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Nepal's safest bank-four times in a row.

The Year of Scandals

■ Shristi Karki

Speaking at a program on the International Day against Corruption on 9 December in Kathmandu, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal admitted that his government's efforts to curb corruption "has so far been inadequate".

It was ironic that the function was organised by the supposedly independent Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA) which itself has been weaponised by politicians in power to keep rivals down, undermining the rule of law and the doctrine of separation of powers.

Indeed, 2023 is ending as the most scandal-ridden year in Nepali history with a new scam almost every week.

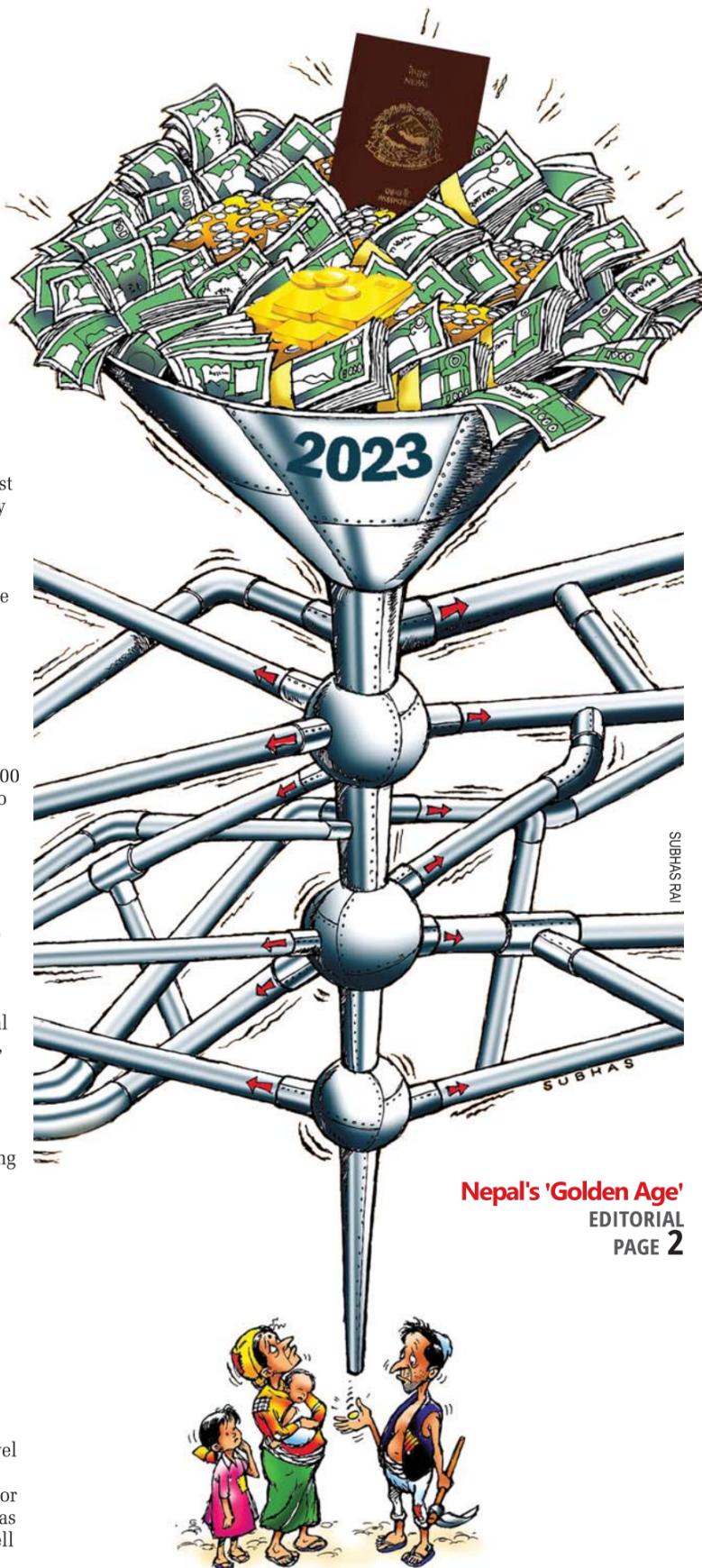
One could say the glass is half full because at least investigative journalists used a free press to expose these crimes, the police investigated and the court did put some guilty behind bars. But the list of graft, malfeasance, smuggling, bribery, kickbacks is too long to print due to space limitations.

Government officials and human traffickers colluded to cheat nearly 800 Nepalis by promising them entry into the United States as fake Bhutanese refugees. A minister is in jail, but some innocents were also framed. Senior police inspectors probing the crime were transferred because the investigation was getting too close to the consorts of the powers that be.

The property surrounding the Prime Minister's residence was parceled off to individuals by the real estate mafia with political patronage, no one has been charged. More than 100kg of gold has been seized from smugglers in the past six months alone. Only mules have been caught.

And just as PM Dahal was marking the first anniversary of assuming office this month, the Malaysian conglomerate Axiata exited Nepal after selling its 80% stake in Ncell to Spectrlite UK Limited registered to Singapore-based Nepali-origin businessman Satish Lal Acharya. A transaction of this magnitude could not have been pulled off without the involvement of top bureaucrats, regulators and politicians.

In a case of the fox guarding the chicken coop, the Cabinet's 'high-level committee' to investigate the Axiata stake sale is chaired by former Auditor General Tanka Mani Sharma, who was himself implicating in absolving Ncell in a previous tax evasion case.



Nepal's 'Golden Age'
EDITORIAL
PAGE 2

"Any investigative body that is tasked to investigate corruption must be independent, have jurisdiction, and be made up of experts," explains Padmini Pradhananga, president of the Nepal chapter of Transparency International. She adds, "Investigations are fig leaves to let the guilty off and demonstrate an utter disregard for the rule of law and the separation of powers."

Dahal's coalition partners have not spoken out about the telecom scandal, nor has the opposition UML. However, Gagan Thapa of the dissident faction in the Nepali Congress has said the Axiata sale would not have been possible without support from political and administrative leadership.

"It would be shortsighted to assume that forming committees will solve this issue," Thapa wrote on X. "Those involved in this sale be they in government or outside, no matter which level, rank, or influence, must not be exempt from investigation and action."

Nepal's mainstream media reports have quoted credible senior government insiders as accusing party loyalists and relatives of PM Dahal as well as relatives of his coalition partner Sher Bahadur Deuba of involvement.

And precisely because such big fish may be involved, there is a danger this one will also fizzle out like the other scandals this year.

To be sure, figures including former ministers, government secretaries and dozens of others are behind bars. But more prominent people who have been named -- including the NC's Arzu Rana Deuba and Manju Khand in the fake refugee scam, Maoist leaders Barshaman Pun, Onsari Gharti Magar, Nanda Kishor Pun, and Krishna Bahadur Mahara in the gold smuggling scandal, as well as former PMs Madhav Kumar Nepal and Baburam Bhattarai in connection with the Baluwatar land grab -- have been unscathed.

Says Pradhananga: "The boundaries between those who are punishable for crimes and those who bear the responsibility of penalising them are blurring. This is a sign of a nation in crisis."

Nepal ranks 110th out of 180 countries in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI), with a score of 34 out of 100. This means that Nepalis themselves regard their government as being 'highly corrupt'.



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Nepal's 'Golden Age'

Next week, it will be one year since Maoist chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal became Prime Minister of Nepal for the third time after abandoning his decade-long effort to revolutionise the Nepali state through force of arms.

Although the conflict ended, Dahal's tenures have been marred by missteps, political interference, nepotism and allegations of rampant corruption. The coalition that he heads has squandered the mandate of elections.

Governance is at a standstill, the economy is stagnant, and even by Nepali standards this has been an exceptionally scandal-ridden year with back-to-back exposés of corruption (page 1).

No wonder the Prime Minister is said to be thinking of shuffling his Cabinet, with just one more year to go before his promised handover of prime ministership to Sher Bahadur Deuba of the Nepali Congress.

There are signs of trouble in high places.

The prime minister's political advisor and senior Maoist leader Haribol Gajurel, who has been known for his personal integrity, resigned last week citing "policy differences". It is an open secret at the PMO that the differences are with Prime Minister Dahal's powerful daughter Ganga.

The politicisation of crime and the criminalisation of politics is blurring the lines between those elected to govern and the human traffickers and gold smugglers implicated in recent scandals. The public is pouring scorn on politicians on the social web, saying that Nepal has now entered the 'Golden Age', or that Tribhuvan International Airport should be renamed 'Suvarnabhumi'.

And it is that airport which offers proof that Nepalis are voting with their feet. Young men and women spent Rs24 billion last year to go study abroad – their student visas mostly facilitating permanent emigration. Even the fake refugee scandal proved how desperate Nepalis are to use any means possible to leave.

Nepalis now do not just migrate to the Gulf or Malaysia out of economic necessity, but also increasingly to Europe, North America and Australia for better opportunities. Young people desperate to earn a living would rather even go fight someone else's war, as we have seen with Nepalis in the Russian Army killed and captured on the Ukraine front.

On Wednesday, Finance Minister Prakash Sharan Mahat said that Nepal's economic indicators were "positive" and there were signs of recovery. We detect no such sign, in fact all indicators point to a

worsening crisis. Petroleum import makes up nearly 25% of the total import bill, and yet Mahat said recently the government could not promote electric transport because it would "lose revenue".

In fact, revenue collection is much lower than projected for other reasons. The trade deficit has become unmanageable because of record low exports. And the only reason the economy has not gone belly up is because of remittance inflows. Nepal's foreign exchange reserves can pay for 10 months of imports and remittance inflows peaked at Rs136.97 billion in September-October, the highest-ever for one month in history.

But the most thriving sector is the shadow economy which is made up of illicit state-protected activities like gold smuggling, human trafficking and corruption.

Public disillusionment has grown to such an extent that many now throng to pro-monarchy rallies with slogans against republicanism and federalism.

Fearful of the anti-establishment messaging through social media platforms, the government shut down TikTok, and this could be the first step in a more general crackdown against free expression.

The coalition government is using the excuse of elections to the Upper Chamber to put off the winter session of Parliament since there will be strong opposition voices from the floor about impunity in recent prominent corruption scandals.

Parliament itself is supposed to debate an electoral reform bill, but the alpha males of the mainstream parties have already struck off the clause in it that would allow voting by mail. So pervasive is the fear of an anti-incumbent vote in the diaspora.

Senior figures from the main established parties all neck-deep in muck, and even the opposition UML appears to be in I-scratch-your-back-you-scratch-mine mode to protect each other from one scandal or the other. Nepal's kleptocracy is populated by kakistocrats, and with all the plunder going on the question is if the country will survive till the next election in 2027.

In his second year in office, Dahal must launch a campaign on investments in infrastructure and manufacturing to create massive job creation, improve access to public services and guide policies for green growth. He must do this not only to protect his own political careers, but for the country he currently leads.

Shristi Karki



Prime Minister Dahal does not have much to show for the first year in office during this third tenure.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Divide and Ruin

Nepal's leaders have always failed to work together. That has been the hallmark of our history, the current coalition led by Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal is an unholy alliance of nine political parties with diametrically opposing ideologies. It is clear that the coalition is collusion for horse-trading. From fake refugees to real estate scams, to wholesale gold smuggling and now the Ncell sale. Divide and ruin is the motto. This editorial published in Nepali Times 20 years ago this week on issue #174 12-18 December 2003 might as well have been written today. Excerpts:



Nepal's tragedy has been that our rulers have always believed in ruling by dividing. They derived short-term political gain by keeping those down the power ladder squabbling madly so they could climb on. This technique was perfected into an art form and the tradition carries to this day. Those who should be engaged in unifying the country, pulling together political forces to forge a common destiny, sewing back society's tattered fabric are busy keeping things apart.

The RPP is virtually split, the UML has a vertical split and the Nepali Congress was veritably split two years ago. Not over any major ideological

disagreement, or over a matter of principle on deeply cherished beliefs, but for short-sighted, narrow-minded personal gain.

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

ONLINE PACKAGES



GOKYO RI
Due to the popularity of the Everest Base Camp Trek, the delight that is the Gokyo Ri trek is overlooked. Following a flight to Lukla, trekkers can witness the diverse beauty of Nepal's Everest region via this 11-day trek. Follow us as we take you to this hidden treasure of the Everest region located on the Ngozumpa Glacier, Nepal's longest. Watch this video on our YouTube channel and the photo feature on page 6-7.



RETELLING GURKHA HISTORY
Brave khukuri-swinging soldiers in combat khakis and hats marching off to battle have been an iconic part of Nepal's past. Forgotten on the pages of history, however, are their sarong-clad wives in Nepal or abroad, their struggles and their contributions. Artist Suzana Thapa Shris attempts to document the experience of Gurkha wives. Subscribe to our YouTube channel for more original multimedia content.

MADAN BHANDARI UNIVERSITY

Wish grand success to this new University ('University for a new Nepal', Kunda Dixit, page 9). Nepal surely needs and deserves a world-class institution of higher education, not only in science and technology but in social sciences as well. A political name, however, will always remain a liability for years to come.

Sukh Deo Muni

■ An excellent, positive initiative. All the best moving forward.

Ranjan Poudyal

■ Would like to know more about how the university can sustain itself if it doesn't charge fees. Nice idea but difficult to implement especially when it is a brand new institute.

Michelle Bostick

MDMS

As usual, Nepal does everything possible to hassle and inconvenience tourists with a not all well thought out plan ('Nepal rule makes Nepal immobile', Aisha MacDougall, #1189).

Roger Ray

FEMALE ON TOWERS

We've grown up in a society where we see gender discrimination even at our workplaces which is why we are always behind everyone else ('High wire act', Anita Bhetwal, #1189). I salute you for taking up and thriving in a profession such as electrical maintenance that hardly sees a woman. Please continue toon no matter what others say.

Kiran Panday

■ I kept thinking if it was a big deal to climb poles for a living. If it was a man, it wouldn't have been but for women who are physically more vulnerable, it is. So, you are a source of inspiration for all women, especially for those who hold back or are held back from reaching their full potential despite their capability.

Sudha Maudgalya

SNOW LEOPARDS

Amazing story on bringing back snow leopards. ('Nepal brings back the snow leopard', Seren Shrestha, nepalitimes.com). Conservation is a choice.

Hum Bahadur Gurung

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



Nepal brings back the snow leopard

by Seren Shrestha
Shey Phoksundo National Park communities are actively saving the elusive and endangered snow leopards. Perseverance, adaptive management by a dynamic local colleague and the support of local partners were crucial in protecting the snow leopard. Visit nepalitimes.com for details.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

Not climate smart

by Sonia Awale
COP28 in Dubai ended with countries compromising on commitments for complete fossil fuel phase-out which means future infrastructure in the Himalaya is at greater risk of climate-induced disasters, making them more expensive to build. Go to our website to read the full article.

Most popular on Twitter

University for a new Nepal

by Kunda Dixit
Just one hour from the Ring Road in Kathmandu, up a steep serpentine road to the pass and down the other side in Chitlang is a brand new university campus, an ambitious foray into science and technology research that avoids pitfalls like political interference. Story on page 9 and join the online discussion.

Most commented



Mobile rule makes Nepal immobile

by Aisha MacDougall
Foreigners visiting Nepal who wish to connect to the local telecommunication network or make and receive calls during their stay are now required to register their cellular devices as per the Mobile Device Management System (MDMS). The cumbersome and confusing registration process has angered visitors. Follow us for the latest updates.

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Ambitious foray into science and technology research avoids pitfalls like political interference. University for a new Nepal | @kundadixit

Kul Chandra Gautam @KulCGautam
This new University of Science & Technology sounds truly visionary & exciting. Really hope it manages to avoid pitfalls of political interference that have so ruined higher education in Nepal.

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
"There is still a lot of shock and confusion here. Rupa's parents are unable to believe that their only son has died without seeing his body."

fried rice is life @neesh_chal
Every day a new failure is revealed of the nepali government

1,000 WORDS

KATHMANDU UNIVERSITY NINETY-NINTH CONVOCATION (FIRST PHASE)

13 December 2023

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Can I get a silly hat, too?



PRADEEP RAJ ONTA/RSS

COMRADES' CONVOCATION:

Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal attended the first phase of the 29th Convocation of Kathmandu University on 13 December.



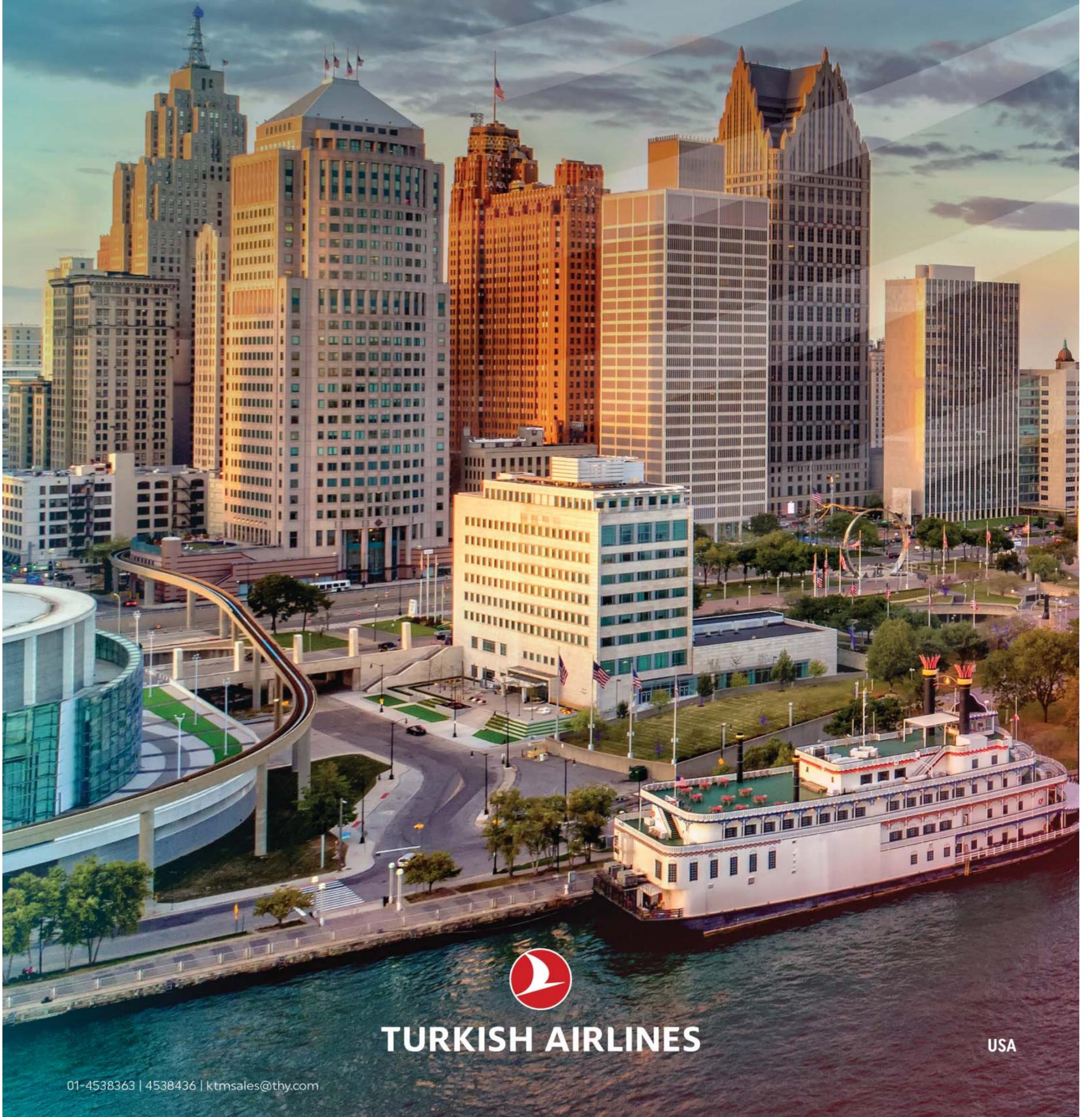
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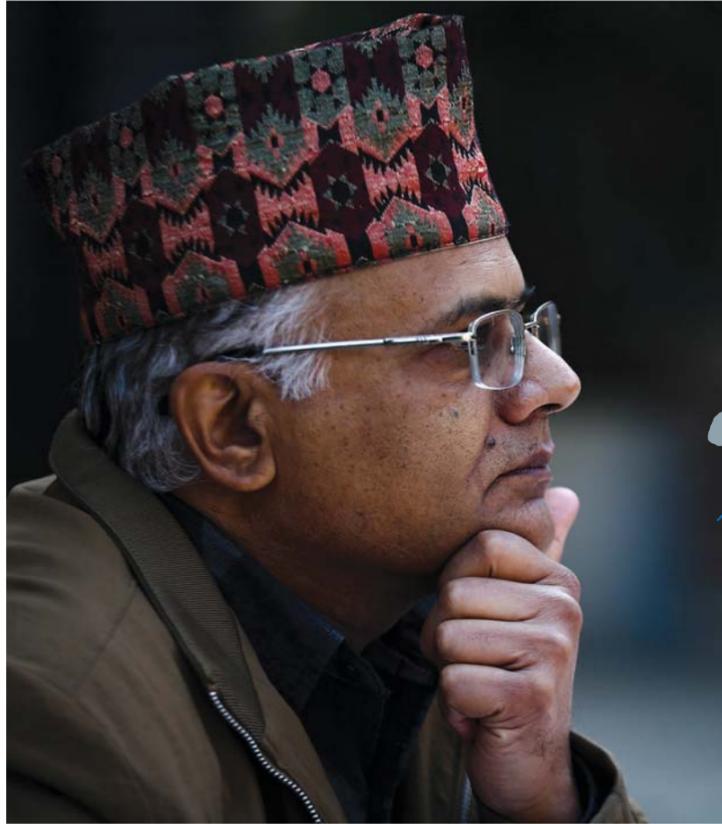
USA

Letters from the Western Front

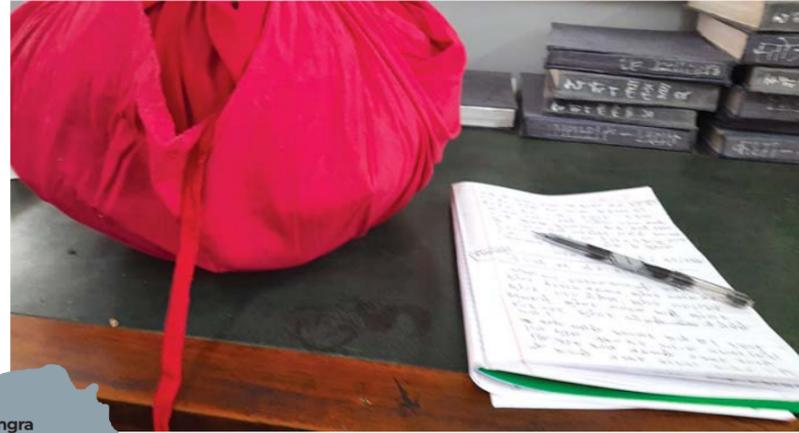
More than 200 years after they were written, battlefield correspondence fill gaps in the history of the Anglo-Nepal War

■ Alisha Sijapati

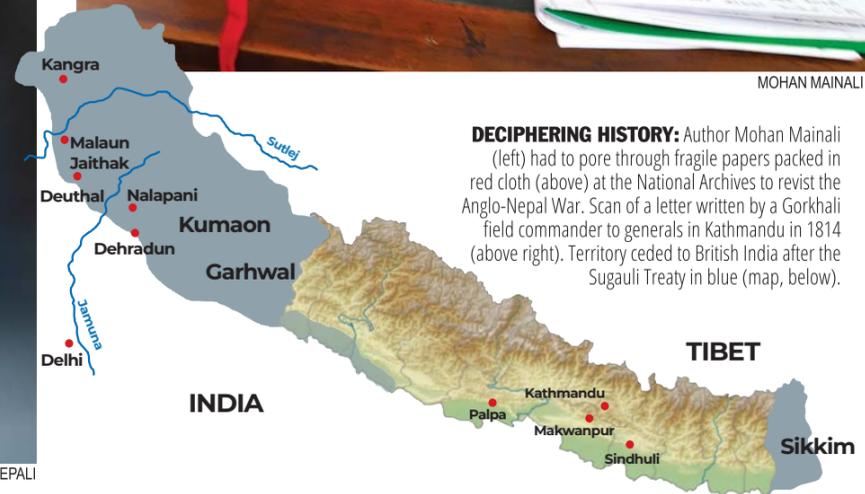
- 'We have heard rumours the enemy will bombard our fortifications day and night for a week when their 24/17 cannons arrive, and then storm our fort on the eighth day. They are adding cannons day by day...when our reinforcements arrive, by God's grace and the sacred powers of the King and with your encouragement, we will continue to strike and resist the white men.' - *Capt Bal Bhadra Kunwar, Ripu Mardan Thapa and others writing from Nalapani Fort to General Bhimsen Thapa in Kathmandu, 10 November 1814*
- 'The English are conceited in their belief that our defence is no match for their cannons. They are getting ready to send troops up to Palpa, Piuthan, and Butwal. They will bring cannons ... hit them hard before they start climbing the mountains up from Butwal.' - *Gen Amar Singh Thapa's instructions to the Palpa Commander, 15 January 1814*
- 'When the white man enemy attacked us from the west of Ramsahar, all of us here first hit them with cannon and muskets. After that we unsheathed our swords, and we prevailed. We killed 24 hat-wearing white enemies and 740 black soldiers. There were many wounded.' - *When this letter from the western front by an anonymous commander arrived in Kathmandu in November 1814, it was greeted with jubilation and a gun salute.*



SUMAN NEPALI



MOHAN MAINALI



DECIPHERING HISTORY: Author Mohan Mainali (left) had to pore through fragile papers packed in red cloth (above) at the National Archives to revisit the Anglo-Nepal War. Scan of a letter written by a Gorkhali field commander to generals in Kathmandu in 1814 (above right). Territory ceded to British India after the Sugauli Treaty in blue (map, below).

- 'The English will have the upper hand if we ratify the (Sugauli) treaty and it will have far-reaching consequences into the future. Even though they signed the treaty, we did the right thing by not putting the official red seal on it.' - *Ujir Singh Thapa writing from Palpa to Gen Bhimsen Thapa in Kathmandu about the Sugauli Treaty that was signed on 2 December 1815, but which powerful generals regarded as surrender.*

It was 210 years ago this week that Nepali defenders of the Nalapani Fort in Garhwal of present-day India finally gave up after a month-long siege by the forces of the British East India Company.

Even before the war started, the westward expansion of the Gorkha Empire had come to a halt after their defeat at Kangra by the combined forces of Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Punjab and local King Sansar Chand.

The British under the command of Maj-Gen Hugh Gillespie and Col

Sebright Mawbey attacked the fort after bombarding it relentlessly with cannon fire. Gillespie was killed by a Gorkhali sniper, but Mawbey located the fort's only water supply and cut it off.

Capt Balbhadra Kunwar escaped from the fort at night, but left behind hundreds of dead Nepali soldiers, their families including women and children.

Now, after two years of painstaking research of letters at the National Archives and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, author Mohan Mainali has brought out hitherto

unpublished communications by Nepali commanders on the western front during the 1814-1816 Nepal-Company war.

"We know the broad strokes of the Nepali defeat, but these letters give us a much more detailed picture of what it was like as well as the meticulous information the generals sent back to Kathmandu with runners," Mainali told us.

What emerges is that the fearsome Gorkhali blitzkrieg at first easily over-ran the kingdoms, and their British allies, reaching the Sutlej River. Ultimately, bamboo



Digital Connectivity

The Indian Embassy on Wednesday held a seminar on Digital Public Infrastructure: Innovating together towards India-Nepal digital bridges to explore the transformative potential of India-Nepal digital



connectivity. UNDP Nepal and Institute for Integrated Development Studies (IIDS) with the support of Nepal Rastra Bank (NRB) partnered. Indian Ambassador Naveen Srivastava highlighted the emphasis on digital infrastructure under India's G20 presidency.

Turkish Golf Cup

Turkish Airlines hosted the 8th edition of the World Golf Cup at the Antalya Gloria Golf Resort from 4-7 December with corporate members, loyalty program



participants, and business leaders. The Grand Finals featured finalists from 12 parts of the world, with Ghislain Sahali from Zagreb/Croatia emerging as the World Champion.



Global's new venture

JBNL Securities, a subsidiary of Global IME Bank, has started its securities trading services from Monday. FBCCI Chair Chandra Prasad Dhakal of Global IME Bank officiated the inauguration. Licensed by the Nepal Securities Board, JBNL Securities is located at New Baneswor and is stock broker number 89 at Nepal Stock Exchange. Global IME Bank Limited has also launched 4 new branch offices in Kathmandu, Chitwan and Tanahun.



Unilever AGM

Unilever Nepal Limited marked its 30th Annual General Meeting chaired by Dev Bajpai and Managing Director Amlan Mukherjee. The company reported a 19% increase in profit after tax, reaching Rs1.834 billion. Shareholders also received the highest dividends in the company's history, at Rs1,580 per equity share this year. Unilever Nepal is marking its 30th anniversary.

Ujaya Shakya honored

Ujaya Shakya received the ECI Innovative Marketer of the Year 2023 award at the ECI Festival Gala Event in Wuxi, China, on 7 December. Shakya was recognised for his contributions to advertising and marketing in South Asia.



Pure Energy solar plant

Pure Energy, a Goyan Group Energy Business subsidiary, has announced the completion and commissioning of the 10MW (Block-1) solar PV power facility in Khajura Rural Municipality of Banke. This is a part of the company's dual solar power plant initiative totaling 20MW. This is the largest solar power plant operated by a single company.

DishHome awards

DishHome handed over cash prizes to players who excelled in ICC T20 World Cup Qualifiers. It had announced Rs1 million to players who scored a century, Rs1 million for



those scoring a century and taking five wickets in the same match, Rs500,000 for those taking five wickets in a match, Rs100,000 for those scoring half century, Rs100,000 for those taking at least three wickets, Rs50,000 for those scoring 35 runs or three catches or stumpings.

StanChart AGM

Standard Chartered Bank Nepal held its 37th Annual General Meeting on 10 December chaired by Zarin Daruwala. The bank reported an operating profit of



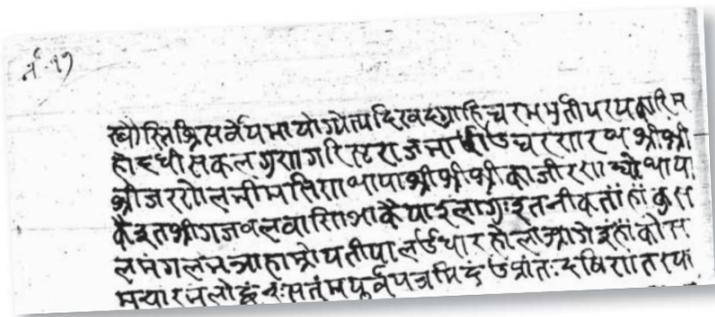
Rs4.97 billion, a 47% growth for 2022/23. The Return on Equity (RoE) rose to 20.8%. The Board recommended a 19% cash dividend of paid-up capital, a 2.5% increase from last year.

Winter tents

Save the Children, supported by the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Operations, received 800 winter tents for earthquake-affected areas in



Jajarkot and Rukum West. The EU Ambassador to Nepal, Veronique Lorenzo, handed over the fireproof, waterproof tents equipped with stoves. These tents will be distributed in coordination with the government's disaster management authority. Aside from this aid, Save the Children plans to utilize Rs865.5 million in EU humanitarian funding to address urgent needs in earthquake-affected communities.



spears, poison arrows and muskets of the Gorkhalis were no match for British bombardment of forts with cannons and siege tactics.

Mainali's book, *मुकाम रणमैदान*: नेपाल-अंग्रेज युद्धको बखान (From the Battlefield: An Account of the Nepal-English War) uses these communications, deciphering the archaic Nepali written on flimsy pieces of paper that are decaying due to damp and dust after two centuries of storage.

While the English account of the war is well-documented, Nepalis have so far largely relied on oral history, leading to factual discrepancies, some airbrushing and nationalistic myth-making.

This first-ever publication of the correspondence between commanders in Kumaon, Garhwal, Palpa with the rulers in Kathmandu fills the gaps in the existing timeline of the war by inserting relevant excerpts from the letters.

It was during a visit to the National Archives in Kathmandu in 2019 just before the Covid pandemic on another quest that Mainali stumbled upon a catalog that mentioned letters from the Anglo-Gorkha war. They included written directives from King Girvan Yuddha and Gen Bhimsen Thapa in Kathmandu to commanders in Garhwal and Kumaon.

Mainali could not hide his excitement, but little did he realise what a monumental task this was going to be. First he had to do battle with the bureaucracy at the National Archives to give him access to the papers bundled in red cloth in the dank storeroom.

Some of the documents had been microfilmed, but others were flagged in the catalogue with remarks like 'insect-eaten', 'water damaged', 'torn', or 'ink-stained'.

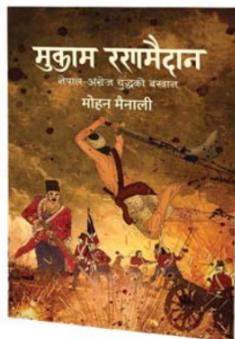
Despite being deeply worried by the negligence with which Nepal's valuable historic archives are treated, Mainali persevered — driven by a passion for history and a journalistic curiosity.

"What comes across in the correspondence is the deep sense of loyalty that the generals, commanders, soldiers, conscripts and even porters had for the king

and country," Mainali explains. "Even while enduring the overwhelming firepower of the British cannons, hunger and thirst, they refused to surrender."

In fact, the British adversaries were so impressed with the bravery and loyalty of the Gorkhali defenders that it led to the first recruitment in 1815 of Nepali foot-soldiers into the British military even before the war ended.

What struck Mainali while poring over the letters was the painstaking sophistication with which the commanders in the field were keeping other generals in the Kumaon and Garhwal as well as faraway Kathmandu informed about the progress of the war, assessment of enemy capabilities, casualties, and urgent requirement of men and matériel.



Some of the commanders who were running low on ammunition and supplies showed uncommon understanding of the larger military campaign by writing to Kathmandu saying that perhaps the Gorkhali forces in adjoining forts were in more urgent need of supplies.

Other beleaguered commanders wrote increasingly desperate letters for reinforcements. Some, surrounded by the enemy and out of ammunition, collected rocks to hurl at attackers. They wrote almost poetically: "There is no reason to live if the kingdom falls."

Aside from degradation of the paper, the biggest challenge for Mainali was to understand obsolete Nepali words (like 'tilanga' for 'soldier' that comes from the

Indian state of Telangana). Mainali consulted experts like Mahesh Raj Panta and Dinesh Raj Panta for linguistic and historical accuracy.

Mukam Ranamaidan is not a casual read, and should be approached only after first dipping to a less detailed history of Nepal's unification, the first invasion of the East India Company in 1767, and the context of the Gorkha conquests that led to the 1814-1816 war.

Some of the letters question the historically-accepted courage of Captain Bhakti Thapa, citing his demise at Lahar Bhanjyang. But a war memorial of the Subathu Regiment in Himachal Pradesh asserts that Thapa's death occurred in Narain Kot during the final battle at Malaun Fort in 1814.

The bravery of Captain Bhakti Thapa was actually first documented by Gen Ochterlony himself, who gave his adversary a dignified funeral. But the letters in Mainali's book show correspondence from Chandra Kunwar to Bhimsen Thapa and Rana Dhoj Thapa in Kathmandu indicating dissatisfaction with Bhakti Thapa's decisions on military tactics.

Mukam Ranamaidan does not get into the cruelty and plunder by Gorkhali invaders. The strategy of the Nepali generals appears to have been to frighten the defenders with sheer terror, rather than win allies with a hearts and minds strategy.

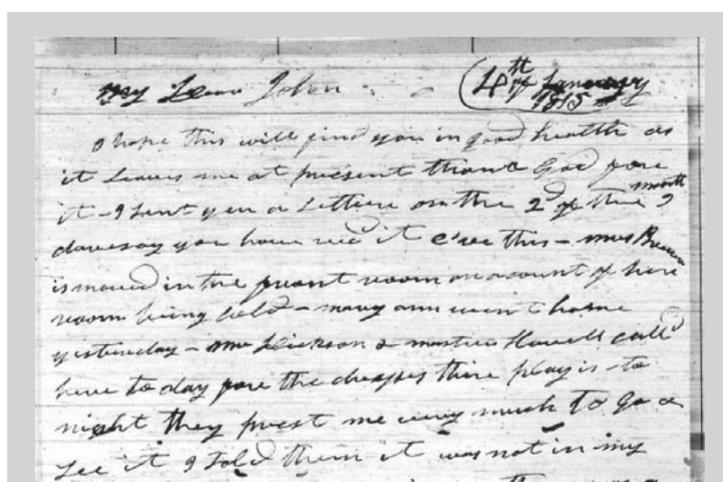
Mainali also found letters written in English that may have come into possession of the Gorkhals after they overran British bases, or personal letters written by wives back in England possibly found in the pocket of an English soldier killed in action (box, right).

In Mukam Ranamaidan Mainali relies heavily on British military accounts and historical sources and shows readers what was happening on the frontlines at the time the letters were being written.

The correspondence between the king and generals in Kathmandu with other commanders prove the opposition of hardliners to the Sugauli Treaty. Gen Ochterlony had to advance into Makwanpur and threaten an invasion of Kathmandu for the final capitulation. Only then, the first British resident Edward Gardner (Nepali nickname: 'Garan') finally arrived in Thankot.

There are no plans by the publishers to bring out an English translation of Mukam Ranamaidan, but that may give these new disclosures a wider readership.

The real message in Mainali's valiant effort in delving into our past is the importance of keeping Nepal's historical archives safe from the ravages of time. 🇳🇵



'God protect you, my dear John'

Letter found in the possession of a British soldier (named John McGuire?) from his wife in England (Eliza) that tells him about what is happening back home, as well as containing words of endearment. Transcription:

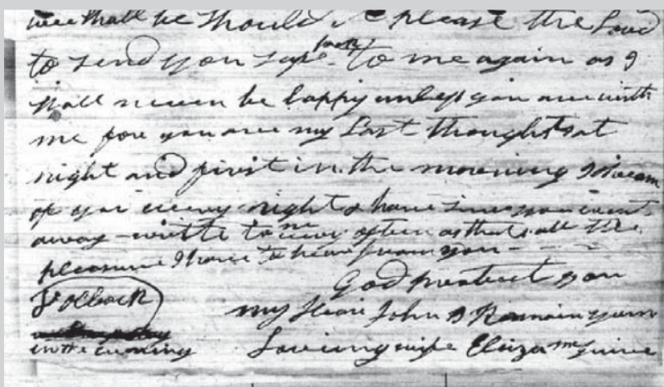
4th January 1815
8 o'clock in the evening
My dear John

I hope this will find you in good health as it leaves me at present thank God for it — I sent you a letter on the 2nd of this month I daresay you have received it (...) this — Mrs (...) is moved in the front room on account of her room being cold — many others went home yesterday — Mrs (...) and Mr Howell have called here today for their daughter's play is tonight they prest me very much to go and see it I told them it was not in my powers to go at that time — there was a man with them that has some sort of a factory he did tell me his name but I almost forgot I think he said (O'Brian) he told me to send to you and tell you to enquire for him at any time you thought proper he should be glad to see you — they told me that they were going to get up next (...) of the wind they asked me to take

the part of piggy I did not give them an answer until sent to you — Let me know what I am to do and what excuse I am to make if I go we shall get a good deal by it and I have the part of — and if I refuse we will entirely lose this forever (...) you know best — answer it as soon as you can for I long to hear from you I was very much pleased with your last letter it showed that you have not forgot me

My love how I long for the time to come for you to return I some times indulge myself with thinking how happy we shall be should it please the Lord to send you home and back to me again as I shall never be happy unless you are with me for you are my last thought at night and my first in the morning I dream of you every night to and have since you went away — write to me often that is all the pleasure I have to hear from you —

God protect you my dear John I remain your loving wife Eliza McGuire



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घाम-पानी छेतछ,
१० वर्ष टिक्छ

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मुसलधारै वर्षाबाट जोगाउँछ

१० वर्ष चारन्टी



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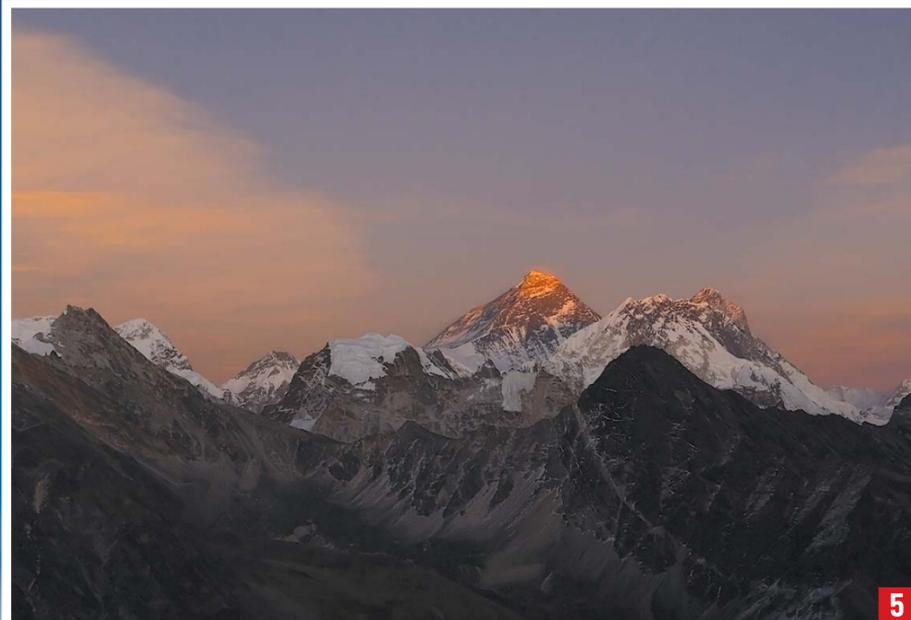
GO GO

Khumbu in winter du
how much Himala



GOKYO

during COP28 shows
Himalayan ice is gone



■ Aisha MacDougall

Just as the beginning of the winter off-season begins, the pristine beauty of the Gokyo trek is even more apparent because of the absence of crowds. But there is also another absence: of ice and snow.

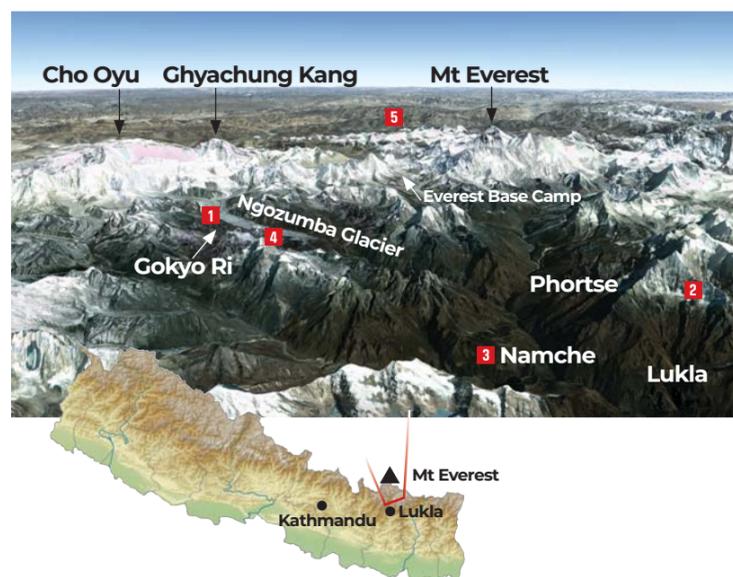
Gokyo is always less crowded than the Everest Base Camp Trail, but it is completely deserted in winter. A trek last week that coincided with the COP28 Climate Summit in Dubai was also a stark reminder of what the inability of world economies to completely and immediately phase out fossil fuels is doing to the Himalaya.

Often overlooked due to the popularity of the Everest trek, the Gokyo trail deserves a status beyond a hidden gem. Following a flight to Lukla, trekkers can witness the diverse beauty of the Khumbu region in this 11-day trek. The route takes visitors across the famed 'Hillary Bridge', through the town of Namche, past roadside shrines, the shores of the five picturesque Gokyo lakes, and finally the peak of Gokyo Ri (5,357m) from where an almost absurdly cinematic panorama of Cho Oyu, Ghyachung Kang and Everest glow in the orange light of a setting sun (left).

At 5,000m the five Gokyo Lakes are the world's highest freshwater lake system and are considered sacred by both Hindus and Buddhists alike with the waters believed to be the residence of Naag Devata, the Serpent God. The lakes are astride the Ngozumba Glacier, Nepal's longest, which has receded and shrunk dramatically in the past 25 years due to global warming.

Like other glaciers in the Himalaya, Ngozumba is now debris-covered as it thaws, and dotted with ice caverns and ponds. The Himalaya is dubbed the 'Third Pole' because it has the third largest storage of water as ice after the polar regions. But at present rates of temperature increase, climate scientists say these mountains will lose two-thirds of their remaining ice during this century.

Over two billion people across Asia are dependent on the Himalaya and Tibetan Plateau for water that flow down rivers that originate here. The tangible impact of the climate emergency is readily apparent all along the Gokyo trek, not just in the melting of the permanent ice, but also the lack of precipitation. 🇳🇵



1 The view from Gokyo Ri (5,357m) looking north towards Mt Cho Oyu (8,188m, partly hidden) and Mt Ghyachung Kang (7,952m) at sunset.

2 Mt Kangtega (6,782m) and Mt Thamserku (6,608m) looking south from the moraine of the Ngozumba Glacier in Gokyo.

3 Namche Bazar, the gateway to the Upper Khumbu and Gokyo is nestled in an amphitheatre below Mt Thamserku.

4 Hotels have sprouted on the shores of Gokyo's main lake, replacing the yak herder's summer huts. This is one of the highest settlements in the world, occupied for two-thirds of the year with residents moving to lower villages during the winter off-season. Mt Taboche (6000m) and Mt Cholatse (6440m) loom over the glacier.

5 The last light of the day highlighting Mt Everest, Nuptse and Lhotse 20km away, captured from the Gokyo Ri last week.



Due to the popularity of the Everest Base Camp Trek, the delight that is the Gokyo Ri trek is overlooked. Following a flight to Lukla, trekkers can witness the diverse beauty of Nepal's Everest region via this 11-day trek. Follow us as we take you to this hidden treasure of the Everest region located on the Ngozumba Glacier, Nepal's longest. Go to YouTube

EVENTS

**Shiva Shakti**

Art discourse, dance performance, paintings by Uday Charan Shrestha, and philosophical discussions at Museum of Nepali Art. 15 December, 8pm onwards, Darbar Marg, Thamel

Kidpreneur

Entrepreneurial market for kids to harness leadership skills and fun activities at Farmer's Market. 17 December, 11am-4pm, Le Sherpa

**Shared Horizon**

Sixteen artists from Nepal and Thailand display diverse artistic genres at a Patan-based gallery until the end of 2023. Till 30 December, Classic Gallery, Patan

Japanese Doll Exhibition

The Japan Foundation presents 'Ningyo,' a comprehensive exhibition on Japanese doll culture. Till 21 December, 9.30am-4.30pm, Nepal Art Council, Babarmahal

**Odisha in Kathmandu**

'The Sovereign Forest' at Nepal Art Council, showcasing Amar Kanwar's films and multimedia works exploring power, justice, and more. Till 31 March, 11am -7pm, Nepal Art Council, Babarmahal

DINING

**New Orleans Cafe**

Enjoy this festive Christmas season accompanied by delicious food and soulful live music. 20 December, Thamel (01) 4700736

MUSIC

Chumbak & Genesis

Chumbak sets the stage on fire with an opening act by Genesis at London Pub. 15 December, 8pm onwards, Darbar Marg

**Gauley Bhai**

Bangalore-based Gauley Bhai perform at Thamel's Supper Club on Christmas eve, offering trans-traditional rock music. 24 December, Supper Club, Chaksibari

**Axe**

Spend the evening jamming to The Axe Band-Nepali, who are set to perform their greatest hits during the Live Musical Night. 15 December, Billionaires Lounge, Darbar Marg

**Album Launch**

Rock band Strangle will launch their third studio album and will croon to their new music to the masses. 16 December, 3pm onwards, Purple Haze, Thamel

Samsaara

Food and drinks and free shots on Wednesdays accompanied by live music from Cambodia-based Nepali band Samsaara. Wednesdays, Watering Hole, Naxal

**Casa Mexicana**

Authentic Mexican eatery with fantastic tacos and welcoming service. Owners happily guide through the menu while serving delicious dishes like tres leches cake. Gairidhara and Patan, 9840542082

The Diplomat

Enjoy luxurious Indian and Continental dining without compromising on comfort and taste at Hotel Ambassador. Lazimpat (01) 4410432

GETAWAY

**Dusit Thani Himalayan Resort**

Celebrate this Christmas reveling in the Himalayan foothills with bespoke packages with exceptional dining and comfort for a magical holiday retreat. Dhulikhel, 9768437590

Tiger Mountain Pokhara

Rustic stone lodges nestled amid lush greenery, offering a tranquil stay with kid-friendly meals. Guides reveal secret spots in Pokhara. Kandani Dada, Pokhara (01) 4720580

**Gokarna Golf Resort**

Nestled in Gokarna Forest Reserve and featuring a unique par 72 golf course, the establishment serves as a perfect getaway away from the hustle and bustle of the city. Gokarna (01) 4451212, www.gokarna.com

Gaida Wildlife Camp

Bordering the rhino zone in Chitwan, Gaida Wildlife Camp as the name suggests is a haven for wildlife enthusiasts. Arrangements are available from Sauraha. Chitwan (01) 4215409/4215431

**The Famous Farm**

A three-story boutique hotel in Nuwakot's subtropical hills offers rich cultural heritage and is nearby the historical palace. Kuwapani, Nuwakot (01) 4522617

Nina's

Satisfy burger and steak cravings at Nina's with unmatched quality and service. Mon-Sat, Maharajgunj, 9851130043

**Evolve Café & Bistro**

Dive into a sensory experience with a variety of sandwiches and homemade fries. Jhamsikhel, 9851111051

WEEKEND WEATHER

**Crisp and sunny**

Weather models are forecasting wetter-than-usual winter for northwestern Nepal, and we are already seeing this with heavy snowfall on the trans-Himalayan plateau. Another westerly front approaching this weekend however will likely bear little precipitation and only fast-moving high altitude clouds. The Trisuli and Narayani valleys as well as the Tarai will continue to be blanketed by morning fog. Kathmandu will have mist mixed with smog lifting by mid-morning with clear sunny afternoons.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
18° 4°	19° 6°	19° 5°

OUR PICK

Close (2022) directed and written by Lukas Dhont is a heartbreakingly beautiful film that captures the tragedy that is the end of childhood naivety, and the silent dangers of societal norms and conformity. An overt description would fail to capture the poignant essence of this Belgian coming-of-age movie which won the Cannes Film Festival Grand Prix. The rich cinematography and lush backdrop of flower fields perfectly balance the raw emotive performances, leaving a taste in the audience that is beyond bittersweet.



MISS MOTI-VATION

KRIPA JOSHI



सामाजिक सञ्जाल प्रयोगमा सचेतता अपनाऔं

- सामाजिक सञ्जालमा अपरिचित व्यक्तिको साथी बन्ने अनुरोधलाई विश्वस्त भएर मात्र प्रतिक्रिया जनाऔं ।
- अपरिचित व्यक्तिलाई जथाभावी साथी बन्न अनुरोध नपठाऔं ।
- सामाजिक सञ्जाल तथा अन्य विद्युतीय माध्यमबाट चिठ्ठा पुरस्कार जस्ता आर्थिक प्रलोभनका प्रस्तावको भरमा नपरौं ।
- आफूले प्रवाह गरेका सन्देश वा सूचनाबाट समाजमा पर्नसक्ने नकारात्मक प्रभावको ख्याल गरौं ।
- आफ्नो सन्देशले कुनै व्यक्ति वा अन्य कुनै समुदायको आत्मसम्मानमा चोट नपुऱ्याऔं ।



नेपाल सरकार
विज्ञापन बोर्ड

University for a new Nepal

Ambitious foray into science and technology research avoids pitfalls like political interference

■ **Kunda Dixit** in Makwanpur

Just when you are about to give up on Nepal, the country springs surprises on you.

Just one hour from the Ring Road in Kathmandu, up a steep serpentine road to the pass and down the other side in Chitlang is a brand new university campus. It is nestled amidst mountains draped in thick pine forests with facilities that would rival colleges in Korea.

Rajendra Dhoj Joshi, formerly of the Institute of Engineering and a World Bank consultant, was always puzzled about universities in Nepal not contributing to the country's economy, and why graduates were migrating in droves.

After a decade of lobbying by educationists, the Cabinet finally passed the University Act in May 2023 that opened the door for new institutions, including the Madan Bhandari University of Science and Technology (MB-UST) in Chitlang.

Situated along the historic foot trail from Kathmandu Valley to the Indian border, the university overlooks the route taken by many young Nepalis in the old



KUNDA DIXIT

days for higher studies in Banaras or Calcutta. On 3 December the university started classes with its first masters and PhD students.

The students are handpicked to research subjects like bamboo architecture, domestication of wild mushrooms, extraction of bioactive compounds, or diagnosis of plant disease using AI.

Joshi explains the rationale: "Nepal is falling behind the rest of Asia. The idea is to build a world-class university for technical and scientific research focusing on real-

life needs of Nepalis to create jobs and make Nepal more competitive."

Joshi has learnt the hard way that to do this he needs to prevent political interference and corruption. The Board of Trustees is chaired by industrialist Padma Jyoti. Members include former Auditor General Bhanu Acharya, Seeram Ramakrishna of the National University of Singapore (NUS), former president of the Korean Advanced Institute of Science and Technology Nam Pyo Suh, ex-Vice Chancellor of McGill University

Canada Suzanne Fortier, Lochan Gyawali of Jun Chiyabari, ex-officio government figures and others.

"Small countries like Singapore and Nepal need to think big," Prof Ramakrishna told the opening class in Chitlang. "A university like this allows us to transform our weaknesses into strengths."

Just because politicians have failed Nepal does not mean Nepal is a failure, reasons Joshi who recalls meeting Nepal's top leaders with the idea for university. "Please go ahead because we have not been

able to do it," they told him.

Indeed, the Asian Development Bank was willing to backstop the university with a \$17 million loan but the government had just turned it down because the necessary law was not in place. The first batch of students and their research are sponsored by Nepal's private agro-economic sector, and Joshi is on the lookout to build a trust fund.

True to its motto 'prosperity and justice', MB-UST charges no fees, and does not give affiliations. It expects 1,000 masters and PhD students in the next two years.



Despite his aversion to political interference, Joshi had to make one concession to the government: name it after politician Madan Bhandari. "However, we do not have anything to do with the UML," he clarifies, with the tone of someone who has answered that question hundreds of times.

MB-UST's laboratories have state-of-the-art equipment and Nepali professors who have returned from Korea and elsewhere. The rooftop solar arrays earn the university Rs210,000 per month from sale of power to the grid. And in a first-ever energy storage system in Nepal, surplus electricity will be used to pump water up to a reservoir that can be drained during peak hours to generate power.

Says Joshi: "My experience tells me what is needed and what to avoid. We will not allow partisan politics, we are building an international-level university to meet Nepal's needs." 🇳🇵

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Life-saving drug prevents

Nepal must remove barriers to a program that can protect women who give birth at home

■ **Marty Logan** in Rukum West

On a late afternoon in August 2022, Sushila Bohara, 19 and nine months pregnant, started complaining of a sore stomach. Soon after, she went into labour.

Within 30 minutes she had delivered a baby girl outside her isolated home in Rukum West district, but her abdominal pain only got worse. Half an hour later, she died.

Details of the young woman's death at her husband's home in Chaurjahari Municipality are still unclear. But one thing is certain: Sushila did not receive the Matri Surakshya Chakki (MSC) that is supposed to be given to every pregnant woman in Nepal who is at risk of having a baby without a health worker attending.

The MSC packet of three pills of the drug misoprostol is meant to be given in advance, and can be taken by women immediately after they deliver their baby to prevent excessive bleeding. Also known as post-partum haemorrhage (PPH), such bleeding is the number one direct cause of maternal deaths in Nepal.

World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines from 2020 recommend advance misoprostol distribution to pregnant women for prevention of PPH. Nepal's 2021 census reported 622 maternal deaths, 162 (26%) of them happened at home.

In October 2023, Bibek Kumar Lal, director of the Family Welfare Division (FWD) of the Department of Health Services (DHS) told Nepali Times he would initiate a review of a program after hearing the story of Sushila Bohara.

Since early 2000s

In interviews, public health workers recalled the effort it took in the early 2000s to convince officials in the Ministry of Health and Population and the WHO to agree that providing misoprostol was the right way to improve Nepal's deadly maternal mortality ratio.

At the time, it was 281 deaths per 100,000 live births a year. Today it is 151, while the target set for 2030 in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) is 70 or less.

A main reason for official reluctance was a misplaced belief that giving the pills to pregnant women in their 8th month (in case their baby came early) would encourage them to deliver at home instead of going to safer health facilities.

Nearly two decades later, that argument is still heard in maternal health circles in Nepal. Combined with a series of unrelated events that interrupted the rollout of misoprostol across the public health system, it has led to some of the most at-risk women in the country dying needlessly.

Bali to Banke

Misoprostol was developed in the 1980s as a drug to treat ulcers. But in 2002 a pilot project was launched in Indonesia to see if



PHOTOS: MARTY LOGAN

misoprostol could help to prevent PPH, in part because unlike other medicines, such as oxytocin, it did not need to be refrigerated or injected, making it well suited to poorer countries. PPH then caused about half of Indonesia's 18,000 maternal deaths yearly.

News of the pilot's success soon reached Nepal, where PPH was also a leading cause of maternal deaths.

"The idea took a while to mature and grow on us," recalled Ashoke Shrestha, then with John Snow Inc (JSI), one of the international health organisations collaborating in the Nepal Family Health Programme (NFHP) which itself was launched in 2002 and funded by the USAID.

"We did the paperwork to pilot an intervention ... we had a fairly good set-up in Banke and we kind of embedded this initiative into the ongoing community-based maternal and newborn program," recalled Shrestha in a 2021 interview.

But he said the idea faced a lot of resistance from the medical profession: "Their logic was that as a general policy the government was trying to promote institutional delivery. This (misoprostol) plan would compete with that objective."

Some officials at WHO headquarters in Geneva were also reluctant, recalled Stephen Hodgins, then with JSI. They were OK with misoprostol being used at home births but only if directly administered by a health worker.

Nepali officials were also divided about permitting rural women to themselves take the drug, recalled Hodgins, now an associate professor in the School of Public Health at the University of Alberta in Canada, who still advises on health projects in Nepal.

"It was very important for us to show that women complied with instructions, so we had very close monitoring," added Hodgins.

Lifesaving project is born

Nepal's misoprostol pilot project occurred in the rural areas of Banke district, and was seen as important enough to be inaugurated by the Health Minister.

Starting in 2005, it included training Female Community Health Volunteers (FCHVs) and others to

identify pregnant women in their area, provide pre-birth health education, dispense misoprostol (three tablets of 200mg) in the 8th month, and make home visits soon after delivery.

A review by NFHP found that among the 11,658 women reached with misoprostol over the first 18 months of the program (about 73% of all the women pregnant in rural Banke) there were only 16 deaths, fewer than half the expected number (33).

A 2010 study led by obstetrician Swaraj Rajbhandari, who worked on the pilot project, noted that of about 840 women who filled out surveys 73.2% said they received misoprostol, while others took oxytocin. Both drugs help to prevent PPH by causing the uterus to contract.

Overall, the proportion of births that included one of the two drugs meant to prevent dangerous bleeding rose from the expected 11.6% to 74.2%. "Those experiencing the largest gains were the poor, the illiterate, and those living in remote areas," the study found.

In a recent interview, Rajbhandari said the results reinforced the belief that oxytocin alone was insufficient to meet the risks posed by home deliveries, mainly because it requires cold storage and must be injected. Misoprostol can be stored at room temperature and just swallowed.

Sushila Bohara's home

It is a 10-minute downhill scramble along a barely visible path to reach Sushila Bohara's home in Chaurjahari municipality. Nimble white goats and brown chicken forage around the worn path that surrounds the small, single-storey stone building. Sushila lived here with her mother-in-law and sister-in-law while her husband worked in India.

Yamuna Budhathoki cradles her son in her lap as the two explain how Sushila died, five days before her due date. "She started complaining of a sore stomach around 4PM and gave birth about a half hour later. She was happy and healthy at that time," she says.

"But soon after, she said her stomach was hurting again. She

asked for hot water, and drank some, but it didn't help."

When Sushila's pain did not diminish, her brother-in-law ran to a local private medical clinic to get a stretcher. Soon, she was writhing in distress in Yamuna's arms. Sushila died about 5PM, one hour after going into labour.

The family called a doctor from a private clinic, who came and pronounced her dead, but didn't give a cause of death. Days later, two FCHVs visited with an official from the municipality's health office. Their report says that Sushila died of PPH.

Growing pains

When the misoprostol program was taken over by the government in 2009-10 it had spread to at least 14 districts. While the initiative appeared to be thriving, sustainability did not seem to be a priority.

Shortages or 'stockouts' became routine. JSI's Shrestha remembered the government having to request an emergency procurement from a global partner in the years following its takeover of the program.

It appears too that the rollout of the program into a new district was mostly effective on paper. Some, but not all, FCHVs appear to have been trained. And they were provided with MSC but only if it was in stock.

"Many of the FCHVs were not supervised and of those who were supervised 42% were not asked about progress relating to misoprostol," found a 2014 evaluation of the program, done by a team that included Rajbhandari.

The review found: "A great proportion of FCHVs do not keep stock of misoprostol with them nor do they distribute to pregnant women. Because of this, women delivering at home without the help of a health worker are at higher risk of PPH."

Only 13% of women who gave birth at home in that period received the tablets, reported the 2016 Nepal Demographic and Health Survey.

Rajbhandari says the evaluation showed clearly that FCHVs were getting mixed messages about misoprostol: "One was 'take them to a health facility, don't

let them deliver at home'. I fully encourage that, as an obstetrician. Everyone should be delivering in a big hospital if possible so that all complications can be managed."

"But what if they deliver on the way or at home? For those women, we do need some kind of alternative medicine to prevent PPH," she adds.

A 2017 assessment also sounded a cautionary note: "In Nepal, women who receive advance misoprostol are both willing and able to use the medication for PPH prevention during home births. However, the supply and personnel challenges identified raise questions about scalability and impact of the program over the long-term."

Lifesaver or barrier?

Orthopaedic surgeon Sushil Pokhrel is medical superintendent of the Rukum West District Hospital and head of the district's Health Services Office in Musikot. He echoes many people who have opposed the misoprostol program since it began in 2005.

"On one hand you are encouraging institutional delivery, on the other hand you are giving misoprostol to FCHVs," he says.

In exceptional cases misoprostol can be used, adds Pokhrel. "But we are in the 21st century — we can do things like station an ambulance close to health facilities, track patients using mobile apps, instruct FCHVs to inform us when complications appear and we can have a team ready to respond."

In the Kathmandu office of the FWD at the Department of Health Services (DHS) compound Director Bibek Kumar Lal says the misoprostol program is misunderstood, partly because the government did not explain it well.

"It was never meant to replace institutional deliveries," he says. "Sometimes people would argue that by raising awareness about this misoprostol program we are somehow telling the pregnant woman and her family that it's fine to deliver at home because once you take these tablets you'd be safe, but that was never the intention of this program."

Officially the misoprostol program today operates fully in 56 districts and in 14 others, staff has been trained but MSC has not been

maternal deaths



SAVING ONE MOTHER AT A TIME: Sushila Bohora's sister-in-law Yamuna Budhathoki and their mother-in-law Deuma Budathoki with Yamuna's child (left).

View toward Chaurjahari Municipality Rukum West district from Khalanga Jajarkot district (above).

distributed. The number of women who took misoprostol decreased in the three years preceding the 2022 annual report of the DHS, from 10,874 to 8,613, to 7,496.

That dovetails with the rise in births in facilities, which went from 64% in 2016 to 79% in 2002. The 2021 census put Nepal's maternal mortality ratio at 151. Fifty-seven percent of those deaths happened in facilities, 26% at home and 17% on the way to a health facility. It did not say how many women who died at home had used misoprostol.

Alleged corruption

With weaknesses already starting to show in the supply and distribution of misoprostol, in 2014 the program was rocked by an investigation by the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA). Eight health department officials were charged for allegedly importing faulty misoprostol at inflated prices.

After the CIAA case, recalled former director-general Pradhan, "procurement was not done for two or three fiscal years. There was a shortage of misoprostol. Because if you were to start a procurement process you'd think that you'd be watched by the CIAA, so everybody was afraid of procurement."

Former director-general of the HSD, Mingmar Gyalzen Sherpa, was one of those charged for buying too much medicine at inflated prices. They were all eventually acquitted by the special court after a probe, but the doctor said he is still waiting for the Supreme Court to clear his case.

Sherpa had retired as director-general by the time of the investigation. He believes now that his frank manner offended an international partner, which provoked a complaint to the corruption authority.

Leela Khanal remembers a big supply gap after the investigation was launched. "The new director sent a letter to all the international partners to supply misoprostol, and they did, but it was not sufficient to cover all districts," says Khanal, who later became JSI's chief of party in Nepal.

The 2015 earthquake, followed by the unofficial blockade by India, further worsened misoprostol

procurement by tangling supply chains. Though it had expanded on paper to 48 districts when Nepal switched to a federal system in 2017, the program appeared shaky.

Under the new governance set-up, responsibility for the drug, and other maternal and child health medicines, was passed to local governments. Many of them had no idea what misoprostol was, recalls Surya Bhatta of One Heart Worldwide (OHW), which has worked on maternal and child health in remote areas of Nepal for 13 years.

"It's not like building a road in your town... you really need to have the technical capacity to understand why this is important," Bhatta said.

Some local governments did not act, resulting in shortages, with potentially long-term consequences, said Bhatta. "Once (the supply chain) is broken, women's behaviour will change. They will forget about the program... if they get the medicine after two years they will not accept it."

Just before the Covid-19 outbreak in 2020 the shortage became critical. While the misoprostol program had expanded to 58 districts on paper, stores in health facilities were empty. In April 2020, Punya Poudel of FWD's safe motherhood unit told media that only 16 of 77 districts in Nepal had a supply of misoprostol.

In June 2020 government officials called international partners to a meeting and asked for help. UNFPA and OHW provided emergency supplies months later.

Disconnected

Purtimkanda Health Post is less than an hour's walk from Sushila Bohara's house. Staff there say that Sushila visited the day before she died, and was healthy according to their tests and observations.

The health post had a supply of misoprostol around the time that Sushila died, says the municipality's health coordinator Ram Bahadur Sunar. "We don't know if the health post in-charge is giving it to the FCHVs, but we are providing it."

Sushila's family says the woman did not receive misoprostol and was not visited by an FCHV during her entire pregnancy, because the volunteer was based in Kotjahari at the time, too far for regular visits.

Officially the misoprostol program was launched in Rukum in 2012-13. The district split into Rukum East and Rukum West post-federalism in 2017. OHW began its program in the district in 2023 and will help build birthing centres, train health service providers and FCHVs, and help stakeholders

improve services.

OHW gave 'refresher' training on misoprostol to all relevant health personnel in 2023, and at least 50% were unfamiliar with the drug and the government program when the course began.

One observer in Rukum West told Nepali Times that if OHW had not launched the training, the misoprostol program would still be stalled in the district.

Sunar says that ending home births is the number one priority of his office, and Sushila's death is, above all, the result of an unfortunate lack of communication.

"When she was delivering, the family called a private clinic, they didn't call the health post, so we couldn't do anything," he adds. "There are many birthing centres within people's access but they don't inform us about coming births — that's why we are so sad about this case."

In Surkhet the Karnali provincial government's top health official also points to a breakdown in communications.

"Before federalism there was one chain of command, starting with the federal government going down to the community," says Rabin Khadka, director of the Health Services Directorate. "Nowadays it's not like that — each level of government has its own system."

While health access has improved overall under federalism, the misoprostol program has its shortcomings, Khadka added. "Most local health facilities we visited have a misoprostol program

but some of them didn't have stock. Other facilities have thrown away their stock of misoprostol because they didn't know what it was — the staff was new."

In Kathmandu, Lal echoes his provincial colleague: "We are responsible for providing budgets... now the basic health services are maintained at the municipal level. It is the districts who should procure and supply the medicines."

Says Bhatta of OHW: "Maybe in 10 years or 15 years home delivery will be zero, then we might roll back the misoprostol program, but today this emergency drug is still needed."

How to explain why a project designed to meet such an obvious, urgent need, which launched with so much promise, has kind of stuttered and stumbled over the years? Could that be because misoprostol targets some of the most marginalised people in Nepal: rural women who lack access to health facilities?

The Constitution guarantees basic healthcare for all but it is those at the margins who are left out. Lal concludes: "It's high time that we did a comprehensive study, which would provide us objective information on why the misoprostol program is not working — we don't even know the level at which it is functional at the moment." 🇳🇵

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MISOPROSTOL TIMELINE

2002

Pilot project on using misoprostol to prevent post-partum haemorrhage starts in Indonesia.

2005

Start of a similar pilot in Banke district, via the Nepal Family Health Programme.

2009-10

Government of Nepal launches the misoprostol programme nationally.

2014

CIAA charges eight over procurement of misoprostol. All were cleared but the case had a 'chilling' effect on supplies.

2015

The Indian blockade tangles supply chains and further limits misoprostol availability.

2017

Under federalism, local governments given responsibility for misoprostol but are ill-prepared.

2020

Health Ministry appeals to foreign partners to acquire misoprostol urgently after stocks run out. The supply arrives at the end of 2020.

2021

During Covid-19 maternal mortality spikes 200%.

October 2023

Bibek Kumar Lal, Director of the Family Welfare Division, Department of Health Services, tells Nepali Times he intends to launch a review of the programme.

Miss Rajni Shrestha
(NOVEMBER 18, 1960 — DECEMBER 3, 2023)

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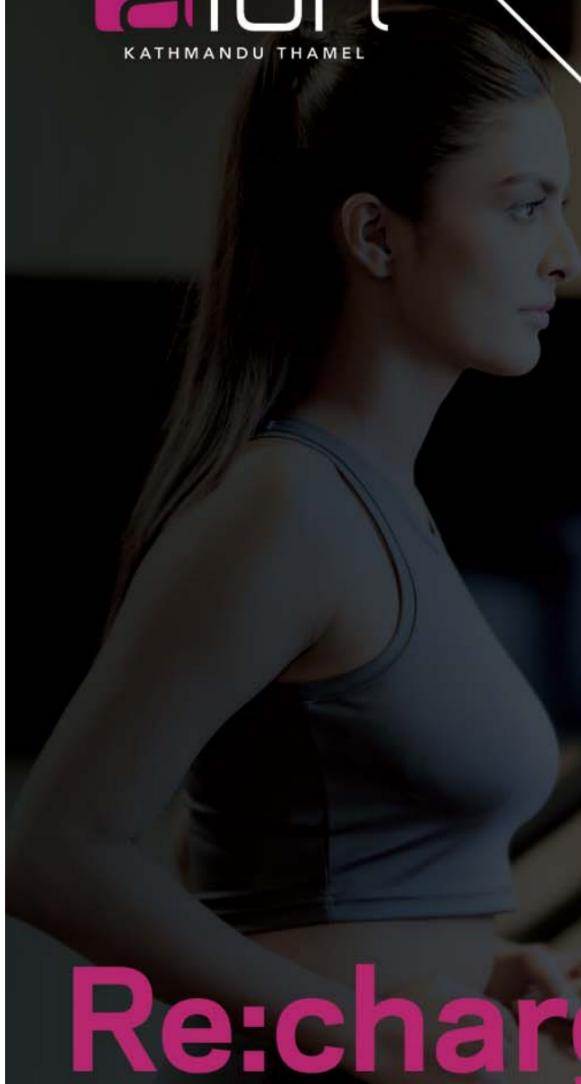
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