

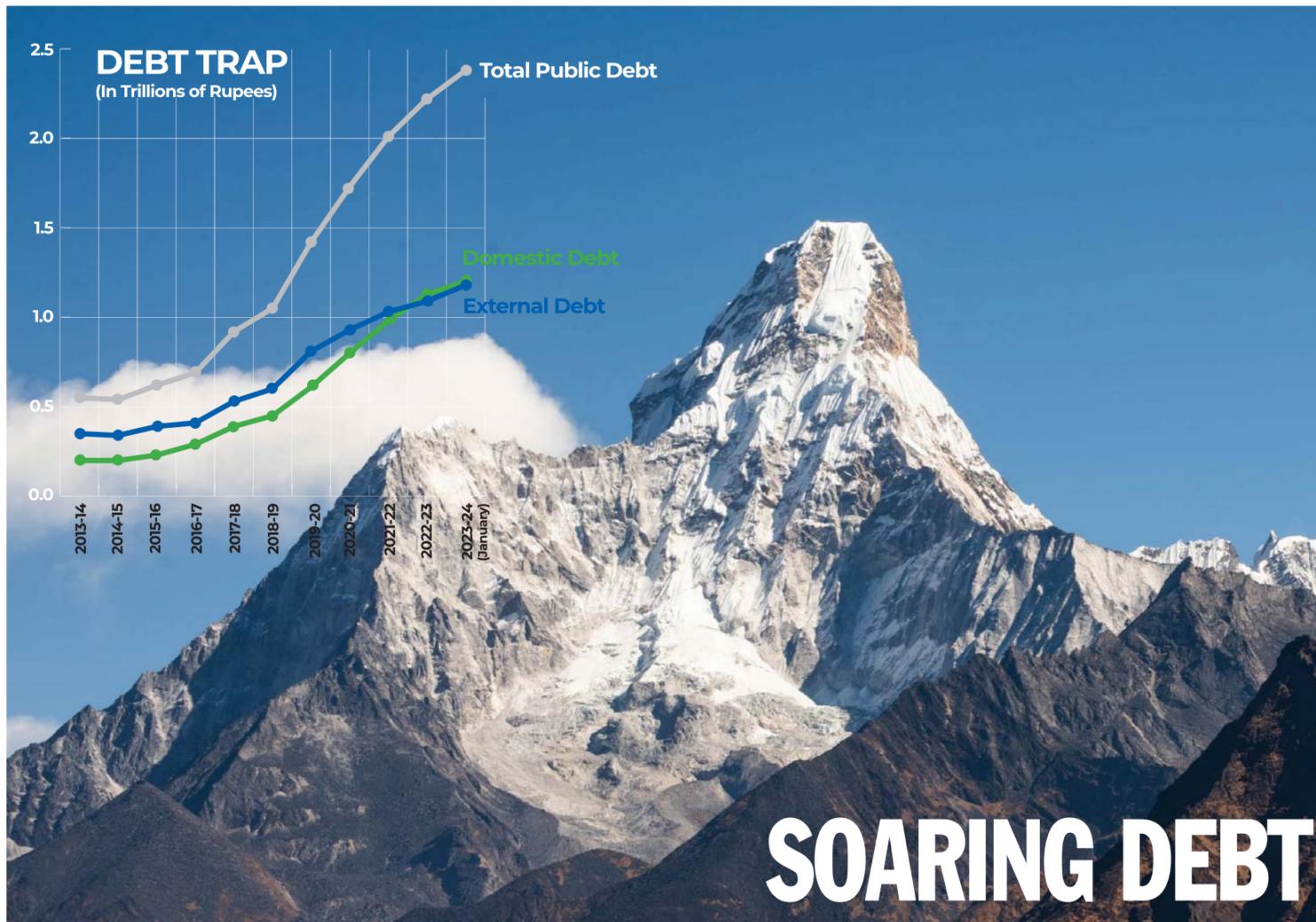


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## SOARING DEBT

KONSTANTINOS SOFIKITIS

Nepal's public debt quadrupled in the last eight years, growing from Rs540 billion after the earthquake in 2015 to Rs2.38 trillion this month, half of it external debt. It now makes up over 44% of the country's GDP.

The revenue growth rate fell in the last fiscal year, reducing capacity to cover expenditure. The government is attempting to compensate by borrowing from within and outside the country.

Officials have attributed Nepal's debt load to post-earthquake reconstruction, a bloated federal machinery, and the pandemic.

This year, the government earmarked Rs330 billion to pay back domestic and external loans and interest, which is more than 18% of the budget. Another Rs302 billion is for capital expenditure.

Nepal has reached a point where it is now borrowing more money to pay back its debt. Of the Rs162 billion borrowed internally and externally since last July, Rs116 billion was spent on loan repayment.

While Nepal's debt burden is still significantly less than India or Japan, for instance, the difference is that debt-financed projects in Nepal have not yielded tangible returns.

The \$120 million Prime Minister's Employment Program funded by the World Bank was declared 'unproductive' by the Auditor General. The Bank itself found that funds had been misused in the Project for Agriculture Commercialisation and Trade (PACT). The Rs1.5 billion Chobhar Dry Port is in limbo.

Agriculture imports continue to grow despite loans from the World Bank and the IFAD. The Rs22 billion Pokhara International Airport funded by China's Exim Bank, and Bhairawa Airport built with an ADB loan have no international flights.

Another ADB scheme, the Melamchi Water Supply Project cost more than Rs35 billion, but supply is still cut after a flood destroyed its headworks in 2021. The proposed Rs25 billion dam on the Nagmati also financed by the ADB has been called extravagant and risky by critics (page 10-11).

"Loans are currently being wasted on unproductive projects," says economist Nara Bahadur Thapa. "As debt increases, the government's spending on citizens decreases, leading to more public disillusionment."

Nepal's governments have not just poured borrowed money into high-risk, low-reward projects, but unnecessary ones like view towers, city halls and minister's villas (Editorial, page 2). Meanwhile, health, education, agriculture, drinking water, and roads remain in a state of permanent neglect.

"Nepalis are not aware of the country's debt burden, but are concerned about the government's mishandling and wastage of loans," says former Finance Ministry Secretary Rameshore Khanal.

The debt burden reduces the government's ability to spend on development, and passes on the debt to future generations. "Domestic debt is similar to a tax that we are forcing on our grandchildren," says Khanal.

Some economists say a debt of up to 50% of GDP is normal for a country like Nepal. Finance

Ministry spokesperson Dhani Ram Sharma says most foreign loans are low-interest and subsidised, but concedes that the government has wasted funds on projects that did not guarantee returns.

"The ministry has become more sensitive to risks associated with securing internal as well as foreign loans without designating the funds to a particular project and ensuring maximum returns," says Sharma.

Economist Biswo Poudel says that although Nepal's public debt is not yet unmanageable, planners must exercise caution while borrowing, control wasteful expenses and take initiatives to increase revenue and prevent revenue leakage.

Poudel says the priority should be a debt cap, more care should be given to what loans are for, not to borrow indiscriminately and be profligate.

"If the debt continues to grow without increase in revenue, the economy will be unsustainable," he adds, "it will be like a Ponzi scheme where we take new loans to pay off old ones."

Ramesh Kumar



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# Development = Destruction

Even before the controversy over Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC) building football fields in Khula Manch had died down, New Road traders this week closed shutters in protest against the city's street parking ban.

The two are linked. Mayor Balen Shah's original plan was to make a three-storey underground parking lot at Khula Manch. We believe he has not abandoned that idea, and the football field will be on top of that enormous structure.

KMC previously imposed similar bans at Darbar Marg, New Baneswor and Bagh Bazar. Following a public outcry, Mayor Balen came up with underground parking solutions like the one at Dharara, the half-built Kathmandu Tower, and other business complexes.

But it is easy to see what this means: systematic encroachment of the last remaining open space in Kathmandu and a misguided notion of 'development'.

Mayor Balen is a rapper and a structural engineer. He therefore has only engineering solutions to congestion. Open spaces are critical during disasters, as we saw in the 2015 earthquake. He should also know that Tundikhel is integral to recharging Kathmandu's fast depleting aquifers.

The Mayor's other solution to solving traffic was to get his high-handed urban commandos to commit atrocities on street vendors. Development is not about structures, it is about people.

Mayor Balen's notion of a 'park' is not a section of the city preserved in its natural state, but a 'parking lot'. The quality of development in a city is determined by how inclusive it is. The measure of progress is not one person in a SUV stuck in traffic, but 40 passengers whizzing along on a bus lane.

Distorted development it is not just happening in cities. The kind of haphazard infrastructure and wanton development going on nationwide will not just bankrupt the country, but hurt citizens — especially as climate breakdown in the Himalaya unleashes multiple disasters.

But local governments are busy building 20m high view towers on peaks already 3,000m above sea level. Nepal's gate fetish is spreading unabated, and the latest fad is to erect giant cement cabbages, onions and apples at highway intersections.

On a national scale, the government is still hell-bent on logging a huge tract of primary forest to build an airport at Nijgad

even as international airlines shun Pokhara and Bhairawa. Nearer Kathmandu, the government is getting an ADB loan to build a Rs25 billion dam in Shivapuri National Park to — wait for this — flush the Bagmati. Nepalis yet unborn are already in debt (see reports on page 1 and 10-11).

Not building is also development. We should know where or what not to build. But kickback-driven maldevelopment is destroying Nepal as megalomania and kleptomania go hand-in-hand. Much of Nepal is urbanising rapidly, often without proper planning or resources, pouring concrete over what used to be fertile farms.

The Nepal Tarai is turning into one long east-west metropolis. Our cities are uninhabitable because of the lack of open spaces, garbage and toxic air. Federalism was supposed to devolve political decision-making so there would be fairer grassroots development.

While this has happened in some rural municipalities, others have a misguided sense of progress. Helambu is building a 15km replica of the Great Wall of China. Instead of investing in agriculture to slow outmigration and boost food production, upgrading schools and equipping hospitals, or ensuring safe drinking water, elected mayors are busy squandering budgets on showy cement ersatz.

We have cost-effective solutions, there are laws and regulations waiting to be implemented. In a democracy, public

pressure and advocacy can lead to genuine change, and only such corrective action should be rewarded in the next election.

Two weeks ago, this paper published a page 1 report on how Tundikhel has been gradually eaten up over the past decades so that citizens of an overcrowded city have much less access to it.

One of the last remaining stretches was Khula Manch (pictured). Having an astro-turfed football ground for use by the city's football clubs is not just daft, it is gross injustice. Air pollution, waste management, lack of open spaces and unplanned building sprees are signs of urban blight, and the root reason is misguided political leadership and its willingness to ignore the greater good.

As Mahatma Gandhi once said: 'A nation's greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members.' The width of footpaths on Kathmandu's roads is indicative of where our priority lies.

Sonia Awale



KUNDA DIXIT

**Kickback-driven maldevelopment is destroying Nepal as megalomania and kleptomania go hand-in-hand.**

## ONLINE PACKAGES



LIFE AFTER DEATH

Hindus predominantly cremate their dead, but ethnic minorities like the Kirats, Muslims, and Christians mostly opt for burial rituals in designated areas. For centuries there have been no problems, but social harmony between the funeral practices of diverse faiths is now being jeopardised by the lack of space as well as recent majoritarian trends. Read the story on Page 9 and watch the video on our YouTube channel.



VIBRANT MITHILA ART

Mithila paintings then done at weddings, festivals and feasts, and the artists were mostly the women of the family. This centuries-old art form has now gone commercial, enabling female artists to hone skills passed down from one generation to the next. Subscribe to Nepali Times' YouTube channel for multimedia content.

### ROAD KILL

In Nepal, vehicles are guns ('ROADKILL', Sonia Awale, #1196). So many people die in accidents because of the government's inability to source reliable, safe, and better quality vehicles for Nepal's terrain. Road infrastructure, drivers, and public awareness about road safety are other factors.

R.

■ This is terrible. With all this evidence, why are there no legal cases against the killers? Unless the Department of Roads and the government is sued and someone is charged and put in jail for manslaughter, they are not likely to change anything.

Bishow Parajuli

■ It is literally Highway to Hell in Nepal.

Saur Sigdel

■ Nepal's roads are a bigger pandemic than Covid-19.

Indra Dhoj Kshetri

■ Highway road transportation and domestic air travel both appear to be risky in Nepal.

Ajay Pradhan

### FOREIGN POLICY

I'm glad Nepali Times agrees with those of us crying hoarse these last decades against our lampasarbadiis selling the country's interest just so they can remain in power and continue to loot ('At home and abroad', Editorial by Shristi Karki, #1196).

Dipak Gyawali

### EMIGRATING DOCTORS

Thank you for drawing attention to the haemorrhage of Nepali doctors to the US, UK and, increasingly, the Gulf ('Grass is greener overseas for Nepal's doctors', Sagar Budathoki, #1196). Many doctors cannot take abuse from tycoons who own hospitals in Kathmandu who give them revenue targets, and physical abuse from relatives of patients who die. I returned to Nepal an idealistic physician to serve my country, and for me these factors are a given. I am relatively insulated from these pressures in my rural hospital. But the question is whether I am prepared after my specialisation to continue working in Nepal knowing these problems, and for how long.

Name Withheld

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### WHAT'S TRENDING

#### Kathmandu Art Biennale

by Anita Bhetwal  
Kathmandu Art Biennale showcases artwork of over 80 participating artists and 100 paintings, sculptures and installations, building on Nepal's artistic heritage with contemporary works. Get the details on our website.

**f** Most reached and shared on Facebook

#### At home and abroad

Editorial  
While Nepal's leadership alienates itself further from its citizens at home, it has been tilting southwards on the geopolitical front. Nepal's foreign policy must not be seasonal, or be determined by domestic political survival considerations. Join the discussion online.

**x** Most popular on X

#### ROADKILL

by Sonia Awale  
Nearly 24,000 people died on Nepal's roads in the last 10 years, in comparison to 17,000 people who were killed during Maoist armed conflict and 12,000 by Covid. Nepalis are not dying on the country's highways, they are being killed. Read more at nepalitimes.com.

**66** Most commented



#### Nepal's sacred female singers

by Sewa Bhattarai  
Although the practice of female priesthood is declining, a vestige of this tradition remains in Kathmandu's Hanuman Dhoka. Read the full story online about the Mangalini priestesses and traditions in Nepal.

**🔴** Most visited online page

## QUOTES

**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
Other Annapurnas in the lives of women  
A bigger challenge than mountaineering for Arlene Blum was overcoming gender discrimination.  
@kundadixit

**connie @mewmewmew13**  
This popped up...seems pretty timely in light of the conquest of Donald Trump by @ejeancarroll if you haven't read Annapurna you should...it gives a sense of what is important in life and what Arlene Blum and other women have accomplished  
@Lawrence #TrumpIsNothing

**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
Nepalis are not dying on the country's highways, they are being killed

**Puspa Raj Pant, PhD @Puspa\_RPant**  
Thanks @SoniaAwale @NepaliTimes for this coverage. But it's BIGGER because: 1) the Global Status Report 2023 by @WHO estimated 8479 (with 7622 a minimum) deaths in the year 2021 alone, and 2) every year @mohpnep HF's record >100,000 road injury patients visiting OPDs every year.

## 20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

### Cost of war

20 years ago this week, the Nepali Times editorial marked the eighth year of the Maoist insurgency and contemplated if it was actually necessary to correct our political system. Nearly three decades after the start of the war, we have asked ourselves the same question.

Certain sections of society are more empowered, there is better inclusion today, but we did not need a violent conflict to achieve them. It certainly was not worth the cost if the current leadership is what it threw up. Excerpt from issue #181 30 January - 5 February 2004:

It is possible that if the Maoist insurgency had not been ignited in February 1996, we would still be mired in corrupt, go-nowhere parliamentary politics. And if our elite and politicians are unable to look beyond their narrow self-interests even when a rebellion is at the gates, maybe they never will.

But it is also quite possible that the distortions of



a democratic polity would have worked themselves out and elected representatives at the grassroots (perhaps even some of those who bear arms today) would now be at the frontline of the war on want. If there had been a momentum for reform from below, it is quite likely that national politicians would have started to behave themselves.

Democracy has a built-in self-cleansing mechanism, a flexibility that brittle authoritarianism lacks. But we will never know. Instead, there is only the certainty that our country is polarised between a hard right and a

ruthless left. It's not much of a choice...if there hadn't been a war and if we still had a parliament, we would still need to address the gross inequities in society. It is possible that parliament would be debating political reforms through constitutional changes.

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

# Diaspora helps return Nepal's stolen gods

Nepalis in New York set a precedent by facilitating repatriation of trafficked sacred objects

■ Alisha Sijapati

The Nepali diaspora is getting increasingly involved in returning the country's stolen sacred objects from museums and collectors overseas, supplementing the role of the two governments.

Two Bhairav masks stolen in mid-90s from Dolakha, an Uma Maheswar from Patan, and a Durga idol uncovered during investigation into New York-based art trafficker Subhash Kapoor were handed over to the National Museum on Thursday.

The Manhattan District Attorney's Office had transferred the objects to Nepal's consulate in New York in December. But what set this repatriation apart was the involvement of the Nepali community in the United States.

Overseas Nepali organisations, notably the Newa Guthi New York, coordinated with the consulate and the Department of Archaeology in Kathmandu to cover the transport of the objects back to Nepal.

"We worked on the return because we also want to promote solidarity among Nepali expatriates to return our country's lost heritage and feel a sense of ownership," explains Bijay Shrestha of Newa Guthi New York.

Shrestha and colleague Pujan Maharjan accompanied the masks, which were earlier traced to the Dallas Museum of Art and the Rubin Museum which is now planning to close its physical space in New York. The Uma Maheswar,



SUMAN NEPALI

which was reclaimed from the Brooklyn Museum, and the Durga statue were also transported as cargo.

Although the initial estimate was Rs3 million for shipment, the final cost came to only Rs700,000, and was borne by the Guthi. Shrestha has been living in New York for 16 years, and worked closely with Anil Chandra Shrestha from Dolakha district for the return.

"We hope to see the masks in

their original shrine in Dolakha," Anil Chandra Shrestha says. "We will wait for an auspicious date for a special ceremony to welcome our gods back to exactly where they belong."

For now the masks will be at the National Museum in Kathmandu for safekeeping until the reconstruction of the Agan Che shrine which was damaged in the 2015 earthquake is complete.

Anil Chandra Shrestha and

Bijay Shrestha credit the Nepal Heritage Recovery Campaign and Lost Arts of Nepal for tracking down the artifacts.

Heritage activists say that their work is not finished until the stolen objects find their rightful places in the shrines where they were being worshipped when stolen. They want the government to ensure that the deities will not be stolen again.

Sarita Subedi of the Department of Archaeology says the National



NHR CAMPAIGN

Museum will only be temporary custodians of the objects until the communities fulfill the necessary requirements for taking them back.

While there are in situ photographs of the two bronze Bhairav masks and Uma Maheswar showing them in Dolakha and Chyasalhti of Patan, there is no evidence about where the Durga statue was stolen from.

Collecting funds and behind the scenes logistics work in repatriating stolen antiquities is a challenging task. And the initiative by Nepalis in New York to send back the masks now sets a precedent for more overseas Nepalis to be involved.

Anil Chandra Shrestha says, "This private initiative not only raises awareness but also encourages active participation of the diaspora in reclaiming our lost heritage. The allocated government funds can now be utilised for other future repatriations." 🇳🇵

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# World Social Forum in Kathmandu

Gathering will bring 30,000 Nepali and international participants to Kathmandu from 15-19 February

About 30,000 participants from Nepal and across the world will be in Kathmandu from 15-19 February for the World Social Forum (WSF), the biggest convention of its kind ever to be held here.

The first meeting of the annual WSF was held in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2001 as an alternative to the World Economic Forum in Davos, and had its motto 'Another World Is Possible' – a theme that has added relevance because of global climate breakdown, conflicts, and the spread of authoritarianism.

The local organising committee includes Nepali groups working on justice and poverty, who say the choice of Kathmandu as a venue proves Nepal's openness and its importance as a meeting place for the world.

The WSF's International Council Secretariat said in a statement: 'The world is moving towards a challenging period of political, economic, and environmental crises ... The forces of globalism, mass capitalism, and neoliberalism have created a system of rising inequality. Coupled with climate change, global food insecurity, majoritarian violence, Covid-19, and geopolitical upheaval, most of mankind is mired in suffering.'

Besides its plenary, this year's hybrid WSF will have panels dealing with Peace and Climate, Democracy and Human Rights, Feminism and Diversity, and Solidarity with Palestine. Explaining its choice of venue, the WSF said, Nepal was selected because of its cultural, religious, linguistic, and ethnic diversity. It adds, 'Nepal proudly stands as a democratic nation with a constitutional commitment to socialism ... guaranteed democratic spaces and human rights,



World Social Forum 2022 in Mexico City.

milestones achieved through the existence of a strong people's movement.'

Nearly 900 organisations from 73 countries will be in Kathmandu or taking part virtually in the panels, and they range from trade unions, peasants, women and indigenous organisations, as well as peace and justice movements.

In addition to the sessions, WSF 2024 Nepal will also have an Intercontinental Youth Forum on 17 February in which nearly 300 young men and women from all over the world have registered. A Parliamentary Forum will also be held on 16 February.

Speakers and delegates include human

rights activist Medha Patkar from India, Hina Jilan of the Pakistan Supreme Court, as well others from Latin America, Africa and Europe. The WSF will kick off with a solidarity march on 15 February and a final day assembly at Bhrikuti Mandap on 19 February.

The WSF began with activism for the Global South at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, and gained momentum during the anti-globalisation movement of the 2000s. While the World Economic Forum in Davos was a closed meeting of a few corporate entities and powerful countries, WSF saw up to 150,000 people at its gatherings.

'The idea of WSF is to create an open forum for the free and horizontal exchange of ideas, experiences, and strategies oriented to enacting and generating alternatives to neoliberalism,' says a statement from the forum.

The WSF has a deliberate anti-neoliberal global capitalism agenda and sees it as the root cause of militarism, imperialism, conflict, north-south inequity, and the climate crisis. The gatherings provide an open space for activists from the world over to plan strategies, debate ideas, and form networks and alliances.

Previous forums have been held in Porto Alegre, Mumbai, Caracas, Bamako, Nairobi, Karachi, Tunis, Montreal and Mexico City.



## Themes for the sessions at World Social Forum 2024 Nepal include:

- Economic Inequality and Economic Justice
- Labor, Migration, Modern Slavery, and Trafficking
- Race, Caste, Ethnicity, and Xenophobia
- Gender, Sexuality, Gender-Based Violence
- Land, Agriculture, Food Sovereignty, and Natural Resources
- Peace, Conflict, and Security
- Migration and Displacement
- Education, Art, and Culture
- Media and Digital Equity
- Democracy, Human Rights, and Authoritarianism
- Climate Justice, Ecology, and Just Transitions 🇨🇪



## Nepal-Korea 50<sup>th</sup>

The Embassy of the Republic of Korea on Tuesday launched a book on the success stories of Nepali workers who have returned and started sustainable businesses back home. Ambassador Taeyoung Park and Foreign Minister N P Saud jointly took part in the ceremony in Kathmandu. The book is a compilation of the stories of 26 Korean EPS (Employment Permit System) returnees who have used the skills and experience in education, hospitality and agriculture, gathered while working in Korea to good use back home in Nepal. Ambassador Park and Minister Saud also unveiled the official logo of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic ties between the Republic of Korea and Nepal in 1974 which will be used for all official functions during the year. "As we stand in the threshold of the next 50 years, let us envision a future where our nations continue to grow and prosper together," Park said at the function.



## Samsung S24 Series

Samsung launched its Galaxy S24 Series at the Galaxy Unpacked event on 26 January. Pranaya Ratna Sthapit, Director of Samsung Nepal, and Shrinikhal Khaitiwada, Miss Nepal World 2018, unveiled the series. The event showcased the Live Translate feature, providing real-time, two-way call translations for 13 languages. The Galaxy S24 Ultra boasts enhanced camera features powered by AI and features Qualcomm Snapdragon 8 Gen 3 Mobile Platform and Samsung's Exynos 2400. The devices will be available in Nepal from 7 February with prices ranging from Rs119,999 to Rs199,999, and pre-order benefits such as easy EMI through Samsung Insta Finance, breakage insurance, and smartphone exchange facilities.

## Turkish awarded

Airline Economics Aviation 100 gave three awards to Turkish Airlines at a ceremony in Dublin this week. The awards were: Global Lease Deal of the Year, JOLCO Deal of the Year, and Supported Finance Deal of the Year which recognised the airline's financial achievements in aircraft finance, totaling approximately \$900 million for eight



new-generation aircraft. Turkish Airlines has received consistent recognition for its financial excellence, earning a total of 29 international aircraft finance awards over the past decade. Turkish Airlines also announced that it is acquiring 10 Boeing 737-8s on a long-term lease with Dubai Aerospace Enterprise which will join the fleet from next year.

## Visa Accelerator

Visa has launched the fourth edition of its Accelerator Program, inviting applications from startups in Nepal focusing on AI, Global Money Movement, and Loyalty of the Future. It aims to collaborate with startups, particularly in Digital Acceptance for Micro, Small, and Medium Businesses (MSMBs) and Embedded Finance. Applications are open until 8 March. Selected startups will participate from May to November 2024. More details can be found at [www.visa.com.sg/apaccelerator](http://www.visa.com.sg/apaccelerator).



## Ncell scholarship

Ncell celebrated the 10<sup>th</sup> year of its Scholarships and Excellence Awards program by honouring outstanding students at Pulchowk Campus for academic achievements. The ceremony, held at Ncell ICON in Kathmandu, recognised top students from five faculties of the Institute of Engineering. This year, 18 Ncell Scholarships were awarded to toppers from the first, second, and third years, while six students graduating with the highest marks received Ncell Excellence Awards.

## Coke turns 50

Coca-Cola marks 50 years in Nepal with two manufacturing plants in Nepal employing over 1,000 people. Chairman of Bottlers Nepal Limited, NN Singh, expressed gratitude to



customers, employees, and stakeholders of the fizzy drink. A digital quiz contest, Coca-Cola 50 Years Quiz Time, was also introduced.



## Terraces awarded

The Terraces Resort and Spa has been awarded the Traveler Review Award 2024 by Booking.com, achieving a score of 9.3. The resort, situated atop a 100-acre private forest with a 180-degree view of the Himalaya at Lakuri Bhanjyang which is a 45 minute drive from the Ring Road, offers 46 guest rooms, holistic spa therapies, and various dining options, including an all-day restaurant and a pool bar.

## Hyatt Place wins

Hyatt Place Kathmandu has been awarded the Best Hotel and Best General Manager in Nepal 2023 by the Hotel Critics & Bloggers Association (HCBA).

The award was granted following a thorough study



that included guest ratings and assessments from anonymous hospitality bloggers. The review covered ambiance/interiors, loyalty programs, and eco-friendliness among others.

## MG clarification

Paramount Motors, the MG Motors dealer in Nepal, has disclosed the cause of the EV fire at Budhanilkantha. According to the study by China's SAIC Motor International, the fire started from the front to the back, with no oil leakage or mechanical failure. The vehicle, parked and charged, showed no signs of internal high temperature or electrical faults. The technical report clarified that there was no impact on the battery or quality defects. The owner reported an electric wire short-circuit and fire while charging the vehicle outdoors during winter with a makeshift 15m long wire. The cause was ascertained to be in the external wire and not in the car.



## Aerial pilgrimage

Shree Airlines has inaugurated its first 1-hour chartered sightseeing flight from Nepalganj for a view of holy Mt Kailash and Lake Mansarovar in China. The first flight on Monday carried 30 Indian aerial pilgrims on the carrier's CRJ 72 jet that flew at 27,000ft over Nepal's northwestern border with China in Humla district. From that altitude, the lake and the mountain are clearly visible as well as other Himalayan peaks including Mt Api and Mt Saipal in Nepal, Gurla Mandhata in Tibet, and Trishul and Nanda Devi in India. China has not yet opened the Kailash pilgrimage to Indian nationals, so pilgrims are making the flight to pay their once-in-a-lifetime respect to the holy site.

# Buon appetito at La Piazza

Italian food festival at Hyatt Place whets the appetite for authentic Mediterranean cuisine

**F**abrizio Berretta was an important member of the Italian delegation to the G20 Summit in New Delhi last September. No, not as his country's official.

Berretta is a neighbour in Piedmont of Italian Minister of Economy Giancarlo Giorgetti who invited him along as the official chef to the Summit, cooking gourmet meals for attending heads of state, including Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni.

After the Italian delegation flew back, Beretta stayed on in New Delhi and is now a chef at the Hyatt Regency in the Indian capital. He was there this week at the Zing World of Flavours restaurant at Kathmandu's Hyatt Place and its La Piazza Italian Food Festival.

"The G20 was a one of a kind experience, and the highlight was Prime Minister Meloni's young daughter loving my pizza, and her mother joking she may not return to Italy because it was so tasty," recalls Chef Berretta.

Since September, Berretta (pictured) has been introducing Italian cuisine to mostly Indian guests at the hotel's La Piazza restaurant. He is pleasantly surprised that even in a much smaller city, Kathmandu has so many authentic Italian places.

He has also been sampling Nepali food, and says compared to north Indian cuisine the dishes here are less spicy and oily which means one can taste the real



ingredients, and the spices do not overpower the real flavours.

The La Piazza Food Festival offers a Trattoria-style fine dining experience over the six-course menu till 4 February, so those interested still have the weekend to stop by for a meal. There is a live rendition of Italian tunes, waiters wearing red kerchiefs and there is a selection of premium wine from Vespers. Hint: go with the Rosso Montalcino.

The Cheese Croquet puts guests in the right frame of mind with pesto mayo and tomato pickle. The Mushroom Flan has a delicate taste and melts in the mouth.

The Minestrone is anything but a regular Minestrone, and has a rustic presentation using kidney and soya beans. Almost a quasi qwati in jhol.

Go easy on the Gnocchi because it is followed by the flagship dish, Chicken Saltimbocca (pictured), the quintessential boneless chicken breast topped with fried bacon and doused in wine with mashed potato, broccoli and asparagus on the side. Some guests may be so 'fulfilled' they cannot partake in the Lemon Sorbet dessert.

Some cuisines make it across



the world and become global, Italian being one of them. So what is it about Italian that makes it so cosmopolitan?

"We are not a very technical cuisine but our ingredients come from different regions, I think it has to do with the Roman empire and its influences," explains Berretta, who used to run restaurants in Italy and Denmark, and whose family owns a vineyard in Piedmont.

His father runs the winery and his mother sells salami and cheese. He says the winery in particular is suffering because of heat stress

due to climate change.

This is Berretta's first time in Nepal and he has also been giving cooking classes at the Hyatt. He has been to Kalimati vegetable market which was a unique experience. But what stood out during his Nepal visit?

"Nepali coffee, it's outstanding. Chef's kiss," he says, gesturing appropriately. ☑

*La Piazza Comes to Kathmandu  
Zing World of Flavours  
Hyatt Place, Tahachal  
6:30-10:30pm  
Until 4 February*



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Mithila art is beautifully painted on walls and buildings all over Janakpur which used to be the capital of the Mithila Kingdom that once held sway over what are now India and Nepal.



Idols of Janak, Sunaina, Ram and Sita at Janaki Mandir that is dedicated to Lord Ram's consort.

# THE SITA-RAM CORRIDOR

Ayodhya in India and Janakpur in Nepal  
have a connection that predates the  
national boundary



ALL PHOTOS: SURAV THAPA SHRESTHA

■ **Surav Thapa Shrestha**  
in Janakpur

**N**ews of the consecration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya swept India last week, and also sent ripples across the border here in Janakpur where Lord Ram's consort Sita was born.

The inauguration of the shrine by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was controversial because the temple was built on the space where the 16<sup>th</sup> century Babri Masjid once stood, and which was razed by a Hindu mob in 1992.

But last week's temple inauguration was celebrated in Janakpur as well because it is the birthplace of Sita, 500km away from Ayodhya. Indeed, the Janaki Temple dedicated to Sita here is itself a holy site for Hindus from Nepal, India and across the world.

Janakpur is the capital of Madhes Province and the erstwhile seat of the Mithila Kingdom once

ruled by King Janak, the father of Sita who features in the Hindu epic, Ramayana.

The city near the Indian border is often overshadowed by Pashupati in Kathmandu and more popular pilgrimage sites in India, but has its own unique and rich cultural heritage and historical significance.

Besides the Janaki Temple few know that Janakpur also has its own Ram Mandir, as well as numerous historic ponds and ashram that have now been meticulously restored. All this makes Janakpur an epicentre of faith and spiritualism in Nepal's southern plains.

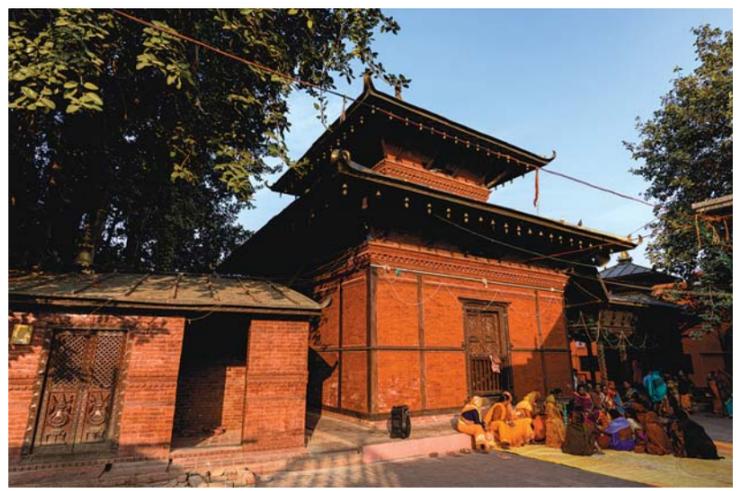
The Janaki Temple was built as recently as 1910 by Queen Brishbhanu of Tikamgarh in India, and imitates the Mughal architecture prevalent at the time. But this structure was built over the ruins of previous temples, including one erected by Sur Kishor Das, a sadhu from India

who came here in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and established a temple dedicated to Sita, also revered as a goddess.

Sita herself is believed to have had an immaculate conception and born from a furrow in the earth. She was later adopted by King Janak and is now a prominent figure in Hinduism because of her role in the Ramayana in which she was abducted by Ravana and spirited away to Lanka, only to be rescued by Lord Ram's monkey army led by the intrepid Hanuman.

Just like Lord Buddha, who was also born in what is now Nepal, Sita has been recognised as a national luminary of Nepal. Today, Janakpur where Ram and Sita were married is celebrated as the symbol of divine love, virtue, and loyalty. The temple is also frequented by newlyweds to make offerings for a happy marriage.

Just half a kilometre away from Janaki Mandir is the temple dedicated to Lord Ram built by Chaturbhuj Giri in the 17<sup>th</sup> century,



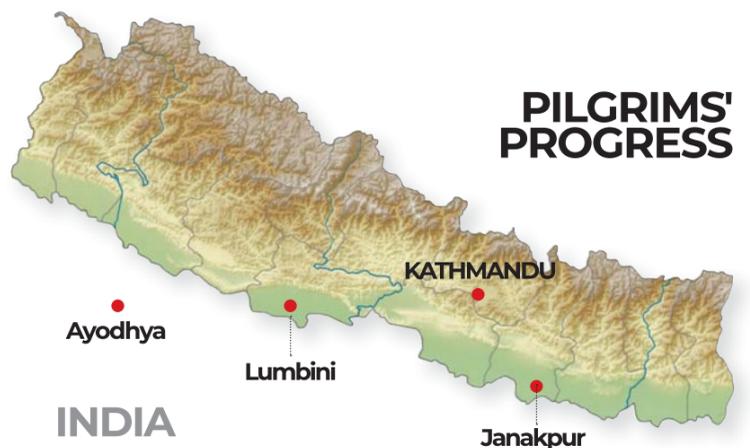
Less imposing than Janaki Mandir, the temple dedicated to Lord Ram dates back at least to 1782.



Hindu hymns are heard all day long in all parts of Janakpur.



The inner sanctum of Janaki Mandir, which houses deities from the Ramayana.



and later rebuilt by Gen Amar Singh Thapa in 1782. The temple houses an idol of Ram, including those of Panchayan, Lakshminarayan, Vishnu Dashavatar, and Surya residing on a seven-horse chariot.

Legend has it that there were once more than 52 ashrams and 72 sacred ponds in Janakpur, some of which are still intact. The holy sites are visited by many sadhus in saffron robes who represent the city's roots in Vaishnavism.

Mornings and evenings, Janakpur is alive with bhajan chants. Each day begins with the singing of Ramacharitramanas, and the sunset prayers at the Ganga Sagar pond in the evening is a spectacle for tourists and pilgrims alike exuding a unique feeling of harmony and devotion.

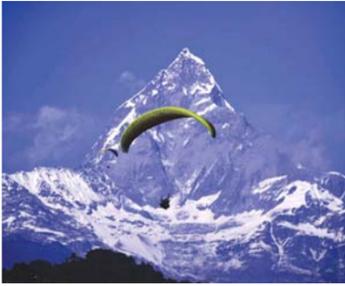
Intricate and exquisite Mithila art adorn walls and buildings throughout the city. The origin of this art form can be traced back to the wedding of Ram and Sita, and has since become a visual

expression of local lifestyle and culture. Initially, it was practiced as a way of life and the paintings and clay reliefs created by women were confined to homes, but over the years has gained immense popularity worldwide.

Janakpur's identity as the home of Sita, and its growth as the capital of Madhes can be the catalyst for boosting religious tourism in Nepal, and bring in both domestic and Indian pilgrims to the city. Janakpur already has a railway (Nepal's only) connecting it to the Indian border that will soon be extended to Bardibas on the East-West Highway. There are a dozen daily flights to Kathmandu, and a flight to Ayodhya and other Indian cities are also planned.

Janakpur is already a stopover for Indian pilgrims going to Pashupati in Kathmandu at Shivaratri and on to Muktinath, the two other important Hindu sites. 🇳🇵

## EVENTS



## Literature fest

Prepare for a two-day literary extravaganza in Pokhara and join the annual Nepal Literature Festival for a weekend of intellectual stimulation and cultural enrichment. 15-17 February, Pokhara

## Artsy land

Artist Priyam Pradhan's works are currently on display at the Siddhartha Art Gallery. Till 6 February, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Babermahal



## Wine and dine

Attend a free wine tasting session and unwind this weekend with friends and family 2 February, Mike's Restaurant, Lazimpat

## Glitz and glamour

Stop by Queer Honky-Tonk's Drag Expressions, a drag show that promises an evening of glitter, glamour, and self-expression. 3 February, Kaalo Ko Gupha, Patan



## Talking arts

Attend artist Abhijeet Prajapati's Let's Talk art session at the Kathmandu Art Biennale, where he will talk about crafting demigods. 3 February, 3pm onwards, Museum of Nepali Art, Thamel

## DINING



## Doko Deli

Look at the menu on social media and take a pick from a variety of appetisers, pizzas, and pasta. Try the Mustang ko Piro Aloo. Jhamsikhel, 9869188070 / 9848997461

## MUSIC

## Jazz night

Indulge in jazz at Lalitpur's recently-opened restaurant featuring Abhishek Bhadra, Lenhart, Allkemper, and Erik Leuthauser. 8 February, 6:30 pm onwards, Pauline's, Jhamsikhel



## All for music

The Kukhri Music Festival this weekend will feature a lineup of popular Nepali artists including Sabin Rai, Wangden Sherpa, Swoopna Suman, and more. 3 February, 2pm onwards, Everest Hotel, New Baneshwor



## Nostalgia

Axix will make its debut performance at the Bhaktapur Music Festival and will be joined by Surmount Nepal. 10 February, 2pm onwards, Imperial Banquet, Bhaktapur



## Winter musical

Join the winter musical festival that will include live performances by Pasa Rockers, DJ Mahesh, and other artists. 2 February, 6pm onwards, The Ai-La Lounge, Kumaripati

## Punk sounds

Save the date for a night of diverse metal and punk sounds from musicians from India and Nepal. 10 February, Namaste Pub, Thamel



## Krishnarpan

The restaurant at Dwarika's has become a must-visit for expats and tourists. Even locals who can eat dal bhat at home find the spread and service exquisite. The Dwarika's Hotel, Battisputali (01) 4479488 / 4470770

## Utopia

Located away from the clamour of Jawalakhel's noisy streets, Utopia features Newari as well as French, Italian and other continental cuisines. Ekantakuna, 9849592412

## GETAWAY



## Hotel Barahi

Nestled by Phewa Lake, Hotel Barahi offers stunning views and relaxing rooms with earthy tones. Lakeside, Pokhara (061) 460617

## Sacred Valley Inn

This getaway in Pokhara has rustic stone walls and is surrounded by lush greenery. Sit by the garden with a cup of tea next time you're in the area. Lakeside Pokhara, 984605352



## Milla Guesthouse

If one prefers the quiet and, Milla Guesthouse with its mix of old and new is the perfect place to stay. It is not too far from the city, yet worlds apart. Bhaktapur, 9851024137

## Soaltee Westend Premier

Located in the green plains of Nepalgunj, this expansive resort is one of Nepal's more energy efficient and eco-friendly getaways. Nepalgunj (081) 551145



## Begnas Lake Resort &amp; Villas

Located in one of the most agriculturally flourishing areas of Pokhara, guests have the opportunity to explore and try locally grown coffee, grains, oranges and more. Begnas Lake, Pokhara (061) 560030.

## Anatolia

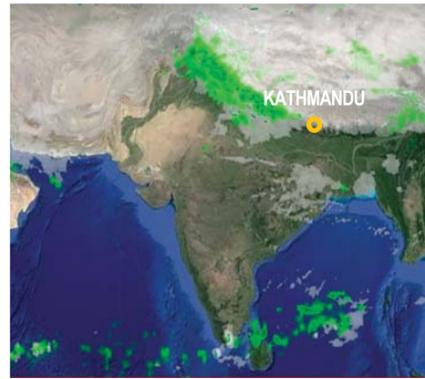
Anatolia's Indian and Turkish dishes are packed with spices and an assortment of flavours. From the Mutton Kofta Curry to the Baklava. All the food is halal. Thamel (01) 4258757



## Lhakpa's Chulo

From Nepali dal bhat and Newari khaja to Swiss Rösti, Italian Risotto and Thai green curry, Lhakpa's Chulo has a range of cuisines to offer. Try the Garlic chilli prawn. Jhamsikhel (01) 5542986

## WEEKEND WEATHER



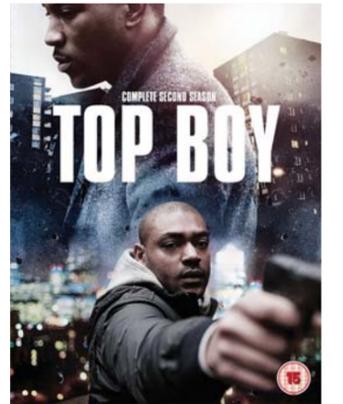
## Still No Rain

The good news is that the minimum temperature in Kathmandu will climb in the coming days. The bad news is that there is still no sign of much needed rain. The westerly front has brought precipitation to western Nepal, and the east got some snow and rain last week, but central Nepal is still high and dry. By the time the westerly disturbance reached Kathmandu, it had dumped much of its scanty moisture along the way. Still a slight chance of some drizzles on the weekend, but don't bet on it.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
17° 4°	18° 4°	18° 6°

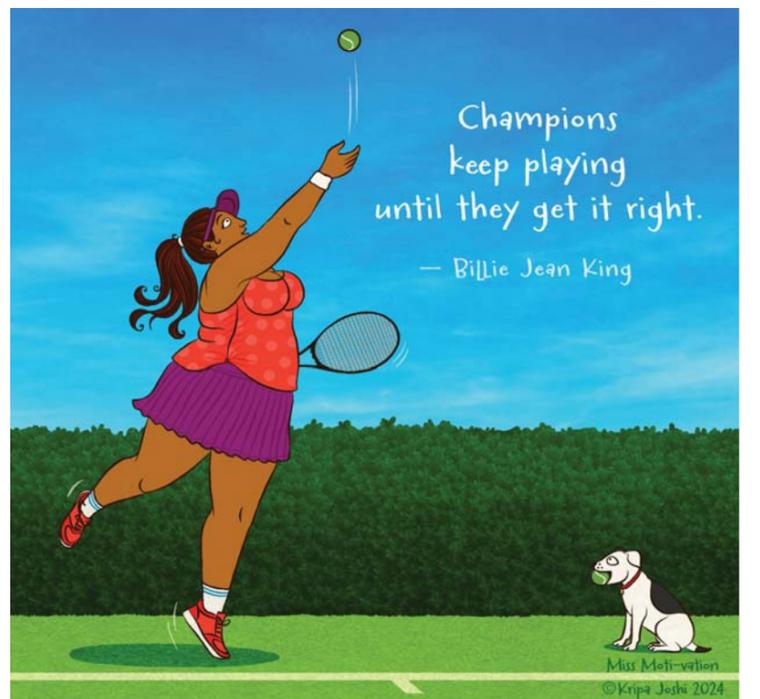
## OUR PICK

Novelist and screenwriter Ronan Bennett's British crime drama series Top Boy follows two drug dealers, Dushane and Sully, and their lucrative drug trade at the fictional Summerhouse public housing estate in East London. Across five seasons, the show explores the lives of the two young men and their associates and enemies involved in drug dealing and gang violence. Meanwhile, other people in the crime-ridden borough strive to live honestly against the odds, butting heads in the process with those to whom crime comes as easily as breathing. Stars Ashley Walters and Kane Robinson.



## MISS MOTI-VATION

KRIPA JOSHI



## भूकम्पको जोखिमबाट बच्ने उपाय

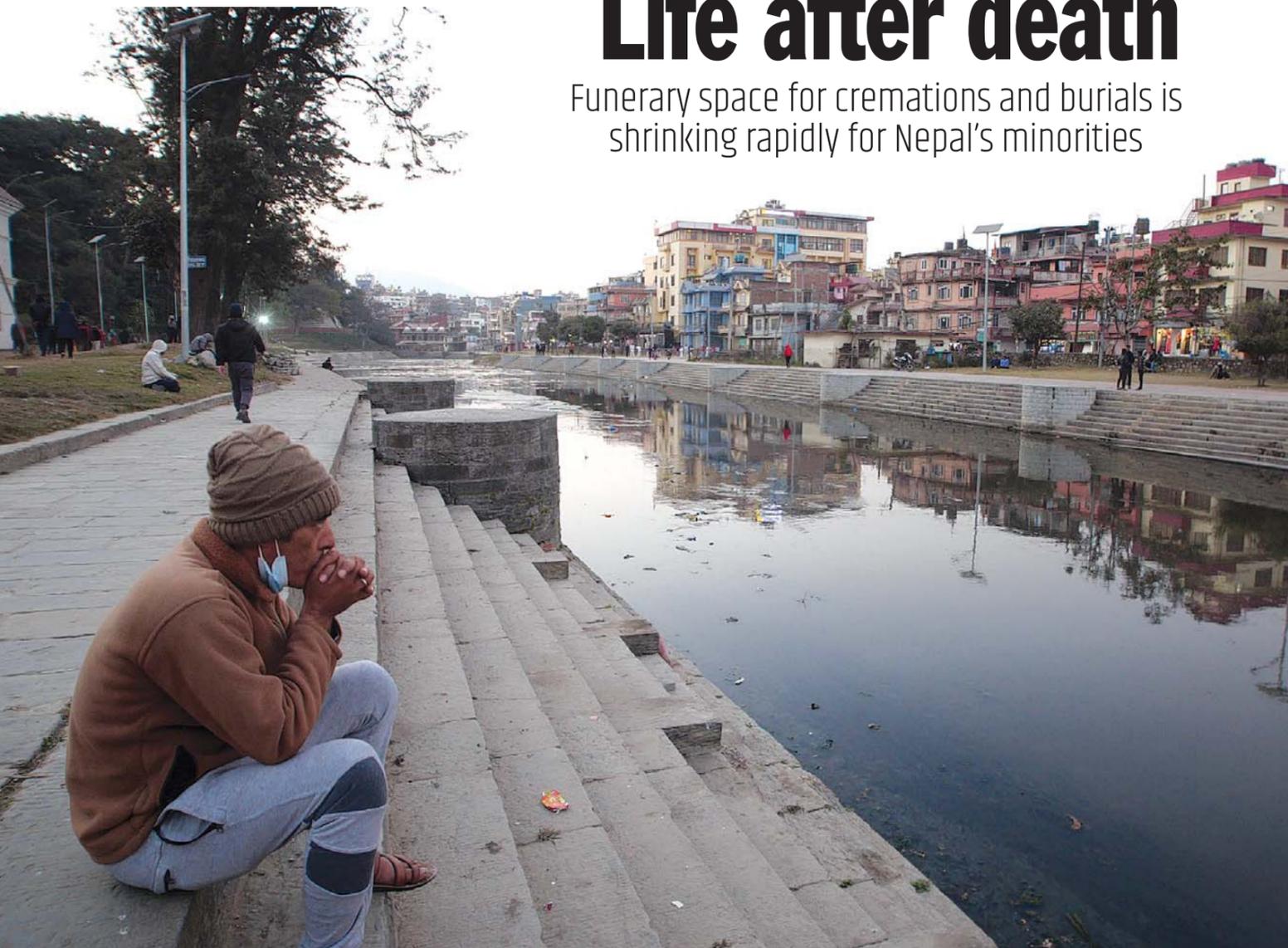
- भूकम्पको जोखिम र त्यसबाट बच्ने उपायबारे जानकारी आदानप्रदान गरौं,
- घरभित्रका फर्निचर, सजावटका सामान, पानी ट्याङ्की नहल्लने र नखस्ने गरी बलियोसँग राखौं,
- घर, स्कूल तथा कार्यालयमा भूकम्पको समयमा सुरक्षित रहन सकिने स्थानको पहिचान गरौं,
- भूकम्पको समयमा आत्तिएर भाग्ने वा दगुर्ने नगरौं,
- भूकम्पको बेला खुल्ला र सुरक्षित स्थानमा जाऔं,
- प्राथमिक स्वास्थ्य उपचारको विषयमा जानकारी राखौं,
- आफू सुरक्षित भई अरुको सुरक्षामा ध्यान दिऔं ।



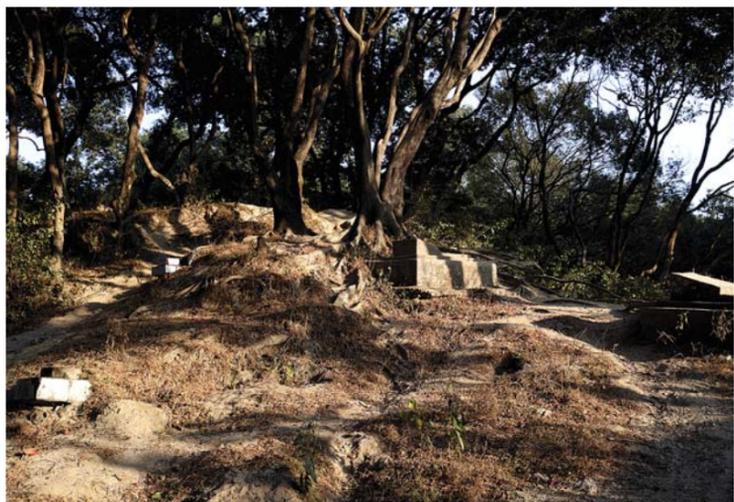
नेपाल सरकार  
विज्ञापन बोर्ड

# Life after death

Funerary space for cremations and burials is shrinking rapidly for Nepal's minorities



ALL PHOTOS: GOPEN RAI



## ■ Alisha Sijapati

An unassuming entrance near Pashupati Temple in Kathmandu leads into Mrigasthali forest. Despite a steady stream of people passing through the sacred grounds, most do not know that for centuries this has been a burial site.

Babies, Hindus from an ascetic sect, and later Kirats and Christians of Kathmandu were buried here.

Hindus predominantly cremate their dead, but ethnic minorities like the Kirat, Muslim, and Christian mostly opt for burials in designated areas. For centuries there have been no problems, but this social harmony between the funeral practices of diverse faiths is now being jeopardised by the lack of space as well as recent majoritarian trends.

Burial space of Nepal's minority groups is increasingly encroached upon despite Nepal's secular Constitution, and this is a source of new friction between communities.

One recent morning along the banks of the Hanumante in Bhaktapur, a group of men dressed in mourning attire were huddled around the flames of a funeral

pyre of a dead relative. On the other bank was what looked like a parking lot, but was a burial site for a Hindu sect that has been living in the town for centuries.

Rabindra Puri belongs to the Dasnami Sanyasi sect, and his forebears were ascetics who settled down in Bhaktapur and assimilated into the local Newa culture. He looks out at where his father and ancestors have been buried, and says: "Whenever I am down, or there is an important event in my life or my family, I come here and feel the energy of my father."

However, on a visit to the sacred site a few months ago, Puri was shocked to see a JCB earthmover levelling the area that serves as a holy place connecting the living with the dead ancestors of the Dasnami sect.

"We do not have a say when the government decides to bulldoze our tradition," laments Puri, who is a heritage conservation activist. Recently, a young man from Puri's community who had lost his wife a year ago came to pay his respects only to find a latrine was being built on top of her grave.

The Ward chair got the contractor to build a public toilet over what he thought was an open space. Construction was halted,

but across Nepal, ethnic groups and religious minorities are finding it more difficult to bury their dead.

Kathmandu's Muslim community has a burial site near Swayambhu. Because of the lack of space there, the Jame community has added soil 3m thick on top of the older graves to make another layer of tombs. The 0.5 hectare cemetery is used by both the Jame and Kashmiri sects, and was granted by the Rana regime in exchange for part of the mosque property in the Jamal area.

"We haven't had issues since we added the elevation, but we are hopeful the government will listen should any conflict arise," says Abdul Shamim of Kathmandu's Jame Masjid.

The Kashmiris are seeking another burial space, and the community foresees potential friction with local communities. "It is the teaching of Allah that we have to bury, not cremate, so there are two options: find space to bury or let the body flow down the river," explains Mohammed Ashraf of the Kashmiri Masjid.

The Kirat community in Kathmandu has a bigger dilemma: opt for cremation or burial. While a majority of families now use the electric crematorium at Pashupati for funerals, many still want traditional burials but

**LESSER MORTALS:** (anti-clockwise) The forest floor around Pashupati is filled with gravestones.

The cremation pyre of the Shakya and Dangol community in Kathmandu is now surrounded by new houses.

There are not enough cremation sites even for the majority Hindu community inhabitants of Kathmandu Valley.

cemeteries have no space.

In 1998, the Supreme Court imposed a ban on all burials within the premises of Pashupati, a UNESCO heritage site, but it was overturned in 2011. This means ethnic groups that have recently migrated to Kathmandu are having problems for funerals.

The Kirat people, for instance, say they have a right to bury their dead as tradition dictates, just as the Christian population of the Valley, who are also lobbying the government for a cemetery near Pashupati. But the lack of burial space means many Christians in Kathmandu use the electric cremation, then place the ashes in urns in their churches.

Hindus make up 81.9% of Nepal's 30 million population with nearly 2.4 million in Kathmandu Valley alone. The Valley also has 84,000 Christians, 48,000 Kirat and 32,500 Muslims, according

to the 2021 census. There is just one electric crematorium and a shortage of burial sites for this population.

Before 1778, when the Valley's kingdoms had their own kings and population was small, funerals for all communities were manageable. But with explosive urbanisation, even the Hindu cremation sites are congested, or face local opposition.

The Newa of Kathmandu had cremation sites in the inner city that have fallen into disuse due to expansion of settlements nearby.

In Chabahil's Gangahiti, there are two cremation spaces for the Shakya and Dangol clans which have been used for cremations for centuries, but are now overrun by new neighbourhoods.

Nirmala Karmacharya has lived in Gangahiti for over 20 years, and did not even know that there was a cremation site nearby when her family built their house.

"You never know when there is a cremation, we have to shut all windows to keep out the smell," she says. "There should be better regulation of cremation sites."

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Mayor Bidya Sundar Shakya built a gas crematorium in Gangahiti, but there are frequent clashes between mourners and residents.

"We understand their pain, but there is already a crematorium in Pashupati. Why do they have to come here?" asks Karmacharya.

In 2023, Gangahiti residents won a case in the Patan High Court restricting use of the site. Now, there is a tandoori restaurant right behind where the pyre used to be.

Public litigator Sanjay Adhikari says that Gangahiti residents were well aware of the cremation site before they purchased the property, and it was unfair to the Shakya and Dangol communities to lose their ancestral cremation site.

The few ghats at Pashupati on the banks of the Bagmati cannot keep up with demand for cremations from Kathmandu's growing population. Most days, there are long queues of distraught relatives waiting for their turn to perform the last rites. The nearby electric crematorium usually only has one furnace running and there are long waits there, too. State officials have a VIP platform for their cremations and do not have to wait.

The pressure on Pashupati's cremation area has also grown because other traditional sites along river banks do not perform funerals anymore.

"Most come to Pashupati because it is the holiest place, and also for its relatively efficient service," says Rewati Raman Adhikari of Pashupati Development Trust.

Mrigasthali forest is regarded as a sacred Hindu site where Lord Shiva came to attain salvation, and burials are only allowed for babies and certain sects. Funerals for other groups are restricted now.

"The burials had an ecological impact, we don't want concrete grave stones in the forest," adds Adhikari. "Burials of other religions within their sacred site is also not acceptable to Hindus. We must learn to co-exist peacefully."

When even Hindus find it increasingly difficult to cremate their dead, the majoritarian mindset means that other religions are left to fend for themselves.

Despite a secular Constitution, Nepal's minorities face exclusion even after death. 🇳🇵

*This report was prepared in collaboration with the Centre for Investigative Journalism Nepal (CIJ-N).*



Kathmandu Valley and the site of the proposed dam on a tributary of the Bagmati that flows through the densely-packed city.



The Nagmati is a stream near the proposed dam site in Shivapuri National Park.

KUNDA DIXIT

## DAM DANGEROUS

Proposed reservoir inside Shivapuri National Park carries more risk than reward, critics say

■ Ramesh Kumar

The Nepal government is all set to launch a Rs25 billion project to build a dam inside Shivapuri National Park to flush the Bagmati, wash away its waste and stanch its stench as it flows through Kathmandu.

However, critics say it is an extravagant undertaking that carries financial, seismic and environmental risks, and that the Bagmati can be more effectively cleaned with a sewage network, water treatment plant and better urban solid waste management.

The Department of Water Resources and Irrigation is planning to build the 95m high dam on the Nagmati stream to also augment Kathmandu Valley's drinking water supply and generate some electricity. The scheme is an extension of a project funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

Engineer Nishchal Chhatkuli of the ADB-supported Bagmati River Basin Improvement Project says the environmental impact assessment is awaiting approval and clearing trees and construction of an access road will begin soon. The project is expected to be completed by 2032 by when the reservoir will be capable of storing 9.4 billion litres of monsoon runoff and releasing 450 l/s into the Bagmati River as it starts to flow through Kathmandu 18km downstream.

The primary purpose of the dam is said to be to flush out the polluted Bagmati River, although some of the water will also be

added to the mains connected to the Melamchi tunnel, as well as generate 1.86MW of electricity.

The Project started in 2013 to improve Kathmandu's river system under which another 24m high dam has already been built at Dhap, upstream from the proposed dam.

But the Dhap reservoir was deemed to have insufficient storage to flush the Bagmati all year round, and the ADB supported a detailed feasibility study completed by an Australian company in 2017 that endorsed a higher dam downstream near Mulkharka, 3km above the confluence of the Nagmati and Bagmati.

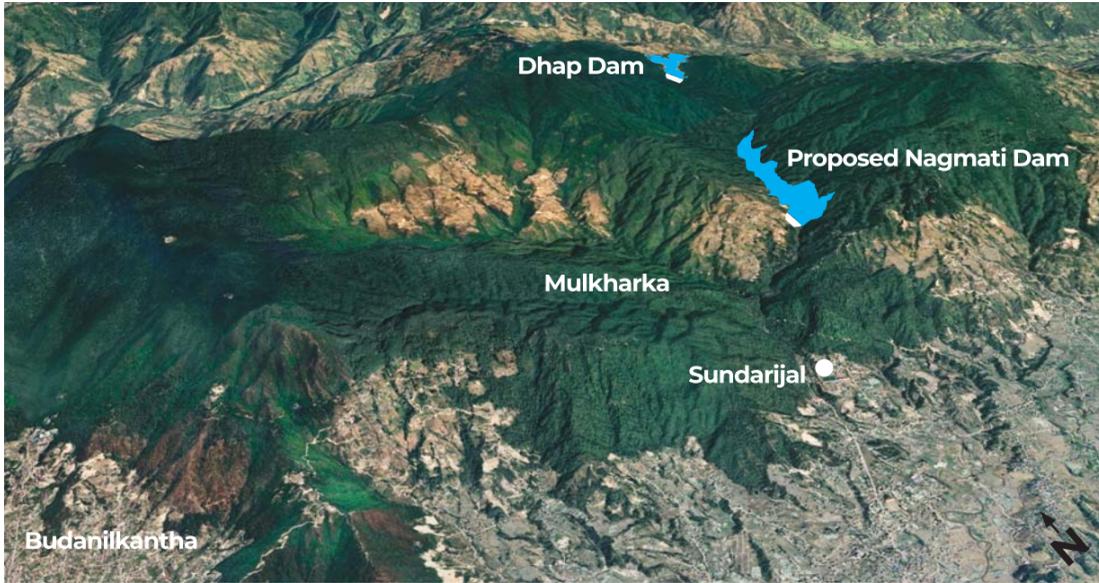
"Since water cannot be brought from elsewhere, stored rainwater drained from this lake is the only way to deliver it to Bagmati during winter and take the river back to how it was three decades ago," Chhatkuli explains.

The dam construction itself will cost Rs19 billion, and additional money will be spent on protecting the watershed, construction of the power house, drinking water use and building tourism facilities.

Although the Nagmati project's stated aim is to protect the river basin, critics say it will come at significant ecological cost to the national park. The environment impact assessment itself says more than 80,000 trees will have to be cut, and the access road will add to human disturbance in the wilderness area.

'Permanent effects of the project include loss of local biodiversity, destruction of wildlife habitat, and construction activities that will

# Shivapuri-Nagarjun National Park (With location of proposed reservoir)



DINESH SHRESTHA

alter local topography, increase soil erosion, and increase turbidity in the river,' the report states.

Nature activist Shrawan Sharma argues that impounding a reservoir of this size will harm the already fragile ecosystem of the Shivapuri-Nagarjun National Park and the Bagmati watershed.

The current government policy is to replace every tree cut with 10 saplings, which would mean that 800,000 saplings would need to be planted. But there is no land area for so many trees in Shivapuri.

D P Jaisi, an engineer formerly with the Department of Irrigation says the construction of a big dam in an area with high seismic risk directly upstream from a densely populated city is a bad idea. Climate change adds to the risk.

"Large infrastructure projects need to be future-proofed to withstand major disasters, but such structures are always a risk," says Jaisi. "If the Nagmati Dam were to collapse, it would be catastrophic for Kathmandu."

The project's detailed report does look at a potential dam collapse, and shows that 3.47 million litres per second would rush down to Kathmandu, reaching Sundarijal in 15 minutes and Pashupati within 90 minutes.

"The debris flow in the event of a Nagmati Dam collapse will affect 500,000 people all the way down to Chobhar and even change the course of the Bagmati as it flows through Kathmandu," Jaisi warns.

Water resources professor at Pulchok Engineering Camp Hari

Pandit says the damage would be large-scale and long-lasting. "We simply cannot rely on dam design in a country like ours with its weak governance and weak construction," he adds.

Project officials like Chhatkuli say all this is scare-mongering and there is no reason to be alarmed because the dam is designed with the worst-case scenario for seismic and cloudburst risk in mind.

But critics are not assuaged, especially considering the disaster that struck the Melamchi water supply scheme in 2021, Nepal's biggest infrastructure project so far. An investigation showed that Melamchi headworks and tunnels did not take into account clear and present danger from climate change in the river's headwaters.

Hydraulic structures expert Ravi Rajbhandari with Cemat Consultants says the dam, which will have concrete slabs on one side and rock-fill on the other, will be "like a sword hanging over Kathmandu's head". He says we should learn lessons from last year's catastrophic dam breaches in Libya and Sikkim.

Experts also question why the Department of Irrigation is involved when the project has nothing to do with agriculture, and when the Rs25 billion lavished on another big project in Kathmandu could have been spent to irrigate rain-fed farms in rural areas and increase harvests.

Some experts say the Nagmati project will mire Nepal in another debt trap. The country's public debt has reached Rs2.38 trillion and now accounts for more than 44% of the country's GDP (see page 1). Pouring money into a low-return project like Nagmati will push generations of Nepalis into indebtedness.

Ravi Rajbhandari and Hari Pandit also doubt whether water released from the dam will actually make the Bagmati cleaner if sewage and garbage continue to be dumped into the river. The money could have been spent on extending the Melamchi tunnel to Larke and Yangri to increase water volume.

But the project's Nishchal Chhatkuli argues that the return on investment from the Nagmati Dam should not be measured only from an economic standpoint. "The price that locals have had to pay for living and being in proximity to the polluted Bagmati is incalculable," he says. "The advantage of a cleaner Bagmati goes beyond purely financial benefit."

[nepalitimes.com](https://www.nepalitimes.com)

What do you think of the Nagmati Dam proposal? Join the discussion online.

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A young couple in blue outfits walking a Dalmatian dog on a rooftop terrace.

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