Campbell and Ed

McCarthy.

Close shaves included the first upset in 'Upset' rapid on the Trisuli and flipping in a waterfall on the Sun Kosi during a monsoon run. In November 1975, Al led the first descent of the Trisuli River to the Indian border. Himalayan River Exploration (HIRE) was the first river company in Nepal.

When I heard the news of Al's death last month in San Francisco, my thoughts went to the day in November 1976 when I crashed on landing at Meghauli airstrip in a Royal Nepal Airlines Twin Otter.

He had asked me to escort Himalayan-hero Eric Shipton from Pokhara but the plane was wrecked, mercifully with no fatalities, so we never reached. Rescued back to Kathmandu that afternoon, I walked into Al Read in his huge office.

Rising from his desk, he handed me a hot drink and hugged me: "I was told you were dead." The rumour mill had been buzzing. "But you know what they say," grinned Al. "Any landing that you walk away from is a good one!"

This incident seemed to exemplify everything about Al's endearing reliability, his humour and humanity. He lived a full and vibrant life in pursuit of adventure, calculating risks, forging friendships, and contributing at a crucial period to establish Nepal as a leading and responsible mountain tourism destination. 🇳🇵

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Remittances up and up

Much to the relief of Nepal's beleaguered economy, remittances from Nepal abroad soared 25% to \$5.5 billion (Rs733 billion) from July 2023 – January 2024. Although some of the rupee value of the increase can be attributed to a stronger US dollar, the inflow represents a 1% increase in the six months of 2022-23 over the same period the previous year. But even in US dollar terms, the increase in the review period till January 2024 was 22% higher than the previous year. In the six months, nearly 210,000 Nepalis left for foreign employment for the first time, while 135,000 were repeats. This figure does not include those leaving on student visas. The increase in remittances has boosted Nepal's foreign exchange reserves to nearly \$13.7 billion in January, up nearly 17% last year and enough to finance nearly 15 months of imports. Imports of petroleum products has declined, and experts attribute this to a shift to battery-powered vehicles and out-migration.



EBL-Dhangadi Netralaya

Everest Bank and Dhangadi Netralaya have signed an MOU to offer a 10% discount on OPD-IPD Diagnostics, Glasses & Frames, and a 5% discount on pharmacy and surgery services to EBL customers.

Hyundai Exter bookings

Bookings are now open for the Hyundai Exter SUV from Laxmi InterContinental. With advanced safety technology it



ensures both performance and comfort and is available in three variants, EX, S, and SX, and six color options, priced between Rs34,96,000 to Rs44,96,000.

Exchange with love

Sipradi Trading is organising an 'Exchange with Love' program starting from 10 February so customers can exchange their old cars for any brand of Tata vehicles, including popular models like the Nexon EV and Tiago EV at any Tata showrooms nationwide. Participants in the program will receive offers such as an exchange bonus, free fast charger for EV vehicles, one-year vehicle tax, accessories, surprise gifts, and even a chance to win an iPhone 15.

Discounts galore

Index Furniture Nepal, a franchise of Index Living Mall, is offering discounts of up to 40%, exclusively on office furniture for a limited time. The offer is valid at their outlets as well as online at www.indexfurniture.com.np

Closeup #NajikAau

Closeup Nepal has announced the return of its #NajikAau Digital Campaign this Valentine's season, whereby viewers will be able to influence the outcomes



of four distinct stories in a web series. Closeup Nepal has also launched a microsite, www.closeupnajikaau.com, where participants can enjoy daily quizzes, write love notes to their special ones, and stand a chance to win gift hampers.

Redmi Note 13 series

Xiaomi has introduced the Redmi Note 13 Series featuring a 6.67-inch AMOLED display with a 120Hz refresh rate and IP54 dust and splash resistance. Prices for the Redmi Note 13 start at Rs24,999, while the Redmi Note 13 Pro starts at Rs34,999 and Redmi Note 13 Pro+ 5G starts at Rs47,999.



Care Fest

Agni Incorporated is organising the Mahindra Global Care Fest 2024 from 4-9 February. Customers can get free labour charge, body wash, health checkup, 10-15% discount on spare parts and lube, 10% extended discount coupon.

Hi-Aim 2024

Hi-Aim 2024, with the theme Hospitality & Its Social Responsibility, concluded last week at Aloft Kathmandu. The event featured discussions and presentations from



renowned companies and stakeholders with the participation of hotel owners, developers, architects, interior designers, and representatives of hotel brands, among others. The emphasis was on using local talent and material over global to fulfill the obligation to the Earth. 250 delegates participated in

the event which was guided by Romesh Koul, founder of Naaz Hotel Consultants and Anil Sharma, renowned architect and founder of practice A Sharma Associates. It was sponsored by Asian Paints Nepal.

Global IME-IFC

The International Finance Corporation (IFC) has invested \$56 million in Global IME Bank to enhance access to finance for small businesses, especially women-owned firms, and to promote climate-friendly projects in Nepal. It will help address the SME finance gap, support recovery from the pandemic, and contribute to climate mitigation efforts, with 50% of the funds allocated to climate and gender financing. This is the first gender financing initiative by a development bank in Nepal.

Global IME Bank customers can now also enjoy a 15% discount on Daraz when shopping online through Daraz's DMall Section. This offer is valid till 30 April. Debit card users can save up to Rs500 (10% discount) and up to Rs750 (15% discount) for credit card users.



Kathmandu's legacy is Götz Hagsmüller's legacy

Austrian architect who made Nepal his home, and preserving its heritage his life's work

■ Kunda Dixit

Götz Hagsmüller, the Austrian architect who made the preservation of Kathmandu Valley's cultural heritage his life's work died on Friday in Bhaktapur, the town he helped restore.

Hagsmüller died peacefully in his sleep at Kuthu Math, the former pilgrim's resthouse in Bhaktapur which he rehabilitated, and where he lived for most of his life in Nepal. He was 85.

Hagsmüller first came to Nepal in 1979 to help with the Bhaktapur Development Project, the German government initiative that over two decades helped restore the crumbling town and upgrade its facilities.

He never left. After Bhaktapur, Hagsmüller went on to be involved in the restoration of Kaiser Mahal's Garden of Dreams, the Patan Museum and the restoration of the Darbar, as well as numerous buildings in Bhaktapur including the unique eight-cornered Chyasilin Temple and the Kuthu Math. He also helped restore the house that would become Milla Guest House in Bhaktapur.

He made the 300-year-old Kuthu Math pilgrim's resthouse his home, spending three decades restoring the courtyard's architecture that retained the original look and feel of the Kathmandu Valley civilisation that was being steadily overtaken by urban expansion.

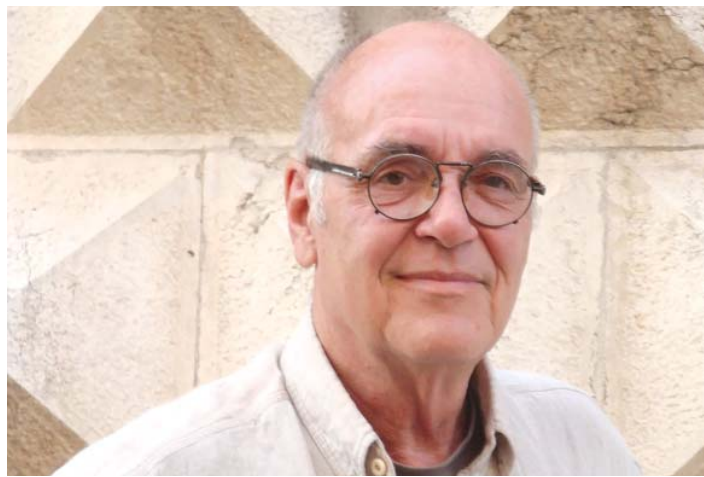
The restoration of Patan Museum, Bhaktapur and Kaiser Mahal are models of heritage conservation, and an inspiration for architects not just in Nepal but around the world. Kuthu Math's courtyard with its moist greenery is a serene oasis in Bhaktapur's urbanscape, and murals that were discovered in the interior walls during restoration have been carefully preserved.

"It is my determination to preserve the spiritual core of the Valley that keeps me motivated," Hagsmüller once told Nepali Times. "Kuthu Math is aesthetically pleasing, and remains as practical to live in as it is beautiful."

The young Hagsmüller studied architecture at Technische



THOMAS KELLY



Universität in Vienna, and discovered early on that he was much more fascinated by aesthetics and beauty than engineering calculations. Later, he was involved in conservation work in Angkor Wat in Cambodia and Luang Prabang in Laos before he came to Nepal to work for the Bhaktapur German project.

The legacy of Hagsmüller's life's

work in Kathmandu was not just to preserve its cultural legacy, but to make his projects sustainable. Having worked with the Nepal government, he understood that maintenance and sustainability were weak points — it was not enough just to restore a heritage site, the architect had to plan for its upkeep.

He ensured that Patan Museum

and Garden of Dreams had local trusts that would be its custodians. Patan Museum, for instance, gets more than 50,000 visitors a year and the entrance fees are ploughed into maintenance and expansion work.

Towards the end of his life, with memory failing, Hagsmüller would worry about what was happening to his beloved Kathmandu Valley with its population explosion and haphazard growth.

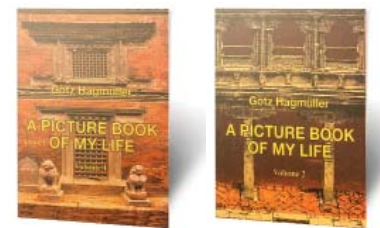
"A lot has changed. Some of the buildings I cannot recognise anymore as I walk through the old streets of Bhaktapur," Hagsmüller told Nepali Times in 2017. "But personally I'm very content with my own work, I wouldn't have done anything differently."

In 2001, Hagsmüller was conferred the Gorkha Dakshin Bahu national medal by King Birendra in recognition of his preservation work. The Austrian Cross of Honour for Science and Art was also awarded to him at a ceremony in 2016 in the Patan Museum courtyard, which he himself helped

restore with the perfect balance of purism and pragmatism.

"It is very very special for me to get this award from the Austrian government at the Patan Museum, which was Austria's first big contribution to the cultural preservation in Nepal," he said after the award.

Despite failing health, Hagsmüller worked on the two-volume *A Picture Book of My Life* that was published in 2017, and is available in Kathmandu bookshops. 📖



nepalitimes.com

Watch video clip of the Austrian Cross award ceremony.

SILK GLAMOR

Glamor that lasts





The sun has come out in Ramidanda village near the epicentre after last week's snowfall that revived the wheat crop after a long winter drought.

Rebirth and rebuilding in the ruins

Three months after the earthquake, Jajarkot looks to the future

■ Naresh Newar in Jajarkot

Three months after the earthquake in western Nepal, with late winter snow dusting surrounding peaks, survivors are grappling with the harsh reality of rebuilding their lives.

Despite the still visible devastation all around, there is a strong community spirit that has helped the people of what were already Nepal's most underserved districts get on with their lives.

"I heard my mother screaming for help outside, and after some time, the people rescued me," recalls 7-year-old Manju, who was trapped under the rubble of her

mud home in Rawat Gaun.

Although grateful that she survived, Manju is still traumatised and is haunted by all the relatives and friends who did not make it on the night of 3 November — including four children and their parents in a neighbouring house.

Rawat Gaun still resembles a battlefield, the houses are flattened as if they were bombed. Damaged buildings stand amidst heaps of rubble that have not yet been cleared. Families spent winter in flimsy tents, tarp and tin sheets supported by tree trunks and rocks.

The destruction here is worse than in the villages of Barekot Rural Municipality, the epicentre of the 6.8 magnitude earthquake.



The heavily damaged police station is still flying the flag as it awaits repairs.



District administration staff in tents help local communities with lost documentation.



Mani and Maya are all



Manju (right) was nearly killed in the earthquake when her home collapsed. Manju, Sashila and Sumnima give joy and hope to elderly relatives and neighbours.



Young mother Manisha with her baby and her new water tank donated by relief agencies.

ALL PHOTOS: NARESH NEWAR

Even before the quake, there were mostly the elderly, women, and children here. The young men and adults had migrated to the cities or to India. Most of the dead and wounded were women, and half of the 153 killed were children buried under collapsed houses.

“Without the children who survived, we would have felt even more bereaved,” says Bali BK, 60, whose son and daughter-in-law are working in the city. “Hearing their laughter and seeing them play gives us joy and hope.”

Nearby, Manju is playing in the dirt with her friends, Sashila and Sumnima, aged 7 and 9, as Bali looks on from the tent in which she has been living alone since

the earthquake. The children sing a ditty they composed about the earthquake. This creases up Bali’s face as she smiles. (Watch video)

“One positive outcome from this earthquake is that many people now know the names of our villages, and outsiders have come to help us with warm clothes, food, and medicine,” says Mani Damai, another elderly resident.

That is not to say life is easy, hardships are compounded by the current cold wave, and the tents offer little protection from the rain and wind.

Nights in the tents are especially difficult for the many pregnant women, and lactating mothers with newborn babies.

“The health of expecting mothers is a big concern,” says Surya Bhatta of One Heart Worldwide. “They urgently require suitable living conditions, healthcare and nourishment for their well-being.”

The German Embassy has helped One Heart distribute tents, equipment, winterisation kits, blankets, and hygiene equipment for pregnant and lactating mothers, and babies.

The earthquake dealt a severe blow to the already fragile and inadequate health system in Jajarkot with 40 health posts damaged, including birthing centers. Access to quality medical care was a concern even before the earthquake, now it is even more critical.

“Talking to local residents, municipalities and officials, we have gained valuable insight into the challenges ahead,” says Sabrina Schmidt Koschella of the German Embassy in Kathmandu. “The scale of destruction underscores the urgent need

for continued support from the international community for recovery and rebuilding.”

Ramidanda Health Post chief Bishnu Raj Jyoti and his team managed to save many lives on 3 November and the next day. Nurses and the health team treated many injured people and those with other illnesses.

“There were a lot of injured and sick among the 400 families in this ward, and we managed to rush those with serious injuries to hospital in Surkhet by helicopter in the days that followed the disaster,” Jyoti recalls.

The local government and security units as well as the Jajarkot District Administration Office played a pivotal role in disaster management. Despite losing his office, CDO Suresh Sunar continues to direct relief efforts from his prefab box to the survivors.

“We had learnt a lot about disaster management from the 2015 earthquake, and knew that we had to help the thousands of homeless survivors,” Sunar says.

Although the government’s one-window system for relief through the DAO got bad press initially for creating bottlenecks, it has now ensured better coordination between donors, agencies, the private sector and volunteers.

The DAO’s prefab ‘office’ is often crowded with people from all over the district applying for lost citizenship papers, National

Identity Cards, travel permits, and other vital documentation.

Despite the adversity, there are stories of hope. Maya was six months pregnant during the earthquake, and recalls the panic as she escaped through narrow stairs from the second floor of her house. Now in her ninth month, she hopes for a safe delivery at the Ramidanda health facility in Baretot.

“I feel lucky that we are safe, but it has been a difficult three months in the cold,” Maya says.

The birthing centre where Maya will be delivering lacks equipment, the maternity room does not even have a proper delivery bed but the nurses are doing their best to provide safe motherhood.

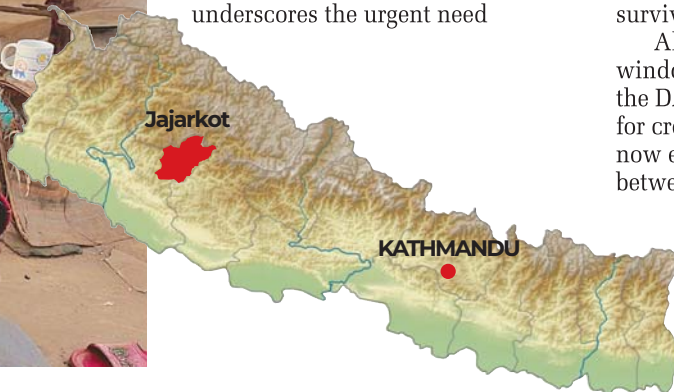
“The disaster is also an opportunity for visitors to see the reality of life here, and how hard it was even before the earthquake,” says Hem Bahadur Giri, Ward-1 Chair of Baretot. “But because of the earthquake, at least we have help to improve our health system.”

Manisha is a young mother with three children and says she has never seen so many strangers in her village before. She is happy they are all there to help with warm clothes.

“Life here was always difficult, we are far from the city and hardly anyone ever came here, but now there are all these people who have come to help,” she says. “We have blankets and drinking water tanks, which we never had before.”



More smiles, and remain close friends. The disaster has brought the community together.



EVENTS



Poetry and music

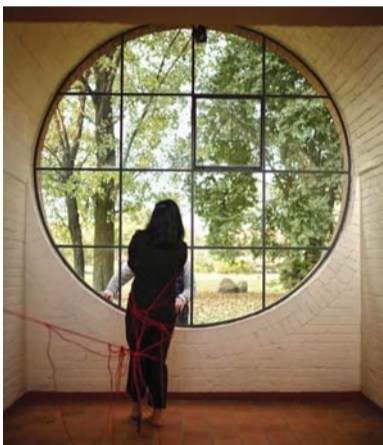
Alok V Menon is headed to Kathmandu with their blend of poetry and musical comedy. Their show will be opened by Queer Honey-Tonk, with Parakram Rana as the host.

16 February, 4-7 pm, Park Village Resort

Shared knowledge

The latest chapter of Kalkalāi, Tales of Titen: Embodied Knowledge will feature artists Alia Swastika, Dipak Lama, Shreeti Prajapati, Manita Newa Khadgi, and Mimi who will share insights into the curatorial vision of Biennale Jogja 2023.

8 February, 11am to 3pm, Nepal Art Council, Baber Mahal



Heritage Buzz

Researched, designed, and curated by Asmita Nepal, The Heritage Buzz, a month-long event, will feature talk sessions with Rohit Ranjitar, Rabina Shilpakar, and Kunda Dixit.

15 February-15 March, Taragaon Next, Boudha road

Period party

Engage in discussions on Nepal's prison policy on menstruation, menstrual policies, and menstrual leave at the Period Party this weekend. Participate in interactive games and networking opportunities.

11 February, 1:30 pm-5 pm, Yellow House, Sanepa



Comedy show

Kick off the week with laughter alongside Aadarsh Mishra and Satish Karki, who will perform stand-up comedy for a good cause.

11 February, 6pm onwards, Tickets: Rs500 - Rs1,000, Rashtriya Naach Ghar, Jamal

MUSIC

Bloom

Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory's Pop/Rock Diploma students will take the stage by storm at Bloom Festival Phase: 1 this weekend.

10 February, 6 pm onwards, Beers N' Cheers



Friends of festival

Khukri's Friends of Festival is coming to Pokhara with line-ups by Kutumba, Prof. Dr. Dhruv Chandra Regmi; his Group, The Blue Fret Band and Bipul Chettri & the Travelling Band.

15 - 19 February, Pokhara



Valentine's show

Love will fill the air at Club Fahrenheit as guests embrace the Valentine's Day spirit with Rockheads, the main act of the night. Call for reservations.

14 February, 6pm onwards, Club Fahrenheit, Thamel, 9841726830



Celebrating Bob

Joint Family Internationale, Bobin, and Alok from The Himalayan Connection will celebrate Bob Marley's birthday with live performances this Friday.

9 February, 6pm onwards, Tickets: Rs700 - Rs1,000, EDN, Sanepa

Romance in Kirtipur

Saurav Bhattarai, frontman of Kush Band, is set to serenade the audience with romantic songs in Kirtipur to celebrate the Day of Love.

14 February, 5pm onwards, Kashi Cafe & Lounge, Kirtipur



Evoke Café & Bistro

Step into a sensory haven at Evoke Café & Bistro, where visitors can choose from favorites like pita bread, baguette, or multigrain bread sandwiches, paired with homemade fries and a side salad.

Jhamsikhel (01) 5432021

Piano Piano

Taste authentic Italian food at Piano Piano. Sample from an array of pasta, lasagna, calzones, and more.

Lazimpat, 9801022392

GETAWAY



Pataleban Vineyard Resort

Escape the monotony of the city and recharge amidst nature at Pataleban Vineyard Resort, an eco-resort that boasts stunning views, jungle strolls, and rejuvenating picnics.

Chisapani (01) 4316377 / 9841679364

Marriott Kathmandu

Break free from Kathmandu's routine and book one of the 200 rooms at this five-star hotel. Dine at the Thamel Kitchen, Edamame, or Raksi Music Bar.

Naxal (01) 4443040



Godavari Village Resort

Nestled across 14 acres of lush greenery, Godavari Village Resort presents mountain vistas and cottages overlooking sprawling rice fields.

Godavari (01) 5560675

Aloft

Aloft with its contemporary architecture offers a variety of dining services, beauty salons, shopping along with accommodations.

Chhaya Devi Complex (01) 5252000



Kantipur Temple House

With its red brick walls, intricate wood carvings, floor seating, and a traditional courtyard, Kantipur Temple House reflects the grandeur of ancient Nepali palaces, just outside the hustle of Kathmandu.

Thamel (01) 5904231

New Orleans Café

Indulge in an evening of romance and flavour with a three course dinner and live music at New Orleans Cafe this Valentine's.

Thamel (01) 4700736

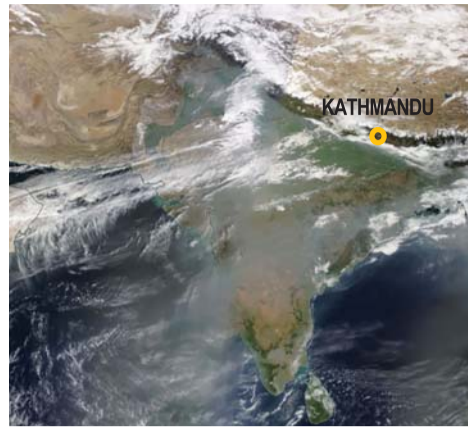


Villa Everest

Villa Everest is the place to go to for Korean food enthusiasts, offering Korean staples like handmade Korean noodles, Bibimbap, Korean BBQ, and Kimchi Jjigae.

Thamel (01) 4441593

WEEKEND WEATHER



Sunnier, warmer

Last week's westerly front fizzled out by the time it got to Kathmandu, but it did clear the air of pollutants, allowing unfiltered sunlight. And without cloud cover for the next few days, it will be sunnier and warmer with the temperature climbing back to 20°C and the minimum rising to 8°C in Kathmandu by early next week. But next Tuesday should see the arrival of a more vigorous frontal system that is forecast to bring rain and snow across the country on Valentine's Day.

| FRIDAY | SATURDAY | SUNDAY |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| 20° 4° | 22° 5° | 22° 5° |

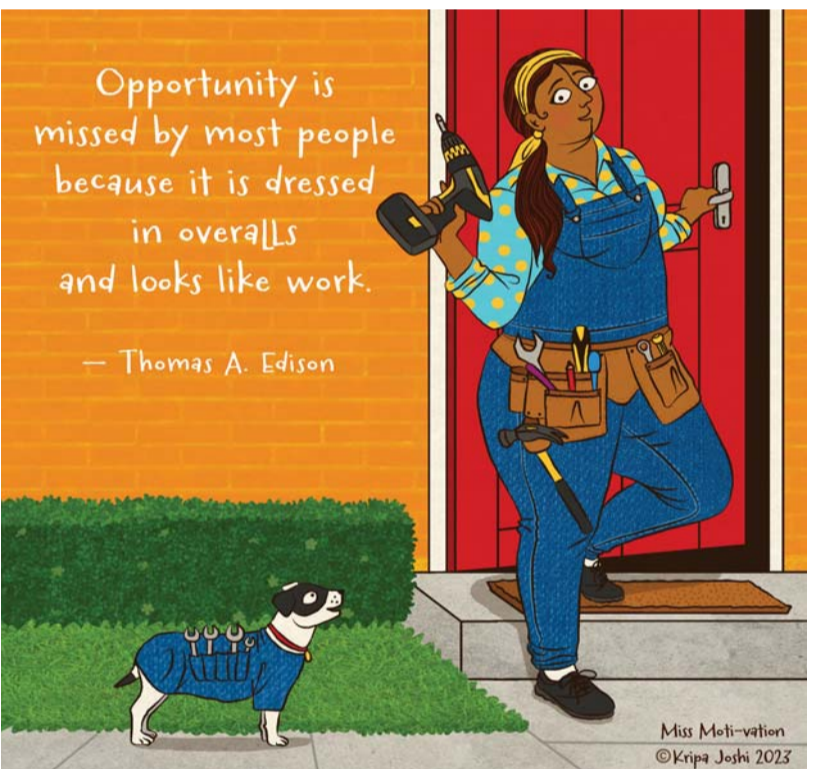
OUR PICK

Mr. & Mrs. Smith, the 2024 spy comedy-drama tv series, might have been inspired by the highly popular 2005 film of the same name, but it veers smoothly away from the original to stand distinctly on its own. The show follows Jane and John, two assassins who become operatives for a mysterious organisation and are assigned the cover of a married couple. Their work for their employer leaves their lives constantly hanging in the balance while their skills and their developing romantic relationship are put to the test. Stars Donald Glover and Maya Erskine as the titular couple.



MISS MOTI-VATION

KRIPA JOSHI



भूकम्पको जोखिमबाट बच्ने उपाय

- भूकम्पको जोखिम र त्यसबाट बच्ने उपायबारे जानकारी आदानप्रदान गरौं,
- घरभित्रका फर्निचर, सजावटका सामान, पानी ट्याङ्की नहल्लने र नखस्ने गरी बलियोसँग राखौं,
- घर, स्कूल तथा कार्यालयमा भूकम्पको समयमा सुरक्षित रहन सकिने स्थानको पहिचान गरौं,
- भूकम्पको समयमा आत्तिएर भाग्ने वा दगुर्ने नगरौं,
- भूकम्पको बेला खुल्ला र सुरक्षित स्थानमा जाऔं,
- प्राथमिक स्वास्थ्य उपचारको विषयमा जानकारी राखौं,
- आफू सुरक्षित भई अरुको सुरक्षामा ध्यान दिऔं ।



नेपाल सरकार
विज्ञापन बोर्ड

DINING



Sam's One Tree Cafe

This café's murals have become a backdrop for countless social media posts and stories. Once there, the sizzler is a must-try.

Darbar Marg (01) 4222636

Mother, who creates

We must find joy in serving. That's what my parents taught me.

It was that day in January when my heart felt the weight of everything around me that I first met Bhargavi Adhikari Mua (pictured, right), and something shifted about the way I had been



SUBURBAN TALES
Pratibha Tuladhar

feeling. As she walked into the premises of the Tapasthali old age home, her walking stick leading her, she became the presence-- the rest of us, audience.

She made her way past the old women, greeting each one, making inquiries, and then ordered a set of plastic chairs to be spread across the lawn so the ladies could soak up some sun.

Just before Mua arrived, I had been chatting with Chandraa Maya Ama from Solukhumbu, who told me Bhargavi Mua is सृष्टि गर्ने आमा, the one who creates.

Mua founded Tapasthali in 1991.

Chandraa Ama, she had left behind a bickering home where she no longer wanted to move to the quiet of Tapasthali, Budhanilkantha. In the summer, she walks with her friends to the nearby Rudreswor temple every morning. Winter has brought along a changed regime: "We live slow lives. We eat, sit in the sun, sing bhajan, drink tea, sleep."

Tapasthali often receives visitors who bring along generous gifts to keep the kitchen warm. One Kapil Shrestha had come bearing a big bag of food for the elderly: "My son is 43 today and he lives abroad, so we wanted to bring some gifts to mark his birthday."

Mua thanked him and said: "The world is a mirror. You receive what you give."

Later, she turned to me and said I should visit her.

...
I step into Bhargavi Mua's home, where she lives by herself, and she immediately sets before me a full plate for a vegetarian-- saag, cauliflower, alu ko achar and pancake. She's been waiting so we can eat together. At 84, she still cooks her own meals.

"I've never done an interview



PRATIBHA TULADHAR

before. I don't want that kind of attention," Mua says. One of the pictures on the wall behind her is that of her receiving the Gorkha Dakshin Bahu medal from former King Gyanendra, in 2008. I tell her I just want to hear her story. Then follows several hours of conversation, during which she takes me back to her childhood, her youth-- several geographical and emotional landmarks.

Mua dropped out of school at 14 to enter matrimony and become a substitute mother to her husband's kid brothers. And that role stuck, as she moved on to raising her late daughter's sons and became custodian to many elderly women.

The process of securing land to build an old age home was a hard one. The energy that is Mua, she relentlessly pursued government permission, and while a land deed

for the home was promised by the erstwhile government, eventually, only partial support was available.

Just above five ropains were first allocated and Mua had planned a home for 100 residents from across Nepal. But in the succeeding years, the local government split up the property to build a community meditation centre. Mua watched as 800 saplings she had planted were bulldozed.

She has had to stand up to layers of government officials to protect the home. She has even received threats. Sometimes, she has been asked for a bribe.

"Why would I offer someone a bribe for a home for old, homeless women? What kind of society does that make us? Shouldn't it be the job of the government to support those who have nowhere to go, instead?" she asks.

children. With the help of family and friends, she sold 150 bottles of nibuwa and khursani pickle, and managed to raise \$1,500 which brought in the first real stash in the purse to build Tapasthali. Her enthusiasm was honoured by her (Late) husband with a Rs50,000 top-up. And others added some more.

Tapasthali, built block by block, can currently accommodate up to 25 residents. The amas are attended to by a cook, a cleaner, a helper and a guard. Other residents are two cows, two dogs and an occasional cat. At one end of the property is the bhajan hall. The cowshed is tucked away behind the trees.

Over the past 33 years, Tapasthali has laid to rest 28 of its residents. And while families hardly visit the waiting mothers, some take their deceased bodies home for the funeral, so that legal requirements for property rights can be acquired. In the event that the families do not claim ownership, the committee overseeing the home ensures the last rites are performed.

Sushila Ama, an orphan, had spent all her life working as domestic help, until she started to age. When her employers were selling their cows to Tapasthali, they asked if she could also be taken in. In her late 50s now, she is one of the residents, but is also paid a salary for caring for the cows. During my walks, sometimes, I see her by the trees, gathering fodder. She smiles, sometimes slaps my face and says, मेरो घर आउनु. Come visit my home.

"Most mothers become unwanted when they no longer serve a purpose at home. And that's why we need to do something. We must find joy in serving. That's what my parents taught me," Mua says.

Only two residents are currently eligible for the senior citizen stipend. The rest either do not have citizenship or lack paperwork for their stipends to be transferred to Budhanilkantha municipality.

"We need some sort of financial aid to fall back on as we age, you know?" Mua says. "Women toil all our lives, only to be discarded when we age." Then she asks me what I'm going to do with my single life. Stay single, I say. Or maybe I will go live at Tapasthali, someday.

"कठै!" she takes my hands in hers. "Poor thing. If you meet a like-minded man, you should marry. Otherwise, adopt a child. A girl. You'll have a friend when you're old. You don't need a man's money. You're enough." 🇳🇵

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

SalesBerry

Made in NEPAL मेला

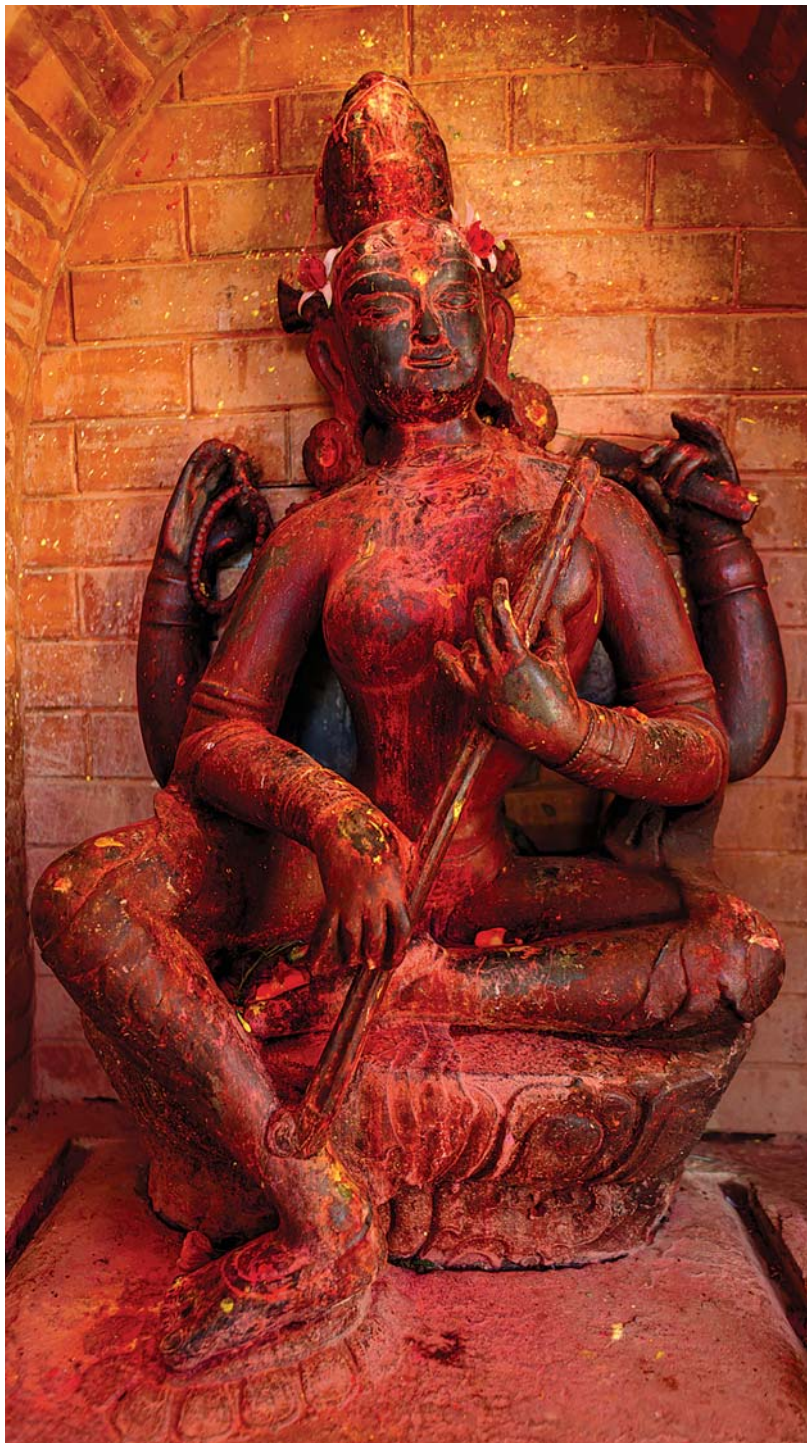
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SAURAV THAPA SHRESTHA

■ Alisha Sijapati

Saraswati Puja on 14 February also marks the first day of spring on Nepal's lunar calendar. Schools hold special functions, students sing hymns, and children go to temples of the goddess of knowledge to write their first letters in chalk on the walls.

The belief that goddess Saraswati resides in books, musical instruments, even laptops and other devices for intellectual pursuit prevails to this day.

The godhead of

This Saraswati Puja, visit the National Museum to pay respects to the decapitated head of the stolen goddess

The most exquisitely carved figure of Saraswati in all of Nepal was in a temple in Pharping, 20km south of Kathmandu. On 11 November 1984 devotees were shocked to see that their goddess had been beheaded.

This was in the 1980s when idol theft in Kathmandu Valley was rampant. International traffickers in collusion with Nepal's high and mighty were smuggling out sacred objects to sell to collectors and museums abroad.

Since the 1.2m high Saraswati carved out of black granite was so large and heavy, the thieves hacked

off just the head and took it away under cover of night. Black granite is not found locally, and is similar to the stone used in the sleeping Vishnu at Budhanilkantha and the Bhagwati at Kavrepalanchok — all believed to date back to the Lichhavi period 1,000 years ago.

German historian Jürgen Schick was living in Kathmandu at the time, and was deeply troubled by the plunder of Nepal's religious treasures, and the emotional toll it was taking on local communities.

He started his own photographic documentation of missing sacred objects and published the book, *Die Götter verlassen das Land*, in 1989. It was updated and translated in 1997 into English as *The Gods are Leaving the Country: Art Theft from Nepal*.

On 8 May 1984, Jürgen had photographed the intact Pharping



TWO HEADS:

The Saraswati figure (far left) at the shrine in Pharping (left) where thieves hacked off the head in 1984 and took it away to be sold to international art traffickers.

The head was replaced with an ugly replica, and later by a more accurate version which has been worshipped now for 40 years. The real head, which was returned from a collector in the United States in 1999, is now in the National Museum in Chhauni.

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Rs. 2,249

Pharping

Saraswati. He went again on 10 December 1984 and took a picture of the decapitated goddess which also had its right foot missing.

Residents of the area, Mohan Narayan Balami and Sapta Balami, told Schick that when they arrived for morning prayers, the Saraswati was tilted, with her head missing. There was a huge nationwide outcry as word of the theft spread.

"The fate of the Saraswati statue is special because it clearly shows that the art robbers do not shy away from even decapitating a beautiful statue of a deity that has been worshipped for centuries," Schick said. "There could be no clearer evidence of their brutality, the same brutality that they also use against the human protectors of the sacred images, as was clearly shown during the theft of the Halchok Akash Bhairav image in 2021 when they threatened the temple priest with a knife to his throat."

Eventually, Pharping's devotees replaced the head with a replica that was so ugly that many found it an insult to the deity, and a reminder of the crime. It was replaced with a more accurate carved head, which is there to this day but still does not match the artistry and beauty of the original.

In 1999, Riddhi Baba Pradhan, then Director-General of the Department of Archaeology, received a letter from the Nepal Embassy in Washington DC that a US-based art curator Pratapaditya Pal had located the Saraswati head and four other sacred objects from

Nepal with a private collector.

Pratapaditya Pal checked Lain Singh Bangdel's seminal book, *The Lost Art of Nepal*, and brought this to the notice of the collector, who promptly agreed to return the objects.

The Saraswati head was then returned to Nepal in 1999 along with three other sacred objects and have been in the National Museum at Chhauni ever since.

"When the boxes arrived from the airport customs, it was a very emotional moment for all of us," recalls Pradhan, who is now chair of the Nepal Heritage Recovery Campaign.

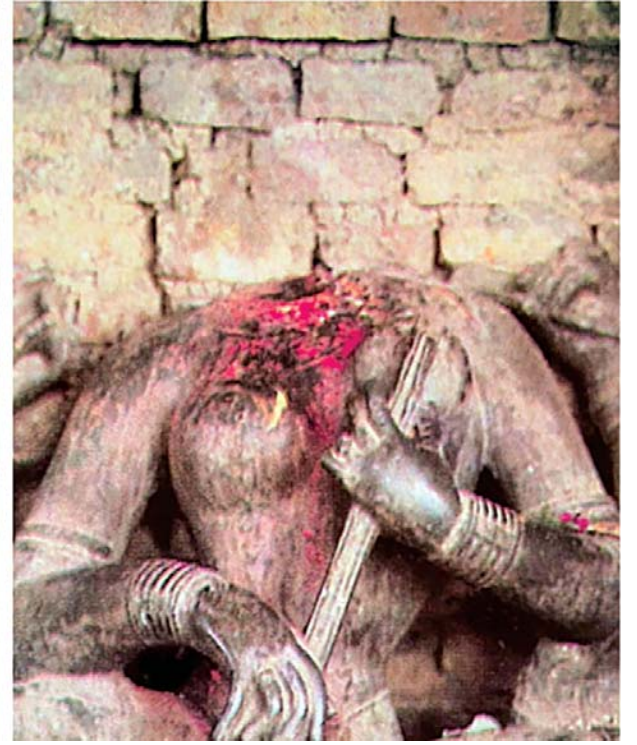
She adds, "It was the first indication that our gods would be returning to their rightful places."

Bal Ram Balami in Pharping still remembers the first time he heard on tv news that the Saraswati head was coming back: "I had this deep sense of happiness, I was overwhelmed with joy and relief."

Many in Pharping wanted the retrieved head to be reinstated on the Saraswati and were looking forward to its true homecoming. But 25 years later, the head is still in the museum. It was in storage till two years ago when it went on public display with other repatriated stolen objects.

The National Museum and the Pharping community have been in constant communication, but no tangible progress has been made.

Pharping's Ward Chair Shailesh Man Manandhar says the locals want the Saraswati returned, but security concerns persist.



JÜRGEN SCHICK

National Museum director Jayaram Shrestha agrees that worries about it being stolen again persist, and the community also does not want to take responsibility for its safekeeping.

"For now, it is important for the head to remain where it is until a final decision is reached," says Manandhar, who has plans to establish a museum in Pharping itself with other religious objects.

By now, the local community has become attached to the replica head since it is being worshipped and already embodies the essence of Saraswati's wisdom and knowledge.

He says, "It may be wise to let the original head remain where it is under protection of the National Museum until we are ready to take it back." 🇳🇵



GOPEN RAI

THE REAL FACE:

German historian Jürgen Schick's photographs of the Pharping Saraswati taken before and after it was decapitated by thieves in 1984 (above).

The head was sold to an art collector in the United States, who returned it to Nepal in 1999. Since then it has been stored at the National Museum, and for the past two years has been on display with other repatriated stolen deities (left).

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