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More of the same in 2024?

■ Shristi Karki

For Nepalis, 2023 was scandal-ridden at home and strife abroad.

The year began with Pushpa Kamal Dahal being Prime Minister for the third time with a promise of better governance. His main preoccupation was to hold his fragile coalition together while it was rocked by a slew of corruption scandals.

Some 800 Nepalis paid up to Rs5 million each to get fake refugee papers, and most culprits got away. Property surrounding the prime minister's residence was parcelled off to private buyers by the real estate mafia. Gold smuggling continues unabated at Kathmandu airport because the kingpins never get caught.

Malaysian conglomerate Axiata exited Nepal after selling its majority stake in Ncell to a Singapore-based Nepali-origin businessman, a deal not possible without high level collusion.

Despite Finance Minister Prakash Sharan Mahat assuring us the economy is "on the mend", it stagnated some more in 2023. Revenue collection plummeted, exports are at a record low, and 90,000 workers and students left Nepal in December alone.

In March, Dahal introduced a transitional justice amendment bill in the House which flouted domestic and international law.

The earthquake in western Nepal on 3 November left 153 dead. Two months later survivors are living in tents in sub-zero

temperatures.

Migration, as Nepali Times has highlighted in 50 instalments of its Diaspora Diaries, is now the central reality of Nepal. The search for jobs has also led Nepalis to some of the world's most dangerous regions.

There are at least 700 Nepalis in the Russian Army, 100 of them are out of touch, and 7 have been killed in Ukraine. Nepali human traffickers have been supplying mercenaries to Russia by flying them to Moscow on tourist visas.

The Hamas attack on 7 October killed 10 Nepali students. Israel's brutal bombardment of Gaza has led to the deaths of nearly 21,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children, with the US helping Israel block a ceasefire.

Burmese of Nepali descent have taken refuge in Thailand because of suppression by the military junta which staged a coup in

Year of reckoning
EDITORIAL
PAGE 2

Burma in 2021. Nepalis trafficked by a Chinese organised crime syndicate to work in call centres in Burma also need to be rescued.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres visited Nepal ahead of COP28 in Dubai to draw attention to the climate crisis and the Himalaya, but the summit failed to commit to an immediate phase-out of fossil fuels.

Nepal's pledges at COP28 do not correspond to its lack of progress in promoting renewable energy to reduce petroleum imports and meet net-zero target. 🇳🇵

All of us here at Nepali Times wish readers in print and online, and all valued partners a happy and healthy New Year. **2024**

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Year of reckoning

Twenty-eight years after the Maoist party launched an armed struggle to overhaul Nepal's centralised state, remove exploitation, exclusion and usher in an era of justice and equality, the former Maoist supremo is prime minister for the third time with a former arch enemy as his main coalition partner. It has been 18 years since the Comprehensive Peace Accord that promised a new political order and transitional justice.

Even former Maoist guerrillas now admit their sacrifice and pain were in vain. Most of Nepalis agree. The main outcome of the war and death of 17,000 Nepalis and trauma of countless others was the federal, secular, republican Constitution of 2015.

Now, that very Constitution which came about after much bloodshed is being challenged by retrogressive forces that want to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Using populism, whipped up pseudo-nationalism and a weaponised social web, they are bent on dismantling devolution and democracy even before it has been allowed to fully function. Instead of throwing out rotten

leaders, they want to replace the barrel.

There have been similar hankerings for strongman rule in world history that have inevitably led to disaster. What feeds demagogic rhetoric is the chronic failure of representative democracy to produce accountable government to deliver development and betterment. The antidote to a malfunctioning democracy is to fix its shortcomings.

Young Nepalis are expressing their discontent with protest votes for populist parties. Monarchists sense the time is ripe to take advantage of popular frustration, and are starting the new year with nationwide rallies to call for the restoration of a Hindu kingdom and scrapping federalism.

India's general election in 2024 and the ruling BJP's Hindutva agenda is infecting Nepali politics. Besides everything else we import from India, we are also importing its communal intolerance.

Nepal's political system need not be remodelled every time there is regime change in New Delhi.

Modifying India

After the defeat of the Indian Congress in state elections in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh a third term for Prime Minister Narendra Modi seems a foregone conclusion. His cult of personality took 10 years to build, and despite policy blunders that cost people their savings (demonetisation) and lives (Covid closedowns) he is more popular than ever. The BJP with its allies now control 16 of India's 29 states, reversing the grand Indian tradition of incumbents losing elections.

The BJP's systemic targeting of minorities and almost complete control of media messaging galvanised support in the Cow Belt. But Modi is also reaping political dividend from an economy galloping at 7.6% a year. Impressive new infrastructure projects and moon landings gave Indians justifiable pride in 2023 in their country's achievements.

Why then does the BJP have to still rely on toxic communalism, bigotry, and violence

against India's minority religions? This is especially inscrutable given that there are millions of Indians working in the Gulf.

Domestically, India is now sliced along a north-south ideological axis. Populist authoritarianism in India exploits opposition disarray, as elsewhere. One reason for its setbacks in state elections was that the Congress was over-confident, and rejected alliances with regional parties.

India is a Subcontinent, not just a country and is the most populous in the world. It is also the world's biggest arms importer, and a weakened West thinks it needs India to confront China. An enemy of an enemy is a friend, so criticism of Modi is muted.

India's strong gravitational tug impacts all neighbouring countries. A stronger Modi may not necessarily be bad for Nepal, since he may be less inclined to flex his muscles and play the Hindutva card. Or maybe he still will. We will see in 2024.

Trumping America

The world's two most established democracies drifting towards authoritarianism does not bode well for the rest of the world. A second Trump term in 2024 will have consequences for the global order as well as the planet.

America's support for human rights, democracy and press freedom around the world sound hollow given a domestic political mess of its own making. Even under Biden, America's standing in 2023 was tarnished by his carte blanche support

for Israel's war machine in Gaza where nearly 21,000 Palestinians have been killed, most of them women and children.

With its military and economic might the US still has a global reach. It also has a crucial voice in reducing climate risk.

America's obsession with a rising China and its Indo-Pacific strategy complicates Nepal's precarious geopolitical balancing act between its two giant neighbours. The yam has a third boulder to contend with.

World wars

Israel's atrocities in Gaza have overshadowed other world wars in Ukraine, Sudan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria. Because Nepalis are now spread out across the world, they tend to get caught up in almost every conflict.

Ten Nepalis were killed by Hamas on 7 October, and one is still believed to be held hostage. At least 7 Nepali soldiers in the Russian Army have been killed in Ukraine. Four are prisoners of war in Ukraine, and there are some Nepalis also fighting for the Ukrainians.

Despite immigration restrictions, the Nepal government is not able to stop its nationals from going to work in dirty and dangerous places. The only medium-term solution to this is to launch a bold campaign to boost investment and provide meaningful employment in Nepal itself.

This is what Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal's address to the nation this week on the first anniversary of assuming office should have announced. Instead, we got more platitude and excuses for another lost year.

ONLINE PACKAGES



Nareesh Newar created this AI-generated rock version of a song with lyrics and music about Nepali Times (for non-commercial use) using an audio-generation tool showing what is possible. The biggest tech companies will be perfecting this technology in 2024. Watch the video and read the story on page 4-5. Subscribe to our YouTube channel.



Follow us as we take you to Tanahu Hydropower Project site, 150km west of Kathmandu. It is only the second dam project in Nepal in 40 years. The reservoir will increase dry season power supply while also regulating the river. Watch the video and read story on page 10-11.

NEPALIS IN BURMA

This is very sad ('Burmese of Nepali descent flee to Thailand', Chandra Kishore, #1191). Is there any explanation for why—if several have managed to escape—authorities could not find and shut down that location and arrest the staff?

Iván G. Somlai

■ Thank you, Chandra Kishore and Nepali Times for stories that otherwise would not have come to light.

Mohan Mainali

■ What a scary situation when skilled and talented citizens, unlike the past stories of uneducated and innocent, fall prey of human traffickers.

Namindra Dahal

■ This is excellent and enlightening reporting.

John Silsi

THARU WOMEN

This is a brave and interesting story ('The Karjahi Movement' Nisha Rai, #1191). I wonder how many more such stories are hidden across the country.

Anesh Gurung

■ Important write-up on the 'her stories' of these incredible history-making Tharu women.

Janak Rai

NEPALI MIGRATION

Our passport has now become our future (Ashim Shakya's AI-assisted artwork on page 1 of Nepali Times #1191).

Anmol Shrestha

■ Many people happily go abroad.

A Jeevan

GURKHA OFFICER

Congratulations Philip Holmes ('The King and I', nepalitimes.com). Hats off to you for your relentless efforts made for Nepal and its women and children.

Pratap Jung Titung

NEPAL & BRITAIN

Nepal and Britain do indeed have a close bond ('Nepal, Britain mark centenary of 1923 treaty', Kanak Mani Dixit, nepalitimes.com). May the bond strengthen over the years.

Neil Pande

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



Karjahi Movement

by Nisha Rai
While researching the history of feminism in Nepal Nisha Rai came across a long-forgotten struggle for land rights led by Tharu women of Dang valley 40 years ago. Go online to find out more about the women who fought jaimindars for their land and justice.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

50 Diaspora Diaries

Editorial
Diaspora Diaries started with a mission to bring out the human side of migration, and how it touches nearly all Nepali families in both positive and negative ways. Read about the journeys of 50 featured migrant workers at nepalitimes.com

Most popular on X

Burmese-Nepalis flee to Thailand

by Chandra Kishore
Chinese organised crime groups are luring people with high-paying IT jobs, including Nepalis. Chinese-owned call centres in Burma are involved in internet financial fraud and online scams and physically torture workers and hold them captive. Join the discussion online.

Most commented

Seeing forest and trees

by Alisha Sijapati
Nepal Art Council's exhibit The Sovereign Forest put together by Indian filmmaker Amar Kanwar is a multimedia installation of film, books, as well as artefacts from Odisha where indigenous people have been driven out to make way for natural resource extraction.

Most visited online page

QUOTES

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
#DiasporaDiaries started with a simple mission: to bring out the human side of migration, and how it touches nearly all Nepali families in both positive and negative ways. 50 stories later, we celebrate their journey.

Adrian Pereira @ViralisingSolidarity
@liberationxxx
Full salute to all Nepalis working abroad to help make life comfortable for us. Do listen to their stories of joys and struggles. May their families be blessed always.

pepper_min @peppermin5
It started with us securing a grant to study #AMR in migrants of Malaysia. It has now given us a stronger appreciation of the lives they live, challenges they face, and also their important contribution to Malaysia's development.

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
The Newa community observes Yomari Punhi in Kathmandu on Tuesday. The day is also celebrated as Jyapu Diwas.

Maruna @EyeofPerishment
Couldn't go there today but man I love my country so much, beautiful stuff

1,000 WORDS



Make mine a large Maotai.

POLITICAL POWER FROM THE BARREL OF A GUN: Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal and his comrades pay their respects to Mao Zedong on his 131st birth anniversary on Tuesday.

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67 Journalists have been killed in Gaza since October 7

Reporters within borders

Sixty-two Palestinian journalists have been killed in Israeli bombings in the last 10 weeks. In addition, 4 Israelis and 3 Lebanese media workers have also been killed. Many have been targeted because they were reporters. In contrast, 63 journalists were killed during the Vietnam War and 69 in the six years of the Second World War.

"Journalists are civilians doing important work during times of crisis and must not be targeted by warring parties," said Sherif Mansour of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).



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WHAT TO EXPECT FROM AI IN 2024

AI is not hype anymore, it is a reality and it is the right time for content creators to be more creative

■ Naresh Newar

The bewildering speed with which generative artificial intelligence developed in just one year dominated the news in 2023. This set off both alarm and excitement: how AI innovation offers solutions to everyday chores, while taking us into dangerous new terrain. Geeks and tech freaks like me watched fascinated as AI applications accelerated in the past year. It was only in March 2023 that I got hooked into AI apps and wrote the front page report in Nepali Times titled Ayo AI.

Last week, this paper carried an AI-assisted artwork by digital artist Ashim Shakya, showing the enormous possibilities in enhancing existing creative processes.

When I began to grasp AI



High resolution AI-generated image of a Nepali child walking with baby rhino. The only problem is that AI didn't seem to be able to tell the difference between an Asiatic and African rhino.

knowhow, I never expected to continue using generative AI apps but was hooked into it. From Open AI's ChatGPT 3.5 and two other image generators, I have now tried out over 1,000 apps. Even that is just a drop in the ocean of AI apps available today.

In May, when Ayo AI was featured in this paper, there were about 640 AI apps. There were 10,842 relevant AIs to 9,000 tasks as we went to press on Thursday. It could impact 5,000 job sectors if these AIs are directly embedded into their workflows.

So far, there is no evidence of this happening yet. According to the world's number one AI aggregator, 'There is an AI for that' among job holders, 98% of those impacted will be the communications managers and others in this sector. But that is just



an opinion, not yet a fact.

For content creators, 2023 has been a great year with generative AI app for almost every task. These can be done with just a few text prompts to generate ideas, stories, voiceovers, images, illustrations,

websites, infographic designs, animations, music and videos.

ChatGPT is no longer the dominant chatbot, but is still one of the best. It was my favourite until I started using Anthropic's Claude-2 that was released in July. It gives 200,000 tokens, which means that we can upload large documents up to 75,000 words and have it summarised in bullet points simplifying the text. I could use it to synthesise this review, but am doing it the old fashioned way.

The biggest sensation is Gemini AI, considered the most capable AI model developed by Google DeepMind, able to communicate and generate human-like texts. Gemini Pro Vision can interpret any image through its image reasoning task, and has the ability to describe the

image and write captions. Its most significant feature is to identify if a photograph or artwork is original or AI-generated.

AI-powered image generators have advanced a lot and taken such a huge leap in creating realism in photos and art. Videos have advanced to another level.

InVideo, for example, can produce a whole video with just a text prompt: from writing a complete script, a voiceover, and creating visuals selected from its 9 million video stock. A major milestone in generative AI is the Runway, which generates amazing visuals with just a text prompt (see video online).

Another new addition that could be Runway's biggest competitor is Pika, its web-based version is now available but has a long waitlist. (I finally managed to get access after a two week wait.) It blew me away with its features: from text to video, video to video. And users can upscale the video, add duration, have out-painting, in-painting and a canvas feature.

AI-generated music is also gaining momentum as part of the audio-generation tools and platforms and being hugely invested by some of the biggest tech companies. Suno AI is considered the best music app so far, and was started by a group of musicians in partnership with AI experts in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

In December, it partnered with Microsoft, which has integrated Suno AI in its Copilot as a plugin. Facebook and Google are also partnering with other music companies to create their own AI music audio generation apps.

AI is not hype anymore, it is a reality. This is the right time to be in the business. For content creators with technical knowledge and skills for design software like the Adobe products or Affinity, it enriches their work and makes them more productive, cost-effective and enhances inventiveness. Warning: it takes time to master the technique and perfect content.

But AI-generated content is

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Holiday gift

Aloft Kathmandu Thamel provided school uniforms, sweaters, and winter hats to 32 children at The Orphans Homes for the festive season. General Manager Vikram Singh said the hotel shared the joy of Christmas New Year with children, with gifts, cakes, and presents.



Ncell ICT award

Sunaina Ghimire Pandey received the Ncell Woman ICON ICT Award 2023 at the Up Grad ICT Awards 2023 in Kathmandu. Pandey has over 25 years of experience in the ICT field, and is the first Woman Vice President of the Computer Association (CAN) Federation and Managing Director of General Technology Private Limited.

Yamaha RayZR

MAW Enterprises, the distributor of Yamaha motorcycles and scooters in Nepal, has introduced the RayZR Street Rally 125 FI Hybrid scooter. Available in Matte Copper



and Sparkle Green, the scooter is powered by an air-cooled, fuel-injected 125cc blue core hybrid engine with Automatic Stop & Start System and a Smart Motor Generator for a quieter engine start.

NMB online

NMB Bank has partnered with Hetauda Water Management Board to facilitate customers with online payment of water tariff through the bank's mobile banking app. The agreement was formalised in a program attended by Mayor Mina Kumari Lama, NMB Bank's Deputy CEO Sudesh Upadhyay and Water Management Board Chair Pratap Bista.



Gang of girls

Sunsilk has unveiled the three winners of Sunsilk Dashain Vibes 3 Contest. Sajina Khanal, Susmita Banjara and Vijaya Pradhan were awarded Rs100,000 each and will get an opportunity to be featured in Sunsilk pack next year. They were picked from 4,485 participants. The contest generated 174 million-plus views across platforms.

Global home loans

Global IME Bank Limited has introduced a home loan scheme with a single-digit minimum interest rate, offering a loan limit of up to 10.2 million. The interest rates range from 9.99 to 11.99%, with a quick loan approval process within three working days. This opportunity is available at the bank's 355 branches across 77 districts for a limited period.

Kathmandu to Lhasa

Himalaya Airlines on Thursday commenced its weekly flight between Kathmandu and Lhasa, and became the first non-Chinese airline to fly to Tibet. Himalaya is a joint venture between Yeti Airlines Group and Tibet



Civil Aviation Development and Investment. This is the fifth Chinese destination for Himalaya, which also flies between Kathmandu and Dhaka, Kuala Lumpur, Doha, Dubai, Dammam, and plans to connect Chinese cities with Pokhara. It is flying a charter to Phuket from Kathmandu in January.

Winter care

Minister for Women, Children, and Senior Citizens, Surendra Raj Acharya, visited Save the Children's earthquake response program in Rawat Gaun of Jajarkot



and handed over winterisation tents provided by the European Union. On 8 December, the EU provided 800 winterization tents equipped with stoves for distribution in Jajarkot and Rukum West.



Water colour of rural Nepal, showing how AIs now have perfected hues and textures without the need for colour correction.

still not as lucrative as people have been led to believe. Customers still prefer original writing and art, photography or videos. YouTube, the biggest platform for creators, encourages original content.

YouTube users are often critical of AI-generated content as they do not want to spend time watching fake content created with AI. I tried that once with my own YouTube channel and many wrote angry messages and they felt offended.

So far, the only AI content that really sells well on YouTube is news about latest AI updates, videos with clickbait titles about how to generate income using AI, or those showcasing new AI apps, interviews with AI experts, and especially scaremongering news about AI destroying humanity.

Instagram has been a popular

platform for original and creative content creators and is now crowded with millions of them. However, their AI-generated content do not get as good a response as original posts.

There is fear mongering about how AI could destroy the careers of people in the creative fields, but AI generative tools have not ruined professional content creators like the designers, content writers, photographers, videographers and paint artists.

It is true that the evolution of the AI generative tools has been speeding up, and we can predict even more advanced generative AI apps. The age of content creation is here and AI apps may be commercially viable and socially acceptable if used ethically and with transparency.

For hardworking creative professionals, technology transformation has never been a

threat or a challenge to their artistic creations. This argument, or rather assumption, about generative AI being a threat is exaggerated. A lot of creative people have joined the AI revolution, enhancing their original pieces of artistic creations. 🇳🇵



READ NEPALI TIMES

Naresh Newar created this AI-generated rock version of a song with lyrics and music about Nepali Times (for non-commercial use) using an audio-generation tool showing what is possible. The biggest tech companies will be perfecting this technology in 2024. Go online for more AI generated images and videos.

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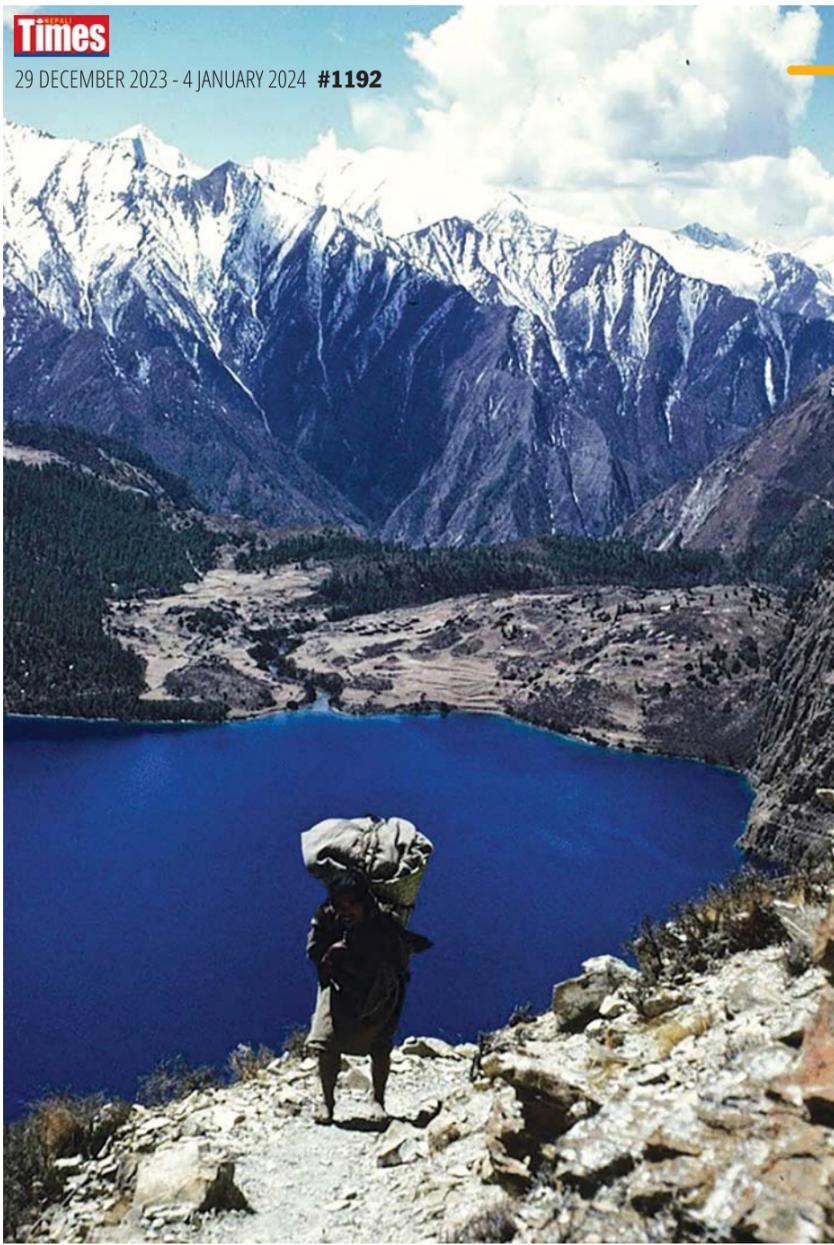
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Porter on trail above Phoksundo Lake in 1971. The shore of the lake is less forested than now.

JOHAN REINHARD



Jitendra Rai above Phoksundo Lake on 1 June 2023. The lookout point with green roof in the background is the only real change since 1971. The lakeshore region, however, will most likely be converted to a tourist hub if the road from Dunai comes up.

ALTON BYERS

Time catching up with timeless DOLPO

Images of Dolpo taken 40 years apart show little change. But that is about to change.

■ Alton C. Byers in Dolpo

In 1973, the writer Peter Matthiessen spent two months trekking in this remote trans-Himalayan region of western Nepal with wildlife biologist George Schaller. The trip was made legendary by his 1976 book, *The Snow Leopard*.

In it, he documented his pursuit of Zen Buddhism at a time of personal loss. Schaller's pursuit of blue sheep and snow leopards to justify setting up a new wildlife reserve, and a timeless land that hadn't changed much in 800 years.

There were no tourist lodges, the trails were primitive and exposed, food was scarce, and given their late November start the weather was unpredictable and uncertain.

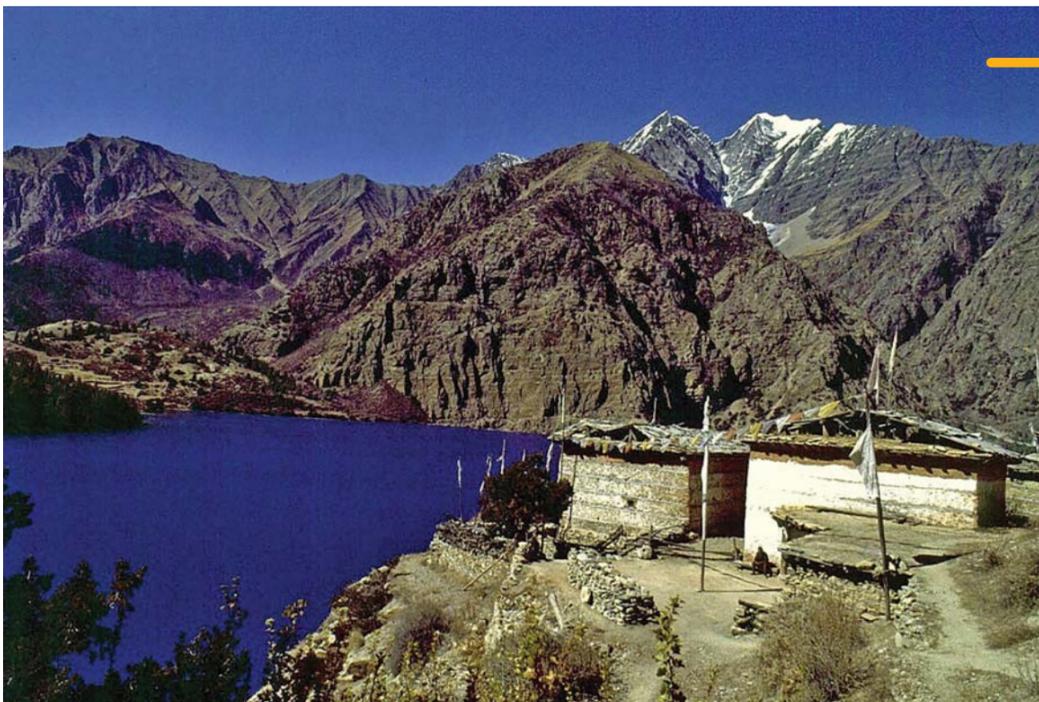
They Phoksundo National Park was established 11 years after Matthiessen's trek. But even though Dolpo had been 'discovered' by adventure tourists much earlier, it

has still remained comparatively inaccessible and mysterious because of its remoteness, and expense. Only 600 tourists visited in 2022.

This, however, is about to change. Mustang and Dolpo are increasingly being connected by roads, and every major village within Shey Phoksundo National Park will soon be linked.

Between May-July 2023 my wife Elizabeth and I spent 40 days trekking in upper Dolpo, photographing wild flowers for the Godavari Botanical Gardens (including the first photograph of the rare *Primula ramzanae* ever taken), making plaster casts of snow leopard pugmarks for the Natural History Museum, and noting the impact of yarsagumba harvesters upon the fragile, high-altitude landscapes.

We also replicated 16 photographs of the villages and landscapes taken by noted anthropologist Johan Reinhard in 1971 and 1993 to assess the

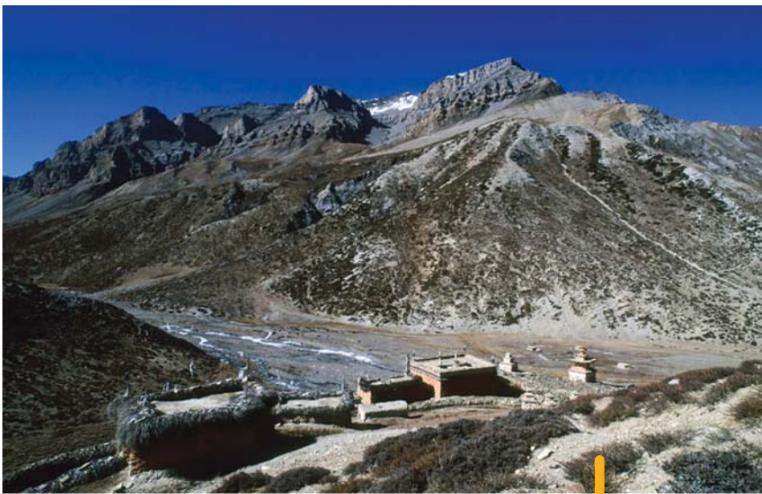


Bon Gumpa overlooking Phoksundo Lake in 1993, the purple colour probably due to colour saturation of the original slide film.

JOHAN REINHARD



Several new buildings have since been built at the monastery. Tree cover in the village of Ringmo (left) appears more dense 40 years



Above Shey Gompa in 1993.

JOHAN REINHARD



The same scene on 10 June, 2023. Only the red structure in the foreground, with its rectangular roof bordered with willow and juniper fuelwood, is new.

ALTON BYERS



SONAM CHOEKYI LAMA

The road less travelled in Dolpo

The view is divided about whether new motorable roads are good or bad for this isolated region

■ Norbu Lama in Dolpo

I was born in the little village of Chepka on the old trading trail in Dolpo. Even since I was a boy, I used to see the yaks and mules go up and down the path, and an increasing number of foreign trekkers and their porters.

I always yearned to see the world beyond the narrow valley to a wider horizon. We started the Gateway Inn located at the night stop point between Jufal airfield and Phoksundo, and business was getting better until the pandemic.

I went to Austria to work for two summers at the Gesäuse National Park, and that augmented my income plus gave me a lot of exposure into ecotourism. Trekking traffic is picking up again in Dolpo, so I do not need to go to Europe anymore.

Tourist footfall would increase if Dolpo was taken off the restricted area list. Because of this rule, foreign trekkers have to pay \$500 per day for a 10-day trek plus \$50 for every extra day to the Department of Immigration. That is in addition to the daily \$150 for the trek itself, the Rs3,000 Shey Phoksundo National Park fee and the higher air fares for foreigners from Kathmandu to Jufal via Nepalganj.

All this adds up to make Dolpo more expensive than the Everest or Annapurna trails, and only the most adventurous (or well to do) come to Dolpo. Even reducing the Dolpo restricted area fee by half could double the meagre 600 trekkers who visit the national park at present every year.

I learnt a lot while in Austria. For example, the signage along the hiking trails are very well laid out so it is impossible to get lost. There is a lot of information along the paths about the animal and plant life, and to identify surrounding peaks and landmarks. There is an effort to minimise the impact of tourism.

The Austrians also do not build roads unnecessarily so as to preserve their wilderness. And that is something we could emulate here in Dolpo, where there is a road-building spree going on.

Till recently, Dolpo and Humla were the only two districts in Nepal without motorable roads. Interestingly, Dolpo is better connected to China at the moment than to the rest of Nepal. Dolpo is located on the trans-Himalayan plateau, and is Nepal's biggest district by area, but has a population of only 45,000.

That might change with the Bheri Corridor which has already reached the district capital of Dunai. One can now travel from Surkhet to Tallo Bazar in 12 hours, cross the footbridge over the Bheri, and transfer to another jeep up to Dunai

in 6 hours over very rough roads. Despite this being a national pride project, progress is rather slow.

Still, for locals, this gives an alternative to the expensive and irregular flights from Jufal to Nepalganj. From Dunai, the Bheri highway is supposed to go on to the Chinese border at Marim La via Dho Tarap and Tinje. Some sections already have motorcycles plying on them, while the already built stretch from Dunai to Laisikap got washed away by floods a few years ago.

It used to take a whole day for locals and two days for trekkers to walk from Saldang to Dho crossing the Chyala La and Jyanta La at over 5,300m. On a motorcycle it now takes just two hours. Once the track from Kagbeni via Charkha Bhot is opened, it will be easier to travel to Upper Dolpo via Mustang than up the Bheri highway from Surkhet. Last year, a tractor already climbed up from the Kali Gandaki to Dho, and there are dozers already at work.

Post-Covid and before international tourism resumed, the trail from Dunai to Phoksundo was filled with Nepali vloggers and TikTok trekkers. This propped up the local economy since the Nepalis tended to spend more money in the villages than foreign trekking groups. If only they did not bring along their loud music, everything would be fine.

The view is divided about whether roads are good or bad for Dolpo. They have made it easier and cheaper for the sick to be taken to city hospitals for treatment, or for the annual winter migration south. However, there are worries about the theft of religious objects, as well as the destruction of chorten and mani walls by bulldozers.

The road network will inevitably spread in Dolpo in the coming years, so we might as well be prepared to minimise its impact, especially on tourism. The roads more or less follow the former trekking routes, which themselves were once the yak trails used by traders, as depicted in Eric Valley's documentary Caravan in the 1980s.

All these roads also make it less tenable to justify the high restricted area fees. The Shey Phoksundo Rural Municipality is trying to make sure that a road is not built up the Suligad River, so that the lake, the Bon Po monastery in Pungmo and the southern part of the national park will only be for wilderness hiking.

Norbu Lama is an ecotourism operator in Dolpo and runs the Gateway Inn in Chepka. norbulama125@gmail.com
Facebook: Norbu O Positive

nepalitimes.com

Watch the video High Way by Sonam Choekyi Lama on Nepali Times YouTube Channel.

changes that had occurred.

Dolpo is still described as a roadless region by trekking agencies, available literature and websites. But new roads are planned and/or under construction from the Chinese border to Chakra Bhot, across to Saldang, down to Dho Tarap, and on out to Jomsom. (see map, below)

Contoured 'mountain bike' trails have been excavated by local communities from village to village to help bulldozers, which will link the remotest settlements within a few years. The Shey Gompa monastery featured in Matthiessen's book will be linked as will Phoksundo Lake.

Our original trek route had to

be drastically revised as a result, as we played 'dodge the new road' to stay on traditional trade and trekking trails in upper Dolpo.

The repeat photographs thus took on an entirely new and unexpected meaning. The photographs actually show how little change appears to have occurred in the villages, monasteries, and landscapes that we replicated.

But with the coming of roads, we can expect unprecedented changes within the next few years, such as new cement hotels, lodges, houses, and other infrastructure. Roads can bring positive (improved access to health care) as well as negative impacts (increased landslides, poaching). We left with the hope that the benefits will outweigh the negative, and that the magic and mystery of Dolpo will continue to prevail in perpetuity.

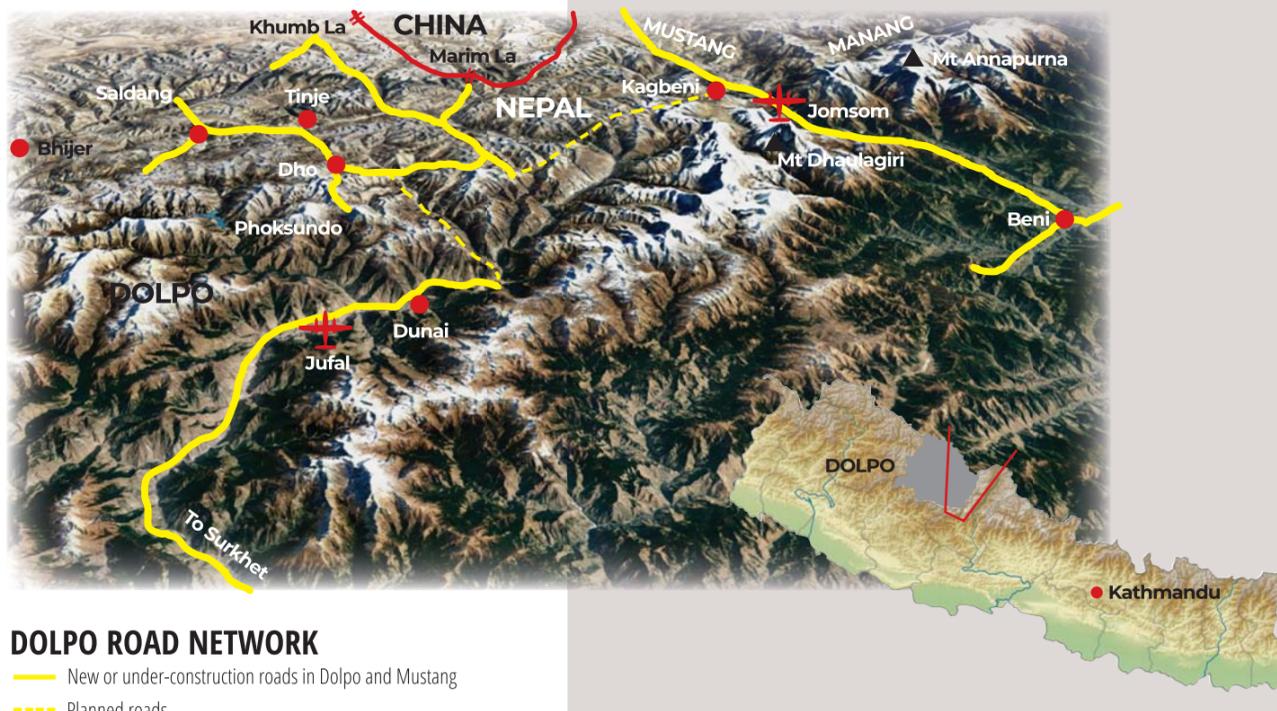
The historic and recent repeat photographs should provide a solid baseline for young Nepali scholars to conduct future studies on the impact of roads in Dolpo, one of the last of the remote, hidden, and mysterious treasures of Nepal and the world. 🇳🇵

Alton C. Byers, PhD is a Senior Research Associate and Faculty at the Institute for Arctic and Alpine Research (INSTAAR), University of Colorado at Boulder.



ALTON BYERS

Mother and daughter lodge owners in Yak Kharka identifying photographs of local people taken in 1971 and 1993 by anthropologist Johan Reinhard.



DOLPO ROAD NETWORK

- New or under-construction roads in Dolpo and Mustang
- - - Planned roads

ALTON BYERS

EVENTS

**Tsherin Sherpa**

Artist Tsherin Sherpa's recent works are on display for a limited time at Takpa Gallery. Check them out now.

Until 31 December, Lazimpat, 9851078953

Play Time

Sarwanam Theatre is back with a bang with a new drama titled Kumarji Aagya Garnuhunchha. Ashesh Malla helms the script of the play directed by Rasik Raj and Sital Thokar.

Till 31 December, 5pm-6pm, Kalikasthan (01) 4011027

**Mastering Macrame**

Macrame knots are easy to learn, but they do take some practice to master. Join the extensive two-day training session this Thursday.

29 December - 31 December, Time: 9:30 am to 2:30 pm Price: Rs1,200, Macrame Love, Samakhushi Town Planning, 9851164138

Uday Charan Shrestha

Solo works of Uday Charan Shrestha, a pioneer of devotional art is being exhibited at the Museum of Nepali Arts.

Until 1 January, Thamel

**Cook for Confidence**

Promising an interactive and hands-on experience, the chefs at Confident Cooking Academy are ready to help young children enhance their skills in culinary arts.

4 January, Confident Cooking Academy, Kalimati, 9742502606

DINING

**Hyatt Regency**

Welcome the new year with lavish dinner, dance, and music with your loved ones at the Helipad Garden and at the Rox Restaurant followed by a brunch at Sesame.

31 December-1 January, 4.30 pm onwards, Rs4,000, Boudha, 9801031235

MUSIC

Lama and the band

Begin 2024 with a big bang. Lama and the band are set to perform this New Year's Eve. Call for reservations.

31 December, 7pm onwards, Evoke Cafe & Bistro, Jhamsikhel (01) 5432021

**Music and Food**

The New Year's dinner and drinks at Soaltee Hotel will be accompanied by music from Bollywood singer Shashwat Singh. Spend the evening with family and friends.

31 December, 7pm onwards, Rs14,999/individual and Rs26,999/couple

**Ring in the New Year**

An electrifying night of music, dance, and celebration at Club Fahrenheit with Anuprastha for the main act. Also features Earhead, DJ Kabin and others. Reserve your tables now.

Club Fahrenheit (01) 4541220 / 9841726830

**Live in action**

Neetesh Jung Kunwar and Samridhi Rai are performing live in Kirtipur for the first time on New Year's Eve at Sasa Twa Newari restaurant.

31 December (01) 5907942

Street Hip Hop

Join one hour and forty-five minutes of street hip-hop this weekend in Swayambhu organised by Street HipHop World.

30 December, 12pm onwards

**Emilio's Pizza**

Try mouth watering Neapolitan style pizza and homemade pastas and raviolis with a unique selection of wines in Emilio's waterproof garden.

Bansbari, 9823711002

Hyatt Place

Experience New Year's Eve The Great Gatsby style at the Skybar and Lounge with a live band, fun games, massive buffet, magic show, and more. Call for reservations and price details.

31 December, 9802340855

GETAWAY

**Aloft Kathmandu**

For a quiet celebration at the heart of Kathmandu, book a table at Nook Restaurant and a room at the centrally located Aloft in Chhaya Devi Complex for a lavish dinner, welcome drinks and late check-out.

31 December, 6:30pm onwards, Price: Rs 4,000 for dinner and Rs15,000 for couple package, Thamel (01) 5252000

The Pavilions

Luxury boutique eco-resort with boutique villas, swimming pool, organic farm, restaurant lounge and bar. Check out for refreshing morning walks, therapeutic and relaxing day-ins, authentic gastronomical experience and quiet nights.

Chisapani, Pokhara (061) 694379

**Chandragiri Hills**

Chandragiri Hills' New Year package for couples includes a cable car round trip, BBQ dinner, DJ night with New Year countdown, and breakfast the next morning. Special door and consolation prizes for every booking.

Chandragiri, 9802069900

Kasara Resort

Immerse in the lush greenery in the heart of Chitwan's National Park. With activities for everyone, from cycling to wildlife viewing, Kasara Resort is a fantastic getaway for families.

Patihani, Chitwan National Park, Chitwan (01) 4437571

**Dwarika's Resort**

Looking to lunch outside the city or for a spa experience that will wash away all worries? A relaxing couple of hours in the salt room for Crystal Salt Therapy at Dwarika's will leave one feeling energised and ready to tackle the chaos of the city.

Dhulikhel (01) 490612

Hyatt Palace

Ring in the New year with an extravagant buffet, live band performance, DJ, and exciting lucky draws.

Tahachal (01) 5381234

**Everest Hotel**

Enjoy a fun evening with a grand dinner party by the poolside at the Everest Hotel. Special room packages with free flow of selected beverages this New Year's Eve.

31 December, 8pm onwards, 9801977324

WEEKEND WEATHER

**Nepal warming**

If, as a long-time resident of Kathmandu, you felt that winter has been mild so far, you would be right. The maximum temperature is up to 4 degrees above normal with the maximum in Kathmandu city centre hitting 21.7°C on Tuesday. The minimum has also been on average 2 degrees above normal. This week will be more of the same, with the lows dipping below zero only at 2,100m on the Valley's outskirts. Saturday will be a balmy 21°C. There has been heavy winter snow in northwestern Nepal, but the central and eastern mountains will remain snowless into the new year.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
20° 7°	21° 7°	20° 6°

OUR PICK

2006 romantic comedy The Holiday directed by Nancy Meyers follows two women who swap homes across continents during the holiday season to escape their respective relationship woes. Cameron Diaz's character, a successful businesswoman from Los Angeles, exchanges homes with Kate Winslet's character, a journalist from a quaint English village. As they adapt to their new surroundings, both women unexpectedly find love with charming locals, portrayed by Jude Law and Jack Black. The film explores themes of self-discovery, love, and the enchantment of fortuitous encounters during the holiday season.



Cameron Diaz - Kate Winslet - Jude Law - Jack Black

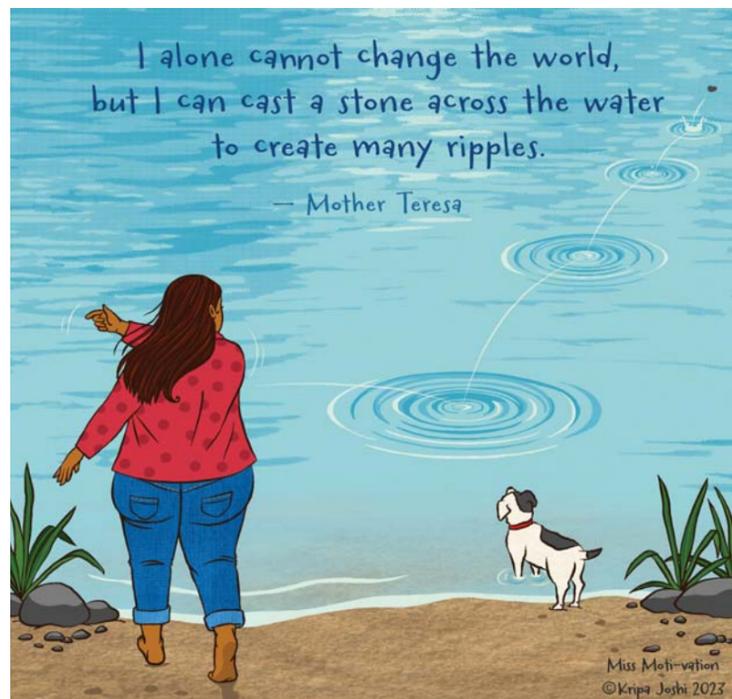
the Holiday

a film by Nancy Meyers



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 नपर्ौं ।
- 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

Seeing the forest and the trees

Every once in a while comes an art exhibition that is not just aesthetically pleasing, but raises piercing questions.

One such is this unique, yet unsettling, exhibit at the Nepal Art Council in Baber Mahal. The Sovereign Forest is certainly not art for art's sake. It is a multimedia installation of film, books, and artefacts from the mineral-rich but dirt-poor Indian state of Odisha where indigenous people have been driven out to make way for natural resource extraction.

Visitors step into sudden darkness, and it takes time for the pupils to adjust to the dim interior. Unlike conventional exhibitions, this one is purposely designed to evoke outrage at the blatant injustice and oppression that underlies the plunder.

The show invites a new kind of engagement to challenge perceptions, and is curated to shock observers out of apathy and recalibrate their moral compass.

Put together by the Indian filmmaker Amar Kanwar, it offers a compelling and immersive narrative through a blend of visuals, artistry, archival materials, and the screening of a documentary.

Some Nepali visitors may not immediately find a connection to one of the lesser known and underserved states in India, but the greed and abuse that drives the extraction machinery there has parallels to what is going on here.

Kanwar's exploration of exploitation is projected powerfully through a unique narrative style devoid of a concrete subject. He intricately unravels the story of an activist killed during a farmers' protest. The film immerses the audience in the farmers' plight, offering us a window into the destruction of nature and the

people who have traditionally lived in harmony with it.

Kanwar's depiction of the funeral of Shankar Guha Niyogi in Chattisgarh in 1991, and flashbacks to the activist's premonitions of demise add a haunting dimension to his story.

There are revelations of injustices perpetrated by India's and the world's richest conglomerates: the Jindals, Tata, and the Korean company, POSCO. It is an age-old story of the struggle of those who live off the land against those who want to own it. The show also exhibits 272 seeds meticulously preserved by a farmer in Odisha, and forces us to think about native seeds that are being driven into extinction by hybrids. This has resonance in Nepal, where seeds adapted to Himalayan microclimates and soils are similarly being replaced by high-yield monocultures.

Says Nayantara Gurung Kakshapati of photo.circle that brought Kanwar's exhibition to Kathmandu: "We are forced to reflect upon and connect with the struggles faced by indigenous groups also in Nepal, and get a deeper understanding through art of the socio-economic challenges of development," she adds.

Replace Chhattisgarh with Chure, and Shankar Guha Niyogi with Dilip Mahato and suddenly it becomes clear that The Sovereign Forest is also about us.

The Sovereign Forest can spur solidarity and action against structural inequity and abuse of power not just in Odisha, but also 500km away in Nepal. 🇳🇵

The Sovereign Forest
by Amar Kanwar in collaboration with Sudhir Pattnaik,
Samadrusti and Sherna Dastur
Nepal Art Council
Till 31 March 2024

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EVENT SPACE 1 & 2

8 PM - 12:30 AM
NPR 7000 NET (SOFT DRINKS/MOCKTAILS) | NPR 10,000 NET (IMPORTED LIQUORS & BEER UPTO 3 HRS)
KIDS BELOW 6 YRS COMPLIMENTARY | 6 - 12 YRS NPR 3500 NET

GLITZ AND GLAM
ZING - WORLD OF FLAVOURS

31ST DECEMBER, 2023 | 6:30 PM - 12 AM
LAVISH BUFFET SPREAD WITH LIVE BAND

NPR 6500 NET (SOFT DRINKS/MOCKTAILS) | NPR 9500 NET (IMPORTED LIQUORS & BEER UPTO 3 HRS)
KIDS BELOW 6 YRS COMPLIMENTARY | 6 - 12 YRS NPR 3250 NET

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ZING - WORLD OF FLAVOURS

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Missing pieces of the

Hydroelectricity supply will soon catch up with demand, and focus is shifting to reservoirs to store energy and regulate water

■ Sonia Awale in Tanahu

Seen from a vantage point high above the Seti River near Damauli, excavators and tipper trucks look like tiny insects clawing away at a cliff. Occasionally there is the sound of dynamite blasting at the rock face. This is the Tanahu Hydropower Project, and it is an indication of how stagnant Nepal's energy planning has been that this is only the second reservoir scheme after the Kulekhani Dam was commissioned in 1982.

The workers have nearly completed drilling a tunnel to divert the Seti's turbid sediment-laden water so construction of the 140m high concrete dam can begin. When completed, the reservoir will be 7.25 sq km in area and store nearly 300 million m³ of monsoon runoff. And unlike Kulekhani, the Seti is a snow-fed river originating in the glacier below Annapurna 4.

A 420m head on the Seti will take water through 7.25m wide tunnels and penstock pipes to an underground powerhouse to give the scheme an installed capacity of 140MW and an annual energy generation of 587.7GWh. While this capacity is less than other projects like Tama Kosi, the stored water can be drained at peak hours and during the dry season to augment electricity supply and keep the water flowing downstream.

Also called Upper Seti, this project funded by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Asian Development Bank (ADB), European Investment Bank (EIB) and Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) is designed for at least six hours of peak operation during the driest months of the year.

"Most of Nepal's hydropower projects are run-of-the-river projects which means we can't store water for winter months when domestic demand is highest," says engineer Raja Bhai Shilpakar, Tanahu's project manager. "We must shift our focus to reservoir projects now to ensure Nepal's energy security and to reduce power import."

Indeed, while Nepal has an installed capacity of around 2,800MW in the monsoon, and sold electricity worth Rs15 billion to India this summer, NEA is still importing power from Indian thermal plants to meet 30% of the winter demand.

Winter generation is low because the rivers are running low and this situation has been made worse by prolonged post-monsoon droughts. Last year, NEA said power supply fell by 20% of the winter average because there was no precipitation and melting of snow.

In its new proposed draft, the National Planning Commission (NPC) has set a power generation



TANAHU HYDROPOWER LIMITED



target of 11,769MW in the next five years. The private sector, which generates nearly 80% of current electricity supply, is not so optimistic given the bureaucratic and financing hurdles.

But even then, there will still be a supply shortfall unless more reservoir projects are built to even out the annual generation profile. Besides Tanahu, reservoir projects are planned on the Budi Gandaki, Tamor and Upper Arun, but those will not be ready for another ten years. Dams are also much more costly to build, and will need government involvement.

Apart from local demands for compensation for submerged land, there are also concerns about

the greater ecological impact of reservoir projects. Studies have shown that rampant dam construction leads to a decline in aquatic life, and livelihoods of people downstream.

The other challenge is increasing risk of climate change-induced disasters like cloudbursts and Glacial Lake Outburst Floods that can wipe out expensive dams like the Chungthang Dam disaster in Sikkim in October.

Nepal's own Kulekhani was supposed to have a lifespan of 100 years but a cloudburst in the

GREEN ENERGY: (clockwise) Dam site of the under-construction Tanahu Hydropower Project with a 25km long reservoir which will be completed in May 2026. The concrete dam will be 140m in height and hold 295 million m³ of monsoon runoff.

This underground powerhouse will give installed capacity of 140MW and an annual energy generation of 587.7GWh.

Transmission lines at the recently inaugurated Kushma-New Butwal 220kV substation which will evacuate power from the Kali Gandaki Transmission Corridor.

catchment area in 1993 deposited so much debris into the lake that the cascade power plants that generate 106MW of electricity from it will now function only for another 30 years.

Shilpakar who was also involved in the Kulekhani project says lessons have been learnt, and Tanahu will have a flushing gate to drain sediment from the reservoir. It is considered too far downstream to be at risk from glacial lake bursts. The dam is also built to withstand earthquakes of much higher intensity than the 2015 event.

"Tanahu is a concrete gravity dam with a much larger catchment than Kulekhani," he explains. "But rainfall patterns have changed drastically. So we have added two flushing gates, increasing the dam's lifespan to 120 years."

Despite the downside, most experts agree that reservoirs are crucial for flood control and dry season irrigation downstream, especially as water supply becomes scarcer with the climate crisis. Reservoirs also have other benefits like fisheries, inland navigation and tourism, as seen in Kulekhani.

"In many ways, reservoirs are not just clean energy projects but also climate adaptive initiatives," says Pushkar Manandhar of the ADB. "Storage hydropower serves as a buffer to cope with erratic rainfall and act as a shock absorber. They store water to augment lean season flow of rivers."

But water is a geopolitical hot potato in the region with India's increased involvement in building river schemes in Nepal, including Pancheswar Dam on the border

Mahakali River, Arun III, West Seti reservoir, and other projects. Experts say India's real interest is in water supply, and would not mind if it gets regulated water for free from reservoirs like Tanahu in Nepal.

But India is playing hardball by refusing to buy electricity from projects it deems to have Chinese investment or involvement. In Tanahu, meanwhile, engineers are running out of explosives because of a ban on export of dynamite by India.

Says Shilpakar: "No contractor is getting an explosive permit from India and we cannot get any from the Chinese either, we need the government-to-government deals otherwise the project could be delayed."

Tanahu also includes the construction of a 220kV double circuit Damauli-Bharatpur transmission line and is looking at a completion date of May 2026. There are also plans for a 126MW Lower Seti cascade project with a dam at Saranghat, and a powerhouse at Mugling to generate 520GWh.

Experts say that along with new reservoir projects, Nepal now needs to pay attention to transmission and distribution to streamline supply so that domestic consumption increases.

"We didn't develop all aspects of hydro schemes in parallel," says ADB's Manandhar. "We focused mostly on generation and now there is a real bottleneck in transmission and distribution."

Kathmandu is a load centre, but transmission lines do not have the capacity to bring the electricity from power plants in central and eastern Nepal.

"We have to build substations to future-proof supply, but there are issues with right of way and land acquisition," Manandhar adds.

Which is why NEA is working at speed to upgrade its substation in Siuchatar, with a state-of-the-art Distribution System Control and Data Centre so that power supply to localities in the Valley can be monitored and controlled more efficiently.

"If there is a fault in distribution, we will be able to see it from here, we won't need locals

hydropower jigsaw



PHOTOS: SONIA AWALE

to call us anymore,” says electrical engineer Dharendra Bajgain. “At the same time, we will be able to quickly restore the fault, in minutes instead of hours by just isolating that area.”

But elsewhere, like in the Dana substation near Kushma of Parbat district, authorities are dealing with a different kind of power spill. Pritam Raj Bista of the Parbat Distribution Centre says that while there is 100% electrification, the total number of consumers is decreasing due to depopulation.

In contrast, nearly 170km south in Dhakdahi near Butwal, demand is peaking with local industries complaining about not getting dedicated feeder lines on time. Even when Nepal did away with power rationing, the area was still facing power cuts until Dhakdahi substation was set up a few years ago. The new substation shared the power load with the Butwal substation and the area has been

getting improved voltage and power quality.

At the recently inaugurated Kushma-New Butwal 220kV substation to evacuate power from the Kali Gandaki Transmission Corridor, the NEA’s Kulman Ghising said his main priority now was to invest in transmission and distribution infrastructure.

“Butwal is critical because it is at the intersection of the Kali Gandaki corridor in central Nepal and the East-West transmission artery,” Ghising said. “It is a pooling hub for power transmission and distribution westwards and for export to India.”

Indeed, these transmission lines will dovetail with the Millennium Challenge Compact (MCC)-supported lines from Hetauda via Damauli. The challenge now, Ghising says, is local compensation demands to transmission lines which have delayed them.

“Our field staff spend 90% of their time dealing with local opposition, social and environmental regulations,” he added.

Transmission lines under the MCC project are likely to face even stronger opposition because of political opposition to the US-funded initiative, and local belief

that the project has lots of money.

If Nepal is to save its economy and meet net-zero targets by 2045, increasing domestic demand should be the priority, and for this, reservoir projects, transmission lines and distribution infrastructure are key.

Nepal could export more electricity but India is buying less than 700MW from Nepal because of Chinese involvement in projects. It is therefore in Nepal’s own strategic interest to increase domestic demand as much as possible.

Even if Nepal could sell all its present electricity generation, it would amount to a mere Rs20 billion against an annual trade deficit with

India at a staggering Rs840 billion.

Instead, if we reduce just 10% of our petroleum bill by electrifying industries, household use and transport, Nepal can save at least Rs30 billion a year. Improving public health and ecology will be a bonus.

“If we sell electricity, we just get cash benefits but if we were to make the maximum use of our power within the country, there will be cascade impacts,” says engineer Raja Bhai Shilpakar. “We can revolutionise our industries and manufacturing, create jobs and prevent young talented people from migrating.”

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