



FEDERAL EXPRESS

■ Sonia Awale

Khim Lal Devkota is Nepal's foremost expert on local government, and is the person journalists and even politicians turn to find out why it is so difficult to decentralise decision-making away from Kathmandu.

He was summoned by the seven Chief Ministers (pictured, above) when they gathered in Hetauda last week to show them a way out.

"I told the Chief Ministers that they need to come to Kathmandu and do a sit-in protest in front of Singha Darbar, nothing less will work," recalls Devkota.

The seven Chief Ministers have put up a

united front against the centre with a list of demands that would devolve constitutionally guaranteed power to them.

Among their demands is the passage of laws on autonomy, handover of police authority, transfer of provincial property, cooperation in law-making, use of natural resources, revenue collection and federal grants. They are demanding 50% of the share of national revenue to provinces and local governments, up from the existing 30%.

"Sub-national governments have been constitutionally empowered but only on paper," says Devkota.

The three levels of the government all have their roles clearly defined in the Constitution. The federal government is responsible for defence, foreign policy, border security, and setting minimum standards for education and health care.

The provinces are supposed to create new job opportunities and develop infrastructure while municipalities are tasked with grassroots service delivery.

But Kathmandu is still holding on to most of those powers and resources, not allowing provinces and local governments to actually function as per their mandate, says outgoing National Assembly member and former Foreign Minister Bimala Rai Paudyal.

"They do not have laws, they do not have enough civil service staff, which means people cannot even access the little services they previously could. The centre is more in control than ever before, directing every move," adds the UML lawmaker.

One of the main reasons for public frustration with federalism is the increased cost of maintaining provincial assemblies, ministers, line agencies in all seven provinces.

"Nepalis had thought federalism meant better service delivery and direct access to elected leaders, but what they see instead is more and more ministers, their security guards and fancy cars, houses, it is natural that they are frustrated," Rai Paudyal adds.

This means that those who were at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, like Dalits and Madhesis in the Tarai are still where they were, and have felt no difference in their lives (page 10-11).

The public disenchantment is being exploited by parties like the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) which has conflated an anti-federalism platform with a call for a restoration of the Hindu kingdom — even though it is the fourth largest party in provincial assemblies.

Even the technocratic Rastriya Swatantra

Party (RSP) has been ambivalent on federalism. It did not put up candidates in the 2022 provincial elections, but says that is because as a new party they were not ready but will contest the next provincial elections.

"Our line is very clear, we are for devolution of power," explains Sumana Shrestha, an MP who is with the RSP. "If you just look at the Education Bill, we are the only political party explicitly asking for teachers' management at the local levels."

She adds: "Politicians have depicted federalism as the cure-all for everything but they are not living up to their own words as shown by the Education Bill. They have abused both the system and power, they are not the people's representatives."

Many say the fault lies not in the system of governance but in the players at the very top of the game and the fact that they haven't allowed federalism to really work. It is too early to judge the effectiveness of a system that has not been allowed to fully function, experts add.

"Nepal has had seven constitutions, we can't keep changing our constitution every time there is an issue with governance. We can reform it, and force leaders to be responsible, and accountable," says Devkota.

He adds: "Besides it is not the system that people are frustrated with so much as with the same old, tried, tested career politicians."

Provinces have become a seven-way mirror of national politics, and a ruling coalition of parties with diametrically opposing ideologies.

The row over naming Kosi Province is a case in point with Prime Minister Dahal of the Maoist-Centre playing politics by supporting the Kirat nomenclature even though his coalition partners do not.

In Madhes Province, which is where the demand for federalism first emerged after the end of the conflict, there is support for federalism but with a growing anti-secular movement influenced by faith-based pre-election politics in India. This has led to increased communal tension in the Tarai between groups which had coexisted peacefully in the past.

Back in Kathmandu, the National Coordination Council chaired by the Prime Minister with members from each province has met only twice in the eight years since the Constitution was promulgated eight years ago.

Says Bimala Rai Paudyal: "At the very least the federal government could muster the courage to hold these meetings with the provincial heads to sort out their grievances." 🇳🇵



SUDUR PASCHIM
Kamal Bahadur Shah (NC)
NC 19 | MC 11 | UML 10 | NUP 7



KARNALI
Raj Kumar Sharma (MC)
NC 14 | MC 13 | UML 10 | RPP 1



KOSI
Kedar Karki (NC)
UML 40 | NC 29 | MC 13 | RPP 6



GANDAKI
Surendra Raj Pandey (NC)
NC 27 | UML 22 | MC 8 | RPP 2



LUMBINI
Dilli Bahadur Chaudhary (NC)
UML 29 | NC 27 | MC 9 | RPP 4



BAGMATI
Shaligram Jankattel (MC)
NC 37 | UML 27 | MC 21 | RPP 13



MADHES
Saroj Kumar Yadav (JSP)
UML 23 | NC 22 | JSP 16 | JP 13

All seven chief ministers and the number of seats won by the top four parties in the provincial assemblies.



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CASHMERE REDEFINED

The F word

The chief ministers of all seven provinces met last week in Hetauda to discuss their next step to pressure the federal government to devolve political power to their provinces.

In a unique cross-party show of strength, the provincial leadership presented a joint memorandum to Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal in Kathmandu. Some of their demands were to transfer control of the police force, pass the long pending federal civil service law, hand over ownership of provincial infrastructure and natural resources, and last but not least, allow them to collect their own revenue.

This is not the first time the provinces have expressed their collective grievance. But Kathmandu, under various governments since the first elections under the new Constitution in 2017, has just been making empty promises.

Indeed, Nepal's main political leaders who were themselves the architects of the federal constitution are loath to devolve political power that they have decentralised to local governments. Even their own party structure is wholly centralised not just in the central committee in Kathmandu, but in just one elderly alpha male in each party.

That Nepal's leadership is lukewarm towards federalism is no big secret, they are unwilling to loosen their grip on power even to their own party leaders in the provinces and municipalities.

Eight years after the establishment of a three-tiered system of government following a prolonged deadlock over the style of federalism that delayed the passage of the post-conflict 2015 Constitution, Nepal's provinces are largely functionless.

For many Nepalis, the perception is that federalism is a corrupt and costly experiment that has failed miserably. Indeed, they have spent a fortune building luxurious lodgings for the provincial leadership in the upscale Bhaisepati neighbourhood.

In Nepal, federalism did not just signify devolution of power, but also the people's sense of identity and belonging, and the participation of those historically excluded from the political process. This fact was reflected in the opposition of the people to the naming of Province 1 as Kosi, and their demand for it to be renamed Kirat Limbuwan.

This is not a new struggle. The Madhes movement for federal restructuring after the decade-long armed conflict actually served as a catalyst for the establishment of the provincial system. The Maoists insisted on an ethnicity-based provincial model and the Nepali Congress was for a geographical delineation. The UML backed a hybrid model.

The Maoists have historically taken credit for the transformation of the governance

system that allowed for the reflection of identity, while the UML and the NC have sought to maintain the status quo even after the establishment of federalism.

Prime Minister Dahal has directly interfered in provincial governance, which in this year's case served to further inflame social unrest in Kosi.

For outsiders looking in who are removed from the nuances in Kosi, Madhes, and Sudar Paschim, and are only involved in Kathmandu-centred discourse, provincial governance and federalism have thus just become a burdensome extension of central politics.

Federalism will once more become an election issue in the 2027 polls as political parties succumb to the temptation to adopt regressive, conservative, and populist rhetoric to appeal to disenfranchised voters.

Bad mouthing federalism has become a favourite pastime for parties like the royal right RPP, which has simultaneously fed and fed off the public's disenchantment with governance to call for the abolishment of federalism and the reestablishment of a Hindu monarchy.

Ironically, the party fielded the second-highest number of FPTP candidates to contest provincial elections in 2022.

Meanwhile, the new and independent Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) which did not field candidates for provincial

elections in 2022, may not say it is against federalism in so many words, but has called it "useless" and "enabling corruption". They have proposed to make the provincial assembly and parliament smaller (page 1).

The provinces today are indeed proxies of Kathmandu —seven mirrors which reflect the political incompetence of the central government instead of being fully functioning autonomous units.

Nepalis have been quick to blame federalism when it is the politicians who have refused to let go of their control. The system of governance is not flawed, politicians that keep provinces on a tight leash are.

Nepal's provinces are not incapable of fulfilling their function, they have not been allowed to explore their roles and responsibilities. Throwing out federalism is not the answer.

To dismantle federalism is to undo the years of work it took to promulgate the Constitution and to overlook the struggle, sacrifice and hard-earned achievements of countless people during the conflict that preceded the Constitution.

In order for Nepal's democracy to truly function, federalism must be given a chance. **Shristi Karki**



Federalism has failed not because the system is flawed, but because Nepal's politicians have

ONLINE PACKAGES



HANGING IN THERE

Nepali workers used rock-climbing techniques to drill into the cliff face to build the steel pathways in Yaru Bagar and Syar Khola in Gorkha District after the 2015 earthquake. Watch the video on YouTube and subscribe to the channel for more multimedia content.



BANKING ON FEDERALISM

In this instalment of Nepali Times studio six months ago, former Swiss Ambassador Elisabeth von Capeller Oswald spoke about how federalism has shown results at the local levels, and why this system of governance needs to be given a chance to work. Watch the video on our YouTube channel. Read federalism special on page 1, 2 and 10-11.

DOLPO

The mindset and lifestyle of the people of Dolpo have changed ('Time catching up with timeless Dolpo', Alton C. Byers, #1192).

Teresa Yao

■ There has been lot of change in the climate. Photos show more snow in 1971 and less snow now.

Joes Ktm

■ The Karnali is amazing. I hope to visit someday.

Gyurme Dondup

■ Per the photos, the ice deposits have got thinner and the snowline has moved up.

Namindra Dahal

■ Wisdom and care is needed to preserve Dolpo, a very special place and culture.

Dan Rex

■ Bicycles and maybe e-bikes might be even better than other means of transportation in Dolpo ('The road less travelled in Dolpo', Norbu Lama, #1192).

Sigmund Stengel

NEPAL HYDROPOWER

Selling electricity gives money to the rulers to spend, whereas consuming electricity by ourselves can give us power independence, job creation and prosperity ('Missing pieces of the hydropower jigsaw', Sonia Awale, #1192). Which one is better? The thing is that there needs to be consistency and reliability.

Neil Pande

NEPALIS IN RUSSIA

The presence of Nepalis in the Russian military is not something that Nepal should be proud of ('10 Nepalis from one town fighting in Ukraine', Sujata Dhungana, nepalitimes.com). Russia is the occupier in a war that has been condemned by the entire world.

Ben-Erik Ness

■ Could this be suggestive of the desperation for better paid employment? While it is a moral tragedy that such employees can't think of a right and a wrong side of a conflict, it is much worse if they have actually perished in this war.

Gudavarthy Vijay

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING

Missing pieces of the hydropower jigsaw

by Sonia Awale

Nepal's hydroelectricity supply will soon catch up with demand and focus is shifting to reservoirs to store energy and regulate water. Transmission and distribution also need streamlining to increase domestic demand. Read the reports from Kaski, Tanahu and Rupendehi on our website and watch video.



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Year of reckoning

Editorial

The very Constitution which came about after much bloodshed is being challenged by retrogressive forces. 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. Join the discussion online.



Most popular on X



Time catching up with timeless Dolpo

by Alton C Byers

Images of Dolpo taken 40 years apart show little change. But that 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. Read story and see photos at nepalitimes.com.



Most commented

The road less travelled in Dolpo

by Norbu Lama

Opinion is divided about whether roads are good or bad for Dolpo. They have made it easier and cheaper for the sick to get treatment, or for the winter migration. However, there are worries about the theft and destruction of historical objects and artefacts. Get more details on our website.



Most visited online page

QUOTES



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Nepalis saw scandals at home and strife overseas in 2023. Let us hope the next year will be an improvement.



Sujeev Shakya @sujeevshakya

A good year end review



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

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.



pigreen1 @pigreen1

Nepalis should shun the divisive politics of Hindutva and demand that their politicians seek the common good

1,000 WORDS



HIMAL KHABAR

SOFA DIPLOMACY: India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar arrived on Thursday for an overnight visit to Nepal during which he will discuss bilateral relations with Prime Minister Dahal, inaugurate new crossborder transmission lines and discuss new air routes.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Course Correction

As the year 2003 drew to a close, there was no sign of progress in negotiations between the Palace and the parties, nor the Army and the Maoists. We wrote that if the king and parties carried on as sworn enemies, it would push the parties to join the Maoists in a republican cause, and the conflict could take on an ethnic edge with greater human rights violations. It was almost as if we had foreseen the future.

Nepal has come a long way since to achieve federalism and secularism but poor governance has given rise to populist leaders. We are at risk of losing past gains.

Excerpts from an editorial published 20 years ago this week in issue #176 26 December 2003 - 1 January 2004 urges a much-needed course correction which is even more relevant today:

There is a reckless disregard for public will and national sentiment. When you see power as a zero sum game, there is a 50-50 chance you will lose. To win at all cost, it is tempting then, to use militarisation, religious

fundamentalism, or revert to authoritarianism. But it is no victory if you haven't addressed the grievances that set all this off in the first place: we don't want this to escalate from a class war to an ethnic or separatist conflagration.

It is already too late to set some things right. But future Nepalis will never forgive us if we don't try, even at this late hour, to work towards a Nepal where power is devolved to the periphery -- the only guarantee of lasting peace.

Time is unrelenting, it moves on. Time heals, time manages itself, it takes care of things. We in Nepal have always let time take its course. It is the fatalistic excuse of the feckless to let things drift. Let us, in this new year, take time by its horns. Let us lift ourselves from this quicksand, from a gathering miasma of apathy and hopelessness, to restore faith in our own ability to set things right.

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



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TURKISH AIRLINES

USA

Air passengers at mercy of winter delays

Airlines are not to blame when poor visibility due to pollution closes Nepal's airports

Last month, Nepal's digital media highlighted the news that a Buddha Air flight from Kathmandu to Nepalganj ended up landing in Dhangadi.

Many readers did a double-take because they were misled by a sensational title which suggested that somehow the crew had got the destination wrong. Not that such mistakes have not happened in the past, but this was a simple diversion due to poor visibility at Nepalganj.

Many Nepali media outlets lack aviation literacy, mistaking aircraft models, getting technical details wrong, or using incorrect aviation terminology, for example calling a normal 'go around' procedure an 'overshoot' which is actually a runway excursion by an aircraft.

The Kathmandu-Nepalganj flight U4451 was operated by one of Buddha's ATR-72s and was approaching Nepalganj after a 40 minute flight from Kathmandu when the runway visibility dropped to below minima. The flight crew then decided to land at the alternate airport, Dhangadi which had better visibility and was only 20 minutes away.

A Shree Airlines CRJ700 from Kathmandu to Nepalganj also diverted to Dhangadi for the same reason. Both aircraft returned and landed in Nepalganj after the visibility improved there after a few hours.

As winter sets in, flights are sometimes cancelled due to poor visibility, but more common are delays due to weather conditions. This also leads to traffic congestion at Kathmandu airport, as domestic and international flights have to make instrument approaches, thus leading to mounting delays in arrivals and



Satellite image of Nepal taken on 1 January showing a thick blanket of ground fog covering the Gangetic plains, including the Tarai. Poor visibility has disrupted domestic flight schedules on trunk routes all week.



KUNDA DIXIT

departures throughout the day.

In winter, visibility below minimum at airports is caused by temperature inversion that traps polluted air at ground level. Inversion is especially pronounced in the mornings in Kathmandu, Pokhara and Tarai airports. In fact, at the peak of winter, the entire Indo-Gangetic plains including the Tarai is blanketed by thick fog that does not lift for days.

"Passengers are understandably inconvenienced for having to wait for hours at the airport because of the congestion caused by bad weather, but the airlines have to stick to safety protocols and it is beyond their control," explains Buddha Air's Dipendra Karna.

It is when Kathmandu has to operate under instrument flying rules (IFR) when visibility falls

below 2km that the delays have a domino effect throughout the day. Incoming flights have to hold for an hour or more, and this means outbound flights are also delayed.

Under IFR procedures, incoming flights to Kathmandu can only land from the south on the airport's only runway, and since the taxiway does not extend till the threshold of the 02 end of the runway, incoming planes have to be spaced up to 7 minutes apart.

International flights sometimes have to divert to alternate airports like Delhi or Kolkata because Bhairawa and Pokhara airports are not yet open for diversions.

Buddha Air has a weather map of Nepal at the Kathmandu domestic airport departure lounge with live web cam videos of main airports in the country showing visibility.

Biratnagar, Bhairawa and Nepalganj also face cancellations and delays in winter because of the north Indian fog mixed with smog. Sometimes, flights from Kathmandu to Nepalganj will not be able to fly even if it is clear at the destination because visibility at the alternate airport is below minima.

"Biratnagar may be open, but if Janakpur or Rajbiraj are closed due to visibility, the flight cannot take off from Kathmandu," says Karna. Domestic flights on trunk routes now have a better chance of flying on time if it is a night flight.

Weather-related delays are unavoidable because safety comes first, but operations could be improved with better navigational aids like Instrument Landing System (ILS) or RNAV satellite-based approach guidance. 🇳🇵

NMB BANK
एनएमबी बैंक

Global IME turns 17

Global IME Bank celebrated its 17th anniversary nationwide with a walkathon program. The event was organised in 73 cities across all seven provinces. In Kathmandu the bank's Chair Chandra Prasad Dhakal, Board Members, and over 1,500 employees took part. From 1-31 January, customers can get up to 17% discount and receive up to Rs1,000 cashback for those making more than 10 transactions with VISA debit and credit cards and SCT cards through POS machines.

The bank is also supporting 35 girl students transitioning from class 6 to class 7 in government schools with annual scholarships of Rs12,000 each until class 12. The bank also organised blood donation programs in all seven provinces along with free eye checkup, blood pressure and diabetes examination. 253 staff members were also felicitated for more than 15 years of service to the bank.



Samsung discounts

Samsung has announced price drops of Rs2000 for its five bestselling handheld devices: Galaxy A34 5G, Galaxy A04s, Galaxy A04, Galaxy M14 5G and Galaxy M04. Galaxy A34 5G (8/128 GB) is available for Rs43,999 (Original Rs45,999), and Galaxy A04s (4/128 GB) for Rs19,999 (Original: Rs21,999).

Hyundai New Year

Laxmi Intercontinental has introduced Hyundai New Year Delight 2024 starting 1 January across all Hyundai showrooms. Under this scheme, customers can purchase



any Hyundai model with benefits, including cash discounts of up to Rs50,000. For those opting for KONA and IONIQ 5 EV, a Go-Green bonus of up to Rs50,000 is offered.

MG EV

The MG brand's four-wheelers gained attention after a MG ZS EV vehicle bearing the registration number 01-027 KHA1581 caught fire at Deuba Chowk, Budhanilkantha on 25 December. Following the incident report, a technical team from the company investigated the site on the same day. As per the local authorities and the company, the fire originated due to a sudden electric wire short-circuit while the vehicle was charging.



Indira IVF

Indira IVF of India has opened its first center in Kathmandu. Founder Ajay Murdia underscored the clinic's commitment to bridging the gap in accessible, affordable, and specialised infertility treatments in Nepal.

Tata carnival

Sripadi Trading is set to organise Fun Carnival 3.0, offering customers the opportunity to exchange their old vehicles for Tata's advanced technology Nexon EV and Tiago EV. Customers can participate in the event at Tata Motors showrooms in Thapathali, Maharajganj, Balkumari, Radhe Radhe, Bhaktapur, Itahari, and Dhangadhi from 5-7 January.

Foodmandu fest

Foodmandu has introduced its New Year Feast offer as per which customers can get a discount of upto 30% on the entire menu of more than 40 restaurants in Kathmandu. Customers can also get discount vouchers on the Foodmandu app and Facebook page. The offer is valid till 31 January.



Daayitwa MoU

Daayitwa, Governance Lab, and Nepali Academics in America (NACA) have agreed to enhance evidence-based decision-making through research and partnerships between the Nepali diaspora and the public sector. It aims to empower youth, promote inclusive prosperity, and institutionalise youth voices to strengthen Nepal's governance system.

Foton EV Van

Foton has launched its High Roof EV Van in Nepal. Priced at Rs57,00,000, the EV vans are European Union WTA-certified vehicles, tested and inspected by the renowned German organization TÜV Rheinland. The High Roof EV Van has an 85kW power, spacious interior, and full AC.



Saving kidneys to save Nepal

How to urgently address and better navigate the epidemic of renal failures in the country

■ Rishi Kumar Kafle

At the National Kidney Centre in Kathmandu, a substantial number of the staggering 800 patients who come for regular kidney dialysis are migrant returnees from the Gulf and Malaysia.

Last month alone, 90% of the 90,000 Nepalis who went abroad were migrant workers. Most of them went to West Asia. They are healthy when they leave, but are exposed to extreme temperatures, and many return with ruined kidneys.

Nepal is suffering an epidemic of renal failure due to the workers' continuous exposure to excessive heat, chronic dehydration, harsh work environment, and the tendency to go for energy drinks immediately after returning from work. The problem will get worse in coming decades with non-survivable wet-bulb summer temperatures in the countries where Nepali migrants work.

Truth be told, renal failure is not confined to migrant workers. Increasingly high numbers of young Nepalis are suffering from lifestyle-related ailments. Individuals as young as 25 are living with high blood pressure, fatty liver, and diabetes.

In the past 40 years, Nepal has seen a dramatic transformation from a country with mortality mostly from infectious diseases to one where people are living longer but are dying due to lifestyle-related ailments. A 2019 study by the Nepal Health Research Council found that non-communicable diseases accounted for 71% of deaths in the country.

Diabetes, high blood pressure, and the irrational use of painkillers are some of the main reasons behind this. Kidney failure can be prevented if diabetes and hypertension are controlled in the initial stages.

Renal health is very much linked to the quality of life and economy. Patients do not suffer alone, often they are the sole



NEPALI TIMES ARCHIVE

breadwinners and their condition will greatly impact their families.

As per the World Health Organisation, 10% of Nepal's total population (300,000 people) suffer from kidney issues, 30,000 of them are in the final stage, and 3,000 need dialysis or transplant every year.

The increasing burden of non-communicable diseases is a global phenomenon but developing countries like Nepal face a double whammy as we continue to battle preventable infections too.

The chances of survival for people suffering from renal failure are slim, but the good news is that the government provides dialysis and transplantation services for free.

Currently, over 90 health facilities throughout the country provide free dialysis services to over 6,000 patients with renal failure. Over 3,000 patients have undergone

kidney transplants since the service started about a decade ago, including a former prime minister and other senior government officials.

Every year Nepal spends Rs2.11 billion on the treatment of patients with renal failure. Local governments also provide monthly livelihood allowances to those with kidney failure or undergoing transplants. This is the highest amount the government has been spending for any single disease.

Even so, the focus is on the treatment of the 3,000 people living with kidney failure, and scant attention has been paid to 270,000 others who suffer from some sort of kidney disease, and another 270,000 who are at risk of kidney disease.

Providing free dialysis service is not a sustainable solution. Authorities concerned should promote prevention, and encourage

renal failure patients to opt for transplants. Despite the legal provision that allows any immediate family to donate a kidney, many with renal failure cannot find one.

Road traffic accidents are one of the biggest causes of deaths today and a kidney from brain-dead donors is a viable option. But this requires increased awareness about organ donation.

Preventing kidney disease is the best way, and the first step is to launch awareness campaigns, the cost of which is minimal compared to the treatment cost of renal patients.

The public should be told about the dangers of obesity, excessive consumption of alcohol, tobacco, salt, and junk food as well as insufficient intake of vegetables and fruits. Regular exercise, drinking plenty of water, and cutting on sugar should be promoted.

Screening is crucial to early diagnosis and a lot of lives can be saved if testing for non-communicable diseases is made free once a year for all age groups. Even then, most Nepalis do not undergo tests unless it is an emergency.

The government has established laboratories at the health post level to carry out the test, but very few make use of the service. People can monitor protein levels in urine and do a creatinine test, a measure that shows how well one's kidneys are performing or filtering waste from blood. The tests cost just Rs100.

Above all, these awareness campaigns should be launched at the school and community levels so that we have an early chance to save every kidney from severe damage. Before things get worse, we Nepalis and Nepal can bring down the burden of non-communicable diseases, cut medical costs, and save lives. ■

Rishi Kumar Kafle is a senior nephrologist and is the founding President of the National Kidney Center in Kathmandu.

BEST OF TWO WORLDS

TOYOTA HYBRID ELECTRIC

10,000 BRIDGES

Nepal's foot bridges have evolved from being essential for connectivity to also becoming tourist attractions

Seventy years ago, when Swiss geologist Toni Hagen explored Nepal, he had to walk because there were no roads. But the most difficult part was crossing rivers because the foot bridges either did not exist or were dangerous.

Nepal's valleys were separated from each other not just by mountains, but also by raging Himalayan rivers. Villagers asked Hagen to help bridge the gap so they could be connected to markets and to other villages.

With the help of the Swiss government and the group Helvetas, the 10,000th trail bridge has been built, with 740 in the past year alone. Much of the original Swiss engineering design for the bridges has been passed on to Nepali companies through technology transfer.

Nepal's trail bridges program is a model of how development projects can be sustainable through long-term collaborative effort. This has led to innovations that have transformed the lives of some 19 million Nepalis nationwide by reducing drudgery and travel time. More than 1 million students, farmers, health workers, trekkers and porters use the bridges every day. Even livestock use them to get to greener pastures on the other side.

The program is also a testament to the power of collaboration and innovation between Nepal and Switzerland. Its success in scaling-up across the entire country and adapting it to the new local governments have magnified the benefits.

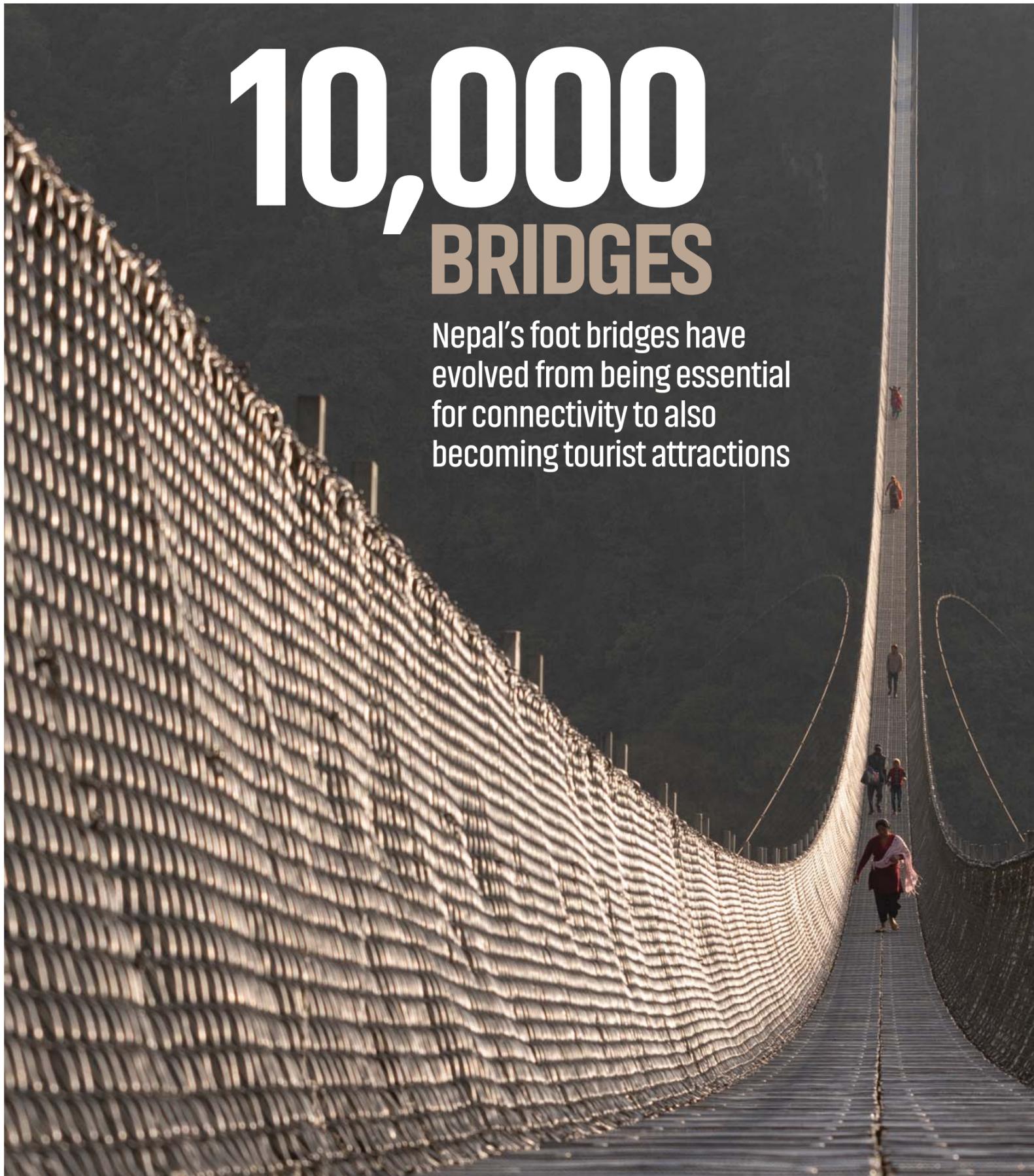
The first trail bridges were built during the Rana period, with 29 steel bridges manufactured in Scotland erected between 1846-1950. Some of them are still standing to this day. Based on Toni Hagen's recommendations, the Suspension Bridge Division (SBD) was set up by the government with the support from Swiss Association for Technical Assistance (SATA).

Each bridge took three years to design and build, compared to 18 months today. Only 10 bridges were built in the 1970s and 25 in the 1980s, but things picked up after that. A milestone was the scaling-up of the Bridge Building at Local Level (BBLL) technology and community approach supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and implemented by Helvetas in 1989. This led to 100 bridges being built every year by incorporating indigenous cable bridge technology and simpler engineering.

The first Trail Bridge Strategy in 2006 was a major milestone as it set a national target that no citizen had to walk a detour of more than 1 hour in the absence of safe river crossing. Short Span Trail Bridges of up to 120m were constructed through Users' Committees and Long Span Trail Bridges with longer spans needing contractors. A survey showed that Nepal needed 6,000 additional trail bridges.

Nepal launched two phases of the Trail Bridge Sector Wide Approach Framework (2009-2019) under which nearly 4,000 new bridges were built with other donors also stepping in.

After the promulgation of the new Constitution in 2015, local governments were given the responsibility of supervising new bridge construction and it saw a boom. The Swiss were still involved to backstop the local institutions despite initial scepticism that municipalities had the capacity to undertake the job.



At 567 metres, the Gandaki Golden Footbridge is Nepal's longest single-span trail bridge, connecting Kushma of Parbat district to Baglung district. This bridge has become a popular selfie spot for visitors.

But by 2019, over 8,000 bridges had been completed, and a review showed that 2,400 more bridges would be needed to fulfil the national target before the Swiss concluded their involvement.

There are significant milestones in the six decades of Swiss involvement in Nepal's trail bridges program:

Design, Engineering and Standardisations: The development of standardised short span and long span technology and construction modalities were important in building cost-effective designs that could be scaled-up throughout the country. Handbooks with specifications were produced.

Domestic Fabrication: The Swiss Association for Technical Assistance (SATA) was instrumental in the 1960s in supporting the Nepal Industrial Development Corporation (NIDC) to establish the Balaju Yantra Shala (BYS), the first engineering workshop. Domestic fabrication of steel bridge parts eliminated the need for imports from India. Former BYS staff went on to establish private workshops outside Kathmandu for bridge parts. There are now 33 fabricators across all 7 provinces which manufacture parts for 900 bridges annually.

Main Trail Maps: The development and publication of district Main



The Upallo Timure suspension bridge in Pokhara's Hemja.



Young women cross the Bhadakhola bridge with their bicycles in Bardia.



Before suspension bridges, many villagers crossed rivers on 'tuin' baskets dangling on wires that they pulled by hand.



Three bridges across the Kali Gandaki and its tributary in Gyadi of Kushma.



People film Tik Tok videos on the three-way Ridi trail bridge connecting Gulmi, Palpa, and Syangja.



Female engineers train to build trail bridges.



Trail and Central Service Maps through Swiss support in 1985 also contributed greatly towards the country's overall development planning. The maps identified main and local trail networks that linked strategic central places.

Domestic Galvanisation: Wooden walkway decks were the weakest component in the traditional bridge design. They needed to be replaced frequently and were replaced by galvanised steel plates in 1995. Maintenance cost was reduced.

Foundations and Walkways: Trail bridge designs were further updated after the 2015 earthquake. Some 79 bridges were damaged out of the then 6,000 built till then. After an in-depth study of the damaged bridges, designs were refined to increase seismic resistance. Pile foundation and wider walkways in designs for the Tarai were introduced in 2009 for motorcycles and three-wheelers.

Enhancing Engineering Knowledge: Elective courses were introduced at the Bachelor of Civil Engineering with academic institutions to institutionalise trail bridge building since the early 2000s with 30 students now graduating every year with trail bridge know-how. Bridge building was also introduced as a regular course for Assistant Sub-Engineers

through vocational training centres. Over 6,000 local bridge crafts-persons (30% women) have been trained in trail bridge building.

Quality Control and Maintenance: Quality monitoring has been formalised in the Comprehensive Manual on Monitoring of Trail Bridges since 2009. All fabricated bridge parts are assembled to ensure that they are fabricated as per the design. Cement quality is also tested, with the list of brands that have passed uploaded to the official website for reference. Currently, over 1,000 trail bridges are under construction in Nepal annually and these are monitored through four monitoring information systems.

Bridges to Federalisation: Swiss technical assistance for trail bridge building will end in November 2023, when local municipalities and provinces will take over. Provincial Technical Assistance Providers (PTAPs) will work with provincial governments to continue providing technical assistance and monitoring for bridge construction independently. Provinces now have their own Trail Bridge Strategy which has increased the target to bring the detour time for people walking for essential services to 30 minutes (from the previous 1 hour) in the National Strategy. 🇳🇵

Adapted from Trail bridge evolution in Nepal: Scaling up to reach the 10,000th bridge, SDC.

ALL PHOTOS: TBSU / SDC

EVENTS

**All things wood**

Media Space Solutions and Futurex Trade Fairs are hosting the Nepal Wood International Expo, Nepal International Furniture, and Home Décor Expo featuring furnishing, machinery, and products for the global market.
20-22 January, Bhrikutimandap

Womanhood

Visual artist Pramila Bajracharya's works will be on display at the upcoming exhibition Womanhood at Gallery Mcube.
29 December 2023- 17 January 2024, Gallery Mcube, Patan

**Uday Charan Shrestha**

Uday Charan Shrestha solo exhibition that has been running in the Museum of Nepali Art has been extended for one more week.
7 January, Museum of Nepali Art, Thamel

Centre of culture

Enjoy a day featuring music, dance, roll calls, and games with family. Also shop from various vendors and support local businesses.
15 January, 12 pm onwards, Chhaya Center, Thamel

**Crochet and creativity**

Bask in the sun and experiment with art, creativity, writing and crochet in Lalitpur in the coming days.
4-15 January, 11 am - 3pm, Studio 18, Swotha

DINING

**Chez Caroline**

Tucked away from the street noise and fumes, this is the place to visit for authentic French and continental cuisine in Nepal. Try the Profiteroles au Chocolat and Choux pastry filled with vanilla ice cream and hot chocolate sauce.
Baber Mahal Revisited (01) 5363070

MUSIC

Open mic

Take friends along and perform voluntarily every Wednesday at Calm's open mic session. Make reservations at the restaurant's counter.
Calm, Tangalwood

**W for Wednesday**

Ladies, shake away the mid-week slump with girlfriends, live music, and drinks every Wednesday.
Wednesday, London Pub, Durbar Marg

**Thrashmandu**

With a lineup featuring Insulter from Germany, Sabotage from India, and local bands Warheads and Black Mamba, Thrashmandu is set to make a return to Kathmandu.
4 January, Rs500, Khatra Bar, Thamel

**Music and movements**

This year, introduce kids aged 5 to 10 to music and movements, a class that features music theories, games, group classes and vocal training.
Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory, Chababhill

Striving to stay

The bands Strangle, Youth Unite, and Total Menace will come together for an evening of punk music. Call for details.
13 January, 4pm, Namaste Pub, Narsingh Chowk Marg, 9849083849

**Fire and Ice**

One of the first pizzerias in Kathmandu, Fire and Ice offers pizza, antipasti and dozens of variants to choose from. Try the rompicalle with mozzarella, tomato sauce, spicy meat sauce, chilies and coriander.
Thamel (01) 5350210

Kairos Cafe

With a customisable breakfast, a variety of juicy burgers and an assortment of Italian, Spanish and English cuisine, Kairos Cafe is a must for foodies.
Jawalakhel, 9813493902

About Town

GETAWAY

**Temple Tree**

Surrounded by peaks, serene foothills and a lake, Temple Tree Resort and Spa is the place to be for a weekend getaway. While there, make use of the spa amenities.
Gaurighat, Lakeside, Pokhara (061) 455819

The Old Inn

This bed and breakfast place offers a scenic view of Annapurna, Langtang and beyond. With its traditional Newa architecture, the timber and brick design is reminiscent of old Newa houses.
Bandipur, Tanahu, 9808882270

**The Inn Patan**

What was once a traditional brick and timber Newa house has been transformed into a heritage hotel. Experience the history of Patan Darbar Square during a stay at The Inn Patan.
Patan (01) 5447834

Barahi Jungle Lodge

The first eco-jungle lodge in Chitwan directly overlooks Chitwan National Park and features a spa, boutique guest rooms, individual and two-in-one private villas, as well as a suite with a private swimming pool.
Megauli, Chitwan, 9866300265

**Club Himalaya**

Club Himalaya is a blend of natural and modern with its cosy accommodations and dining services. A bonus: guests can view the sunrise and sunset the private balcony of each room.
Nagarkot, 9801321201

Cibo Bistro

If you're heading to Cibo Bistro, be prepared to leave feeling full. The carefully curated menu of pastas, pizzas, salads, appetizers and desserts will have diners wanting to try every single dish.
Pulchok (01) 5541940

**Le Sherpa**

With a focus on seasonal and local vegetables and fruits, the Le Sherpa's chef creates a seasonal menu. Try fresh homemade ravioli with Dolpa morels.
Maharajgunj (01) 4528604

WEEKEND WEATHER

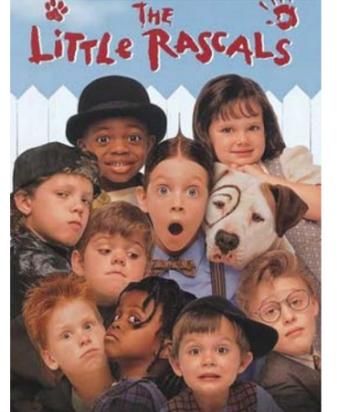
**No rain on horizon**

A series of westerly fronts will be sweeping across central and northern India in the coming days. But this will not bring Nepal much needed winter rain, let alone cloud cover. The temperature in Kathmandu is coming down to more normal levels, although the minimum is still above normal due to the heat island effect. Thick fog mixed with smoke will persist across northern India and the Tarai (satellite image on Thursday morning), affecting flights.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
18° 4°	18° 4°	18° 4°

OUR PICK

The Little Rascals, a 1994 comedy film directed by Penelope Spheeris, recounts the escapades of a bunch of neighborhood kids. They embark on a journey to save their clubhouse from demolition and to assist their friend Alfalfa gain the affections of his sweetheart, Darla. The film is filled with funny antics and youthful companionship, and shows the youngsters' playful pursuits as well as their struggles to overcome hurdles. The Little Rascals is a beloved family-friendly classic adored for its charm and nostalgic appeal, thanks to its light-hearted tale and recognisable characters.



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

Karnali to Korea dream dashed in Kathmandu

Desperation to migrate collides with excessive police force

■ Dhanu Bishwakarma

Sujan Rawat, 23, had come to Kathmandu from Dailekh in Karnali province in hopes of somehow making it to Korea to pay off family debt. His dreams and that of his family back home were dashed last Friday on the Ring Road in Kathmandu.

He was one of the two aspirants hoping to go to Korea who were killed in a police charge at Balkumari in Lalitpur.

Applicants for Korea jobs had gathered at the Korean Employment Permit System (EPS) office in Balkumari to protest a recent decision that disallowed them from applying for a mandatory Korean language test.

The angry protesters set fire to the car of Physical Infrastructure and Transport Minister Prakash Jwala (pictured, right). As the violence intensified, riot police was deployed and they charged the agitators with batons, also firing tear gas and rubber bullets.

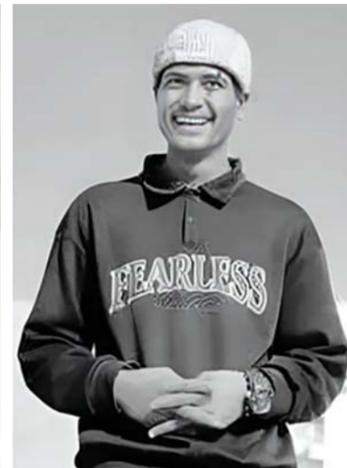
Rawat had left his room earlier in the morning looking for his older brother who had also joined the protest. Having arrived in Kathmandu just a week before, Rawat did not know his way around but managed to reach Balkumari.

Rawat was just walking on his side of the road when the police suddenly charged at him, said Roshan Katuwal, a relative.

"He wasn't there to protest, he was minding his own business when the police took him for one of the demonstrators," he told Nepali Times. "A heavy blow to his chest



SUMAN NEPALI



Sujan Rawat (left) and Birendra Shah (right).

is what killed him."

Rawat was taken to nearby KIST Hospital but there wasn't much doctors could do to save his life.

"He was brought in unconscious at 12:40PM, he succumbed to his injuries at 1:17PM while undergoing treatment," Amish Pathak, executive officer of KIST Hospital, told us. "He had a blue bruise on his chest."

Rawat had followed his older brother to Kathmandu from Dailekh Bazar where his family ran a small shop. But when his father was diagnosed with a brain tumor, the family could not afford treatment. They incurred debts, the responsibility of which had fallen on Rawat to clear.

"His father passed away less than a year ago and now this has befallen the family," added Katuwal. Rawat has a mother, a younger sister and a brother back

home who had pinned all their hopes on Rawat.

Rawat himself wanted to continue his studies after high school but his family situation meant he didn't see any other option than to migrate overseas to pay off the loans.

As soon as he reached Kathmandu, Rawat enrolled himself in a Korean language class and was preparing for the EPS exam.

Birendra Shah, 22, of Achham was seriously injured in the police charge on 29 December 2023 and taken to Patan Hospital, but he died during treatment.

On Tuesday, bodies of both Rawat and Shah were sent to their families back in their hometowns.

The government has announced Rs1 million in compensation for the families of Rawat and Shah, as well as suspension of the key security officials involved until further

investigations.

The Cabinet on Sunday formed a three-member inquiry commission to investigate the incident, led by former high court judge Shekhar Paudel and including former AIG Arun BC and Joint Secretary of the Home Ministry Narayan Prasad Bhattarai. Meanwhile, police on Sunday released 73 individuals arrested during the protest.

The protest was triggered by a notice published by the EPS office which stated that for applicants to be eligible to apply for the test, they should not have done so in 2023.

Following the notice, 12 individuals filed a writ in the Patan High Court on 28 December. The single bench of Judge Chandramani Gyawali gave an interim order not to stop anyone from filling out the application form for the Korean language test, stating that it was a violation of their rights.

The court's order states, '... as the petition presented by these petitioners will be addressed during the final hearing, from the point of view of the irreparable damage to the petitioners and inconvenience, it is not reasonable to deprive the petitioners of filling the application form, and interested persons of the same nature as the petitioners...'

Per the order, all the agitating youths will now be able to apply for the EPS exam. But Rawat and Shah will have lost their lives in vain.

There are about 80,000 Nepali labour migrants in Korea, where there is better salary and labour rights than in the Gulf.

Which is why there is such high demand from Nepali migrants for jobs in Korea. The EPS exam system is supposed to streamline the selection process, but it ended up costing the lives of two promising young men. 🇳🇵

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THE MARGINALISED ON THE MARGINS



ALL PHOTOS: SONIA AWALE

Two Nepali families on either side of a path suffer from state neglect, but one is much doing better. Why?

■ Sonia Awale in Lumbini

Bijay Prakash Netuwa, 40, has been to Saudi Arabia twice. But all the money he earned was not enough to pay off his debts, build a house for his family of six, or prevent his wife and daughter from continuing their ancestral occupation of begging.

The Netuwa are nomadic people who roamed across northern India and are now settled in Lumbini and Madhes Provinces in Nepal's Tarai plains. Some 56 families have made Shuddhodhan Rural Municipality here their home, a 45-minute drive from the Buddha's nativity site.

Legally, Netuwa people do not own land but here they have built thatched huts in an area allocated by the government. However, they still roam the surrounding villages with their families, striking camp to perform music and dance in return for rice and money. Afterwards, the children go to school.

"We have no land or property, but what's the point of raising children and educating them if they are going to end up begging like us," points out Mantola Netuwa, 38, wife of Bijay Prakash.

Bijay Prakash takes every day-labour job he comes across, but it is not enough to make ends meet. He does not yet have a voter ID. He has built a one-room house, but it does not even have a real door and or windows yet. It is dark inside, the kitchen's mud stove is outside with

a makeshift roof. There is no toilet, no running water.

Just across from the Netuwa home is a more prosperous looking concrete house. Sati Prasad Yadav, 47, and Deepa Bhurtel, 40, have a toilet, running water, cable tv and even wifi. They vote in elections, and plan to add a fridge in the kitchen.

The couple has a son in India who sends money home to his parents regularly, and makes video calls on their smartphone. They rely on Facebook and YouTube for news. Deepa is educated enough not to want to change her surname after she had an inter-ethnic marriage with Sati Prasad.

The Netuwa and Yadav-Bhurtel families are just separated by a path, but they represent the layers of marginalisation within Nepali families living in the periphery. They are coexisting, but are worlds apart.

Much of the rest of this village is made up of 200 of the 1,300 Netuwa people in Kapilvastu and Rupandehi districts bordering India. They speak Avadhi and Hindi but the younger school-going generation now also speak Nepali.

At present, the government recognises Netuwa as Madhesi Dalits and the last census put their number at 2,896. But that number also includes populations in Bara, Parsa, Sarlahi and Parasi where interestingly they identify themselves as Muslim.

The community has pinned its hope on being listed as one of Nepal government's endangered indigenous communities, which they believe will make them eligible for government grants and facilities.

Netuwas are doubly marginalised since they are also ostracised for their 'begging' tradition. The community is trying to move away from its ancestral occupation, and some are playing music at weddings and festivals

instead to make a living. Others harvest wild honey or have become experts at rescuing snakes.

"For as long as I can remember, for all of our six generations, we have been begging. But for the first time my son got a job as a teacher under the quota system, only to be fired three years later," says Prahlad Netuwa of Mayadevi Municipality. "We have no voice, we have no jobs and the government in Kathmandu, K P Oli, Prachanda, they only want votes. They do not care for people on the margins like us."

Krishna Netuwa, 17, completed his Grade 10 but was not able to get a certificate because he did not even have Rs3,000 for the fee. Krishna had been begging most of his life, but also does occasional construction jobs, making about Rs500 on such days. His parents do not have jobs, and he takes care of seven younger siblings.

"People curse at us, ask us why have we reduced ourselves to begging when we can work, but only we know the pain of having to beg despite being educated, it is killing us internally," he says. "But we have no support system, least of all not from this uncaring government."

Elsewhere in the neighbouring villages of Motibhar and Ganariya, almost every family has someone in the Gulf, Malaysia or India. Most of the houses here are concrete and freshly painted, some with perimeter walls and black metal gates.

Amrik Kumar, 27, is preparing to go to Qatar as a plumber, and has taken a loan of Rs300,000 to afford an air ticket and pay the recruiter. He worked in a furniture company in Malaysia for seven years previously.

"I bought some land with the money I earned in Malaysia and built a nice home for my family," says Kumar, who is now a father of three, as he takes us to his new house, a one-storey concrete structure. Next to the building lies

a thatched roof structure where his elderly parents still live.

Kumar's oldest brother passed away due to a sudden heart attack a couple of years ago, forcing his young sons to grow up early. Both of them are now working in India. The rest of Kumar's brothers are also in the Gulf or Malaysia.

Remittance money has also allowed families here in the Chamar and Harijan Dalit communities to afford boarding schools for their sons that cost Rs1,100 per month. Girls are also educated and even outspoken, they tell visitors frankly about the lack of teachers in their colleges. They say they are getting their lessons on YouTube instead.

Most want to pursue higher studies but child marriage is still prevalent. The boys mostly drop out of school for jobs abroad.

"We still face discrimination for being Dalit, even in school, although it is not as visible as it was back then," says 18-year-old Mamta Harijan. "But as girls, we are discriminated against in our own home, boys are sent to private boarding schools. We aren't."

Unlike Netuwa, Chamars are not landless but they cannot cultivate their land because of a chronic water shortage. The water in the wells is not sufficient even for daily household use, let alone irrigation. They know this is happening because those with pumps are overusing the ground water.

Villages here have been demanding quality education in public schools and colleges, employment for women, irrigation, and better healthcare as alternatives to labour migration at high-interest loans but the government has ignored their voices, they say.

Because the nearby health post and even the hospital do not have anything more than basic drugs, locals also have to go to India and spend a fortune on medical treatment.

Says retired teacher Ram Prasad Baran: "This country has had so many governments, several constitutions but have they ever been for us? This is a country run by upper-caste people for their own interests."

Dalits and Muslims bear the brunt of statelessness

JANAKPUR -- Their forefathers were dacoits, and now this is a village full of migrant workers. Janakpur's Jhijha village, 17km away from the Indian border in Nepal's southern plains, is going through perhaps its most dramatic demographic shift in its history.

Too much water in the monsoon and too little in the dry season has made agriculture less viable for a majority of farming families here. Wages for daily labour are too little, and there are no other jobs.

Many have migrated to India, and those who can pay recruiters have gone to the Gulf or Malaysia. But the largely uneducated Dalits and Muslims at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder are struggling.

"At the very least if the flooding in the area could be controlled, we could till our own lands and increase productivity. Maybe an embankment or irrigation," says local Dalit leader Jay Prakash Paswan. "We have been left to our own devices, the government hasn't given us anything, they just built us a temple. If anyone has built anything here it is because of their earning from abroad."

Social ostracisation and discrimination make matters worse, especially for the community's women. Child marriage is common. Parents fear that exposure to social media will lead their daughters to elope, so they marry them off early.



CYCLE OF LIFE: (clockwise) Mantola Netuwa and husband Bijay Prakash Netuwa with their house in the background. Bijay Prakash has been to Saudi Arabia twice but earnings weren't sufficient to prevent their ancestral occupation of begging.

Mina Harijan, 20, with her three-year-old daughter. Her husband, also 20, is unemployed and alcoholic. Child marriage is still prevalent in these parts of Madhes.

Muslims in Janakpur say they fear for their safety because of the rising influence of Hindutva from across the border in Tarai.

Deepa Bhurtel and her husband Sati Prasad Yadav live right across the Netuwas but they have a toilet, running water, cable tv and even wifi unlike the nomadic couple.

Underage couples are unable to register their marriage and births of children, which means their kids cannot get citizenship papers and jobs. The nearest hospital is quite a distance away, most women give birth at home.

For most of the young men here, labour migration is the only option they see to uplift their standard of living. But even then, they do not have money of their own to afford to go abroad. They borrow from local loan sharks who charge them very high interest rates.

"We need to pay Rs400,000 to manpower people for an overseas job, but we don't make that kind of money here, and we do not have skills," says Biswonath Paswan. "Even when migrant workers come back they are still paying interest. So we end up going to India for menial jobs."

Rabi Paswan, 20, has finished high school but sees no prospect for himself in the village and wants to go to India to make something of himself. He says: "I have no job, nothing. Most of my friends have left, or are planning to."

Tarai is not geographically

remote like Karnali or Far West but what holds the Madhes Province back is gender discrimination and an entrenched caste system. Female literacy in the province is also lowest in the whole of Nepal.

Many people in the bordering towns of Nepal's Tarai still do not have citizenship. In Lohma, a predominantly Muslim community, a local explained with tears in his eyes how district bureaucrats demanded Rs20,000 for citizenship papers.

"I'm a farmer, I barely make enough to meet my family's demands. How could I pay that much for something that should have been my birthright?" asks Mohammad Kalam, 43. "They said I can get a citizenship card in two days if I paid that amount. A Nepali has to pay for his own citizenship, what kind of country are we living in?"

Across Nepal, the voice for a Hindu state is gaining momentum with increasing influence from across the border in India where Prime Minister Narendra Modi is contesting the 2024 general election on the Hindutva platform. The effect of that is already palpable here in the border region.

Leaders in Nepal have further inflamed the situation, leading to a volatile mixture of religion and politics.

"Never before had we faced communal discrimination, for as long as we remember Hindus and Muslims have coexisted harmoniously but now we fear for our safety," says Mohammad Mubarak Hussain, adding that easy access to India makes it also easier to bring in pro-Hindutva elements from across the border.

He adds: "There are extremists in both religions making things worse. But this is when we really need our government to calm things down, not to take political benefit from stoking religious tensions." 🇳🇵



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उत्कृष्ट बैंकिङ्ग सबैका लागि

ग्लोबल आइएमई बैंकको १७ वर्षको यो यात्रामा निरन्तर साथ, सहयोग र शुभेच्छा प्रदान गर्नुहुने सम्पूर्ण ग्राहकवर्ग, शेयरधनी, नियमनकारी निकाय, कर्मचारी तथा शुभेच्छुकहरुमा हृदयदेखि नै कृतज्ञता व्यक्त गर्दै आगामी दिनहरुमा पनि यहाँहरुको साथ लिँदै अझ उत्कृष्ट बैंकिङ्ग सेवा दिँदै जाने प्रतिबद्धता व्यक्त गर्दछौं ।

