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Not over till it's over

Nepal needs to boost booster doses to prevent not just another surge but also new variants



UNICEF

BRIDGING THE HEALTH GAP: Community health worker Birma Devi Kunwar, 32, crosses a bridge in Darchula with a Covid-19 vaccine box on her back. Nepal's success with previous vaccination drives is the main reason the country has now fully-inoculated 81% of its eligible population against Covid-19. But booster doses are trailing.

available, and the government may soon start offering it to children up to five years.

Nepalis do not show vaccine denial so much, but there is some Covid complacency.

"We have to keep up with the pace of vaccination, but we must continue prioritising vulnerable populations and children," adds Pun. "And it might help to provide the rationale and evidence to back the need for a booster because for most people, complete vaccination means only two doses."

Nepalis are slowly becoming careless about masking up and avoiding crowds but, experts say, this must continue to be a part of prevention measures. Testing needs to continue, especially as countries around the world open up for businesses and tourism.

Nepal has also now removed mandatory PCR test and quarantine for fully vaccinated visitors, but the country cannot let its guard down.

Says Buddha Basnyat: "Masks are protecting us, there is no harm in continuing to wear them. They in fact defend Nepalis from a myriad of other infections, as well as air pollution." 🇳🇵

On 23 March, Nepal recorded 38 new Covid-19 cases, one of the lowest figures since early 2020. The pandemic does not make it to the headlines anymore, and Nepalis are going about as if the crisis is a thing of the past.

But it is not over until it is over. Given the latest outbreaks in Hong Kong and China, the WHO has warned that we may only be 'halfway' through the pandemic. That surge is just across Nepal's northern border.

Parts of China are back under lockdown. Hong Kong with its world class health care system, is seeing high fatality rates from the Omicron and BA.2 sub-lineage.

Omicron and its stealth variant may have run their course in the Subcontinent, but the Deltacron hybrid has been detected in several countries, including India.

While there is no evidence yet to suggest that the recombinant

virus is more contagious or virulent than previous strains, it is too early to make any assumptions.

"If the new surges around the world are due to the BA.2 variant, we might not have to be as concerned, but the same can't be said for Deltacron since we have not yet established its transmissibility and virulence," says virologist Sher Bahadur Pun at Teku Hospital.

Physician at Patan Academy of Health Sciences Buddha Basnyat agrees: "It is an unfolding story, but it will be prudent to assume that the pandemic is not yet over. And if there is anything we should learn from the past two years, it is that this is a very wily virus."

In January, the WHO projected that the acute stage of the pandemic would end in 2022 provided that there was necessary treatment and equitable distribution of vaccines worldwide.

But citing the latest rise in case numbers, it has changed its forecast saying the world is only in the middle of the pandemic.

Universal vaccine coverage is the only way to prevent another surge, and newer variants from coming up. In the last two years, SARS-CoV-2 has proven to be very adaptable, naturally mutating and attacking the unvaccinated.

In Hong Kong, the majority of those hospitalised had not been vaccinated, or had received the less effective Sinovac jabs.

Nepal's inoculation status is now relatively high: over 93% of the target population is partially vaccinated while 81% have got both doses. Much of the credit goes to grassroots health workers mobilised across the country who built on Nepal's past success with vaccination drives for other diseases (pictured above).

However, the figure for booster doses is at only 9.8% even though Pfizer vaccines are now easily

Inside

Don't act on the Act
EDITORIAL
PAGE 2



Fixing broken parts in Nepal-China ties

PAGE 10-11



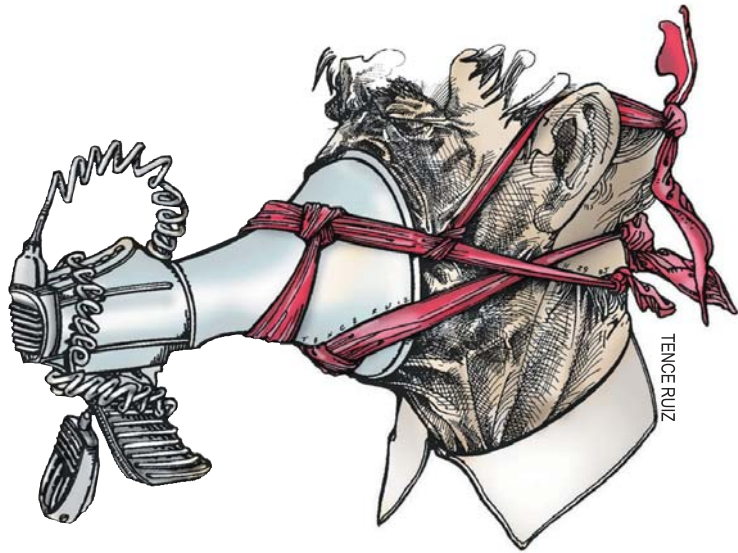
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Don't act on the Act

Nepal's governments have been biologically incapable of going to the root of any issue to find solutions. Instead, they introduce knee-jerk rules and blanket bans that impinge on citizens' rights. The latest is the 11th amendment to the National Broadcasting Regulation in the Nepal Gazette. Like all previous ill thought out rules, this one is vague, contradictory, and unconstitutional.

The new amendment seeks to regulate Over the Top (OTT), Video on Demand (VOD) and internet television in Nepal. OTT is the service of displaying tv programs through the internet without using direct-to-home cable or satellite. It also includes media streaming services through other online platforms.



Now, any individual or organisation uploading a video via internet tv 'on a regular basis' needs to register. The licensing fee is Rs500,000.

The National Broadcasting Regulation is concerned with frequency allocation, not the internet. Regulating net content is not the purview of broadcast rules.

Advocate Prabin Subedi explains that the National Broadcasting Act does not regulate the internet. The government is trying to restrict the freedom of choice of citizens.

Any new law should either try to solve a problem or to facilitate a solution. But this is not just a clumsy attempt to restrict freedom of expression, but a blunt sword that can be used to go after anyone the government does not like. For example, what is a 'regular broadcast'? Once a month? Once a week? When is an occasional post 'regular'?

Even if it is to regulate 'regular' social media content, it should go through an internet specific law like the proposed Information Technology Bill. If it is about a tax on the earnings of online/social media it should be governed by corporate or taxation laws, explains Santosh Sigdel of Digital

The vagueness of a new amendment to the broadcast law is designed for arbitrary application

Rights Nepal.

By its very nature, the internet is an open ecosystem where people can communicate openly. Nepal's Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, and the country is also party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Article 19.

The amendment is against the Constitution because it limits freedom of expression. This is like needing a license to speak up.

After a public outcry, officials have tried to justify the amendment. But even if this is an attempt to curb fake news, open defamation and mala fide YouTube videos, it is crude and ham-handed. Instead of introducing draconian regulations, the emphasis should have been on spreading media literacy among citizens.

Sigdel told us the problem is that the government just does not understand the Internet's convergence of text, video, audio and graphics. It is still trying to regulate them individually. It is clear that in this year of elections, politicians are concerned about the influence of social media content.

"Content cannot be regulated by state's intervention. Most people can distinguish between genuine and

fake news on YouTube, and we can create awareness through media literacy," says Subedi.

Nepal appears to be following the example of its neighbours in subduing internet content. China has its Great Firewall, and last year India introduced controversial

rules that have been used selectively to target opponents while allowing hate speech on other platforms. In February, Bangladesh came up with a draft regulation similar to India's IT rules to curb social and digital media including OTT platforms. It is as if countries are exchanging notes on the most effective way to muzzle the media.

Successive governments in Nepal have tried to constrict the public sphere, the right to privacy and media freedom through various bills and regulations. Their vagueness is deliberately designed for arbitrary application against people the government does not like.

Nepal today stands as a beacon of press freedom in a region where the mediascape is increasingly constricted. Our lawmakers and bureaucrats should abandon the notion that they can suppress free expression just because other countries have.

Sahina Shrestha

a hospital for the locals, by the locals and of the locals.

This new concept of community hospitals in Lamjung and Dhulikhel might be the beginning of a quiet revolution in health care in rural Nepal. Organisations involved in these two hospitals are beginning similar projects in Rukum, Dhading, Kavre and Sindhupalchok. The trick is to take the locals into confidence, and let them run it. Even so, the larger public health picture in Nepal is pretty disastrous. A 2000 World Bank Study shows that public sector spending on health care, including donor expenditure, is a mere \$3.10 per person per year-far less than the \$12 needed to provide a basic health care package. One high-ranking official at the Department of Health Services told us there is a new problem: "Political instability and interference are destroying the health sector in Nepal. Political patronage make the government employees unaccountable and irresponsible, making the delivery impossible."

The only way to keep health care out of reach of politicians in Kathmandu and to make it affordable is to mobilise local resources to set up and run rural hospitals. The new hospitals in Lamjung and Dhulikhel are two exemplary, and different, models of community hospitals. Both aim to deliver inexpensive services and be self-sustaining.

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

ONLINE PACKAGES



HIGH TEA

Watch video of the production of High Himalayan tea, and join us on a tea tasting ceremony that illustrates how orthodox tea is different from ordinary tea – and why Nepali tea is gaining international acclaim. Read the story on pages 6-7.

NATURE

We face a climate crisis in the mountains, but spirits are still high ('Himalayans in the frontlines', Ang Tsreing Sherpa, #1102)

Akku Chowdhury

- Our leaders of New Nepal have destroyed many ('Kathmandu's ancient water sprouts still functioning', Alok Tuladhar, #1103). They wanted to concretise Rani and Kamal pokharis. And they have fully concretised the banks of a few remaining rivers like Bagmati and Bishnumati in the name of motor-able corridors which disrupt the water cycle and prevent recharging of groundwater, while those like Banganga of Baneshwor have been paved over.

Lal Bahadur

- This is ghastly ('Saving Gokyo from itself', And Rita Sherpa, #1102). You are graced and entrusted with such a glorious piece of the natural world which foreign people come and pay for so that you preserve it. Why would you ruin it like this?

Varvara Hajisawa

ELECTIONS

Why are CDOs still operating under Nepal's new political system ('Feudalism to federalism in Nepal', Editorial, #1103)?

Ashwin Thakali

- You know how you can save money? Do away with provinces and unnecessary provincial MPs and ministers. That will save you lots of money. Local bodies however seem much more responsive, effective, accountable and worth the money!

Unpopular Opinion

UKRAINE

Putin is to be blamed for the death of not only Ukrainian men, women and children but also young Russian soldiers who did not want to kill their brothers in Ukraine ('Ukraine crisis hits Nepal economy hard', Ramesh Kumar, nepalitimes.com).

Alan Roadnight

- If you think fuel prices will return to 'normal' once the conflict ends, you are delusional.

Aleksandr Verkotsyn

- No part of the world is exempt from the fallout of Russian aggression against Ukraine. The 5th largest exporter of grain in the world will not be able to plant wheat this season and millions of people in remote villages all over the world will face starvation. This will affect the ordinary people of Russia as much or more than the international sanctions. Putin could care less - so long as he can stay in power.

Stephen T Eckerd

- We must learn to live without fossil fuels.

Renate Schwarz

LABOUR MIGRATION

Very good for them ('Female migrant workers hold up half the sky', Sahina Shrestha, #1102)! But it is also true that many young Nepali women and men are treated badly in the countries they go for work, mostly to support their families. Is the government doing enough to end this and to help them?

Jean Kern

WASTE BURNING

Let's try to be responsible and spread environmental awareness. Otherwise, it is going to kill our own future generations ruthlessly ('No smoke without fire in Nepal', Tom Robertson, www.nepalitimes.com).

Chandra GT

THE ASS

The Ass' alcohol export idea to Bihar is just brilliant ('7 ways to save Nepal', The Ass, #1102).

Devendra Basnet

- First, we need to save Nepal from its incompetent politicians.

Shusma Kalikoti

Love the nighttime gravity flow bootleg to Bihar idea - raksi on tap in Bihar cities.

Raj Gyawali

- I have idea number 8 to save Nepal. No 8. Have a Government that:
 1. Functions
 2. Is responsible/accountable
 3. Cares for Land and People

David Durkan

- Far too many ways to save Nepal!

Rohit Rai

Nepal Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



Atlas of art in a world in motion

by Ashish Dhakal
At one of the five Kathmandu Triennale 2022 venues, artists from all over the world have converged with diverse expressions of cartography. The exhibition is an expression of a borderless globe, where unique ideas find companions. Visit nepalitimes.com for the review of the exhibit.

f Most reached and shared on Facebook

Kathmandu's ancient water spouts

by Alok Siddhi Tuladhar
Many great cities and civilisations have collapsed when their water systems ran dry. But in Kathmandu Valley, the *hiti* water supply systems built centuries ago were so robust that its cities never suffered a shortage. This water supply network built by our forebears is a blueprint for sustainability. Read the full story on our website.

t Most popular on Twitter



7 ways to save Nepal

by The Ass
As the Russian invasion of Ukraine sends the price of fuel soaring, sending Nepal's economy into freefall, The Ass comes to the rescue with innovative suggestions on how to narrow the country's widening trade gap. Post your own hilarious suggestions online.

66 Most commented

Kathmandu's own 'Eataly'

by Sonia Awale
Jhameel's newest restaurant L'italiano is introducing authentic Italian cuisine to the local palate. Michelin star chef Andrea Cannalire was in town to train fellow Nepali chefs before the grand opening. Go online for profile and review.

7 Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Harrowing escape from #Ukraine Refugees survive terrible conditions to flee to neighbouring countries only to face an uncertain future. Ed Holt for @ipsnews

N the Himalayas @Night04812666
It's heartbreaking to see there are tears and embraces as children say goodbye to their parents. People flee their home country in the hope of safer situations, but the evacuation itself is fraught with peril as the invaders cruelly fire shells at buildings or vehicles in which innocent citizens take refuge.

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
"The #Ukraine crisis is likely to sideline our #climategoals for the next few years. #Europe could be using this as an opportunity and set an example to the rest of the world by rapidly transitioning to renewables and cleaner fuels."

Utsav Shakya @utsavshakya
One crisis doesn't wait for another. #Nepal needs to understand the dangers of fossil fuel dependence and rapidly act on switching to #RenewableEnergy. The layperson cannot be expected to silently suffer because of inefficient policies.

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
"Foreign employment allowed me to be financially independent. It made me capable and changed the way society viewed me." Sharada Rai worked as a domestic worker for over a decade, she is now a psycho-social counsellor in Morang's Letang Municipality.

Shirley Blair @himlayanchildrn
Love it when they come home.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Equitable Healthcare



There is a great divide between public and private health care in Nepal. Government hospitals are understaffed and underfunded, accessing private services bankrupt families of patients. That is the reality of healthcare in Nepal, yesterday and today.

But some model hospitals are providing exemplary medical care to the neediest even in the remotest corners of the country at a minimal cost. We have highlighted them in Nepali Times over the past decades. This week we go back to one such story that instills hope for equitable healthcare.

Excerpt of the report published 20 years ago this week on issue #86 22-28 March 2002:

The Lamjung Hospital is, by Nepali standards, sophisticated for such a rural setting. But even more surprising is that this 25-bed hospital is managed entirely by the community it serves. While the rhetoric of "community-participation" has become a development cliché in Nepal, this hospital is anything but. Here is

Nepal Times

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Holding up ½ the sky on climate action

The involvement of Nepal's women is imperative in adapting to the impacts of climate breakdown

● **Navanita Sinha**
and **Pertti Anttinen**

Nepal is one of the world's most vulnerable countries to the impacts of climate change. Himalayan glaciers are melting at an exceptional rate, threatening the lives and livelihoods of millions of people who depend on glacier-fed rivers.

Nepal is party to the Paris Agreement of 2016, the first legally binding international treaty on climate change that aims to limit global warming to 'well below' 2° above pre-industrial levels, preferably 1.5°.

The Covid-19 pandemic has not slowed down the pace of climate change, and there is an increasing likelihood that the goals of the Paris Agreement and Agenda 2030 will not be met in time.

With its development partners Nepal seeks to address the inevitable effects of climate change. Having recognised the triple threats of Covid-19, climate change and rising inequality, Nepal adopted the Green, Resilient and Inclusive Development (GRID) approach in 2021 to achieve economic growth while addressing environmental degradation and social inequalities.

For this there is a need to focus on women's roles in climate-related action. Women and girls are bearing a disproportionate impact of climate change because of socially embedded and stereotypical gender roles.

Women are generally more likely than men to experience the adverse effects of climate change because they constitute most of the poor, and are usually directly dependent on threatened natural resources as their primary source of food and income.

Women-led interventions are therefore needed to link the economy, gender, social inequality and climate change. Already, the impact on the lives of women is



UN WOMEN / MERIT MAHARJAN

Indra Maya Tamang waters her farm in Kavre. She is a participant of agricultural and entrepreneurship training provided by UN Women with Finland's support.

evident, especially in developing countries, where the loss of natural resources has a direct impact on food and water security.

A National Climate Change Impact Survey in 2016 revealed that over 84% of households in Nepal suffered depletion of surface water, with a majority also reporting new crop diseases, invasive pests and additional health problems in livestock.

With over 74% of households in Nepal using biomass for fuel, women are predominantly tasked with collecting water and firewood. Moreover, three-quarters of the female workforce in Nepal is engaged in agriculture. The loss of surface water, crops and forest cover means women have been bearing the brunt of climate change.

Climate change also drives



conflict and increases the vulnerabilities of women and girls to gender-based violence, human trafficking and child marriage. Women are also more likely to drop out of school due to the growing economic burden.

Improving the conditions of women – especially through better education and health care – would not only reduce poverty and benefit society, but also mitigate the impact of climate change.

Climate change is a complex phenomenon, but the debate around it is too often one-sided. The gender perspective is not always sufficiently taken into account during global discussions. This amplifies existing inequalities that pose unique threats to the livelihoods, health and safety of women and girls.

Women have a special role to play in tackling climate change and their under-representation in negotiations does not reflect their unique skills and knowledge. Because women have a greater responsibility for the natural resources used by households, they also have experience on their acquisition and use.

This knowledge in agriculture, conservation and natural resource management, particularly at the

local level, can ensure action and adaptation methods that are more effective.

In March 2022, the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the principal intergovernmental body dedicated to gender equality and women's empowerment, is assembled for its 66th session from 14-25 March in New York.

The priority theme of CSW66 is 'Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes.'

The CSW has highlighted that women and girls' participation and leadership are critical for making climate, environmental and disaster risk action more effective. The importance of leveraging ancestral knowledge and practices of Indigenous peoples and local communities for gender-responsive climate action has been reiterated in the CSW66 Agreed Conclusions.

Ensuring the equal and full participation of women in climate decision-making, planning and implementation is a requisite to protecting women's rights and promoting gender equality.

The potential and role of women in seeking solutions to a problem that transcends regions and generations must not be ignored. Combating climate change and its impact requires the inclusion of women in all levels of decision-making. It is crucial to the survival of our planet. 🇳🇵



Navanita Sinha is the Head of Office of UN Women Nepal and **Pertti Anttinen** is the Ambassador of Finland to Nepal.

prabhu BANK

Turkish Technic

Turkish Technic which handles aircraft maintenance and overhaul has recorded a 15.7% growth in 2021 compared to the previous year with \$1.034 billion in revenue.

Turkish Technic has overcome pandemic-induced setbacks and received maintenance authorisation for C/D Hangars at Istanbul Airport. Performing base maintenance of a Boeing 787 type aircraft for the first time, Maintenance, Repair and Overhaul enhanced its landing gear maintenance-repair.



"We are happy with these numbers which showed we grew and profited during 2021, especially after one of the hardest years for aviation," says CEO of Turkish Technic, Mikail Akbulut. "We are determined to surpass our growth and revenue level obtained before the pandemic by the end of 2022."

In 2021, Turkish Technic supplied 672 aircraft base maintenance services while providing maintenance-repair services to 216 landing gears and over 100,000 components.

Reviving economy

Chandra Prasad Dhakal of the Federation of Nepalese Chamber of Commerce & Industries (FNCCI) has recommended local businesses, politicians, the private



sector, finances and banks come together to minimise the impact of the pandemic and the Russo-Ukrainian war on the economy. Speaking at the AGM of the FNCCI, he stressed the development of entrepreneurship at the local level by modifying traditional policies and laws.



Islington is 25

Islington College celebrated its 25th anniversary this week. The college has more than 5,500 alumni in the field of business and IT, and currently employs over 300 people.



Jyoti's helping hand

Jyoti Foundation and Syakar Group have donated Honda generators to Himalayan Rescue Association Nepal for use in the remote and rural Nepal where it takes cares of trekkers and porters affected by acute mountain sickness and other injuries.

Nabil-NB merge

Nepal Rastra Bank has permitted the merger between Nabil bank and Nepal Bangladesh Bank following which the former will now have Rs23 billion in paid-up capital, Rs44 billion primary capital, Rs2.99 billion net profit, Rs3 billion total credit and Rs3.18 billion total deposits.

Ncell award

Ncell Axiata has won the 'Telecom Company of the Year' Award at the 2022 Asian Telecom Awards in recognition of its Integrated Data Centre, reliable service and support to raise awareness about Covid-19. Ncell built the first Tier-III standard IDC in South Asia in an earthquake zone and received the 'Infrastructure Initiative of the Year' award.

IME FD Loan

Global IME has made a loan against fixed deposit digitally available for customers through the Global Smart Plus app or globalonline.gibl.com.np website. The maximum loan limit is 90% of the Fixed Deposit amount or Rs1 million.

NMB Online

NMB Bank has become the first bank to provide Demat, Mero Share and CRN services to customers regardless of their location. Through a video call, clients can open new accounts and also update or complete their KYC.

Hyundai Golf

Krishna Pun has won the Hyundai Open Golf Tournament 2022 organised by Laxmi Intercontinental. Major General Narendra Rawal won the senior category while Pratiba Rai aced the



women's tournament. Shyam Simkhada won the Hyundai car winner category, Dawa Sherpa received the longest drive award and Norbu Sherpa got the most birdies. All winners got a Samsung Galaxy smartwatch and Pun a Bushnell V5 range finder.

Enslaved in Lebanon for 12 years

Sajita Lama finally returns home in Nepal with just the Rs5 note she left with

I first came to Lebanon when I was 18 years old. I lived in the country for 12 years as a domestic worker. Of the 12 years, I was only paid my salary for 1 year and 9 months.

My case is unique because unlike others, I did not realise that I was being cheated through most of my stay there. I got along well with the family that I worked for.

When they said they were saving up my wages in the bank, I believed them. Why would I not? They were like family, or so I thought. The idea of taking home a lump sum of money all at once was very appealing to me. After all, I had come to Lebanon to earn money to support my family back home in Nepal.

Now I realise that I was too trusting, and it was naïve of me to believe that we were like family. They were just exploiting me, and trying to squeeze as much work from me as possible without paying for any of it.

It is easy to fall prey to a trap like this if you believe, like I did, that people are decent. A kind word here, a pat there, and sometimes, a *bakshish* is all it takes to motivate you.

But all of that turned out to be just selfish actions by my employers to derive as much value out of me as I slaved for them. Everything was fine, and I was treated well as long as I was willing to be a domesticated domestic worker whom they could tame.

The minute they realised that I was also someone with a family that I had to care for back home, with my own feelings, opinions, preferences, they completely switched on me. This was in 2021, the minute they realised that I was determined to go back to Nepal after a decade in Lebanon, the trouble started.

For over a decade, I had patiently obeyed all their demands, even though I was technically working for two employers and should have been paid more. My employers and their parents lived separately, and I was made to work in both the homes.

Despite the double work, I realised I was not being paid even my basic wages let alone anything extra for the endless hours. I had to get up at five-thirty every day, and it would usually be midnight by the time I got to bed. All day I would be busy with all kinds of household chores in both houses.

If I had not been too trusting, I would have figured out much earlier in just how much trouble I was in.

For over a decade, I believed my Madam's father was kind to me. He used to give me *bakshish* once in a while which I used for my personal expenses like toiletries and such, but also on food for the family or for clothes for her children.

It came naturally to me that this was the way families behaved. I genuinely had a soft corner for the elderly couple. I helped with their medications, cleaning, cooking, etc. and even accompanied the old man's wife to hospital when she had to stay overnight. But now, in retrospect, I realise that it was all just a put-on to use me.

I remember wanting to come home after my first three years of my stay in Lebanon. My Madam cried as the family at that time was wholly dependent on me. I took care of their ailing mother, of their little children.

After five years, once again I said I wanted to return. The same thing happened. I relented because they were treating me well, and I trusted them that my salary was being deposited in the bank.

Finally in 2021, I realised I had had enough. It was time to come home. They tried to silence me by falsely assuring me that they would send me home as soon as they got a replacement.

Months passed, and they would not bring anyone. How many "next month, I promise" would I have to believe? As I got increasingly impatient and started voicing my desire to go home, they started behaving cruelly to me.

When it was evident that I was no longer willing to be their puppet and my longing for home was too strong this time, they showed me their true colours.

They said things like "I hope your plane crashes", or "You are worth nothing". These inhuman words ring in my ears to this day. Even then, they would not let me go no matter how much I insisted.

I started losing my appetite and getting depressed. I had a feeling of being trapped without any way out. I felt as if I was suffocating. I remember calling my sister



COST OF WORK: Sajita Lama with the Rs5 note that her sister-in-law gave her when she left Nepal, which she has brought back. Screenshot from the homepage of the labour rights group, This Is Lebanon, that exposed her abuse (below).



and mother in Nepal out of desperation with the words: "Either get me out of here or be prepared to receive my dead body." This is exactly how I felt.

My uncle managed to get hold of a Nepali in Lebanon, and requested him to help rescue me. That man put me in touch with the Nepal Consulate in Beirut, which tried to help me but couldn't do anything for months.

I also lost my nerve. At the Consulate office, my employer's father shed tears and I felt so bad that I assured the people who were trying to help me that everything was okay. We agreed to give them a month or two after which they would send me back, but they did not do that. I felt like a fool falling for the tears of the old man.

On the side, the Nepali man my father introduced me to also reached out to the activist organisation This is Lebanon which helps migrant domestic workers like me in the country. It would turn out to be my saviour.

When Dipendra Upreti from This is Lebanon first started reaching out to me, I would be scared and used to hang up on him. But slowly, he convinced me

that he was there to help workers who were in trouble like me. Indeed, he had been in touch with my family in Nepal, the Consulate, the Nepali community in Lebanon to plan my rescue. Back in the house of my employers, I was getting more and more paranoid. It felt like the employers were always plotting something to get me jailed so they could get out of the arrangement without paying the salary they owed me.

By this time, This is Lebanon had already reported my employers on my behalf and were naming and shaming my employers.

Finally the police rescued me from my employer's home after an order from the General Prosecutor. At the police station, the employer tried to come up with a settlement of \$1,800, with a promise that he would send the rest later.

I did not agree. How could I trust them to send the salary they owed me, when I have already left the country? This time, I was not going to budge unless they paid all my dues.

At the police station, they brought my clothes, my phone charger and earphones but not my phone. They knew how to mess

with my head. But I kept quiet. The Consulate sent his driver to pick me up after which I was sent for quarantine and then to a shelter run by Caritas.

In both these places, I would not eat, I just could not stop crying. I was stressed beyond words, and all the memories of the past year would haunt me all the time. I was in such bad shape that they decided to send me home, and This is Lebanon bought my ticket to Kathmandu.

When I left Lebanon and landed in Kathmandu airport on 15 February, I did not have any money on me. I was relieved, but also very weak and tired. I felt like I would not make it. Perhaps I had returned to Nepal just to die, I thought.

How I got to Nepal is a blur, but the moment the plane landed I could not stop crying in the plane and in the arrival area of the terminal. It did not matter that people were staring at me as I wailed loudly, I was beyond being concerned about अरुले के भन्नुन्, what others would say.

At immigration and every step of the way through the airport, I was weeping loudly, and the officials just let me pass through. I had only one goal at that moment. I had made it this far, and if I was going to die, it would have to be after I finally saw my mother's face.

I broke down when I finally saw my mother, and hugged her. Among all the emotions I felt, for some reason, as I held on to my mother, all I could say was "मै ले केही पनि ल्याउन सकिन, आमा", I didn't bring you anything...sorry Ama, I couldn't bring anything for you.

As she held me tight in her embrace, I remember my mother telling me that she did not need anything, everything was okay and having me back was enough for her.

Twelve years is a long time to be away from home and family. My Nepali is not as fluent anymore because of my isolation, and I keep mixing Arabic with my Nepali when I speak, and I do not realise that I am confusing people. They have to correct me.

I have a lot to recover from. My physical, mental and emotional states are very fragile. I took a walk today around the neighbourhood, but quickly returned home. What if I faint along the way? I have so much to recover from.

I do not know what future awaits me in Nepal. For now, there are people who have been helping me and rallying for me, including financially. I appreciate all the help from the bottom of my heart. However, my fight will end when I get my employer to pay back salary he owes me.

It is my money that I earned by working from before dawn to midnight for 12 years. Only when I get hold of it, will I be able to feel that justice has been done. The thought of all those 12 years boiling down to nothing financially eats me up every waking moment of every day.

When I had first left Nepal in 2010, I had a 5 rupee note with me given to me by my sister-in-law. I kept that red bank note with me throughout my time in Lebanon.

And that is all the money I brought home with me. I have now laminated the 5 rupee note. I will not forget this Nepali money because that is all I left with, and that is all I returned with. 🇳🇵

Translated from a conversation in Nepali with Sajita Lama. Diaspora Diaries is a regular column in Nepali Times providing a platform for Nepalis to share their experiences of living, working, studying abroad. Authentic and original entries can be sent to editors@nepalimes.com with 'Diaspora Diaries' in the subject line.



Go online to watch video prepared by This is Lebanon of Sajita Lama's homecoming at Kathmandu airport and interviews with her Lebanese employers. Parts of this video may be distressing to viewers. To help Sajita get back on her feet: Sajita Lama, Mega Bank Woman Account 1980050018887.



DIASPORA
DIARIES 4



ALL PHOTOS: JUN CHIYABARI

Tea Talk

“ Jun Chiyabari is a mark of trust and artistic creativity in Japan. All its various types of tea come in amazing quality and with an unmistakable sense of purity that captures the heart of tea connoisseurs.

This is the fruit of constant effort trying to understand tea itself and the market. They are one of the very few producers who have tried and also succeeded in adapting a part of themselves towards the Japanese market.

Sayaka Nakanoji
Silver Pot Inc, Tokyo

Our connection to Jun Chiyabari tea garden dates back more than seven years. We purchased our first batches in 2014, which was one of the best decisions we have made. Since then our business has flourished and Nepali tea sales are increasing in our region.

We consider Jun Chiyabari to be the most progressive tea company in Nepal. In my opinion, they bring Nepali tea to a very high level and bring much fame to the country. Their attitude and care towards co-workers and the surrounding natural environment is a model to be followed in other parts of the world.

We are proudly selling the carefully selected batches from the Jun Chiyabari tea garden to various restaurants and cafés in Budapest, Central Europe, including the finest Michelin star restaurants.

Gábor Tólos
Zhao Zhou Tea, Budapest



Getting high on High Himalayan Tea

Rebranding Nepali tea, putting it on the world map

● Sonia Awale

The all-purpose Nepali greeting “चिया खानु भो?” literally means “have you had your tea?” But it can mean anything from ‘Good Morning’, ‘How are you?’, or any other greeting.

Now, mundane tea-drinking is being replaced by a new breed of beverage aficionados who savour and grade sophisticated teas as if it were champagne.

For the untrained palate used to morning tea with milk and sugar, the subtle aroma and flavour of High Himalayan Tea brings out the wholesomeness and simplicity of the leaves. Once hooked, many in Nepal and around the world do not want to slurp anything else.

And slurp it you must, as a recent elaborate tea-tasting ritual showed. Speciality teas of the High Himalaya have been quietly gaining a loyal international following, proving to be a premium export from Nepal.

“There is no one way of drinking tea but we have completely rebranded Nepali tea, not just in taste but in our mindset and marketing,” says Lochan Gyawali of Jun Chiyabari, a family-run tea garden 2,000m high up in the mountains of Dhankuta.

Nepali tea is often mistaken for the more popular Darjeeling variety because of similar taste and production methods. Historically, whole-leaf tea grown in Nepal used to be sold in India to be exported and blended into Darjeeling while the rest was processed into cheaper broken-leaf CTC black tea for domestic consumption.

But Nepali growers are now consciously moving away from British and Indian influences, carving a unique Asian identity for tea from Nepal with refined taste.

Speciality tea or ‘orthodox

tea’ as it is commonly called, uses the wholeness of the leaf to create a diverse range of flavours. The leaves are not torn or crushed as they are in Darjeeling teas, but carefully rolled to create the desired taste and tang.

Starting this month until December, tea pickers in Jun Chiyabari’s 90-hectare plantation on the slopes near Hile in eastern Nepal will be busy, carefully plucking young leaves before they go into processing.

“From the beginning we brought experts from Japan, China, Taiwan and Bhutan to train our staff to unlearn what Darjeeling has been doing,” says Gyawali, who himself grew up among tea gardens next to his school in the hill station.

Unlike the usual tea production, High Himalayan goes through withering, rolling and drying with specialised equipment designed to retain the organic compounds that give tea its essence.

“You change the machine, you change the taste. Our teas have become different because of the way we pick them, process them, and the equipment,” explains Gyawali who started Jun Chiyabari with brother Bachan Gyawali after dabbling in the tourism and electronic export sectors.

Jun Chiyabari today produces up to 20 different types of tea, each with its own distinctive flavour. It is exported to the United States, Canada, Japan and Europe where connoisseurs compare the teas to the sophistication of fine wines. The popularity of High Himalayan is also growing amongst Nepal’s urbanites, where it is often called ‘chiampagne’.

“If you want to sustain a market like Japan, mediocrity will not sell, you need perfection. Japanese buyers tell us our tea is unlike anything they have tasted from South Asia,” says Gyawali proudly.



Indeed, High Himalayan is described in Japanese as having the ‘flavour of the mist of the mountains’ — an accolade of the highest order.

Speciality tea production is not without challenges. Nepal has not even scratched the surface of the potential in the domestic and world market. There are no studies into cultivars suitable for Nepal’s topography. Growers have to rely on trial and error methods.

This means raw material is limited. With additional challenges posed by climate breakdown, growers are having to cope with increased demand and maintaining

a delicate balance between quality and quantity.

“We already knew global heating was going to impact us, so the selection of plantation sites was important. We couldn’t do anything about rising average temperatures and precipitation patterns, but we could, and did, go higher up the mountains,” says Gyawali.

The pandemic has also affected Nepal’s tea industry, but

enthusiasts have discovered the health benefits of High Himalayan during this time and boosted online sales. More and more growers are now interested in this niche market.

Jun Chiyabari’s motto has remained the same over the years, to grow unique leaves to put Nepal on the world tea map. If the praise it has received internationally (*see above*) so far is anything to go by, it has already achieved this. 🇳🇵



History of Tea

Tea dates back to ancient China 5,000 years ago. Legend has it that Chinese emperor Shen Nung in 2737 BC was sitting beneath a tree with his servant boiling drinking water when some leaves from a tree were blown into it. A renowned herbalist, Shen Nung, decided to taste the infusion. The tree was *Camellia sinensis*, which came to be known as 'tea tree'.

Over time, tea established

its medicinal properties helping reduce stress and fatigue. Before long, tea travelled across Asia via Buddhist monks to Japan, Korea and beyond.

It was only in the 17th century that tea became popular among the British who then introduced tea plantations in India, specifically Darjeeling, to end the Chinese monopoly.

It is only natural that neighbouring Nepal would be the next place to be 'tea-fied'. The beverage soon took off, influenced by British and Indian preferences for mixing in milk and sugar, and lately, other spices.

But the history of tea in Nepal is not linear. In 1863 the Daoguang Emperor of China gifted tea plants to Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana. Tea plantations in Ilam district began shortly after the British set up theirs across the

border ridge in Darjeeling.

But tea was consumed in Kathmandu long before that. Newa traders in Tibet had already brought tea drinking to Kathmandu – not with milk, but black tea with salt and butter.



TEA TYPES

Broadly speaking, there are five main varieties of tea in the market:

Black: The most common type of tea, this is fully oxidised, is darker in appearance and has higher caffeine content. It is characterised by a strong flavour and is typically consumed with milk and sugar. Think Darjeeling and English Breakfast.

White: Simply withered and dried, this is the least processed of all teas. Has a high level of antioxidants but the lowest caffeine content. Best consumed without any additives. The infusion is very light-coloured and has a mild flavour. Originally from China.

Green: The unoxidised tea that has retained its natural green colour with a high level of antioxidants, vitamins, and minerals. It produces a pale greenish-yellow infusion with a light and grassy taste.



Popularised as a healthy tea, it can be taken with lemon, but not milk.

Oolong: Semi-oxidised tea mainly produced in China and Taiwan with flavour resembling neither black nor green. The aroma depends on how long the leaves are allowed to sit before halting oxidation. Produces golden or light brown infusion.

Pu-erh: Exclusively from Yunnan province of China known for its distinctively earthy flavour. Made from wild tea leaves rather than cultivated ones, it is fermented by pressing raw leaves together, often stored underground for several years for maturity. Can be either black or green depending on the level of oxidation allowed.

High Himalayan



Harvesting: Young leaves are plucked by tea-pickers between late March and December. Tea makers can decide which type of tea to make depending on their look, the area where they are from and the time when they were plucked.



Withering: Leaves are spread on vast trays to wither, are gently fluffed, rotated and monitored to ensure even exposure to the air. Before withering, some teas go through the sun, wilting out in the open.



Rolling: The leaves after they become limp are rolled either by hand or a machine. This is to break cells and mix together a variety of organic compounds found naturally within the leaves to bring out its flavour.



Oxidisation: The clumped leaves are broken up and set to oxidise, laid out to rest for several hours depending on the style of tea being produced. Oxidisation greatly influences flavours.



Firing/drying: Finally, the leaves are heated or fired quickly to dry them to below 3% moisture content and stop the oxidation process. The leaves can then be stored safely.



HIGH TEA

Watch video of the production of High Himalayan tea, and join us on a tea tasting ceremony that illustrates how orthodox tea is different from ordinary tea – and why Nepali tea is gaining international acclaim.

EVENTS

**Know your flowers**

Nepal is one of the most bio-diverse countries in the world for the space it occupies. This is your chance to view and learn about more than 450 varieties of plants at the floriculture expo by Floriculture Association Nepal.

24-27 March, Rs100, Jawalakhel Youth Club Football Ground

Boulder Competition

Climb fun, challenging routes in the third edition of the boulder climbing competition. People with all skill levels are invited. Register to participate.

26 March, 11am-5pm, Kathmandu Sport Climbing Center, Kaldhara, 9869386887

5P Expo

Participate in the 5P International Expo on plastic, paper, printing, packaging and processing industries. Go online to register for tickets.

31 March-3 April, 10am-5pm, Chitwan Expo Center

Changing academia

Participate in the training workshop organised by National Young Academy of Nepal on discouraging predatory academic practices and raising awareness among researchers. Fill up the form to join.

25-26 March, 10am-5pm, Pokhara University

**Nhuchhe Bahadur Dangol**

Attend the first multimedia showcase organised by Nepal Music Archive on percussion maestro Nhuchhe Bahadur Dangol.

26 March, 10am-5pm, Bagh Bhairab Kiripur

DINING

**DanRan Restaurant**

Enjoy a hearty Japanese meal at DanRan. Don't miss out on the soft tofu, pork cutlets and don varieties offered.

Jhamsikhel Road, (01) 5521027

ONLINE ARCHIVES

Martin Chautari

Watch Martin Chautari discussion sessions on topics ranging from feminism, parenting to Nepali infrastructure. Sessions available on the Martin Chautari Facebook page.

**Virtual street festivals**

Google's Colorful Street Fests & Carnivals is a virtual tour of eight of the most vibrant street festivals in the world. The celebrations include the La Tomatina festival in Spain, Oktoberfest in Germany, and the Mardi Gras in New Orleans.

One world theatre

A few of the One World's plays are now on their YouTube channel. Watch their play The Flight and its adaptation of the Russian play Three Sisters.

**King Falls AM**

A bimonthly podcast, King Falls AM is centred around a lonely little mountain town's late-night AM radio talk show and its paranormal, peculiar happenings and inhabitants. Find on Stitcher and Apple podcasts.

Minesweeper

Brush up childhood memories with the single-player puzzle game. Google 'Minesweeper' and start playing online.

Chez Caroline

Go to 'the' place for authentic French and continental cuisine in town. Try the Profiteroles au Chocolat and Choux pastry filled with vanilla ice cream and hot chocolate sauce.

Baber Mahal Revisited, (01) 4263070

**Tukche Thakali Kitchen**

Having a hard time deciding what to make for lunch? Head to Tukche and get your fill of Thakali food.

Darbar North Gate, (01)4412462

GETAWAY

**Temple Tree Resort**

Temple Tree, with its traditional Nepali architecture, promises best services and a relaxing atmosphere to wind down and enjoy delicious delicacies.

Lakeside, Pokhara, (061) 465819

Namo Buddha Resort

The traditional Newa style resort is perched on a hilltop with a magnificent view of the Himalayas. The peaceful, tranquil environment is also perfect for short hikes.

Namo Buddha, Phulbari, 9851106802

Kathmandu Guest House

Just a short walk away from Kathmandu Darbar Square is a rejuvenating stay in the heart of Thamel for trekkers. Their buildings offer hospitable, comfortable accommodation with scenic gardens.

Thamel, (01) 4700632

Tiger Tops Tharu Lodge

Get up close and personal with wildlife and the local Tharu culture at the Tiger Tops, located four kilometers away from Chitwan National Park.

Kawasoti, Nawalparasi, (07)8690721

**Dwarika Resort**

A perfect getaway offers myriad of services from appetising multi-cuisine food to re-energising spa experience. Try Crystal salt therapy during the visit.

Dhulikhel, (11) 490612

**Mad Over Pizza**

Mad Over Pizza is befitting of its name. With each bite exploding with rich flavours, you will keep coming back for more.

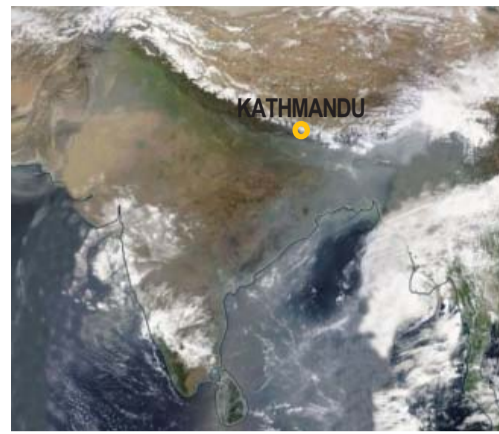
12pm-9pm, Milan Chowk, Baneshwor, (01) 4498970

Buingal

Buingal offers scrumptious multi cuisine and a great ambience for family and friends to come together. Don't miss out on their vegetable sekuwas!

11am-10pm, Maitidevi, (01) 4521393

WEEKEND WEATHER

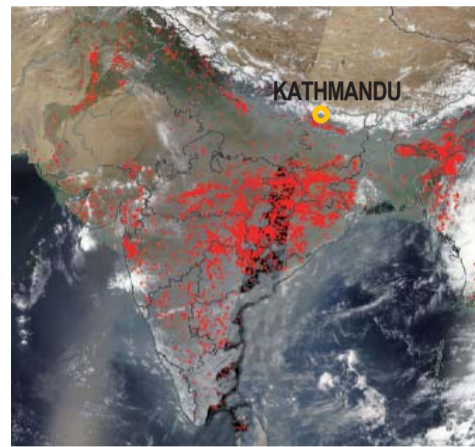


Daytime temperatures in the Gangetic plains are up to 5 degrees higher than average for this time of year. March temperatures are more like the levels seen in May.

The heat wave has also affected Nepal, including Kathmandu which hit a record 33 degrees last week. All this means is that the convection systems which push lighter hotter air up the mountains to form clouds and localised storms have also started earlier than usual, as seen on Tuesday and Wednesday. Expect some of that Fri-Sun in Kathmandu, Pokhara and across the mid-mountains.

| FRIDAY | SATURDAY | SUNDAY |
|------------|------------|------------|
| 27° 13° | 27° 14° | 28° 14° |

AIR QUALITY INDEX



Anyone who has flown recently into or out of Kathmandu will have noticed that the thick haze enveloping the Valley for the past week stretches right across northern India. This seasonal suspension of particulate matter is a combination of wind-blown desert dust, industrial and vehicular emissions, as well as agricultural smoke. Satellite true-colour imagery of the subcontinent (left) shows the blue haze and locations of fires. Smoke over eastern Nepal where prevailing winds dump these soot particulates. They also creep up the river valleys in Nepal, transported by afternoon up-valley winds. Track Kathmandu's Air Quality Index measured at US Embassy in Phora Darbar live hour-by-hour on www.nepalitimes.com

OUR PICK

An expert tailor must outwit a dangerous group of mobsters in order to survive a fateful night in this American crime drama that opened in cinemas this week to much acclaim. *The Outfit* follows Leonard Burling, an English tailor who used to craft suits on London's world-famous Savile Row until a personal tragedy forced him to relocate to Chicago. Now, Burling makes beautiful clothes for the only people around who can afford them: a family of vicious gangsters. Helmed by Academy Award winner Mark Rylance, the film stars Zoey Deutch, Johnny Flynn, Dylan O'Brien, Nikki Amuka-Bird and Simon Russell Beale.



कोभिड-१९ विरुद्धको खोप सरकारले निःशुल्क लगाइरहेको छ ।



अबैध रुपमा खोप बेच्ने र किनेर लगाउने दुवैलाई प्रचलित कानून बमोजिम कडा कारवाही हुनेछ । कोरोना विरुद्धको खोप बेचबिखन भएको थाहा पाउने जो कोहीले स्थानीय प्रशासन, प्रहरी कार्यालय, पालिका वा स्वास्थ्य कार्यालयमा यथार्थ जानकारी गराउनु हुन अनुरोध छ ।

बजारमा लुकिछिपी बेच्न राखिएका खोपहरु नक्कली हुन सक्छन् ।



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Fixing the broken bits in Nepal-

Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit can clear the air between Beijing and Kathmandu

• Kanak Mani Dixit

Foreign Minister Wang Yi hopefully had his team do diligent homework on Nepal as he arrives in Kathmandu on 25 March, allowing him to understand and unravel the mistakes made over the past couple of years by Beijing's diplomats and policymakers.

Whether it is geopolitical arrogance or wilful disregard, Beijing seems headed towards repeating mistakes of the kind made by New Delhi, whose attempt at interventionist micro-management tended to backfire. While the India elephant seems to have learnt the lesson not to tease the Nepali rhino beyond a point, the Chinese dragon has not invested time and effort to understand the complexities of Kathmandu politics.

Just as Nepal and the world are having to adapt to a China that has evolved as a global powerhouse challenging the United States and leaving others (including India) far behind, economically and militarily, Beijing must adjust the lens with which it views Kathmandu. It has clearly been lulled by the decades of obsequiousness of Nepali interlocutors, not realising that there will be assertion when interventionism crosses a limit.

Chinese Counterbalance

When we speak of Nepal's links to China, historically it means mostly the relationship with Tibet, including between the Kathmandu Darbar and Potala palace, the Newa traders of Lhasa, as well as the cross-Himalaya cultural and commercial ties between Tibetans and the Himali communities of Nepal's high valleys.

Proximity also brought conflict, and the last war with Tibet, which was ably supported by the Chinese emperor, was fought in 1856. Kathmandu's defeat was marked by the Thapathali Treaty, which

resulted in the five-yearly overland missions to Beijing. Even though China's exercise of suzerainty over Nepal remained notional, and Kathmandu kept the relationship alive to counter the growing power of the East India Company.

Continuing with the strategy, in the modern era, Kathmandu placed Beijing on a high pedestal as a counterweight to the overwhelming cultural, geopolitical and economic presence of New Delhi in national affairs. For this reason, the CPC leadership has had it easy over the decades, with visiting Nepali personages acting more like supplicants than equals.

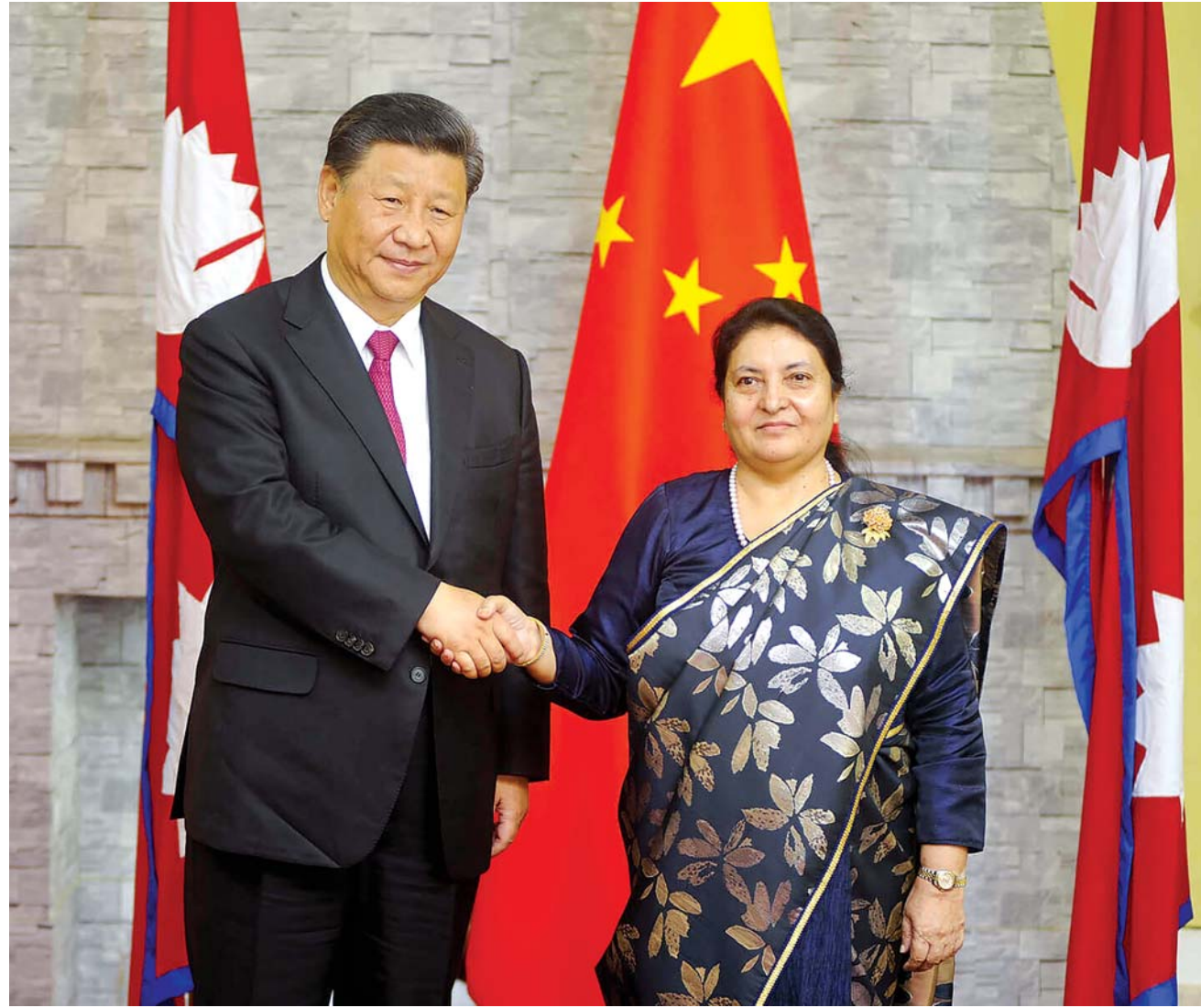
Beijing was plainly embarrassed with the rise of the insurgency espousing Mao Zedong Thought in the mid-1990s, but as the rebels came above-ground and the monarchy went into eclipse, Beijing's leaders cultivated Maoist supremo Pushpa Kamal Dahal ('Prachanda'), seemingly looking for a stable long-term partnership. They were obviously unaware of Dahal's fickle nature, his politics based on populism and opportunism rather than ideology and principle. Beijing would have done better to spend its resources on scholars and diplomats studying Nepal as a democratic and pluralistic society that clearly intends to remain that way.

Meek No More

Before the current proactive phase in the era of Xi Jinping as president, Chinese diplomats were stand-offish on Nepal, their only interest being that no 'anti-China' (read pro-Tibet) activities receive support from within Nepali territory. If you discount the brief period up to the early 1970s when CIA-supported Khampa rebels managed to operate out of Mustang, Kathmandu has had no stomach for supporting Tibetan independence nor Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, in his exile.

Starting in the mid-Twentieth century, the sage counsel of Chinese leaders including Mao Zedong and Zhou En-Lai to visiting Nepali delegations was to regard Nepal as squarely in the Indian sphere of influence south of the Himalayan ridgeline. "We will help you where we can, but try not to irritate New Delhi," was the Chinese line.

That policy has now seen a reversal. With its rise as a global power snapping at the heels of the United States, Beijing has revised its engagements globally, in South Asia and in the Himalaya. Chinese diplomats have abandoned their



NEPALI TIMES/ARCHIVE

self-effacing act of decades, and the Xi Jinping era has seen the rise of aggressive diplomats (战狼外交) who speak in unabashed self-interest and confidently lambast opponents.

The Chinese moves along the frontiers of India and the border with Bhutan are the face of a proactive Beijing bent on establishing facts on the ground, as it is doing in the South China Sea. Meantime, China reaches out across the world with the Belt and Road Initiative to provide infrastructure financing even as it turns every world crisis to advantage, from the advent of Covid to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Kathmandu needs to understand this 'new China' and come up with a China policy that is respectful, mindful of Beijing's likes and dislikes, and yet able to protect its own democratic agency.

Nepal's Open Society

Howsoever decrepit its polity might look and feel, for now, Nepal is a haven within South Asia for its

openness, fundamental freedoms and inter-community relations. We must resist the movement towards 'closed society' that is evident in the rest of the region including Big India, and neither should the bilateral relationship with China require compromise on existing freedoms.

However, criticism of Chinese policy, or defending the rights of Tibetan refugees under international convention and Nepal's own past practice, immediately brings forth Beijing's displeasure. The trolls within Nepal also become hyperactive, hurling accusations at the critics for being 'free-Tibet wallahs', used as an abuse, and the lackey of Western imperialism. Amidst such a backlash, civil society has gone quiet on the matter of statelessness of Tibetan refugees, and there is no discussion of the overt Chinese interference along the northern districts.

This submissiveness towards Beijing has historical roots, even though it may have had practical

purpose. At bilateral meetings before the substantive agenda is taken up, Chinese delegations expect the by-rote declaration from the Nepali side of fealty to the one China and commitment never to allow anti-China activities from its territory.

To avoid further humiliation at the hands of the China, it is almost as if we need a billboard to be put up at the Tribhuvan International Airport arrivals area, with large letters declaring once and for all: "Nepal supports the One China Policy and will never allow its territory to be used for anti-China activities."

CPC and MCC

One hopes that Beijing will introspect on the mistakes it has made on its Nepal policy, which tend to reflect imperiousness and a lack of homework. Some examples should suffice to make the point, ending with the fiasco of the Chinese stand on the Millennium Challenge Compact (MCC).

The visit by President Xi Jinping

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PUSHPA KAMAL DAHAL/TWITTER

HANDS ACROSS THE HIMALAYA:

Chinese President Xi Jinping with President Bidya Devi Bhandari during his state visit to Nepal in October 2019 (left). Foreign Minister Wang Yi met Pushpa Kamal Dahal in September 2019 ahead of President Xi's visit (above).

to Kathmandu in October 2019, the first by a Chinese president in 23 years, had several bracing moments, but one grating, troublesome aspect. Denying dignity to the host country, Xi used the occasion to read out a blunt warning meant to be heard by his Nepali hosts vis-à-vis Tibet but also to democracy demonstrators in Hong Kong, and beyond: "Anyone attempting to split China in any part of the country will end in crushed bodies and shattered bones."

On MCC, China seems to have decided early on that the straight grant of \$500 million for infrastructure would needlessly extend American influence on Kathmandu at a time it was making inroads. Nevertheless, Beijing's initial public stance was to term the MCC debate as internal Nepali affair.

As the CPN party broke up and the Oli Government fell, the new Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba proved unwavering in his public commitment to pass the MCC bill. Beijing went into overdrive, with its official media coming out publicly against parliamentary adoption. A flank of the Nepali ultra-left and royalist right – ever willing to undermine the system under the new Constitution – was more than happy to jump on the bandwagon and try to make the public believe that the US military was about to march into Nepal riding the MCC charger.

In the end, Parliament did pass the MCC agreement with a meaningless 'interpretative declaration'. The Foreign Ministry

spokesperson in Beijing then came out with the official Chinese view on MCC, protesting what it called "coercive diplomacy" carried out to force Nepal to accept the project – the reference being to the United States.

Besides being mistaken on the MCC's merits, Beijing showed lack of sensitivity to Nepal's right and ability to sign the MCC with open eyes if it was good for the economy. Beijing's outburst suggested to the public that the CPC was behind the anti-MCC campaign all along.

Lumbini and China

There was an invigorating line in President Xi's banquet speech delivered at the Shital Niwas presidential palace in October 2019: he confided that among the countries of South Asia, the people of China wanted to visit Nepal the most. It is the inefficiency of Nepal's tourism sector that the quote of the Chinese President has not been used to promote tourism in Nepal.

Despite the inefficiencies, inbound Chinese tourism was evolving as a major source of national income before Covid set in, and it is clear that tourists from the Mainland are going to be a mainstay of the Nepali economy – attracted to Kathmandu, Pokhara and Lumbini. Before Covid, Kathmandu was already better connected by air to half a dozen cities in China, whereas in the case of India most tend to be Kathmandu-Delhi shuttles.

Lumbini/Kapilvastu will

be a long time draw and a great injection to the national economy because the Chinese state is keen on promoting Buddhism among its growing middle class as a homegrown faith. The challenge for Nepal will be to protect the spiritual, cultural and archaeological sanctity of the Kapilvastu region even as the foothills shoot up from lakhs to crores in coming years.

Trilateral Knot

Given the escalated acrimony between New Delhi and Beijing, it is incongruous that back in 2015 the two signed an agreement on the high pass of Lipu Lek to allow passage for Kailash-Manasarovar pilgrims coming up from Uttarakhand. The Limpiyadhura area of which Lipu Lek is part is claimed by Kathmandu, and here too Beijing can be faulted for not practicing due diligence.

Meanwhile, the Lipu Lek agreement shows Beijing strategists are eyeing the Indian market – it will be pilgrims coming up for now, but goods and services going down before long. In that context, Kathmandu observers make the mistake of believing that China's interest in building expensive connectivity infrastructure under the proposed Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network is meant to only connect to Nepal.

Without doubt, the mercantilist communists of Beijing have an eye on access to the massive market comprising India's Gangetic plain and beyond, which can be supplied through railroads and highways breaching the Himalaya. In the evolving world of trans-Himalayan connectivity, Nepal's challenge is to benefit more than merely earning from transit duties.

Mao and Maoists

Foreign Minister Wang's visit is opportunity to make amends for the two recent egregious mistakes, which are also the result of excessive hand-wringing by the Kathmandu interlocutors. One was for Beijing to have waded into the swamp of Kathmandu politics, the other the fiasco of opposing the MCC project.

Over the past couple of years, Beijing overstepped diplomatic bounds by publicly trying to mend the breach within the erstwhile Communist Party of Nepal (CPN). The Nepali citizenry knew that the unification exercise was a lost cause to begin with: how come Beijing promoted it and sought to shield it?

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Himalayan Underbelly

While Nepal will not (and would not be expected to) do anything that would make Beijing nervous about its vulnerable Himalayan underbelly, Beijing should learn to not meddle on matters that are internal to Nepal. The historical, civilisational links between Tibetan and Nepali society are a fact, and Beijing-Kathmandu must set the goal for a border regime that is more relaxed than what it has become.

The Beijing authorities must accept that Nepal will deal with Tibetan refugees with the dignity they deserve. For decades, there was tacit understanding between the two governments that the pilgrim-refugees emerging from the Himalayan passes would be provided papers by the UN refugee agency UNHCR and given safe passage to Dharamshala. Over time, however, Kathmandu's authorities found it impossible to ignore Chinese insistence that the Tibetans be prevented from crossing the high frontier, or that refugees be prevented from celebrating the Dalai Lama's birthday.

It is interesting that, six decades after the takeover of Tibet, Beijing remains insecure about its hold on the populace of the high plateau. The restrictions at the border points are indicator of Beijing's insecurity rather than any 'misdemeanor' on the part of Kathmandu.

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much noticed. Before you knew it, Chinese firms were the predominant contractors in Nepal's mega projects, from airports to hydropower projects. Chinese tourists flooded Kathmandu, Pokhara and Lumbini even as Nepali students traveled by the thousands to Mainland China for higher studies. Kunming, Chengdu and Guangzhou became familiar to the Nepali ear.

For all the connections that were already developing, it was the Indian blockade in response to the adoption of the 2015 Constitution that created the conditions for Nepal to swivel towards China. The citizenry stood up resolutely to the blockade over more than five long months, giving the political class (led by then Prime Minister K P Oli) the courage to make the China pivot and sign seven protocols on bilateral trade, energy, connectivity and access to seven Chinese seaports and inland ports for third-country transit.

Two-way Conversation

A critical matter to thrash out during the visit of Foreign Minister Wang is the opening up of the Nepal-Tibet border points for bilateral commerce, also allowing locals on both sides to continue their age-old cultural and economic interactions.

In the late 1990's, Beijing had begun to feel more comfortable about its grip on Tibet, and tourism flows had increased commensurately. The surge of protests and self-immolations in Tibet timed to the 2008 Beijing Olympics led to a clampdown in Tibet and restrictions at the Nepal border points. All along the frontier, sadly, memories of the syncretistic trans-Himalayan milieu are fading.

As against Beijing's preoccupation with internal security and international optics in relation to Tibet, Kathmandu must develop a confident bilateral conversation with Beijing. For example, a first-time frontier issue having flared up regarding a border pillar in Humla District, the two sides must deploy a joint team to clear up the matter.

The world is changing dramatically, the Himalayan chain is no longer a barrier for commerce, and the Chinese railway has arrived in the Tibetan plateau and is pushing westward along Nepal's north. Only a confident Nepal can take advantage of the commercial possibilities, to develop its own economy and provide passage to India, Bangladesh and the Bay of Bengal.

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PUSHPA KAMAL DAHAL/TWITTER

HANDS ACROSS THE HIMALAYA:

Chinese President Xi Jinping with President Bidya Devi Bhandari during his state visit to Nepal in October 2019 (left). Foreign Minister Wang Yi met Pushpa Kamal Dahal in September 2019 ahead of President Xi's visit (above).

to Kathmandu in October 2019, the first by a Chinese president in 23 years, had several bracing moments, but one grating, troublesome aspect. Denying dignity to the host country, Xi used the occasion to read out a blunt warning meant to be heard by his Nepali hosts vis-à-vis Tibet but also to democracy demonstrators in Hong Kong, and beyond: "Anyone attempting to split China in any part of the country will end in crushed bodies and shattered bones."

On MCC, China seems to have decided early on that the straight grant of \$500 million for infrastructure would needlessly extend American influence on Kathmandu at a time it was making inroads. Nevertheless, Beijing's initial public stance was to term the MCC debate as internal Nepali affair.

As the CPN party broke up and the Oli Government fell, the new Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba proved unwavering in his public commitment to pass the MCC bill. Beijing went into overdrive, with its official media coming out publicly against parliamentary adoption. A flank of the Nepali ultra-left and royalist right – ever willing to undermine the system under the new Constitution – was more than happy to jump on the bandwagon and try to make the public believe that the US military was about to march into Nepal riding the MCC charger.

In the end, Parliament did pass the MCC agreement with a meaningless 'interpretative declaration'. The Foreign Ministry

spokesperson in Beijing then came out with the official Chinese view on MCC, protesting what it called "coercive diplomacy" carried out to force Nepal to accept the project – the reference being to the United States.

Besides being mistaken on the MCC's merits, Beijing showed lack of sensitivity to Nepal's right and ability to sign the MCC with open eyes if it was good for the economy. Beijing's outburst suggested to the public that the CPC was behind the anti-MCC campaign all along.

Lumbini and China

There was an invigorating line in President Xi's banquet speech delivered at the Shital Niwas presidential palace in October 2019: he confided that among the countries of South Asia, the people of China wanted to visit Nepal the most. It is the inefficiency of Nepal's tourism sector that the quote of the Chinese President has not been used to promote tourism in Nepal.

Despite the inefficiencies, inbound Chinese tourism was evolving as a major source of national income before Covid set in, and it is clear that tourists from the Mainland are going to be a mainstay of the Nepali economy – attracted to Kathmandu, Pokhara and Lumbini. Before Covid, Kathmandu was already better connected by air to half a dozen cities in China, whereas in the case of India most tend to be Kathmandu-Delhi shuttles.

Lumbini/Kapilvastu will

be a long time draw and a great injection to the national economy because the Chinese state is keen on promoting Buddhism among its growing middle class as a homegrown faith. The challenge for Nepal will be to protect the spiritual, cultural and archaeological sanctity of the Kapilvastu region even as the foothills shoot up from lakhs to crores in coming years.

Trilateral Knot

Given the escalated acrimony between New Delhi and Beijing, it is incongruous that back in 2015 the two signed an agreement on the high pass of Lipu Lek to allow passage for Kailash-Manasarovar pilgrims coming up from Uttarakhand. The Limpiyadhura area of which Lipu Lek is part is claimed by Kathmandu, and here too Beijing can be faulted for not practicing due diligence.

Meanwhile, the Lipu Lek agreement shows Beijing strategists are eyeing the Indian market – it will be pilgrims coming up for now, but goods and services going down before long. In that context, Kathmandu observers make the mistake of believing that China's interest in building expensive connectivity infrastructure under the proposed Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network is meant to only connect to Nepal.

Without doubt, the mercantilist communists of Beijing have an eye on access to the massive market comprising India's Gangetic plain and beyond, which can be supplied through railroads and highways breaching the Himalaya. In the evolving world of trans-Himalayan connectivity, Nepal's challenge is to benefit more than merely earning from transit duties.

Mao and Maoists

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Nepal's past, present and future in a photo

Peeling away layers of a historical photograph reveals lessons for Nepali politics today

Recently, with my mother Kalpana Ghimiré and my aunt Chetana Kaushik Sharma, we discussed a photo that has remained in the family collection ever since I can remember.

For the child that I was, the picture was a mere image of my towering twenty-something grandfather Bal Chandra Sharma with his



COMMENT

Bhumi Ghimiré

political colleagues and friends in Banaras. Without really understanding why, I insisted that they provide me the photo to have it placed in the public domain.

At the time, I was not quite able to put my finger into why I felt the way I did about it, until the point of writing this commentary. This picture is a strong and genuine historical testimony.

Looking at it, I realise that like the Russian Matryoshka doll, which when opened reveals a smaller figure inside, which in turn has another figure inside of it, and so on, this image can be to be read and understood on many layers.

I am convinced that it bears not only a significant historical importance but also is strong relevance to today's Nepal political climate, and might even be delivering a message for the future.

Amongst these young men, some are more familiar to us than others, but for the most part they have come to become these larger than life iconic personalities who were to leave behind important imprints in the historical, political and academic landscape of our country.

At the time this photo was taken, they were Nepali students studying in Banaras and key figures of the Nepali National Congress (Nepali Rastriya Congress). They had participated in the Free India movement and were inspired by the whirlpool of revolutionary ideologies and activities against British colonialism there.

Given their patriotic inclination, these young men wished to dedicate their lives to bring about socio-political change in their own country that was then under the yoke of the Rana oligarchy.

It is a studio-posed picture, and such photographs were markers of special occasions in those days. From family accounts, I know that this picture was taken in October 1947, not long after my grandfather and many others had been released from the Dhankuta Jail following their active participation in the Biratnagar Jute Mill labour strike of March 1947.

The agitation had been put down *manu-militari* by the Rana state troops, workers were brutally repressed, its leaders arrested and imprisoned. The strike, which initially was a movement against the management for labour rights, turned into a call for the nationwide anti-Rana regime movement.

Youth and leadership:

This photograph draws attention to youth leadership, which is so glaringly lacking in Nepali politics today, and discouraged by the establishment, including the Nepali Congress. Apart from the occasional lip service to "yuva shakti" (youth power), we are having to put



From left-right standing: Lakpa Tsering Sherpa, Ganesh Man Singh, Bal Chandra Sharma, Mahendra Narayan Nidhi
Sitting: Matrika Prasad Koirala and Bishweswar Prasad Koirala

up with personalities in their mid to late 60's and 70's at the helm of a nation that is predominantly young.

It is sad and ironic that the Nepali Congress today, the very party that these young men established, refuses to re-invent itself and pave the way for a new generation. The youth in this photo were promising, dynamic, purposeful and so are the young, aspiring leaders of today.

But they are held back by a coterie of over-the-hill oldsters who were nurtured and educated with outdated, obsolete social and political values. Whether it is the right or left, or the even so-called progressive 'Maoist' communists, our present leaders are utterly out of touch with where Nepalis are headed, and what they want.

The young men in the photograph changed the course of Nepal's history, and ushered in the transition from feudalism to democracy. They were visionaries, ahead of their time, capable of anticipating changes that were sweeping the world during that period of history.

Nepal's current political elite lacks this

vision, and is lagging behind in the collective aspiration of the people of Nepal. There is a massive gap in ideology, in communication, and indeed in comprehension between the populace and politicians.

The people do not understand the motives of their leaders, nor do the leaders address our concerns and aspirations. The current political watchwords seem to be sloganism, nepotism, 'kursi ko khel' (literally, a game of thrones) – in all political parties, including the former Maoists in the NCP.

Ethnic representation

The other layer in this photograph is its representation of Nepal's various ethnicities — effectively representing the Himal, Pahad, Tarai. This is something we do not see much of these days, at least within a single political party. Has politics in Nepal become so retrograde when we are supposed to have a progressive and inclusive Constitution?

When did we last see a Sherpa in the leading committee of NC or the NCP? Many will see that there is a non-representation of

women in the photograph, but for that one has to bear in mind that this was the 1940's after all. The fact that the minorities are so well represented is in itself remarkable.

The identity of the man standing on the top left corner has been a subject of debate. On the back of the photograph, a writer has identified him as Lakpa Tsering Sherpa and some have argued it to be Nirmal Lama, both were members of the Nepali Congress in the early days.

Pose and *pahiran* (attire)

It is obvious how the vestimentary call of the day was defiance and differentiation. These sartorial elements are more than just fashion statements. How one dressed in that generation reflected one's political, ideological, cultural or social leanings.

When this photo was shown to friends, one of the recurring questions that kept coming up was: why none of these young Nepali men were attired in *Dhaka-topi daura-surwal*?

The *daura-surwal* as we know it today is a variation of the *Tapalan*, something that the Newa people had been wearing for years. The Rana regime declared it to be the national attire, and ordered all Nepali men to wear it for formal occasions.

For these revolutionaries, the *daura-surwal* represented the oppressive governance of the Ranas, who were often seen wearing them. These young men wanted to steer clear of this image, and depict a 'newer' Nepal.

Only after the iconic image of King Tribhuvan waving as he deplaned a Dakota with registration 'VT-CVC' at Gauchar airfield in 1951 in a simplified *daura-surwal*, would the attire get its badge of democratic honour.

Sedition and disjunctures

The core of the layered Matryoshka doll in this photograph prompts us to dig even deeper into the bane of Nepali politics since.

We should not just revere these great men, but also critically analyse their shortfalls. Their expressions show resolve and determination, but also exhaustion from having survived the brutal sentence they served for the Biratnagar Jute Mill Strike. In their eyes, we see unity, fellowship and resolve.

However, looking back, we also know that this unity was about to crack. Discord, alienation, treason, alliances and misalliances were in the offing. In 1951, the Mukti Sena which had been established as the NC's Liberation Army against the Rana regime came into disaccord with BP with regards to the tripartite Delhi Accord.

Further tension between BP and his half brother Matrika created more fissures. It is tragic that they failed to work as a team for a common goal, and it is partly because of this that King Mahendra had the ammunition to be able to carry out his 1960 coup.

Infighting and division seem to be the malediction of Nepali political leadership. This is an invaluable point that the history of Nepal has taught us over and over: our leaders continue to fight among themselves like jackals over a piece of carcass.

Seventy years after this photograph was taken, this is still a burning question, and the curse that defiles, degrades and debilitates our political landscape and actors. We still seem to be stuck in square one. 🇳🇵



हिमाल खबरपत्रिका

नपढी सुखै छैन !



हिमालमिडिया प्रा. लि.
पाटनढोका, ललितपुर

Sky high fuel prices hit tourism, airlines

Fallout of Ukraine war knocks Nepal's aviation as it struggles to recover from the pandemic

One month after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the fallout of the war on global fuel prices threatens to derail Nepal's aviation and tourism sector which was finally reviving after two years of the Covid pandemic.

Nepal Oil Corporation (NOC) raised prices for petrol and diesel at filling stations, but aviation turbine fuel (ATF) has seen a steep hike.

International airlines serving Kathmandu which had already seen some booking cancellations due to the Ukraine war are now paying double the rate for refuelling their planes at Kathmandu airport.

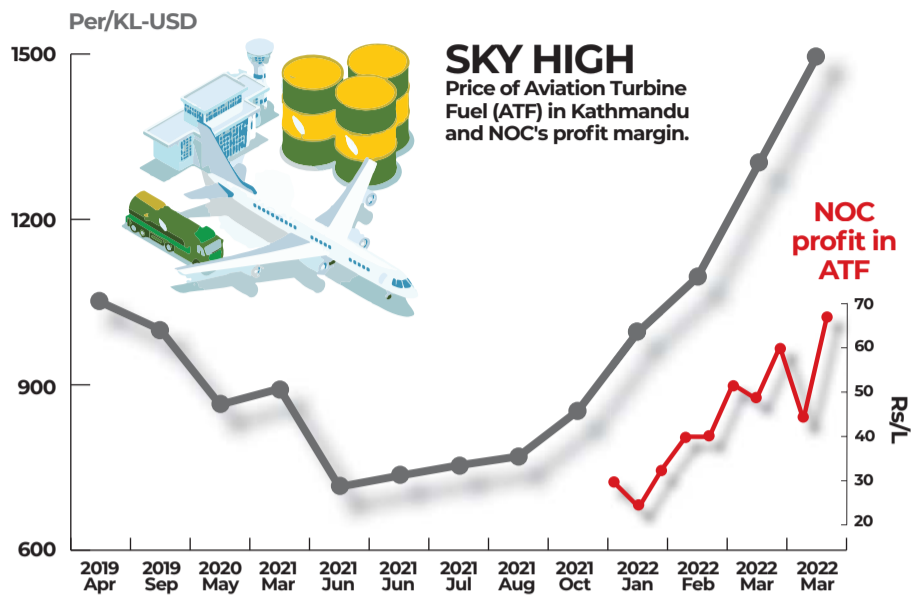
ATF cost in Kathmandu has risen steeply from \$715 per kilolitre in June last year to nearly \$1,500 after the latest NOC price hike on 17 March (see graph).

But the NOC appears to be passing on the rising import bill for petroleum products to its customers, while keeping its profit margins intact. The state-owned monopoly's own website shows that the profit it makes from ATF sold to airlines has risen from Rs23.92 per litre in January to Rs67.93 this week.

The NOC's overall fortnightly losses have also soared from Rs1.83 billion to Rs4.66 in that same period. It is clear that NOC is compensating for its losses from petrol, diesel and LPG sales at fuel stations by doubling the price it charges airlines in order to subsidise Nepali customers.

NOC officials have justified the price hike saying that the fuel needs to be transported in tankers from the Indian border, and the hike in diesel prices has added to the cost of ATF in the international market.

However, the price of aviation fuel at Indian airports was only \$900 per kilolitre — which is \$600



less than in Kathmandu.

Nepal's domestic airlines, which were seeing a boom since the Omicron wave started to subside earlier this year, have passed on the added cost to passengers with a hefty fuel surcharge.

However, it is medium and long haul operators to Kathmandu like Singapore Airlines, Korean Air, Turkish Airlines, Qatar Airways, Himalaya Airlines and Nepal Airlines which have been hit hardest. Airlines have started flying in on full tanks only topping up in Kathmandu to save on fuel costs.

A 7-hour flights to Incheon or Istanbul, for instance, burns 40 tons of fuel at a cost of \$75,000. That will now go up, but airlines cannot raise prices on pre-booked tickets.

"Because of the rise in passenger demand we were

increasing our frequency, but with these costs it is not feasible," says one international airline executive. "Fuel prices have gone up everywhere, but in Kathmandu it is 50-90% higher than any other Asian airport."

NOC first jacked up the price of aviation fuel to \$1,095 on 2 March after the Russian invasion. It then raised it to \$1,295 on 4 March, and again to \$1,495 on 17 March.

Brent crude prices had dropped last week, but with Russian counter sanctions against European countries and the spectre of a war of attrition in Ukraine, it again climbed above the \$120 per barrel mark.

Some US states have temporarily waived taxes on fuel to stabilise gas prices. Nepal has heavy taxes on all petroleum products, but it cannot afford to reduce the levy when it faces

budgetary pressure, spiralling trade deficit, and plummeting foreign exchange reserves.

The oil price shock could not have come at a worse time, just as the country's tourism was starting to show signs of revival after two years of Covid closure.

Several European tour operators have cancelled bookings to Nepal at the last moment. The crisis has coincided with the start of the peak trekking and mountaineering season, and a large Ukrainian expedition to Mt Everest has been cancelled. The number of climbers who had booked Himalayan peaks is expected to go down by half. More than 1 million people depend directly on the tourism industry. There was considerable optimism that Spring 2022 would see a revival, but those hopes have been dashed.

There are other indirect impacts from rising energy prices in Nepal, with electricity rationing this week along industrial corridors in the Tarai. As the dry season flow of Himalayan rivers reduces generation capacity, peak demand this week outstripped supply by up to 600MW.

The Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) was meeting this shortfall with imports from the Indian grid, but on Tuesday and Wednesday it was outbid by other purchasers.

Most of India's electricity is generated from coal and diesel powered plants, and this has nearly doubled the price of peak power imports from India to INR13 per unit on Wednesday. 🇳🇵

Remembering Nepal's lost and the found

Temporary exhibition of repatriated sacred objects opens at the National Museum in Kathmandu

• Ashish Dhakal

The two-storeyed Buddhist Art Gallery in the National Museum in Chhauni is a conspicuous building, with its red walls, slanted roofs and vibrant windows. The *torana* above the door and the *tundal* supporting the roof are decorated with deities caught in floral waves that mimic the traditional designs found in the ancient Kathmandu Valley squares.

On 21 March, the gallery opened a new temporary exhibition to mark the museum's 83rd anniversary, featuring 40 repatriated sacred objects, some of which had been returned to Nepal from abroad as far back as 1986.

As more and more stolen artefacts are being returned to Nepal by collectors and museums in the West, museum chief Jayaram Shrestha feels that the exhibition is most timely.

The stolen images of Nepal include sculptures of deities, temple struts, frieze, copper and ivory figurines, most of which were smuggled out of the country in the 1960s-80s.

"In the last two years alone, we have been able to bring many objects back through the works of citizen groups and heritage activists like the Lost Arts of Nepal and Nepal Heritage Recovery Campaign," says Shrestha. "And



we feel that the returned artefacts we hold in the museum should be shown to the public."

At present, most repatriated pieces of devotional art are mandated to be stored in the National Museum while they await to be reinstated in situ. Among the artefacts on exhibit are the 14th century flying *Apsara Gandharva* (*Biddhyadhar*, according to the museum nomenclature) stolen from

Itum Bahal and the upper section of the 17th century *torana* wrenched out of the main doorway of Yampi Mahavihara/I-Bahi in Patan, both of which were recently returned to Nepal by the Rubin Museum in 2022.

The *torana* is one of the first objects one sees upon climbing the steps of the gallery to the exhibition space, mirroring how it would have welcomed visitors to the Mahavihara before it was looted. The vast carved piece will also be returning to its original space.

Another archaeological marvel is the 73x58cm 10th century *Shridhar Vishnu* (pictured above). Several broken fragments of the sculpture were returned from London in 1995 which were later assembled in Chhauni. Larger pieces from the stele are still missing, almost like an aposiopsis. But the image demands to be completed, at least by imagination.

In the cabinets of curiosities sit several copper figures of the

Buddha, Tara, a Lama and Manjushree. An ornate bronze *Vajrakilaya* which was repatriated from Kolkata in 1986 slants against a mirror that reveals the intricate designs on its reverse. On a slab around the corner sits the disembodied head of the 15th-16th century stone *Saraswati* from Pharping, which was broken off in the early 1980s and repatriated in 1999 from Los Angeles. In the middle of the room, stands the *Shiva Parivar Yantra* in ivory, returned from London in 1995.

The overall atmosphere of the room is ambivalent: mixed with the feelings of joy and relief at the return of Nepal's divine art is the bleakness of loss. This is visibly expressed in the pieces, some cracked, some broken, some missing — the marks of violent struggles to wrench the artefacts from their original homes. And some are quite literally lost and adrift, their original locations unknown.

But on the brighter side, the 16th century *torana* stolen from Kumari Baha and the 18th century stone image of a donor from the Manjushree Mahabihar in Om Baha (both in Kathmandu) will be soon joining the exhibition upon their arrival in Nepal. The artefacts were returned to the Nepal Embassy in London by the Barakat Gallery on 18 March 2022. 🇳🇵

BACKSIDE

Horsing around

The Ass takes umbrage at Nepal celebrating Horse Day with an official holiday in Kathmandu Valley on 25 March, whereas there is no special day earmarked for us donkeys. Horses are snobs, they exude entitlement and high caste privilege. A day just for these high horses proves just how exclusionary the Nepali state is towards other members of the genus *Equidae*, despite the 2015 Federal Constitution.

But hold your horses. Those of you who know us Jack and Jenny Asses will not need to be reminded what we think of our equine daddies. After all, it was because horses horsed around with asses to produce progeny known as mules that we have not taken our relationship any deeper than that. Ever since, jackasses and the mares observe decorum and have strictly platonic relationships.

That makes me question why Nepal does not have an Ass Day. And why, during these austere times, do we need a separate Horse Day and Cow Day? Why not lump them together? That way, bulls can take part in equestrian events on Ghode Jatra at Tundikhel, and horses can horse around on Guy Jatra.

It is precisely because Nepal has so many jattras that it has now been declared the happiest country in South Asia. The Ass was happily going about his morning business the other day when there was a headline with these glad tidings.

It is not a coincidence that the UN's Sustainable Development Solutions Network has ranked Nepalis as the 84th most jovial out of 146 countries around the world. We are more cheerful than even Indians, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans and Bangladeshis. And this makes us happier still.

This announcement followed another headline last month that Nepal was the second-most corrupt country in South Asia, so this probably means that we are happy because we, as a nation, merrily offer and accept bribes.

The Global Unemployment Ranking also puts Nepal below most other countries in the world, and that makes us mighty pleased with ourselves. Deservedly so. Imagine if we really had to work.

We are also at the bottom of the heap in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index, the Fragile States Index, Global Competitiveness Quotient, and the Index of Economic Freedom. But all that just makes us all irrationally happy because when you hit rock bottom there is nowhere to go but up.

This week, IQAir brought out the annual list of the world's most polluted places. And as if the Swiss were telling us something new, they ranked Kathmandu as the city with the sixth worst air quality, and where it is like smoking two packs of cigarettes a day. But happily, happy-go-lucky Nepalis are thrilled to bits saving all that money in buying cigarettes.

The other reason we Nepalis are unnaturally happy is probably because alcohol consumption per head is at an all time high. Just look at all the booze ads in this paper. And it is typical of the optimistic nature of us Nepalis that even when we do a bottoms up, we still see the glass as half-full.



The Ass



CRAFTED WITH PASSION

Exquisitely rich in color and refreshing aroma, "Gorkha Craft" is moderately hoppy with balanced bitterness and full flavor of toasted Ruby malt.

