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Look east: Sunrise near Phaplu in Solu Khumbu after recent snowfall.



MANISH PAUDEL

# Long road back to Shangrila

Ever since *Time* magazine printed a story in 1992 titled ‘Goodbye Shangrila’, Nepal’s travel trade and government have tried to clean up the country’s international image.

Visitor arrivals plummeted during the conflict years, and even after the ceasefire there was negative publicity about the instability, strikes and shutdowns. The earthquake and the Blockade also hit tourism hard.

But Nepal is such a solid brand, and such a unique tourism product, that visitor numbers are picking up again. Finance Minister Yubaraj Khatiwada is credited with picking the target of 2 million as a way to revive income from tourism to help balance Nepal’s growing trade deficit.

In the 1980s, tourism made up 22% of Nepal’s GDP. It

now contributes only 4%, not necessarily because tourism is down, but because other sectors like remittances and trade have grown. Under Tourism Minister Rabindra Adhikari, 2020 was chosen to promote Nepal internationally so that we could reach the magic 2 million figure.

But Adhikari was killed in a helicopter crash last year, and travel trade executives say promotion activities have not been effective enough. President Bidya Devi Bhandari inaugurated Visit Nepal Year 2020 at Kathmandu’s main stadium on 1 January with fireworks and a flypast of military helicopters. But critics said the money would have been better spent on promotion abroad.

Instead of promoting

Nepal within Nepal, the government should have cleaned up Nepal. The country’s image has suffered lately because of social media posts by visitors shocked by Kathmandu’s squalour and pollution.

Tourism Minister Yogesh Bhattarai has been ridiculed in social media for visiting Sydney this week, in the middle of a bushfire emergency, to promote Nepal. The government has also run into flak for a daft proposal to mandate very Nepali worker flying out to wear Visit Nepal t-shirts and caps.

Bhattarai admits that airports need to be upgraded and service improved. But he adds: “There have been improvements at Kathmandu Airport, we are taking steps to make the

travel experience more pleasant.”

The travel industry says the emphasis should be on making a Nepal trip as convenient as possible for visitors by streamlining the airport, its tedious visa-on-arrival process, and sprucing up the country’s crumbling infrastructure. There should also be a moratorium on excavators digging roads over trekking trails. The other deterrent is that Nepal is an expensive place to travel to because the price of aviation fuel here is double that in other airports in the region.

Says hotelier Yogendra Shakya: “Nepal is ideally placed to tap the vast tourism potential from India, China and Southeast Asia, and promotion should focus there first.”

Mukesh Pokhrel

THE NEPAL BRAND EDITORIAL PAGE 2

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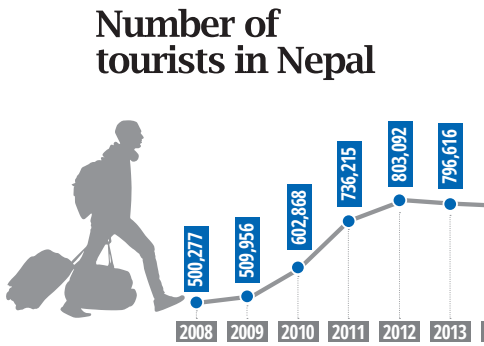
# THE NEPAL BRAND

On new year's day, President Bidya Devi Bhandari inaugurated Visit Nepal Year 2020, aimed at attracting 2 million tourists this year, at a lavish show in Kathmandu's main stadium with fireworks and a flypast of military helicopters.

There was only one thing wrong with the event: it was in Kathmandu and not in the countries from which it is trying to attract visitors. The money would have been better spent on targeted promotion in selected countries.

It might have been an even better idea to spend the money sprucing up Kathmandu airport, fixing the roads, and cleaning up a once-beautiful Valley that has become an ulcer — before bothering to convince visitors to come.

All seven provinces inaugurated the campaign with much fanfare. The parades were performed by Nepal's and the spectators were Nepalis. How does that help bring more tourists to Nepal?



Well-intentioned it may be, but the entire Visit Nepal campaign has been mediocre and sloppy every step of the way — planned and executed by people without imagination or knowledge about the tourism industry.

**Instead of promoting Nepal within Nepal, the government should mark Visit Nepal Year 2020 by cleaning up Nepal in 2020.**

The travel industry is generally unenthusiastic, and it is understandable why:

- There has been insufficient preparation in the countries we should have prioritised for promotion
- Publicity and marketing should have started at least two years ago, not on January 1.
- The Ministry of Tourism has shown utter fecklessness by asking ambassadors to send senior ministers for the 1 January event in Kathmandu. (Why would anyone spoil a new year's holiday and travel all the way at such short notice?)
- Minister of Tourism Yogesh Bhattarai travelled to Australia to launch the campaign in the middle of a national fire emergency.
- Bhattarai then announced that Nepali workers travelling abroad would mandatorily have to wear Visit Nepal caps and t-shirts. Everyone ignored this edict.
- Nepal Tourism Board lost its chief at the start of VNY 2020.
- There should be a revenue target, not a target of 2 million visitors.

- The only aerial gateway to Nepal is a disgrace. It seems purpose-built for maximum inconvenience, with an incomprehensible visa-on-arrival process and an excruciating queue at the 'metal free' x-ray.
- Nepal sells itself for cheap, but it is an expensive destination to get to mainly because of the high cost of aviation fuel which airlines are compelled to pass on to passengers.

The miracle is that despite everything we do to dissuade them, visitors still come to Nepal. The country has such high brand equity that even though we have done everything to wreck it with all the squalour and decrepitude in Kathmandu and our Byzantine bureaucracy, tourists still come.

We have even destroyed the countryside with haphazard road-construction along popular trekking routes — treacherous passages that even the bravest fear to tread.

Instead of promoting Nepal within Nepal, the government should mark Visit Nepal 2020 by cleaning up Nepal in 2020. The trekking trails need to be preserved and cleared of plastic garbage, it has to be convenient and safe to get to the hinterland, and visitors should be encouraged to spend their money where it is needed the most — in the villages through which they hike.

There is the idea that only Kathmandu, Pokhara, Lumbini and Chitwan are Nepal's tourist attractions. There is fundamental ignorance among policymakers about what a tourist is looking for in Nepal — they do not come here to be

extorted every step of the way with two-tier pricing for tickets for museums to domestic airlines.

In the past, the Maoist insurgency, a decade of political instability with frequent shutdowns (hotel vans still carry 'Tourist Only' on windshields as a relic from that era), the earthquake and the Blockade could have been blamed for low visitor numbers. We have no more excuses. Nepal now is a vibrant democracy with a strong government.

Publicity within the country for Visit Nepal 2020 must be channeled to making people aware about cleanliness, maintaining infrastructure, reducing bureaucratic red tape, and streamlining procedures to make visitors' stay as convenient as possible by treating them really as gods, not as wallets.

Only then will tourism once again be a strong pillar of the economy. The industry that once contributed 22% to the national GDP now contributes only 4%. Tourism income can help Nepal redress its growing trade gap.

Nepal's location is ideal for tourism. We need to expand the country's national airline, spread its network and rebuild the Nepal brand.

Times.com

## ONLINE PACKAGES



Suicide by pesticides is the easiest, cheapest and the quickest way to kill oneself in Nepal. Replacing highly hazardous pesticides with safer options is key to preventing suicide deaths. Nepali Times recently caught up with Prof Michael Eddleston from the Centre for Pesticide Suicide Prevention to speak about the crisis. Story: page 14-15

### BIOGAS

This needs taking seriously by all 7 states, the pluses are all so big. (This is bullshit, Kunda Dixit, #991) But that will require politicians who care for the welfare of their people.

Alan Roadnight

- This biogas plant in Kaski should be upscaled, not only replicated. Kathmandu is overripe for these kinds of solutions and more in the line of sewage and sludge treatment.

Olav Myrholm

- Climate finance will be crucial for scaling up such innovation.

Pragyajan Rai

- This bullshit is worth reading.

Ramesh Bhusal

### GOOD NEWS

We need more positive stories like this one ('Staying in Nepal to create jobs', Naresh Newar, #991). The negativity surrounding our country is killing me.

Rizal Sunit

### PREPPING FOR TOURISTS

Set aside certain percent of income from tourism industry to clean up the city and expand sanitary infrastructure (Chinese tourist influx to Nepal in 2020, Josie Wang, #991).

Ramesh Shrestha

### NIJGAD

What I missed in argument FOR Nijgad is earthquake risk to single runway at Kathmandu airport halting all international flights ('15 points for and against Nijgad airport', #990).

Edwin van Teijlingen

## WHAT'S TRENDING

### Staying in Nepal to create jobs

by Naresh Newar  
Dolakha's Dil Bahadur Gurung used to work as a domestic servant in exchange for food and shelter. He later turned down an offer to go abroad in order to start his own handicraft business. Today, his company is valued at Rs10 million. Visit nepalitimes.com to read his success story.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

### Chinese tourist influx to Nepal in 2020

by Josie Wang  
Chinese Ambassador to Nepal Hou Yanqi and famous Chinese actress Xu Qing are promoting Visit Nepal Year 2020 to help bring 500,000 tourists from China in 2020. But what are Chinese visitors saying about Nepal on social media? Find out in this most-read report.

Most popular on Twitter

Most visited online page

### This is bullshit

by Kunda Dixit  
Visit a new industrial-scale biogas plant in Kaski that converts farm and urban biodegradable waste into bio-CNG and organic fertiliser. Replicating this nationwide will slash Nepal's import bill. Read the field report at nepalitimes.com and watch the video on our YouTube channel.

Most commented

## QUOTE TWEETS

**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
Oli was once a staunch supporter of #HumanRights, #PressFreedom & pluralism. Why is he now leading the charge to curtail #democracy, muzzle the #media & to constrict open society?

**Arvind Rimal (अरविन्द रिमाल)@ArvindRimal**  
A readable article, especially by men-in-power. But a successful statesman is he who heeds the opinion of his adversary. Jay Nepal!

**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
Manoj Rai was a student in Bhutan in 1990, when soldiers arrived at his dorm, took away all the Nepali books and set them alight. After escaping the army dragnet, Rai chose not to return, resettled elsewhere and pursued his passion for music. #refugee

**Navita Srikant @NavitaSrikant**  
#MustRead A refugee's journey is a reminder where we fail as a collective. To let it happen again tomorrow, believing that the "refugee" shall not be one of us, is a fallacy.

## 10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

The Nepali Times edition of #484 from 8-14 January 2010 ten years ago was full of revelation of a fallout between Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Baburam Bhattarai. Even the Ass made fun of it. But this paragraph from Prashant Jha's column, Plain Speaking said it all:

Nepal may still have been stuck in a bloody conflict but for Dr Baburam Bhattarai and his emphasis on democratic republicanism. The ongoing attempts to marginalise him within the Maoists reveal much about the balance of power and how counterproductive it could be for the peace and constitution-writing process.

By snubbing Bhattarai and his 'line' again - as Prachanda did by depriving him of the deputy prime ministership in August 2008 and incorporating Kiran's views at Kharipati two months later - the Maoists run the risk of undermining their achievements, repeating the mistakes of their 20th century communist counterparts, and failing.



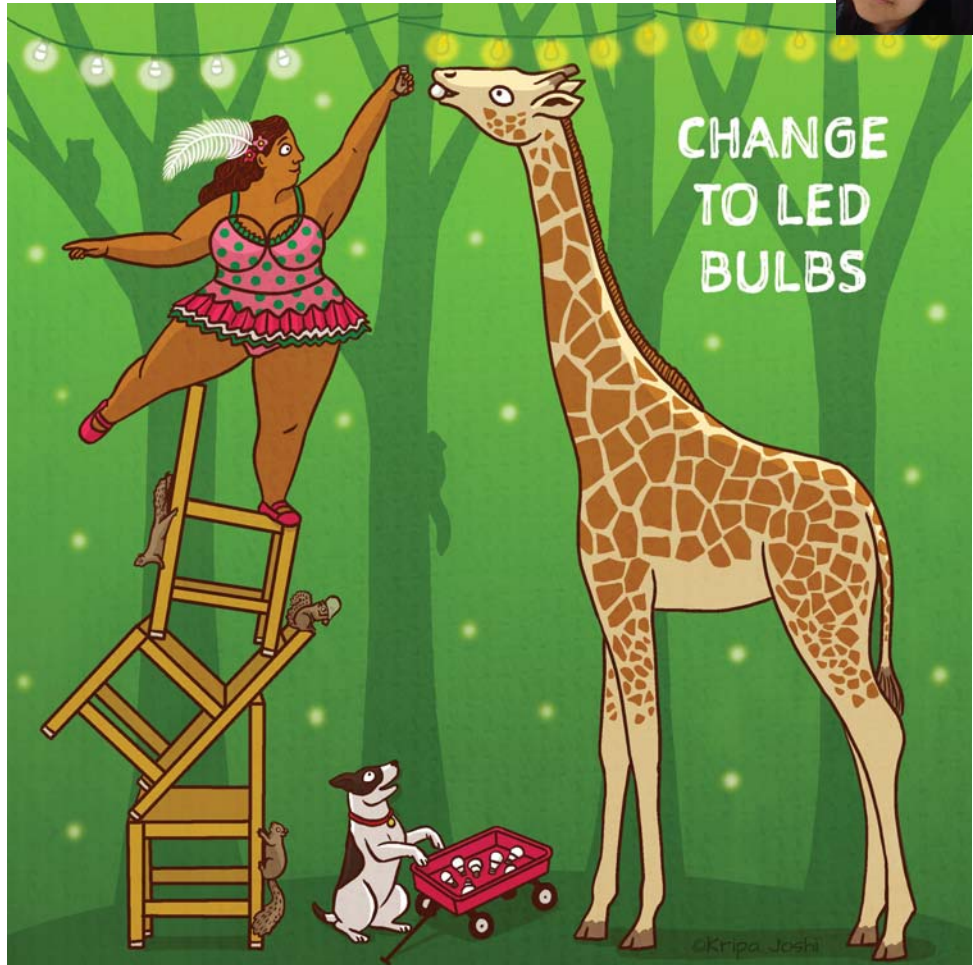
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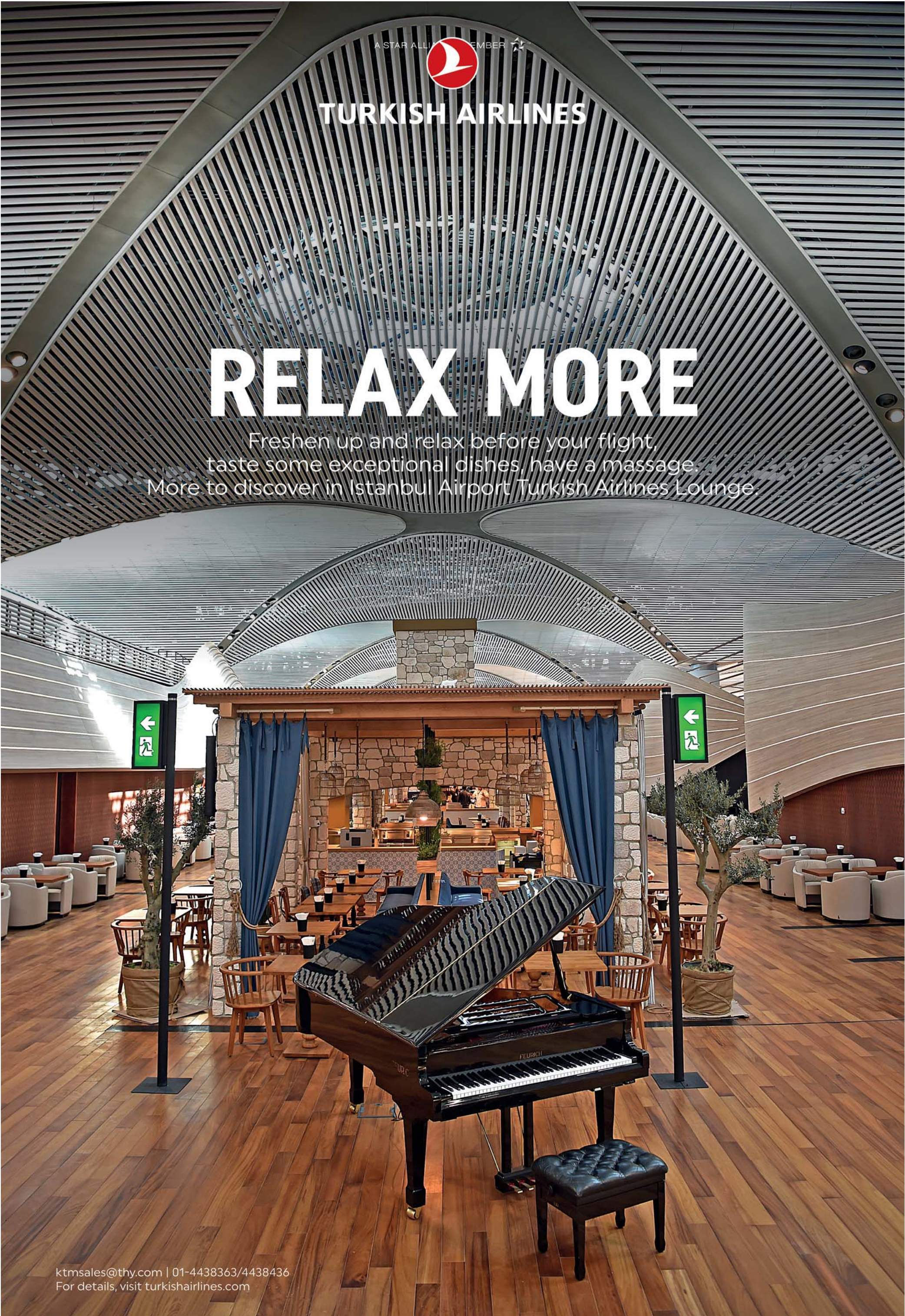
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KRIPA JOSHI



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# Back to the future in Nepal

For Nepalis who migrated to New South Wales, it must feel like going from the frying pan into the fire

Many conversations about the coming 2020s decade for Nepal end up turning into a debate about our past. Usually it is the fatalists and those who have profited by sending Nepali workers and students abroad who bring up the lost opportunities of the past in order to justify their businesses. They denigrate Nepal and its vast potential to move ahead in order to make the case that the best option is to leave.



1/2 FULL  
Anil Chitrakar

Few still romanticise the past because that is where they had their space and comfort. Historical wrongs have taken place here, as they have all over the world. There are feasible ways to correct these injustices to ensure that we can coexist peacefully into the future. But for many, village life was that past and life in the city here and around the world is the future. Attempts to get the discussion back to the future and the potential that Nepal has for growth and prosperity, often drift into needless comparisons with other countries. Nepal can, should and needs to learn from other countries, but to compare is to compare apples and oranges. The USA was partly built by slaves and the British enriched



KUNDA DIXIT

themselves by exploiting colonies. We do not have oil like the Gulf does. We do not have a relatively homogenous society like that found in Japan. What are we comparing, then, when we compare Tokha to Tokyo, or Dhumbarahi to Dubai? It is not helpful to extrapolate from one narrow example and to generalise it as the universal development principle. Many study tours that Nepalis have taken abroad are futile because they end up exacerbating a sense of helplessness.

The Nepali resolution for the 2020 decade has to be to build on what we can be rather than to dwell on the way we were. Lessons are useful, but what good is it to organise a donors' meeting when we are actually seeking investments? How useful are lessons on Leninism from the Soviet era? What is the use of planning for an economy based on fossil fuels when the path ahead is clean and renewable energy? The world must

resolve not to repeat the failure of the Madrid Climate Summit in Glasgow. The coming decade has to be about the innovation and creativity that will benefit the many who have been left behind. A new decade has begun with many parts of Australia burning, the Persian Gulf in a hair trigger, Europe and the UK starting divorce proceedings, and large cities in the most populated areas of the world, like Jakarta and Venice, going underwater.

Yet, many Nepali migrants have chosen these very countries as greener pastures. Yes, Nepal is plagued with political uncertainty, corruption, nepotism, and bad air quality. But for Nepalis who have migrated to New South Wales in Australia, it must feel like jumping from the frying pan into the fire. In the USA many Nepali Americans face the possibility of being drafted into an escalating war. If we stopped focusing on the past and making irrelevant comparisons, we could actually begin to look at Nepal's future more objectively. For example, Nepal is an upstream country, but this is not often used to describe Nepal and what its comparative advantage could be. Being an upper riparian has numerous advantages and opens up all kinds of possibilities. A country of 30 million is not small. And Nepal is not poor, just poorly governed. So let us stop describing ourselves as "a small and poor country". Having a young population is not a liability but a historic opportunity that is the envy of rapidly-ageing countries like Japan. One thing we will need while moving ahead is to restore our faith in ourselves. Recently, climbing the steps of Swayambhu, a fellow-walker remarked, "If people went to work with the same faith as they do when they go to temples, Nepal would surely develop." **Anil Chitrakar** is President of Siddharthinc.

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BIZ BRIEFS

**TURKISH MADRID LINK**  
Starting 9 June, Turkish Airlines is increasing its weekly flights from Istanbul to Madrid. Passengers can now chose from 25 flights per week for their visit to the Spanish capital, up from 21 per week.

**XUV300**  
Agni Incorporated which sells Mahindra vehicles in Nepal, launched its new compact SUV, the XUV300 in Chitwan on 3 January. The vehicles comes with Dual-Zone fully automatic temperature control, ECOSENSE Technology with social media connectivity, a Micro Hybrid system, Push Button Start/Stop and Rear Parking Camera with dynamic assist.

**Laxmi Bank**  
Laxmi Bank and F1Soft International have signed an agreement for the execution of invoice discounting service through 'QuikBhuktani' platform. 'QuikBhuktani' is Nepal's first online invoice discounting and reverse factoring platform developed by F1Soft, with support from UKaid Sakchhyam Access.

**Sanima Bank**  
On 4 January Sanima Bank Pokhara gifted Himalaya Eyes Hospital a water purification system to provide clean drinking water for the patients and hospital staff.

**Aloft Hotel**  
Aloft Hotel organised a gathering for hoteliers in Nepal to exchange thoughts

**Everest Bank**  
Everest Bank signed an MOU with NRNA to provide special facilities to non-resident Nepalis who open a bank account. The Bank says this offers the highest return on NRN savings with free ATM, internet/mobile banking, e-statement, 50% discount on locker services, credit card and special discounts on processing fees on various loan facilities.

and plan for Visit Nepal 2020. Hoteliers from Marriott Hotel, Soaltee Crowne Plaza, Hotel Annapurna, Hyatt Regency, Hotel Himalaya and Akama Hotel were present.



# Torture systematic in South Asia: ICJ

South Asian states continue to use torture to control and punish dissent, fail to pass laws to criminalise the practice and, where laws exist, do not use them in good faith, concluded a recent regional meeting in Kathmandu.

Organised by the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), the meeting last month brought together lawyers, human rights experts and activists from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, ahead of global Human Rights Day (10 December).

“Torture and other ill treatment are prevalent in South Asia, and in some countries widespread and systematic, with perpetrators enjoying impunity for the crime,” said ICJ in a press release.

The trend is supported by ‘a mistrust of the justice system’, as shown by an incident last week in India, where police who killed four men accused of raping and murdering a woman were celebrated by crowds as heroes, said Reema Omer, ICJ International Legal Adviser for South Asia.

“More troublingly, however, the perpetrators of such human rights violations — be it extrajudicial killings, enforced



disappearances or torture — are rarely held accountable but instead, are often protected and even celebrated by the state,” added Omer in an email interview.

“This has to be distinguished from the response of the general population as regardless of how ‘popular’ such conduct is, the state still has a duty to ensure an effective and impartial investigation leading to the prosecution of the perpetrators. Unless there is accountability, such violations will persist,” she added.

She said that torture and ill treatment are

used in similar ways across the region, one major difference being in areas of conflict, such as Kashmir or the former federally administered tribal areas in Pakistan. There, “torture is also used as a means of control and as a reprisal against dissenters and those who go against the state’s policies,” she noted.

“There are also some differences in who the vulnerable populations are in each country, who are disproportionately subjected to torture and other ill treatment.”

One positive development is the new penal code in Nepal, which came into force in 2018 and recognises torture as a distinct crime. Other countries in the region have standalone laws on torture while India and Pakistan do not.

Even when officials are held accountable, they are often charged with lesser crimes than torture, such as assault, battery, coercion or abuse of office, which carry relatively low punishments. Lower or middle-ranking public officials are often targeted rather than their superiors.

When torture charges are laid, they frequently fail because of the difficulties in proving the crime, which include finding

witnesses who will testify, inadequate or conflicting medical evidence and threats of reprisals against victims and witnesses. If those barriers are overcome, immunities that protect public officials from prosecution can allow perpetrators to escape accountability.

Military and intelligence agencies, in particular, ‘have extensive and unaccountable powers, including for arrest and detention, which facilitate the practice of torture and other ill treatment’, said the statement.

The conference looked at possible models for reform in the region, such as laws in Ireland and the Ukraine. Omer said they could potentially be used to guide the ways lawyers and activists approach the investigation and prosecution of torture in their own countries.

Under international law, states must ensure protection against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. The ICJ said when there are reasonable grounds to believe such a crime has been committed, states must investigate allegations competently, impartially, independently, promptly and thoroughly. 🇳🇵



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# Memories of a London Nepali hangout

Travelling back in time to The Garage to relive the diaspora dream

**Sunil Pun**  
in London

On the street opposite the Gurkha Store in the west London suburb of Feltham is a row of terraced, semi-detached houses. Among them is 'The Garage', where local Nepalis used to hang out to produce music, art and videos, and to write.

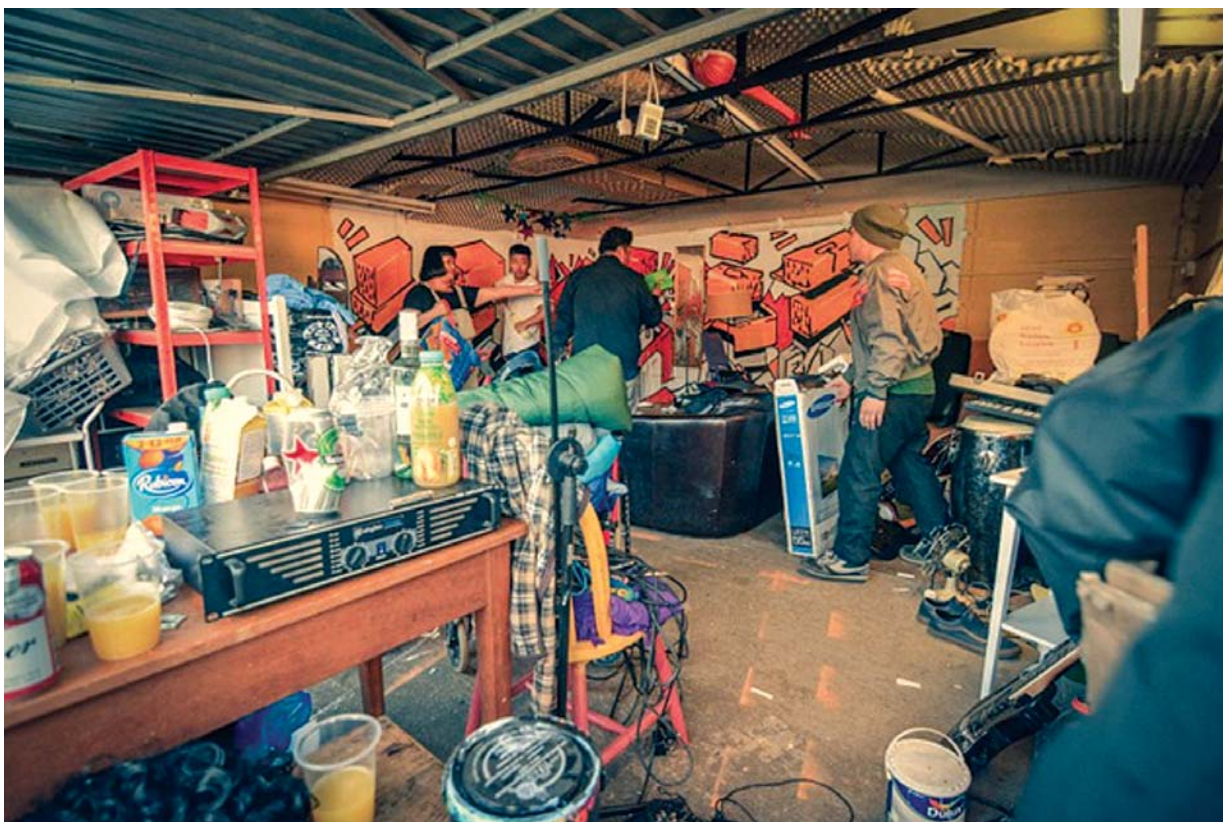
Owner Shirish Gurung remembers a time when The Garage was a vibrant venue, bustling with the activity of young Nepalis adjusting to their new country. It hosted indie artists, screened short films and was a place where scripts were written for films that were never shot.

Sometimes artists meditated to get their creative juices flowing, or performed collective shamanist dances for cathartic purposes to the rhythmic beating of the madal and drums.

They were Nepalis in their mid-teens to early twenties who found themselves in the UK through their parents' Gurkha connection. Their common background and culture shock brought the youth together. Young people moving to a new country often feel a sense of isolation and long to belong, but lack the confidence to assimilate. It was this shared experience that brought this group of youth together in this secure place where they could express themselves artistically.

The Garage could accommodate six cars comfortably, but Shirish DIYed it into a homemade band rehearsal studio. Multiple layers of egg crates plastered on the walls and ceiling acted as a partial soundproofing, and electricity was wired in from the main house for the electric guitars and amps. A second-hand Pearl drum kit sat in the corner.

The conversion of the space into a band rehearsal studio was a necessity rather than a hobby. Back then, Shirish was playing for a band called the Lemon Curse, which had regular gigs, from performing original content at a jam-packed venue in Camden to covering crowd-friendly songs at Indian weddings in Southall. Converting the garage space into a rehearsal



ALL PHOTOS: SUNIL PUN



studio was done to cut costs.

Word of an available rehearsal space spread across the community, and attracted musicians from the diaspora. Apart from rehearsing musicians, The Garage also attracted onlookers, who began to congregate to witness the creative process and to ensure that beer and tobacco did not run out. Long after Lemon Curse became history, The Garage was still the place to be.

Some of the artists who frequented The Garage during its heyday were Yugal Gurung, Haami, Afuraki, Namlo Band, Falcor Pilot, Jerusha Rai, Shreya Rai, Bijay Gurung, and Ashish Gurung. To name a few.

Junkiri Session, a YouTube channel led by Awesh Gurung that captures live performances of UK-based Nepali artists, also began as an idea at The Garage.

The Garage also screened short films, some of which were Shirish's own creations, and others via Passe Pic which included Kesari, Vizarded, Escappare, I Hear the Raven's Call, Passe Pizza, Shuffle (shot in Nepal) and Mulberry Madness. Feature films included Lato Kosero and Heera Harayo.

The films revolved around themes of isolation, dislocation and a sense of displacement. Though they sounded gloomy, the content experimented across genres, from dark comedy to horror.

Shirish has remained loyal, either by choice or circumstance, to the definition of indie films -- low budget, autonomous, small-scale, using actors selected from West London Nepali youth on local locations.

Today, though The Garage is still used as a hangout for occasional drinking, it can no longer boast its earlier youthful energy. There are still reminders of the past: the old leather sofa, a retro lamp and clock, vintage box television, guitars with broken strings and the tattered sleeping bag used when activities went late into the night. People got older, took on responsibilities and commitments, or otherwise moved on. But The Garage space remains a place that once captured the hopes and aspirations of young Nepalis adjusting to their new home. 🇳🇵



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# Chinese farmer strikes roots in Nepal



PHOTOS: JOSIE WANG

Standing in his field on the outskirts of Pokhara and below the dazzling snows of the Annapurna mountains, Xiang Shaohua points to peach saplings in his orchard.

The seedlings were sent to him by his son and daughter who are studying back home in China. And just like Xiang himself, the peach are striking roots in Nepal’s soil.

Xiang first came to Nepal 10 years ago as a tourist, travelled to Pokhara and was so mesmerised by the place and people here that he never left.

Today, he rents 2 hectares of farm and is growing lettuce, cauliflower and fruits commercially to sell to the market and restaurants in the lakeside tourist town. He also works as a subcontractor at Pokhara airport, and at other infrastructure projects.

“In the beginning, it was only supposed to be for three years, and if it did not work out, I planned to go back to China,” Xiang recalls. “It has not all been smooth sailing, but



it has been worth it.”

Xiang now has his father and wife helping out at the farm. The fact that he came from a farming family back in Sichuan where the climate and soil are similar to Nepal, has been helpful.

Xiang says his most challenging period was during the 2015 blockade, when supplies were scarce. He felt like quitting, but realised he had greater responsibilities.

“Actually, I could have left, but that would have meant that my

Nepali employees would be out of their jobs,” recalls 32-year-old Xiang, who speaks Nepali with a distinct Pokhara lilt and considers himself “half Nepali”. Everyone here knows him by his Nepali nickname, Sandesh, and some call him China’s “non-governmental ambassador” to Nepal.

His Nepali side was heartbroken to see the destruction after the 2015 earthquake, and reminded him of the deadly Sichuan earthquake of 2008. He and some other Chinese from Pokhara set up a rescue team

and headed off to Gorkha to dig among the ruins with their bare hands and shovels to rescue people.

While tens of thousands of youth from Pokhara have migrated to the Gulf or Malaysia for work, Xiang is proof that there is plenty to do in Nepal itself, and it is possible to prosper if one is prepared for hard work.

“Farming is very labour intensive, and I notice that most educated young Nepalis are unwilling to do it,” says Xiang, who recalls the first time he came to Pokhara and noticed that farm productivity could be easily improved. That is when he saw an opportunity to put some of his own farming experience to good use, and stayed. Now, Xiang regards Nepal as his second home, and his Nepali neighbours regard the cheerful Nepali-speaking Chinese as a Nepali too.

“I know Nepal. I know what Nepalis need. At the same time, I can communicate with Chinese

enterprises to know what they want, and I can be a good go-between,” says Xiang.

With the new airport, and Chinese contractors working on various hydropower projects in Central Nepal, Xiang sees lots of opportunity for mutual learning between Nepali and Chinese people.

Xiang is not interested in making the quick buck, and says: “I would rather do something I like doing even if I do not make money for a while.”

Farming is not that profitable, but it is a passion and he enjoys growing food among people he likes, and in a land he calls his second home.

In his office, a poster on the wall in Mandarin characters says: ‘Remain true to your aspiration’. Xiang appears to follow his motto to the letter. And as he starts his second decade in Nepal, Xiang wants to make the best of his life in Pokhara. 🇳🇵

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**OFFERTUNITY**





## Trip home rekindles childhood memories for Mustang native

**Ghana S Gurung**  
in Mustang

As the road meanders uphill towards my village of Dhee in Upper Mustang, I recall my childhood amidst these mountains. Life was hard then. Things people take for granted now were privileges only few could afford.

I walked 11 days to Pokhara for my SLC exams. Seeing cars was magical. We were more likely to see helicopters in

Mustang than we were cars.

There was only one primary school in whole Kingdom of Lo then. It was a six hour walk away, and the only secondary school was in Jomsom, three days away.

Thanks to the secretary of the late King of Mustang, Chandra Bahadur Thakali, I was able to stay with his family in Jomsom, paying a rent of Rs310 a month in 1976. That was a what a full-

# 11-day trek

grown sheep cost then.

Mustang was a restricted area and outsiders were rare. Today, there are western trekkers and Nepalis on motorbikes on the motorable road that joins Lo Manthang to Jomsom. In fact ‘domestic tourists’ are more visible than non-Nepali visitors.

And that is the biggest change in Mustang today: The Road. Accessibility has accelerated change in this kingdom within a republic. The 11-day trek from Pokhara can be done in one day – the highway may be precarious but it is a new lifeline.

Subsistence agriculture and pastoralism have been replaced with trade, and now with outmigration and tourism. The road connects Mustang’s pristine culture, stark beauty and fragile ecosystem to the outside world.

Accessibility has helped upgrade health facilities, improve education and bring modern everyday necessities which were nearly non-existent in the past. With no knowledge or access to primary health care, locals mostly depended on traditional

*amchi* healers. With modern medicine and better nutrition, most health indicators have improved.

Food was always scarce during my Mustang childhood. Mules, horses, yaks, people and sometimes even goats had to travel for a week to transport grain to the villages. As a result, grain was expensive.

Before the road, we ate nutritious local produce like buckwheat, beans, wheat, potatoes and barley, but we suffered from a food deficit. While on the one hand the road has contributed to food security by lowering the cost of essentials, it has also brought processed and packaged food to Mustang, encouraging poor dietary choices.

Another big change is that the few local primary schools that did exist are now all closed. With increased income, locals prefer to send their children to Jomsom, Pokhara or even Kathmandu. But even though fewer of them are growing up at home, education and exposure to the wider world has given Mustang’s youngsters a deeper understanding of the value of their cultural and natural heritage.

# Ama Khando: a difference

**Aayush Niroula**

Road trips are not an established genre in Nepali films, like romance, action or comedy, even though they may have all these elements. But in the last few years more than a few have made it into commercial cinema.

Road trip movies tend to be romantic and usually feature a guy and a girl trekking to Jomsom or Mustang with a gaggle of friends to bicker and eventually fall in love. Dollops of crude and convoluted sex jokes spice up the script, and keep the plot moving.

There is usually a dead parent, a crazed brother or a failing orphanage in the mix as part of a thinly established back story or a point of conflict. The mountains always glisten in the background as romance blossoms. Such clichés are something Nepali movie-goers have to suffer through.

However, a few memorable road trip films have been produced over the last couple of decades. *Caravan*, *Kaagbeni* and *Highway* come to mind, in the genres of adventure,

horror, and political drama respectively.

*Ama Khando* is an addition to this list. It is an intimate comedy-drama depicting the journey of two families from Lo Manthang in Mustang to Pokhara. The families make the trip annually, but this year it is different, especially for the little boy who, along with his mother, is the film’s protagonist.

The eponymous Khando of the movie’s title is Ama, or mother, to a school-skipping, fight-picking 10-year-old who never seems to listen to her. While the film’s central relationship is between these two -- Khando and her son Dhondup -- the family friends who travel with them also drift in and out of the film’s focus.

Lobsang, the elder son of the other family, wrestles with having to abandon his studies for lack of money, and has a tense relationship with his father because of this.

Khando, a financially vulnerable single mother, is also frustrated with her son and worried for his future. The elders in the story are concerned about their children’s prospects in the difficult terrain of Mustang as the world closes in. Even though they are conflicted about the idea of the city, its bustle and pollution are a draw.







ALL PHOTOS: GHANA S GURUNG

# is now a day's drive in Nepal



Also adding to the exposure is the interaction with tourists, who come to Mustang to admire its unique cultural heritage and stunning scenery. This has allowed locals to realise that their environment and culture are worth

preserving, and has contributed to restoring pride in their way of life.

However, development comes at a cost. With the road, there is now pressure on the region's fragile ecology. Haphazard road construction has triggered



landslides, and added sediment to the rivers. Drainage has been disrupted, creating water shortages as springs go dry. Climate breakdown has exacerbated this crisis.

Traffic will increase once the

Kali Gandaki Corridor is upgraded to connect to the China border at Korala. It is essential to urgently carry out an assessment of its impact on the environment and to plan for sustainable and green infrastructure.

Climate change has changed rain and snowfall patterns, but on the flipside, it has also had positive impact: cucumbers, tomatoes and vegetables that never used to grow here because of the cold are now plentiful. Mustang apples can now grow in areas which were previously not suitable for orchards.

On balance, road connectivity has provided a strong boost to the economy through tourism. It has connected produce to markets, workers to jobs, students to schools, and patients to hospitals.

The once forbidden kingdom is now connected to the world, and it is at a critical crossroads. It is vital that decisions to balance development with conservation of nature and cultural heritage be taken now so Mustang's fragile beauty is preserved for the next generation. 🇳🇵



**Ghana S Gurung** is the Country Representative of WWF in Nepal and Snow Leopard Champion for the global WWF network. The views expressed here are personal.

## ent road trip film



**THE LONG WALK OUT:** A still from *Ama Khando*. Lead actress Pema Dolker Gurung and director Tshering Dhondup at the International Film Festival of India in Goa in December, where *Ama Khando* was screened.

For young adults like Lobsang the idea of remaining farmers is financially and socially unattractive. Much like many of our young migrants overseas, they can only be nostalgic for a homeland they are already moving away from.

For children like Dhondup, who do not care for much beyond food, entertainment and his long lost father, these larger socio-economic realities do not interfere in his small adventures, but they will eventually decide his fate.

Writer-director Tshering Dhondup is from Upper Mustang and drew from personal experiences to create this story. He plays himself in some portions of the film and so does his own mother. His friends have roles too.

The film is made up of little moments, small talk and chance encounters. There are no spectacles here, but much like the colossal mountains that make for the background in this journey, brooding themes of love, loss and identity are quietly visible under the surface. Here at least, the mountains do stand for something. Here is a road movie where the characters are real and the emotional stakes highly resonant.

The film does occasionally falter (musical cues seem needlessly placed and expose a proclivity for forced sentimentality; some handheld shots feel arbitrary) but in the larger scheme of things, *Ama Khando* works.

And one reason it does, is the lead actress Pema Dolker Gurung's performance which is unencumbered by showiness and lends itself so beautifully to the screen. The score by Pushpa-Sangam and the understated cinematography by Ali Rasheed and Manoj Panta blend well.

Made by a skeletal crew and under the difficult circumstances that come with filming in far off locations on a shoestring budget, the film nevertheless has heart enough to travel. The film was selected for the prestigious Busan Film Festival and the 50th International Film Festival of India in Goa, coming home in December to a warm reception at the Kathmandu International Film Festival, where it won the audience award for best film. 🇳🇵

👉 [nepalitimes.com](http://nepalitimes.com)  
Go online to watch trailer.





EVENTS



Sharing Everest

Kalpana Maharjan, the first female journalist to climb both the north and south sides of Mt. Everest, will be sharing her experience of her expeditions and about her campaign against child marriage.

13 January, 5:30pm-6:30pm, Nirvana Wellness Center, Jawalakhel (01) 5201792

Art & Photography Workshop

Karyashala Creation is organising an art workshop for children aged 6-14 and a photography workshop for adolescents aged 14-19.

6-19 January, 9am-11am, Karyashala Creation, Kupondole, 9860728664

Meditation Hike

Relieve stress and take a meditative hike through the lush forests of Jamarko. Pre-registration required.

11 January, 6:45am-8:30pm, Rs1,500 per person, Meet at Sooriya Wellness and Yoga Centre, Lazimpat (01) 4001714



French Movie Night

Le Chat du Rabbin (The Rabbi's Cat), is a French film that tells the story of a cat who eats the rabbi's parrot and is able to speak human languages. But when the rabbi discovers how rude the cat is, he decides to teach him about the Torah.

14 December, 6pm-8pm, Alliance Française Kathmandu, Jhamsikhel (01) 5009221

Parasite

FICSON Film Series, Organized by Film Critics Society Nepal, presents Bong Joon Ho's critically acclaimed South Korean Film, "Parasite."

16 January, 3pm-5:30pm, Martin Chautari, Thapathali (01) 4102027



LOK

Lok is the journey of an artist, a father, a son, a teacher and a student. Over the course of his four-decade-long career, Lok Chitrakar has created a lasting legacy in the Nepali art scene. His skills as a painter are unparalleled, as seen through his works, such as the painting Chintamani.

11 January-9 February, Le Sherpa, Lazimpat, 9851177901



Book Launch

"Boudha - Restoring the Great Stupa" is a book of images created by Nepali photographer Mani Lama. The book looks at the past and present of Boudha and explores its significance to Buddhists and its rich history.

18 January, 2pm onwards, The Taragaon Museum, Boudha (01) 6201035

A Portrait Story

Nepali artists from a diverse set of backgrounds and artistic styles will be presenting their take on portraits.

9-23 January, Taragaon Museum, Boudha (01) 6201035

MUSIC



Antoine

French singer Antoine, who is regarded as the man with the "golden voice", will be playing at AFK's rooftop bistro. His music has been influenced by African sounds, reggae and Buddhism.

10 January, 6:30pm-9:30pm, Alliance Française Kathmandu, Jhamsikhel (01) 5009221

Serenade

Bring a friend to Full Moon Serenade, sit by the bonfire, and enjoy live music and good food.

10 January, 6pm-9:30pm, Yala Mandala Cafe, Dhaugai (01) 5522935



Almoda & Innov8

Almoda Uprety, singer, songwriter, composer and music producer, will be performing with the talented alternative rock band, Innov8.

10 January, 7pm-10pm, Common Room Gastro Lounge, Soaltee Crowne Plaza, 9801090111

Live Music

Enjoy a musical performance by Uttam Dhakal, Sunil Bhujel, Suraj Bajracharya and Ashok Maharjan every Friday evening at the beautiful garden at LAVEE Residence.

Every Friday, 6pm-9pm, LAVEE Garden, Boudha, 9808996175

Reggae Party

Roots reggae and Ska band, The Riddim Sons, will be playing covers and original songs for a lively evening.

10 January, 6pm-10pm, Moksh, Jhamsikhel (01) 5528362

DINING



Achaar Ghar

Satisfy your desire for home-cooked meals along with a variety of pickles prepared using recipes passed down through generations.

Jhamsikhel, Pulkhok (01) 5541952

Friday BBQ

Tantalize your taste buds with an evening of pork, chicken, buff and vegetarian barbeque.

10 January, 5pm onwards, Belle Ville Cafe, Baluwatar (01) 4411266



Chez Caroline

Tucked away from the street noise and fumes, this is the place to visit for authentic French and continental cuisine in Nepal. Try their Profiteroles au Chocolat and Choux pastry filled with vanilla ice cream and hot chocolate sauce.

Baber Mahal Revisited (01) 4263070

The BLVD

The newly renovated restaurant at Hotel Royal Singi serves healthy and flavourful gluten-free meals. Don't believe it? Try the quinoa tabbouleh served with grilled skewers of paneer, mushroom, tomato, pepper and onion.

Lal Durbar, Kamaladi (01) 4424190



Captain Egg

Egg lovers can rejoice at this egg-themed restaurant. Have a savoury Amritsari Egg Chole, Potato Egg Rosti or even an Egg Sizzler.

Gahanapokhari (01) 4445330

GETAWAY



Maya Manor

This Rana palace turned boutique hotel offers a Victorian Gazebo, manicured gardens, highly-rated restaurants and an exclusive rooftop garden overlooking the city.

Darbar Marg (01) 4428028

Buddha Maya Garden Hotel

Just beyond the historical Maya Devi Temple and near the heart of Lumbini, stay in the beautiful Buddha Maya Garden Hotel. Take a stroll along Lumbini World Heritage Garden in the morning while listening to the spiritual hymns of nearby prayers.

Lumbini (71) 580219/220



Marriott Kathmandu

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Naxal (01) 4443040

Grand Norling

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Gokarna (01) 4910193



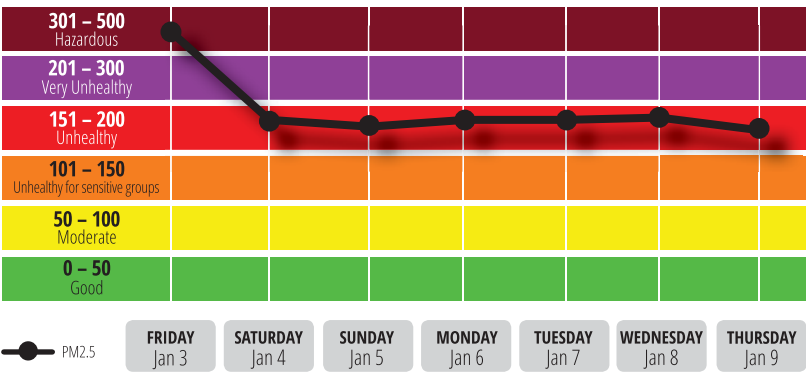
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Borderlands Eco Adventure Resort, Sindhupalchok (01) 4381425

AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 3 - 9 January



Thanks to yet another winter rainfall this week, the Air Quality Index in Kathmandu improved slightly. But 'improved' is a relative term, AQI measured in terms of the concentration of particles smaller than 2.5 microns dropped from above 200 at one point to below 150. But these are daily averages, and there were peaks during morning and evening rush hour when pollution levels were nearly off the charts. This weekend, with added moisture and lower minimum temperature, the smog trapped in Kathmandu Valley inversion will raise AQI again to very unhealthy levels.

<https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>

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OUR PICK

Opened in Kathmandu on 10 December

Robert Downey Jr. plays a doctor who can talk to animals in this adventure fantasy. When Queen Victoria falls ill, his skills are in demand. He sets sail to a mythical island with his animals, in search of a cure. With stunning visuals and cute animals, the movie looks to be a family entertainer. Directed by Stephen Gaghan, the movie also stars Rami Malek, Tom Holland and Emma Thompson.



Sonam Choekyi Lama  
in Dolpo

For the past five days, Tsamcho Gurung and her friends have been waiting for a flight out of Jufal airfield in Dolpo to go down to Nepalgunj and then Kathmandu. The third major snowfall this winter has meant there is little chance of flights till at least Friday.

Having spent all her money waiting at a lodge near the airfield in Jufal, Gurung has now decided to return to her home in Saldang. But she may not be able to make it back home either because heavy snow has covered the high passes.

Nepal's mountains and the trans-Himalayan districts of Mugu, Dolpo, Mustang and Manang experienced snow much earlier than usual in December, and another heavy snowfall now. This has caught many locals unprepared.

Usually, people of Upper Dolpo like Tsamcho Gurung travel to the lower valleys for the winter. This year, since the snow came early, many have been stranded.

Karma Dolma and her parents are planning to spend the winter in Kathmandu, going on pilgrimages to Buddhist shrines like Boudha, and getting health checkups while there. Dolma made it across the Kangla and Shey-La passes with great difficulty in waist-high snow, only to find out in Jufal that there have been no flights because of bad weather.

"Crossing the passes is easier than waiting here at the airport," Dolma says. "The uncertainty is killing us. We could try to hire a jeep, but it takes several days and the roads are treacherous."

Aishwarya Rokaya has a Tara Air ticket to Nepalgunj where she needs to get admitted to hospital for a stomach ailment, but says she has had enough of waiting. "If the plane doesn't come tomorrow we have no choice but to go back home. What to do. I am sure the pain will get worse."

Students from Crystal Mountain



PHOTOS: SONAM CHOEKYI LAMA

School in Dho walked for four days across snowbound passes to get to the airport, and have now been waiting for three days. The annual winter migration from Upper Dolpo includes children who use the school break to descend to warmer climes.

At the airline counter in the airport, there is a chaos every

morning with no information from airline staff. Passengers on mobiles try to contact relatives in Nepalgunj to ask about the weather and if the plane has taken off.

"The weather is unpredictable here in Dolpo, but we cannot control the clouds," says the Tara Air manager here. "If it clears up we can make up to two flights, but

there is a big backlog of people who have been waiting for many days."

Dolpo is served only by Tara Air and Sita Air, and both airlines have not operated here for nearly a week now. The shortage of flights means there is a thriving black market in tickets, and distributors who own lodges give priority for their guests by asking for an extra fee. 🇳🇵

**ALL ABOARD:** (Anti-clockwise) Passengers boarding the last flight out of Jufal airport in Dolpo on 29 December.

Snowbound Phoksundo Lake: this week's third storm has blocked most of the high passes in the trans-Himalayan district.

Stranded passengers at Jufal airfield last week.

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# Why has zero-cost migration not

Recruiters are still taking advantage of the desperation of workers for a better shot at life

Labour migration touches every Nepali in one way or another. The pain of departure at the airport, the joy of reunion. Aspirations drive us to move to wherever we get more credit, recognition or money.



## LABOUR MOBILITY

Upasana Khadka

The confidence with which a person fastens the seat-belt on a plane reveals whether Doha is the final destination or just a place of transit – and that determines treatment by flight attendants. Regardless of the differences in where, why and how we move, we are all aspiring for a better shot at life.

The migrant industry has evolved: the private sector has seen an opportunity for arbitrage, the government tries to regulate it with policies, and the media, human rights organisations and non-profits are story-tellers, watchdogs and advocates.

Platforms like the Global Compact for Migration and the Sustainable Development Goals



SHANKAR DAHAL

advocate a ‘whole-of-society’ approach where different stakeholders will work collectively to advance the goals of good migration.

We have come a long way, but we need to see more tangible impact. The discussion has to move from what should be to where we actually are. The chasm between de-jure and de-facto in the foreign

employment industry is so wide that it is easy to fall between the cracks.

Everyone is quick to point out that zero-cost migration is not happening. There is public litigation and there are supreme court orders. We hold rallies and conferences and we write about the issue. There are random surveys at airports that seek to find out what workers are paying. And guess what, it is not zero.

While this attention is necessary to keep the debate alive, the focus of our discourse should now shift from ‘if’ it can be implemented to ‘why’ it has not been, and ‘how’ it can be enforced.

Workers are willing to pay. Let’s start there. They are convinced there is a brighter future waiting for them. If you take me to America, I will pay you \$40,000. If you get me

a janitor job in West Asia, I will pay \$1,500. If you find me a security guard or driver job, I may pay you \$5,000.

The cases that end up coming to the notice of authorities are those in which there is no job in return for the money spent. By the time this becomes clear, it is too late because the worker does not have proof of the transaction. On the

## Irresistible forces: wage differentials and demographic trends

In many parts of the world the ratio of the working-age population to the elderly population is in decline. By 2050, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries will lose more than 82 million workers, and gain 96 million elderly individuals.

In contrast, developing countries are experiencing a youth bulge, including Nepal, which is in the midst of a demographic window of opportunity expected to last until 2047. Over 500,000 Nepali youth enter the labour market annually, not all of whom can be absorbed, increasing the pressure to migrate for work.

“In order for labour migration to be an industry for good, it has to be a good industry,” said Oxford University professor Lant Pritchett, at a recent lecture in Kathmandu. It was ironic that the remarks came a week after Labour Minister Gokarna Bista was ousted for trying to push worker-friendly reforms by targeting illicit profit-making.

Pritchett highlighted two aspects of the global economy that make labour mobility “a simply irresistible” force of the future: demographic trends and wage differentials. Pritchett and his colleagues came up with the concept of ‘place premium’: persistent wage differences for workers with the same productivity across borders, adjusted for the cost of living.

The impact of these two factors is being felt in Nepal. In April 2019, the Nepal government signed an agreement with Japan, a country with a severely ageing population, to mobilise workers in 14 sectors under the Specified Skilled Worker visa category. If selected, Nepali workers will receive

equal pay for equal work, which means the income gains of moving will be in orders of magnitude.

However, such a win-win outcome has not always been realised in practice. When a few months of salaries of a 24-month contract period are spent repaying loans and interests, the wage differential that drove the decision to move can be muted.

Furthermore, migration in Nepal has also entailed giving up basic rights, including freedom of movement and access to justice. The economic ‘place premium’ has almost always been accompanied by a rights ‘place cost’. Stories of abuse, discrimination and inadequate labour protection abroad have shaped a more cautious migration discourse in Nepal, despite its high dependence on remittances.

The emphasis on addressing malpractices in recruitment and employment of migrant workers is warranted, but Nepal must also be forward-looking and take advantage of potential opportunities opening up in Europe and other ageing societies.

Pritchett predicts we are entering an unprecedented demographic era in which the narrative in many ageing societies will change from ‘how do we find jobs for workers?’ to ‘how do we find workers for jobs?’ Temporary labour market programs can ease the qualms of receiving countries that fear immigration, and of sending countries worried about losing their productive workforce.

Nepal needs more active labour diplomacy, especially in Europe, to benefit from these opportunities. Nepalis need skills for jobs of the future, such as in hospitality and care, which meet international standards and are less susceptible to automation.



Private intermediaries here undercut competition for labour by compromising on wages and hiking up recruitment costs. If this is not addressed early on as newer job markets emerge, we can expect recruitment costs for the new destination markets to be significantly higher than now. The

recruitment costs demanded by intermediaries at their discretion and the workers’ willingness to pay for such jobs out of desperation are also often tied to the attractiveness of the job and location. This would again create a big dent in the place premium.

Better migration opportunities should not be considered to be at odds with national development priorities. Research shows that economic development and emigration follow an inverted-U pattern, with emigration rising with economic development until countries reach upper-middle income levels.

The latest labour force survey estimates that over 35% of Nepali youth (ages 15 to 24) are not in employment, education or training, while the unemployment rate of this age group is over 21%. The costs of staying are not negligible if those who remain do not have access to meaningful work.

Not giving those who want to migrate legal avenues means irregular channels of migration will flourish and workers will put themselves at risk knowingly or unknowingly, especially in the face of the two ‘irresistible forces’.

We have seen this with the female domestic worker ban that led to unauthorised travel through India. We saw it in the story of Santosh Shrestha, who died in an airstrike in Libya earlier this year but who had dreamt of making it to Italy. And we see it in the stories of the four Nepalis who had to be rescued last month in Malawi while chasing their American dream. 🇳🇵

Upasana Khadka

बालबालिका माथि हुने हिंसा, दुर्व्यवहार, शोषण भएको, जोखिमपूर्ण अवस्थामा रहेको वा बालअधिकारको उल्लंघन भएको छ भने बाल हेल्पलाइनको पैसा नलाग्ने फोन: नं. १०५८ मा खबर गरौं।

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# happened?

flipside, after the provision in the Malaysia-Nepal MOU requiring employers to pay for visa and ticket, Malaysian companies are reportedly lamenting that it is too expensive to hire Nepalis. Let that sink in: a profit-driven industry in Malaysia is complaining about losing competitiveness after having to bear the costs that had otherwise been borne by a poor worker himself.


The recruiters are taking advantage of the absolute desperation of workers for a better life. They know their role is indispensable and that it will remain so. When one worker is charged in exchange for a promised job, it costs \$1,000. If one considers that every one of the 4 million workers mobilised in the last decade paid this amount, the total is astronomical. There is also double dipping: with employers paying for the same placement.

With that kind of money floating around, decisions on political careers and diplomatic postings can be swayed. To flourish in the foreign employment sector in Nepal a Labour Minister or bureaucrat have to be willing participants in sharing the loot, or complacent and indifferent. Anything else, and you are out.

Despite all this, a comparative study on recruitment costs borne by workers from Bangladesh or Pakistan are at least three to four-fold more than what a Nepali worker pays. If there are positive ways to reduce costs based on practical lessons, those should

drive our narrative and not just de jure principles. Research and advocacy should focus on identifying the few employers who are actually willing to participate in the zero-cost scheme, like the Responsible Business Alliance-affiliated employers in Malaysia.

The driving force for this may very well be pressure on the employer from due diligence imposed by headquarters in Europe and America, and not concern for the worker. Recent surprise raids by the Department of Foreign Employment (DOFE) in response to worker complaints seem promising. But how much longer before the current Director General of DOFE is seen as a threat and is transferred? What can be done to instill fear among the 850 plus recruiters in Kathmandu that such raids are not an exception but the rule? How can recent bilateral agreements for zero-cost migration be operationalised?

What we need now is what scholars call 'labour market realism', that implementation needs to begin from labour market realities rather than ideals and principles. Our efforts are inadequate if we limit ourselves to finding out from a handful of workers that they are paying, or if we continue to inform a handful of potential workers that they should not be paying, knowing very well that the minute they are in the clutches of the recruiter, they will pay. 

**Upasana Khadka** writes this column every month, analysing trends affecting Nepal's workers abroad.

# Back to Nepal for good



OM ASTHA RA

On 31 December, Malaysia's amnesty program for migrant workers called 'Back for Good' (B4G) came to an end. By paying RM700 (\$170) and tickets back home, the scheme gave undocumented migrant workers an opportunity to return home without facing the penalty of up to RM10,000 (\$2,500) for overstaying and imprisonment of up to five years.

Over 17,000 raids were conducted in 2019 alone, and many Nepali workers were caught up in the dragnet. Many Nepalis become undocumented despite being aware of the risks and consequences of getting caught, and some employers are equally involved in the process but get away facing little consequences.

"What was different this time was the proactive role played by the Nepal embassy in Kuala Lumpur," said Dinesh, a Nepali worker living in Malaysia for a decade. "They made sure fraudulent agents were not involved in the processing to assist those who wanted to benefit from the program."

An employer has to jump through hoops to obtain an approval to hire a foreign worker. A recent World Bank report details a lengthy ten-step process involving multiple visits to Malaysian ministries and payment of levy, insurance policy, security bond, etc. to hire a worker. There are also formalities on the Nepali side including demand-letter verification and labour approvals.

Alternately, employers can easily poach migrant workers in Malaysia by simply providing a salary premium and avoiding time and financial costs associated with recruitment and formal costs such as insurance and levies.

An undocumented worker is easier to hire, abuse or fire as they

do not have any power to report misconduct. Many workers who are victims of abuse or breaches of contract opt to move to the irregular status because there is no option to legally change employers.

Many overstay their visas given a few months of the initial contract are simply spent repaying the recruitment costs that brought them there. Others simply want more freedom, higher income, and more hours of work by working with multiple employers.

This can seem like a win-win situation for both until they are caught. In such cases, however, the worker is disproportionately punished. “Employers can easily bribe their way out of the fines and imprisonment they are liable to for hiring an undocumented worker,” says Dinesh.

Experts say a more comprehensive study on the factors driving millions of foreign workers and thousands of Malaysian employers to opt for irregular hiring can benefit both the sending and receiving countries. Bans and amnesties only scratch the surface of deeper structural issues that drive both employers and workers to opt for irregular channels in the first place.

The World Bank estimates that there are over 1.2 million irregular migrants in Malaysia. Given this, the fact that only 187,000 foreign nationals -- including 5,900 Nepalis -- opted for the B4G program points to how many decided to remain despite the appeal of the program and the heightened risk of apprehension.

"I have Nepali friends who chose to remain back despite the risks because they are earning well. They live outside the raid-prone areas and feel relatively safer. They are positive that another Amnesty Program will be arranged by the Malaysian Government, by which point they will have saved money," says another Nepali worker.

With flights to Kathmandu filled with workers returning from Malaysia, the spotlight is also on migration stakeholders in Nepal. Nepal needs to focus on its reintegration policy, our own 'Back for Good' program that does not have the same negative and unwelcoming connotation as Malaysia's.

Nationalisation policies in Gulf countries have also partially or entirely banned sectors for foreign workers, and the finishing up of FIFA-related construction projects in Qatar and regional geopolitics means more and more Nepali migrants are returning home.

The image of the thousands of workers leaving the country gets all the attention in the mainstream press, but on the other side of the airport, the Nepalis returning home are not noticed.

Upasana Khadka

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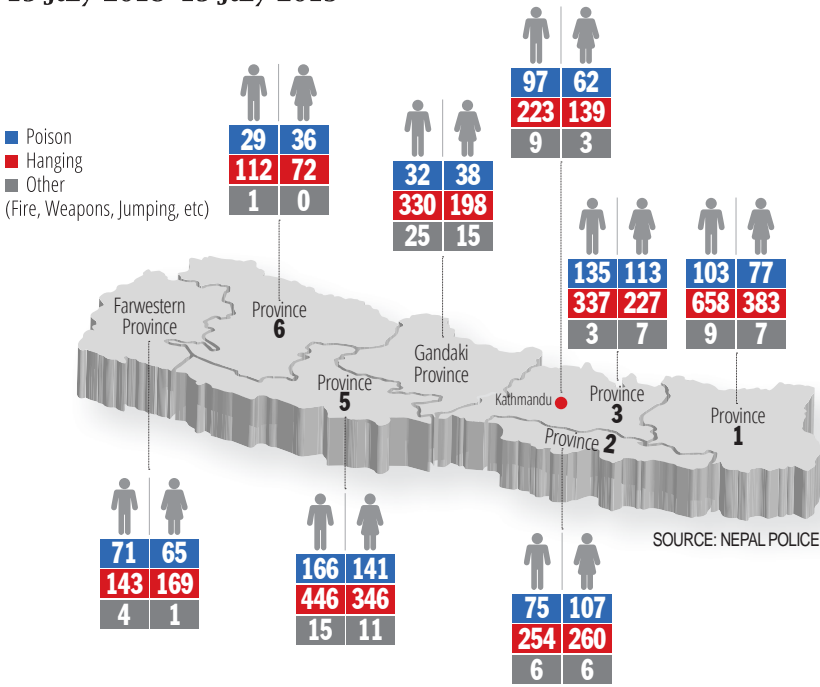


# Nepal’s suicide rate vastly

The official statistics for people taking their own lives are bad enough, but the actual number is much greater

## SUICIDE METHODS in NEPAL

15 July 2018–15 July 2019



Sewa Bhattarai

Nepal’s public health system has no mechanism for recording suicides, and the only statistics about suicides can be found in police records. This data shows that about 5,000 Nepalis kill themselves every year.

But since only police records are

counted and attempted suicides are not reported, the official data gives no sense of the incidence of people trying to take their own lives.

Based on police data and projections, the World Health Organisation put Nepal as the country with the 7th highest suicide rate in the world (24.9 per 100,000). Public health experts say that suicide is just the symptom, and that the real disease is poor

mental health.

Most people who commit suicide suffer from depression and other mental illnesses like schizophrenia and substance abuse disorders. The Nepal Health Research Council (NHRC) is for the first time conducting a nationwide survey of mental health by year-end, and already the picture is not looking good.

“From our pilot survey, we

found depression in 3.4% of people, and suicidal tendencies in one out of every ten Nepalis,” says Kriti Adhikari of NHRC.

Most of these people cannot access the counselling and treatment they need since Nepal has only 0.13 psychiatrists per 100,000 people, and most of them are concentrated in urban areas. Nepal Police is the only entity that deals with suicide, and it is more

concerned about the criminality of the act than about mental health.

“Nepal’s law classifies suicide and abetting suicide as crimes, so our priority is figuring out the criminal element of the cases,” explains police spokesperson Shailesh Thapa Chhetri. “There is no punishment for suicide because the person is already dead. But we investigate to find out if the death was a murder or a suicide.”

The fact that Nepal Police personnel are not trained in mental health, and that the health system does not record suicides or suicide attempts means that there is no entry for suicide in the Health Information Management System, the database of all patients at government health facilities. This keeps suicides hidden.

“The police data on suicide understates the problem of mental health in Nepal,” says Ravi Shakya, a physician at Patan Hospital, which has a mental health department. “We know more men die from suicide than women and they tend to use more violent means. But in fact, many more women attempt suicide and fewer of them succeed. They may come to hospital, recover, and go back home, but that does not mean their mental illness is over.”

Except at Patan Hospital, victims of attempted suicides

## Suicide by pesticide

Sonia Awale

Of the 25,308 suicides recorded by the police in Nepal in the past five years, poisoning was the method of choice of 6,213 and pesticides were the most common form of poison used. Suicide by pesticides is the easiest, cheapest and the quickest way to kill oneself in Nepal.

A 2015 study in Chitwan showed that 90% of all poisoning cases resulted from deliberate ingestion of pesticides. Hospital and forensic data over the years reveal that pesticide self-poisoning kills at least 1,000 people in Nepal annually.

“Pesticides are in fact a far greater threat than what police records show. There are many people who make the attempt and survive due to insufficient dose or medical treatment,” says Ravi Shakya, a mental health specialist at Patan Hospital. “If we also count attempted suicides, pesticide is the most preferred method of suicide in Nepal.”

Shailesh Thapa Chhetri of Nepal Police agrees: “Previously, hanging used to be the most common method of suicide, as people had the easiest access to ropes. Now, access to pesticides is even easier. Almost every household has pesticides, whether to kill cockroaches or to spray in the farms.”

And as the import of pesticides increases, the hazardous chemicals will only be more accessible for self-harm. The Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development claims that Nepal’s pesticide consumption is 396g per hectare but research by the Netherlands-based Wageningen University shows it to be 2.9kg per hectare in vegetable patches.

“Pesticides that kill people are readily available in the market, they do not need prescriptions and anyone can buy it,” says Dilli Ram Sharma, former Director General of the Department of Agriculture. “To make matters worse, farmers always go for the most

Easy availability make toxic agrochemicals the preferred way for Nepalis to take their own lives



MONIKA DEUPALA

toxic ones that kill all pests at once.”

A 2014 National Forensic Science Laboratory study that looked at the trends of clinical toxicology cases in Nepal from 2002-2012 showed that of the total poisoning cases due to insecticides, 71% were by ingesting the organophosphorus compounds Metacid (Methyl parathion) and Nuvan (Dichlorovos). Pyrethroid, carbamate and organochlorine were also used. Some of these pesticides are actually banned in Nepal, but available over the counter.

A Central Police Forensic Science Laboratory study conducted over the past three years shows organophosphorus compounds and aluminium phosphide as the most common active ingredients in poisoning cases. Data from seven tertiary hospitals across Nepal found Celphos (aluminium phosphide used to kill rodents) as the most common pesticide in those admitted for poisoning.

The Centre for Pesticide Suicide Prevention in collaboration with the University of Edinburgh and Nepal Public Health Foundation is collecting three years worth of hospital and forensic data to analyse self-

poisoning. Prof Michael Eddleston of the University of Edinburgh is the principal investigator and was recently in Nepal.

“I don’t think it’s ever possible to use pesticide safely. You have to make pesticides non-toxic to humans, animals and the environment. We are trying to identify the problematic pesticides that are killing people here and provide that information to the concerned authorities so that they are banned and replaced with safer pesticides,” Eddleston told Nepali Times.

The Nepal Public Health Foundation is also organising a two-day national conference (9-10 January) focussed on healthy farming and reducing pesticide use.

Indeed Bangladesh, Korea and Sri Lanka have shown that removing highly hazardous pesticides from agricultural practice is key to preventing suicide deaths without affecting agricultural output. The good news is that some of the most toxic pesticides are being banned in Nepal.

In 2019, when the Centre for Pesticide Suicide Prevention pinpointed Dichlorvos and 3g tablets of aluminium phosphide as the

most common causes of pesticide suicide in Nepal, the Plant Quarantine and Pesticide Management Centre placed a ban on both the pesticides, to be enforced after a grace period of two years for the chemicals already on the market.

Similarly, before Metacid (Methyl parathion) was prohibited in 2006, up to 68% of Nepalis killing themselves were using the chemical. After the ban, this figure came down to 8%.

“Prevention is better than cure and that is exactly what pesticide ban does. And this has a double benefit: it reduces suicide death while also bringing down the rampant use of pesticides in agriculture, leading to a decline in pesticide residue,” adds Sharma, who retired after banning the two pesticides.

Despite the ban, however, the smuggling of pesticides across the open border with India remains a challenge, and experts call for crossborder cooperation to fight it.

Says Rakesh Ghimire of Teaching Hospital: “Control of pesticides especially in agricultural areas is important, but as important is pesticide information centres and treatment when the poisoning happens.”



Suicide by pesticides is the easiest, cheapest and the quickest way to kill oneself in Nepal. Replacing highly hazardous pesticides with safer options is key to preventing suicide deaths. Nepali Times recently caught up with Prof Michael Eddleston from the Centre for Pesticide Suicide Prevention to speak about the crisis.



# underestimated

## A note on suicide notes

With the spread of social media, police have to contend with suicide notes not just on paper but also on the Internet platforms. But the real challenge of dealing with suicide note is still the same: the mental health. Should the declaration of a dead person be believed? And if the dying declaration blames someone else for that death, how credible is the allegation?

Ravi Shakya, a physician at Patan Hospital says that dying declarations are usually held to be credible evidence. "When someone declares that they are want to die and proceed to kill themselves, we have every reason to take such a note seriously," says Shakya. "However, if they blame another person, we cannot assume guilt based on the allegation. We have to take into consideration that the person who committed suicide could have been mentally ill."

The police also take such suicide notes seriously, but prioritise criminal investigation over mental health. "A suicide note is evidence, so we treat it with utmost care. We analyse the handwriting to make sure it matches the dead person's. If the dead person blames other people, we consider them under suspicion until they are proven innocent," says Shailesh Thapa of Nepal Police. The police do not necessarily question the sanity of the person who wrote the note, therefore sidelining the mental health aspect of the suicide.

receive no mental health counselling after their physical health improves. But last year the Ministry of Health and Population appointed a focal person for mental health for the first time. This focal person, Phanindra Baral, acknowledges that Nepal has not done enough to address mental health and suicide prevention.

"There are not enough psychiatrists in Nepal to serve the whole country. So for now, we are training the current health staff in basic mental health issues and counseling," says Baral. "We are taking the program to 41 districts this year, and hope to serve all 77 districts in the next two years."

For the first time, the Ministry has included mental health as a priority in its proposal to the National Planning Commission, hoping to see that reflected in the next five year plan. But till that happens, there are other things to be done.

"Mental health still has a stigma and people are not willing to acknowledge it or seek help. The first step is to raise awareness of mental health and suicide," says Uden Maharjan, public health researcher and co-author of a paper on suicides in Nepal. "We need suicide helplines and people should be made aware of how to access them so they can open up."



परिवर्तनको ज्योति

“ मेरो सानो प्रयासले देश विदेशमा रहेका आँखाका बिरामीहरूलाई ज्योति प्रदान गरी थोरै भएपनि परिवर्तन ल्याउन पाएकोमा म खुशी छु । साथै यस कार्यलाई थप हौसला प्रदान गर्न तिलगंगा आँखा प्रतिष्ठानलाई सहयोग गरी साथ दिनुभएकोमा ज्योति विकास बैंकद्वारा प्रवर्द्धित "हाम्रो विकास प्रवर्द्धन कोष" लाई धन्यवाद । ”

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# FAQ Nepal

There are many things about Nepal that flummox visitors who stray into the country’s sovereign territory from time to time. In order to help them make sense of this country which is a riddle wrapped in a mystery and stuffed inside a conundrum, the Ass provides this one-stop window containing answers to some Frequently Asked Questions about Nepal:

**Q. Where is Nepal?**  
A: Good question. We’re just trying to figure that out ourselves. In a philosophical sense you could say that we don’t know where we are at the present juncture of history, or the direction we are headed as a nation state.

**Q. Why doesn’t Kathmandu have any working traffic lights?**  
Because an automatic traffic light has not yet been invented which can detect an approaching VIP motorcade and stop all vehicular movements at intersections for a minimum of one hour.

**Q. How is Nepal promoting tourism in 2020?**  
Nepal will not meet the 2 million target in 2020. It will exceed it. The Minister of Tourism, Marxism and Leninism is in Australia as we speak to offer people there safe haven in Nepal. The minister also got the brainwave to require all of Nepal’s 4 million overseas workers to wear #VNY2020 t-shirts at construction sites in Saudi Arabia and in palm oil plantations in Malaysia.

**Q. What is Nepal best known for?**

- The birthplace of Lord Buddha.
- Home of Lord Ram’s in-laws.
- The highest mountain in the world.
- As the highest per capita producer of instant noodles.
- Always 15 minutes ahead of Indian Standard Time.
- For the world’s friendliest and most trustworthy crooks.

**Q: How do people commonly greet each other in Nepal?**  
“Khanu bho?” Translation: Have you partaken in a bribe yet?

**Q: What are some common Nepali customs?**  
Never offer anything with your left hand, it is considered rude. If it is offered under the table, taking with either hand is OK.

**Q: Any tips on dining etiquette?**  
To blend in with your hosts, chew loudly with your mouth open. After finishing your meal, show gratitude and appreciation by burping in a loud and carefree manner.

**Q: What other cultural sensitivities should I keep in mind?**  
Public display of affection is considered offensive. Refrain from holding hands in the streets unless you are of the same sex.

**Q: How do I ensure that my visit will help Nepal’s economy?**  
Always insist on paying three times more than what locals pay for meals, museum tickets and domestic air transport.

**Q: Is there any reason why you shouldn’t be in preventive custody under the new IT Bill?**  
None whatsoever.

The Ass

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