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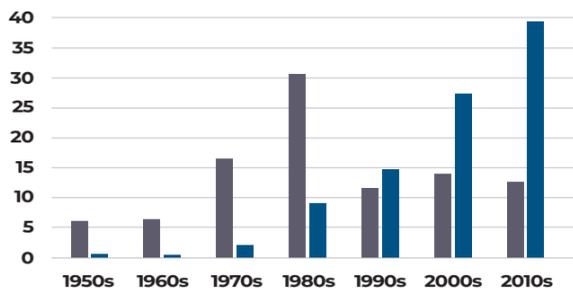
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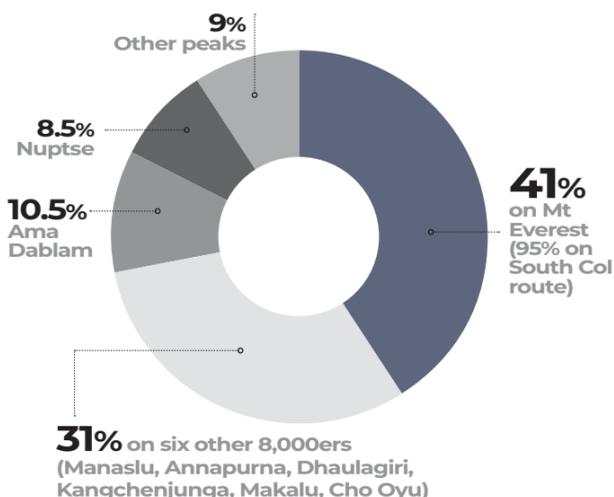
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Expeditions on 7,000m and 8,000m peaks (in %)

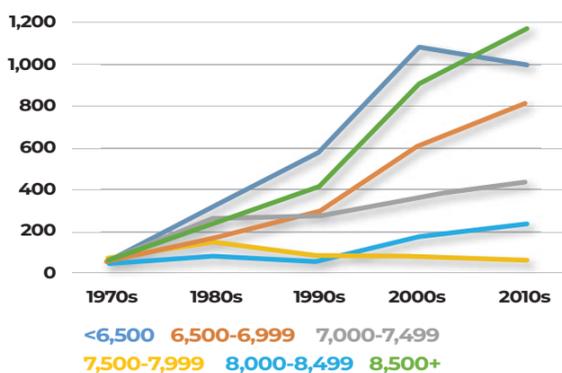


Climbing Permits by Peaks in Nepal Himalaya (in 2023)

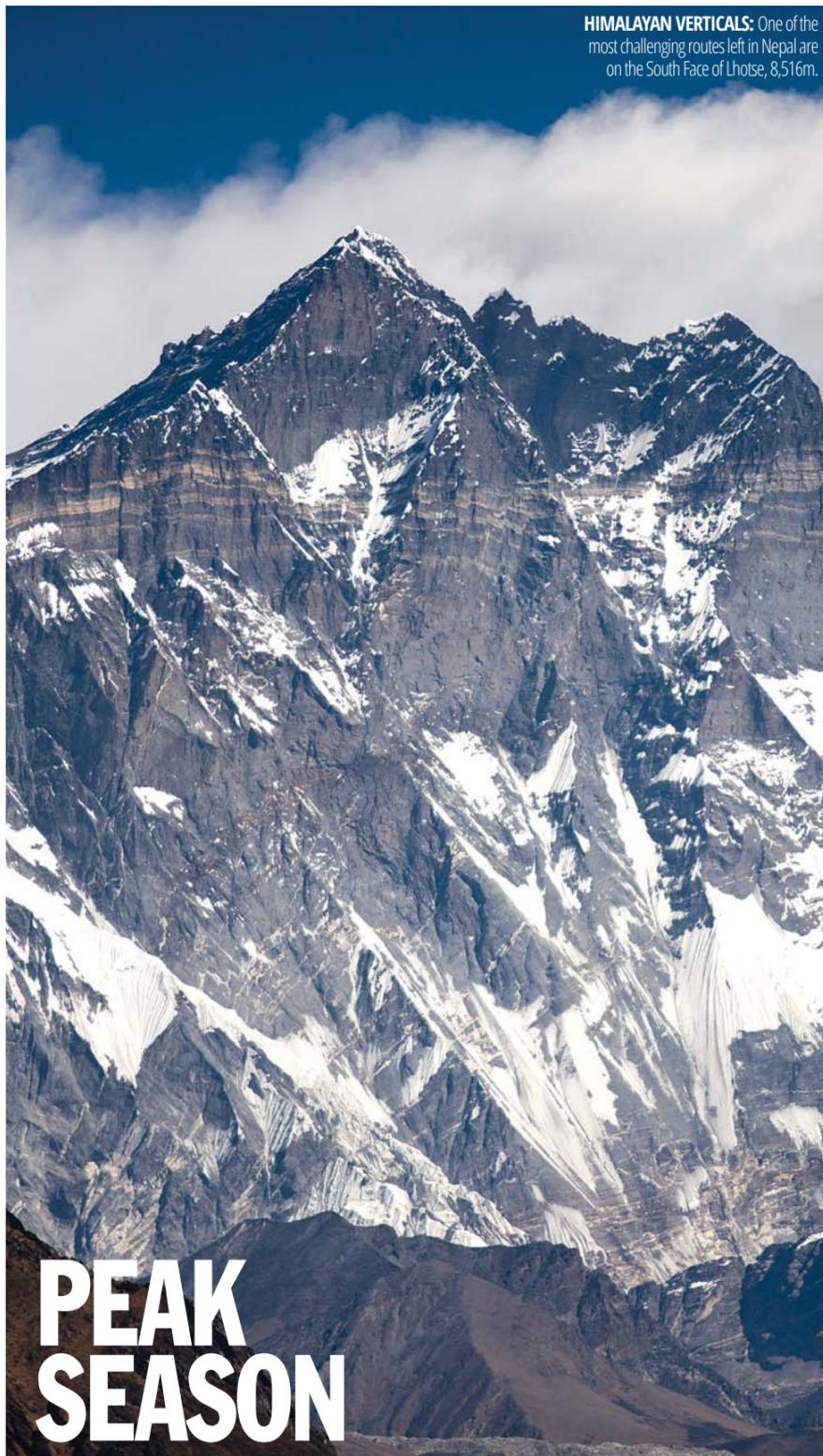


Of **374** open peaks in Nepal **346** had no climbers in 2023

Number of Expeditions by Elevation Range



ADAPTED FROM THE HIMALAYAN DATABASE / EDWARD MORGAN



HIMALAYAN VERTICALS: One of the most challenging routes left in Nepal are on the South Face of Lhotse, 8,516m.

PEAK SEASON

KONSTANTINOS SOFIKITIS

It has been a century since Mallory and Irvine may or may not have reached the summit of Mt Everest. Mountaineering in Nepal has changed a lot since that first British expedition in 1924.

Everest gets bad press for traffic jams, garbage and frozen corpses. But such is the draw of the world's highest peak that climbers just keep coming. The other reason for gridlocks on Sagarmatha is the

tectonic shift in the business of mountaineering from foreign to domestic operators.

Before 2013, Nepali guides were mostly ground handling agents for international expeditions. That was also the year when 100 Sherpas had the world's highest fistfight with three European mountaineers climbing Alpine style.

After that, Nepali guides started working with clients through their

own companies, bringing prices down, so more climbers came.

"Local companies have vastly improved," says Dawa Steven Sherpa of Asian Trekking. "Nepalis are no longer exclusively in the servant-porter role. Sherpas are now world class mountaineers."

Climber and author Edward Morgan says news of traffic jams on Everest spread the myth that the Nepal Himalaya is crowded (page

8-9). Actually, 346 of the 374 peaks in Nepal open for climbing had no expeditions in 2023, and 41% of all climbers were on Everest.

Climber Billi Bierling points to the brighter side. "Everybody has their own reason to climb, and the vast majority of people on the slopes are working together."

Vishad Onta

MORE ON PAGE 8-9



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Brain drain into brain gain

In 2023, Nepalis made up the third fastest-growing student population in Canada. There were 20,465 Nepali study permit holders, up from 7,680 the year before, an increase of 166% in just one year.

Of Australia's 26 million population, Nepalis account for over 300,000. Another 51,000 are in Portugal, making Nepalis among the biggest immigrant groups in the south European nation.

Every day, 3,000 Nepalis leave the country, and nearly 1 million left last year. Migrant workers in the Gulf, Malaysia and India mostly return. But a majority of Nepali youth leaving for the United States, Europe, Canada or Australia are emigrants.

Successive governments in Nepal have failed to stop this brain (and brawn) drain, treating migration as a convenient social safety valve and relying on remittances as a critical source of support for the economy.

Nearly a quarter of Nepal's GDP equivalent comes from overseas remittances, higher than most labour-exporting countries. This is an indicator of a stagnant economy. Most of the money goes into paying for basic needs, and property investment.



NEPAL LITERATURE FESTIVAL

At the 11th Nepal Literature Festival last week (pictured) economist Swarnim Wagle and urban planner Shrinkhala Khatiwada, both Harvard-educated returnees, tried to answer the difficult question of how the diaspora can contribute to Nepal.

Nepalis have always migrated. A life of sub-subsistence farming in the mountains was hard, there was exclusion and inequity, and many fled loan sharks. Often, the only alternative was to fight and die in other people's wars.

The Nepali word 'lahure' comes from the British cantonments in Lahore, where Nepali fighting men went after being recruited ever since the 1814-16 war. Nepalis have fought in most major wars, and hundreds are currently in the Russian Army. Some are also in the Ukrainian military.

Today, Nepal exports more workers than warriors. The number of migrants is increasing because the economy just cannot produce enough jobs for the 500,000 young men and women joining the workforce every year.

"For most aspirational middle-class Nepalis, migration is the only outlet," acknowledged Wagle. "Frustration adds to this, there are long queues to pay taxes, get a driver's license...and then there is the huge wage disparity between Nepal and elsewhere."

Young Nepalis still in high school already think the country's situation is hopeless and there is peer pressure to leave the first chance

they get. Parents themselves want their children to settle abroad, and sell what little property they have or take high-interest loans to pay recruiters to send them off. The push-factors are not just economic.

In reality Nepal has made some dramatic progress in health, education, poverty and development, although improvements are not evenly spread around the country. Young Nepalis are leaving without ever having truly lived and worked here.

In rural Nepal, families are paying up to Rs7 million to human traffickers to take their children to America through the backdoor.

The biggest frustration is the lack of well-paying meaningful jobs, and this is where the private sector could help.

Noted Khatiwada: "It is not the government's job to create jobs but strengthen the private sector to do so. The private sector is responsible for 80% of jobs in the country and that is still not enough."

She added that the private sector does not necessarily mean big companies, and they need help to grow and create jobs. She added, "Only when people have economic stability and security will they come back home."

On return, Wagle joined politics, first the NC then the RSP "to deliver results and make the government accountable".

The Tanahu MP breaks down the Nepali diaspora into three groups. First, Nepalis now permanent citizens of other countries who need to be engaged culturally to keep their links to Nepal.

Next are global Nepalis, who are abroad but still want to do things in Nepal. They can contribute through digitisation and IT, clean energy, high-value agriculture and tourism.

Third, are migrant returnees who come back with limited savings and skills, and who need help so their entrepreneurial dreams can take root and prosper so they do not have to leave again.

To this we can add that Nepal's politicians must go another step and reform election laws so that Nepalis abroad also have voting rights. The established parties do not want to risk doing this, since they know the diaspora vote may unseat them.

In this paper, we have frequently profiled role models who have returned to Nepal and done well including a Korea returnee who started a modern dairy farm in Gulmi. There are others like the aspiring bell pepper farmer in Dang who left a lucrative Wall Street job. A Kavre native who gave up his Canadian PR to run a resort in Pokhara. There are many like them.

And there are people like Swarnim Wagle and Shrinkhala Khatiwada who aspire to give back to Nepal what Nepal gave to them.

Sonia Awale

The skills, exposure and savings of the Nepali diaspora can be harnessed to uplift Nepal

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Melamchi in a mess again

Melamchi is still a mess. The 2021 floods partially destroyed this water supply project, the most expensive in Nepal which took 30 years to complete.

Exactly 20 years ago this week, Nepali Times carried a story about how Melamchi was once again in limbo because the Maoists ordered staff to stop work. Irony of the ironies, Melamchi was inaugurated for the third time by Prime Minister and Maoist supremo Pushpa Kamal Dahal earlier this year.

Excerpt of the report from issue #184 20-26 February 2004:

After years of slow motion, the Melamchi project has finally ground to a complete halt. The ambitious \$464 million scheme to bring glacial melt water to parched Kathmandu through a 28km tunnel is Nepal's biggest infrastructure project, and is now on hold because of Maoist threats.

Officials from the Melamchi Water Supply Project (MWSP) said their staff had to return to Kathmandu this week after Maoists ordered them to stop work.

"The Maoists pasted notices on walls, and we just can't compromise on the safety of our staff," one official



said. Although Maoist activity has delayed work, this is the first time the rebels have actually forced the project to stop.

The only tangible outcome of the project so far has been a 9km stretch of access road from Melamchi to the headworks of the tunnel in Helambu.

The international contractor, Hanil Koneko, has already been paid nearly 30% of its fee for less than 15% of the finished road.

The controversial Melamchi project aims to pipe 170 million litres of water a day to Kathmandu.

Critics and experts have charged that it is too expensive, and will only benefit an already pampered capital. They also say cheaper options of storage reservoirs on the Valley rim and upgrading the water supply system should have been the priority.

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

ONLINE PACKAGES



There is a lot more to Lumbini than Lumbini. While the Ashoka Pillar and the Mayadevi Temple mark the nativity site, there are the ruins of ancient Kapilvastu nearby — home of Siddhartha Gautam's father King Sudhodhan in Tilaurakot. Watch the 2021 video on YouTube and read our package on Lumbini on page 14-15.



The mountains of Palpa are famous for dhaka weaves, but the district is now also the centre of lemon cultivation in the country, thanks to an enterprising couple. Meet Goma and Hum Nath Bhandari, and their entrepreneurial journey. Watch the video on our YouTube channel and subscribe.

NEPAL POVERTY RATE

Has the level of poverty actually declined or has the level of debt increased ('Not Rising Nepal', Editorial, #1199)? Statistics have always been easily massaged to suit the intended narrative.

Gus Ferguson

SHEEP-REARING

I followed a group of sheep herders trekking to Giling Lekh in Gorkha to Lamjung Hile in 2013 ('Climate crisis ruins Himalayan pastoralists', Rabin Pun Magar, #1199). The problems sheep herding faced were more related to the community forestry program and a lack of market and value of sheep products rather than climate change itself.

Dilli Bhattarai

DRUG RESISTANCE

I am thrilled to see this piece in Nepali Times ('Nepal's wildlife at risk from drug resistance', Siddhant Pandey, nepalitimes.com). Wildlife are an often forgotten component of the One Health dynamics of antimicrobial resistance (AMR), but we hope to change this in the future.

Jessica Mitchell

BUFFALO CRUELTY

It is hard as a westerner to understand Nepal's cruelty towards buffaloes and reverence for cows ('Be kind to buffaloes', Abinash Thakur, nepalitimes.com).

Sigmund Stengel

PHARPING SARASWATI

The decapitated head of goddess Saraswati, stolen under an autocratic monarchy, was returned after multi-party democracy in Nepal ('The godhead of Pharping, Alisha Sijapat', #1198).

Ratna Sansar Shrestha

RAMGRAM CORRUPTION

This incompetence surprises me eternally ('Lharkyal Lama's Lumbini, Inc', Jibraj Chalise, page 14-15). If corruption was kept in check, this could have been a source of income for the country. We might have our differences, but all of us wish for the betterment of the Lumbini region. If Prachanda were Buddhist, maybe he would have been more responsible with Lumbini.

Marjolijn Hg Huijgens

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



The Nepal Cook Book

by Kunda Dixit
Rohini Rana's Nepal Cook Book divides up the world of Nepali cuisine into chapters, and sticks to the more iconic dishes of each community. Read the review on our website.

f Most reached and shared on Facebook

Climate crisis ruins Himalayan pastoralists

by Rabin Pun Magar
To the Magar community that makes up the majority of the Rukum East population, sheep rearing used to be a way of life. But climate change and outmigration is forcing them to leave their ancestral occupation. Story and watch video at nepalitimes.com.

X Most popular on X

Not Rising Nepal

Editorial
The Nepal Living Standards Survey published last week showed that the proportion of Nepalis living below the poverty line had dropped. But despite the statistics reality is different for the poorest Nepalis. Join the discussion online.

44
77 Most commented



Biosphere on the brink

by Izabella Koziell
Despite our best efforts, it is almost too late for nature in the Hindu Kush Himalaya, writes the Deputy Director General of ICIMOD. Get the details online.

🔥 Most visited online page

QUOTES

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Nepal's macroeconomic indicators are rosy: foreign exchange reserves can sustain a year of imports, remittances are up, and inflation is manageable. But on the streets, shutters are down, and newspapers are full of bank notices for collateral auctions.

Uendra Sapkota @usapkota
Exactly! Nepalese economists who frequently reference these statistics are essentially out of touch with the ground reality.

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
In a volatile world, nuclear weapons must be eliminated, not just controlled, writes Victor Gaetan.

AL3X_HhHh @CrookedRook77
It's either nuclear disarmament, or nuclear destruction.

1,000 WORDS



JAI SHRI RAM: President Ram Chandra Poudel being welcomed in Baglung by local officials on Thursday for the inauguration of a bell weighing 5,555 kg.

DAMMAR BUDHA MAGAR / RSS

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TURKISH AIRLINES

ENGLAND

Unconventional convention

Hindu state agenda divides the Nepali Congress as religious tension grips the Tarai

■ Shristi Karki

Sabir Khan was riding his motorbike in Parsa on Tuesday when he was stopped by several men and boys wielding sticks and saffron flags. The encounter was captured on video. The men are heard forcing Khan to venerate the Hindu god Ram, to which he replies that he has an urgent errand up the road.

"I don't care how important your errand is, you don't get to leave without saying Jai Shri Ram," one of the men says. Another man smacks Khan on the head.

The audio cuts off at this point, but Khan must have eventually agreed to the threats, because he is allowed to ride away and the men begin to chant "Jai Shri Ram" around a burning tyre on the road.

Such video clips have become commonplace across the border in India, but that it is happening in Nepal confirms what many had warned about: that India's Hindutva ideology would spread to Nepal.

This week, there were communal clashes at Ishnath Municipality in Rautahat over a procession to immerse the idol of goddess Saraswati. The tensions spread to Birganj, where groups staged demonstrations, prompting authorities to enforce curfews.

Social media is awash with posts by sympathisers from across the border, many with sentiments like 'Nepal was much more beautiful when it was not secular', and praising Nepali activists for backing restoration of Hindu state.

"In Nepal, Hindutva as a political ideology is still nascent. Its seeds have been planted on a soil fertilised by democratic decay," wrote Birganj-based media



KIRAN RAJ BISTA / RSS

commentator Chandra Kishore recently in his column, Borderlines, in this paper.

India's shift to far-right Hindu nationalism under Prime Minister Modi has emboldened those with a similar ideology in Nepal, and this is mixed up with a call also for the restoration of the monarchy.

India's opposition parties have tried but failed to stop the juggernaut of political Hindutva. And here in Nepal, leaders across the political spectrum have done little to quell the rise of religious intolerance and extremism.

Instead, some parties are pushing faith-based politics to

endear themselves to capitalise on what they see as an anti-secular vote bank during the next election.

Nepal's avowed Maoist Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal sought photo-ops clad in saffron in temples in Nepal and India. Former communist Prime Minister K P Oli attempted to provoke Hindus in Nepal and India by claiming that Lord Ram was actually born in Nepal. Nepali Congress (NC) leader Sher Bahadur Deuba expressed support for removing secularism from the Constitution during an all-party meeting last year.

The call to restore a Hindu nation loomed large at the NC

party convention in Godavari this week (pictured). This appears to be driven by Deuba's need to pull the rug from underneath anti-secularist forces in his own party, as well as the growing popularity of the Hindu monarchist RPP.

NC lawmaker and central committee member Shankar Bhandari used the party's convention to launch a campaign to include the restoration of a Hindu state at the party convention.

In response, NC vice chair Purna Bahadur Khadka wrote in his policy proposal presented to a closed meeting of the NC: "The people seem to be delirious with

the need to adopt populism and regress to authoritarianism.'

Bhandari's proposal was rejected by the party leadership. But the NC in general and Deuba in particular have bigger fish to fry. Deuba is being challenged by not-so-young Turks like NC General Secretary Gagan Thapa, who is pushing the party to abandon its alliance with the Maoists in the next election.

Growing calls in the NC to go it alone have sent shock waves in the Maoist Centre, which is the third largest party in Parliament by a wide margin after the NC and opposition UML.

Prime Minister Dahal also faces calls from within his party about the partnership with the NC, and has been hinting that all is not well within the coalition, and that he may reshuffle the Cabinet.

"The Nepali Congress had no choice but to form an electoral alliance with the Maoists due to special political circumstances. But upset voters see it as an ideological contamination of our party," Gagan Thapa told the convention.

For now, both Dahal and Deuba maintain their commitment to the coalition because a breakup would mean that the premiership-sharing deal between Dahal, Deuba, and CPN-Unified Socialist chair Madhav Kumar Nepal would no longer stand, preventing Deuba from being prime minister for a sixth time.

Meanwhile, NC General Secretary Bishwa Prakash Sharma, who has been an ally of Gagan Thapa, differed about going it alone in the next election.

Said Sharma: "Our future electoral alliance or the lack thereof is a bridge we will cross when we get to it four years from now." 🇳🇵

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UK Aid

UK Minister for Development Andrew Mitchell on a visit to Nepal announced a £400 million aid package addressing the climate crisis, finance, promoting economic transformation, and enhancing governance and inclusion in Nepal. By 2030, the initiative is expected to create 13,500 jobs, attract over \$1 billion in investment, and provide quality healthcare and education services to two million women and girls. Mitchell visited UK-funded projects, and observed efforts to improve climate resilience.

MG upgrades

From 7 February, MG's 30 kW DC charging stations in Nepal will be temporarily suspended for 15 days for maintenance and software upgrades. Paramount Motors recommends using alternative charging stations.



Exide inverters

Exide Industries has introduced its latest inverters, Exide Star and Exide Magic which have advanced features such as microcontroller technology, low voltage operation capability, LED displays, and auto smart protection.



Aloi with Kumari

Aloi and Kumari Bank have signed a MoU to collaborate on sustainable and green financing through digital financial literacy programs. The partnership aims to digitise green financing, starting with digital financial literacy workshops for MSMEs in agriculture. Arpan Paudel of Kumari Bank, Sonika Manandhar and Tiffany Tong of Aloi did the signing.

New Branch

Global IME Bank Limited has launched its branchless banking service in Dairy Bazar of Phidim, Panchthar District bringing the total number of branchless banking services to 275. Rural residents can reach banking services including opening accounts, making deposits, and withdrawing funds through local representatives.

Wash Project

The Coca-Cola Foundation, with CIUD and WAN, has completed the Kalitar Sustainable WASH Project, benefiting 148 households in Godavari Municipality focusing on water infrastructure rehabilitation, sanitation improvement, and community capacity building.

Galaxy A15 5G

Samsung has launched the Galaxy A15 5G in Nepal, featuring a 6.5-inch Super AMOLED Infinity-U Display with FHD+ resolution and a 90Hz refresh rate. Powered by the MediaTek Dimensity 6100+ chipset, it offers fast 5G connectivity and storage options up to 8/256 GB. The camera setup includes a 50MP wide-angle lens, 5MP ultra-wide lens, and a 2MP macro lens for versatile photography. Galaxy A15 5G starts at NPR 27,999.

PSL on DishHome

DishHome has announced the exclusive live broadcast of the Pakistan Super League on its Action Sports HD channel, starting from 17 February. Cricket enthusiasts across Nepal can enjoy all the live action of the PSL until 18 March.

Surya Nepal Golf

The Surya Nepal Western Open, the fourth event in the Surya Nepal Golf Tour, kicked off at the Himalayan Golf Course in Pokhara on Wednesday with 50 golfers, including



35 pros and 15 amateurs participating in the 54-hole tournament. Top contenders include Dinesh Prajapati, Bhuvan Nagarkoti, Rabi Khadka, and Sdbhav Acharya. The tournament will feature a cash prize of Rs840,000, with the winner receiving Rs140,000.



Spain award

Spanish Ambassador to Nepal Jose Maria Ridao Dominguez on Tuesday conferred awards to Honorary Consul General of Spain Ambica Shrestha and consular staff at a function at Dwarika's Hotel in Kathmandu.

Nabil and Hair & Shanti

Nabil Bank has announced a partnership with Hair & Shanti offering its customers a 10% discount on payments made with Nabil Bank Debit Card, Credit Card, or Priority Banking.

Pulsar bike ride

Hansraj Hulaschand, the authorised distributor of Bajaj motorcycles in Nepal, has completed the Bajaj Pulsar 1000 NS Ride. Customers from the Sagarmatha and Janakpur zones participated in planting more than 100 fruit trees on the occasion of World Wetlands Day.

Tata EV

Sipradi Trading, the sole authorised distributor of Tata Motors in Nepal, has said the Tata Nexon K3 and Tata Tiaga EV medium range, which have been adjusted for price in India, are yet to debut in Nepal. The EVs will be available at adjusted price upon their release in the Nepali market. Currently, Tata Tiaga is available in introductory price since the Nada Auto Show. The Tata Tiaga long range is priced between Rs2.54-2.79 million, while the Nexon EV costs Rs4.59 million.

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This is the 1,200th hardcopy edition of Nepali Times. In the last 24 years, the world has changed, Nepal has changed, a whole generation has been replaced by the next. But this newspaper looks the same, and feels the same.

Newspaper readers are creatures of habit, they do not like surprises. There are enough surprises in real life. Navigating a favourite periodical therefore should be effortless, muscle memory guiding us to a favourite



#0 JULY 2000



#600 13-19 APRIL 2012



#1200 23-29 FEBRUARY 2024

back page column, to page 2 for readers' comments, the centerfold spread for striking pictures and bold design.

This does not mean newspapers

should be boring and predictable. Content is like fish, if it is not fresh it is rotten. Items must be original and exclusive, thought-provoking enough for readers to snuggle up

and read the paper cover to cover.

Recently, Nepali Times organised a focus group made up of readers responding to our call, the paper's self-confessed addicts and freelance contributors to take stock of the last 1,200 issues.

The paper's plus points were deemed to be its continuity, quality, objectivity and positiveness. There were also suggestions to add more multimedia material, be more visible on social media, appeal to younger readers, add podcasts and sports coverage, interact and engage more with readers.

Over the past two decades and half, nearly 100 journalists have worked in the newsroom of

Nepali Times. But staff strength has shrunk, and with it the number of pages. The torch has passed on to a new crop of young, dynamic and dedicated journalists who believe in the enduring role of media in exposing problems, and finding solutions to them.

In the Publisher's Note of the very first #0 edition of this paper in July 2000, we wrote: 'Those who want to take us back to bad old days of authoritarianism say that Nepalis are only free to complain about how miserable we are. OK, but that is precisely the point.'

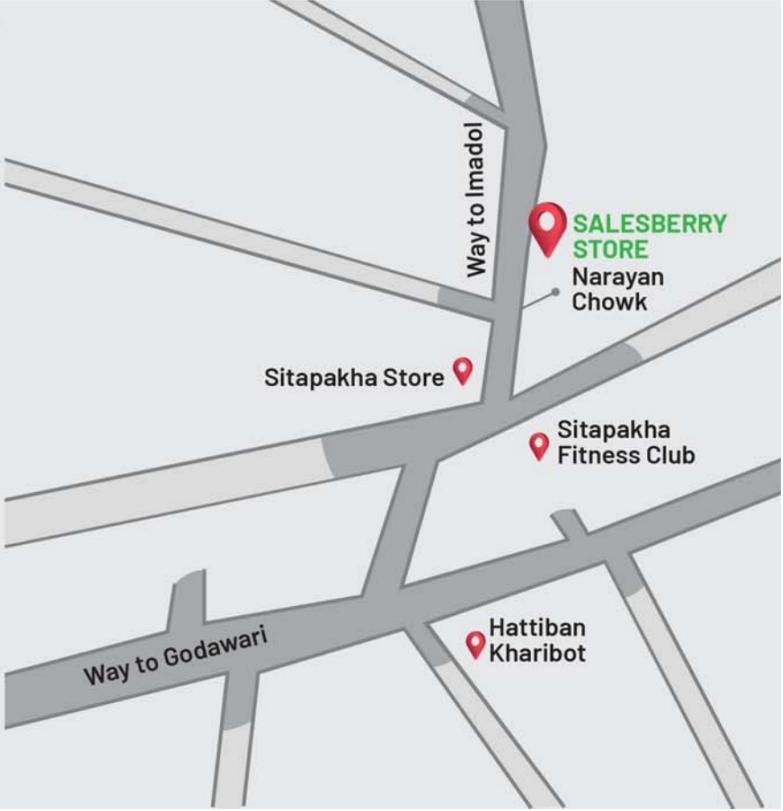
We could very well have written those lines this week.

Kunda Dixit, Publisher



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Dispelling myths about climbing

Nepal's Himalayan peaks are not crowded, and they have not run out of mountaineering challenges

Edward Morgan

Last spring, I climbed a couple of easy 6,000ers in Nepal with Howard Lister. When we returned to Kathmandu, we had dinner with Richard Salisbury and Rodolphe Popier of The Himalayan Database.

For them, Nepal's 2023 spring climbing season had not been very interesting. Although there was a record number of climbers on Mt Everest and many more on the other 8,000ers in Nepal, almost all fall into what László Pintér calls 'of only statistical value' -- commercial

expeditions repeating the ordinary routes on 8,000ers.

It could seem like Himalayan climbing (defined as making new routes and early repeats) is in decline. There are a couple of myths about Himalayan climbing, that should be dispelled:

Myth 1: The Himalaya is Crowded

The record numbers of permits given for Everest and the famous images of queues of climbers on the South-East Ridge might make a casual observer think that the Himalaya is crowded. This is far from being the case.

In the 2023 pre-monsoon season, 1,176 climbers were

LOOK UP: A fore-shortened view of Lhotse's imposing South Face from the summit of Island Peak.



EDWARD MORGAN

Mt Everest (Pvt) Ltd

A century after the 1924 attempt to climb the world's highest mountain, it is not so lonely at the top anymore

Vishad Onta

Mountaineering is an expensive sport, but a radical shift from international to domestic expedition companies has led to lower prices. This shift has made the activity accessible to a much wider range of climbers. Clients are no longer just from the West but from Southeast Asia, India, China and Nepal.

Many Chinese mountaineers prefer to climb Everest from Nepal, as requirements to climb are much stricter on the north side of Chomolungma in Tibet -- they must have climbed at least one other 8,000er. Most Nepali operators offer expeditions to clients with much less, or even zero, experience.

This increase in inexperienced climbers comes with a greater risk of fatalities. Spring 2023 was the deadliest season on Everest with 20 killed or missing over the season.

"People should not be learning how to abseil on Everest," asserts Swiss-German journalist and mountaineer Billi Bierling.

Mountaineering blogger Alan Arnette recommends that climbers scale at least a 7,000er before aiming for Everest. He is also for limiting the number of permits, since problems come up due to overcrowding high on the mountain.

Inexperienced climbers also need much more assistance from high altitude guides, and the ratio of Sherpas to climbers on Everest is higher than it has ever been. This does mean more employment for locals, but it also leads to more trash, and greater risk for porters on the Khumbu Icefall.

The Khumbu Pasang Lhamu Rural

Municipality's announcement this month that all expeditions will be required to bring down their poop from Everest made headlines around the world, and provided material for comedy shows. But many decades of frozen human waste thawing on the slopes, due to climate change, is fast becoming an issue.

Waste Alleviation and Gelling (WAG) bags are now mandatory for expeditions. Long used by soldiers, these poop pouches are lined with deodorising powder. There are doubts about whether this new rule can be enforced and monitored. Consolidating feces in drums at Camp II and flying it to Base Camp by chopper has also been proposed.

Arnette points out: "Tourists paying \$100,000 for an expedition are unlikely to bring back their own waste, and it is demeaning to ask Sherpas to do it for them. The use of these bags will come down to personal responsibility."

The Municipality recently announced other rules: each climber on Everest is required to also bring back 8kg of other garbage. Expeditions currently pay a \$4,000 deposit which is refunded only after proof of a significant volume of trash being brought down is shown.

"Officials readily give this deposit back because, frankly, they don't know what to do with the money," says Dawa Steven Sherpa of Asian Trekking, who maintains that Nepal's mountains are no longer dirty. "They are a hell of a lot cleaner than they used to be."

Sometimes, there are valid reasons to leave garbage behind, such as when a camp is buried by an avalanche, or tents shredded by a storm. Also, when team members are sick or dying, the priority is their rescue.

Many feel that the tradition of assigning liaison officers on paid leave from their civil service jobs to every expedition by the Tourism Department in Kathmandu is obsolete, and driven by kickbacks.

Liaison officers earn \$5,000 and paid time off over two months. Most officers also depend on expeditions even for their sleeping bags and jackets, and many do not bother to stay at base camp.

"How does it make sense that they are policing us when they are reliant on us?" questions Sherpa, adding that liaison officers are a financial and physical burden for expeditions, often requiring more attention at Base Camp than climbing clients.

The Municipality has also released a new policy limiting helicopter ferries and the 'luxury' at base camp. The guidelines titled Base Camp Management Procedure 2024 was issued at the start of the spring climbing season, and are seen by many as an "eleventh hour media stunt" that is simply not enforceable.

Luxury dome tents with en suite bathrooms are now supposedly banned at Base Camp, as are bakeries, cafes, and even massage tents. There is more: a climber is allocated no more than 7.5sq m per sleeping

tent and 1sq m per dining tent, which is absurdly small. The policy also caps expeditions at 15 climbers plus 15 guides ostensibly to reduce the ecological damage at Base Camp. But Dawa Sherpa thinks 15 climbers need at least 30 support staff -- one Sherpa per client, kitchen teams, doctors, physios. Sometimes family members want to spend a few days at Base Camp too.

Arnette is a proponent of a free market on mountains, and thinks agencies should be allowed to have 5-star expeditions if they so wish. "It does increase the average footprint per climber, but bigger changes will come from limiting total numbers," he says.

Preliminary data suggests that the total number of climbers on Everest this spring will surpass even last year's 683.

Of last season's record 20 fatalities, Alan Arnette believes that about half were avoidable, had climbers not pushed on up the mountain when they should not have. A larger proportion of the fatalities came from less expensive expeditions.

China is finally opening up the North East Ridge route to foreign expeditors, and this is the last year before Nepal increases permit fees. Currently, climbers have to pay \$11,000 royalty if climbing from the Chinese side, and \$18,000 from the Chinese side. Nepali permits will cost \$15,000 per expedition from 2025, an surge of 37%.

Despite Arnette's position on fewer Everest permits, he still thinks the mountain can accommodate a good number.

He says, "Everest is a big mountain that can handle hundreds of climbers at a time. Guides need to cooperate to prevent overcrowding on any particular day." 🇳🇵



TENDI SHERPA

granted permits for the 374 'open' mountains, making an average of only three climbers per mountain. That does not sound too crowded, but the distribution of climbers is indeed unbalanced.

László writes about 'guided summit collectors who seek fame', and these were massively concentrated on 8,000m peaks with 41% of the climbers on Everest. Even there, they were almost all on the South Col route.

Another 31% were on normal routes on Nepal's six other 8,000m peaks. Of the remaining 329, a quarter of the climbers were on Ama Dablam and a fifth on Everest's near neighbour, Nuptse.

That left another 187 climbers spread amongst 365 peaks, of which 346 had no visitors at all. If you want solitude in Nepal, it is not difficult to find.

The magic 8,000m line has a massive influence on the choice of climbing objective. Whilst 847 people tried mountains of above 8,000m, with the exception of Nuptse, there were no attempts on any of the other 23 mountains between 7,500m and 8,000m.

Myth 2: There Are No Climbing Challenges Left

'Guided summit collectors' tend to make up increasingly contorted claims to fame ('first left-handed Zimbabwean' or the 'oldest dyslexic dentist' to climb Everest). The casual observer might assume this is because there are no real climbing challenges left. That is absolutely not the case.

Let us start with Lhotse, which essentially has three faces and three ridges. None of the ridges have ever been climbed, and almost all ascents have been by a single route on the North-West Face. The South Face was climbed 33 years ago, and waits for a repeat. This is a very wide wall on which multiple different lines would be possible. The North East Face of Lhotse has not even seen an attempt.

Some of the other 8,000ers have had the most obvious routes

picked off, but there are other climbing objectives to last a few centuries at the current rate of progress. The high 7,000ers in Nepal are mountains which differ from the 8,000ers only by being slightly below an arbitrary height line.

Gyachung Kang, the world's 15th highest mountain, is less than 50m short of being an eight thousander, but it has only had 10 ascents and no attempts for 18 years.

Next is Annapurna II, which has been climbed only 5-6 times. For some Annapurna II may sound like a minor sub-peak of Annapurna, but being 30km away from Annapurna I and with a prominence of nearly 2,500m makes it indisputably a separate mountain.

But these days hardly anyone attempts Annapurna II. There were 16 expeditions to it in the 1980s, three in the 1990s and three in the 2000s, but only one since 2008.

Dhaulagiri, like Annapurna, is a name given to a series of mountains in a massif with Dhaulagiri II, III, IV and V -- all above 7,600m. Dhaulagiri III, IV and V may be considered subsidiary tops of Dhaulagiri II, but Dhaulagiri II is every bit as independent as Annapurna II, yet has received only 10 ascents, the last in 1986. None of Dhaulagiri III, IV or V have been attempted since the 1970s.

If you Google 'what is the most dangerous mountain in the world?' you will get an answer based on the somewhat nonsensical measure of dividing the number of deaths by the number of successful summit climbers. It is declared to be Annapurna I followed by K2 and Nanga Parbat.

This is wrong because it only looks at 8,000m peaks. Annapurna is often quoted as having a 'fatality rate' of 32% (although the large number of commercial climbs in the last few years have brought this down to under 20%).

That certainly does not make it the most dangerous mountain

Which mountain is most dangerous?

Fatalities of total summiteers (in %)



Ngadi Chuli

250%



Dhaulagiri IV

117%



Annapurna I

32%

in the world. Twelve climbers have summited Dhaulagiri IV, but 14 have died while trying, so the fatality rate on that peak is 117%.

But Ngadi Chuli (Peak 29) is the world's 20th highest mountain at 7,871m. It has had only two summiteers, but five people have died while trying, giving it a fatality rate of 250%. It has not even been attempted for more than 40 years.

There is plenty of scope for new routes on all of these mountains. Excluding variants, Annapurna II has been climbed by two routes, Peak 29 by two, Dhaulagiri II by only one.

And then there are mountains that have never been climbed like Shartse, a 7,591m peak on the East Ridge of Lhotse Shar.

There are still some bold climbers making fantastic ascents, like Ukrainians Nikita Balabanov, Mikail Fomin and Viacheslav Polezhaiko on the South-East ridge of Annapurna III in 2021.

The French pair of Boris Langenstein and Tiphaine Duperier last year explored the possibility of ascending the huge and untouched North East Face of Dhaulagiri II. Their plan to climb up and ski down was thwarted by route finding difficulties and bad weather, but this was a real pioneering attempt.

One of the finest climbs on a high 7,000er was the alpine style ascent of a partially new route on the daunting North Face of Jannu by Americans Matt Cornell, Alan Rousseau and Jackson Marvell last autumn.

If we compare the proportion of expeditions to the seven 8,000ers and the highest seven 7,000ers in the Nepal Himalaya by decade, we can see the picture very clearly (graph, page 1).

Mostly non-guided climbing of 7,000ers, making new routes and first or early ascents,

peaked in the 1980s and has been much lower since, while 8,000m climbing, mainly by commercial expeditions, is growing almost exponentially.

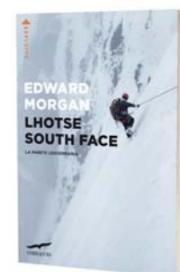
While 'real' Himalayan Climbing is not dying, it is declining and carried out by a relatively small number of highly talented climbers.

That situation is masked by the large numbers of climbers on commercial routes on Everest, the other 8,000ers and a handful of popular mountains and by the publicity these climbs receive.

The lack of such 'adventurous climbs' is not because there are no worthwhile objectives. Himalayan climbing is dangerous even on the heavily populated and well equipped mountains, and it is even more so for those who venture away from well-trodden paths to seek new challenges.

Anyone who attempts such exploits needs to make their own mind up about the risks and difficulties involved. But if anyone believes there are no climbing challenges left in the Himalaya or that all mountaineering in Nepal involves long queues on fixed ropes, then they are absolutely wrong. 🇨🇳

Edward Morgan is the author of Lhotse South Face - The Wall of Legends.



Lhotse South Face - the Wall of Legends
by Edward Morgan
Bee Different Books, 2015
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EVENTS



Documentary Screening

The Kesang Tseten Retrospective (read page 11), presented by Social Science Baha and photo.circle will screen 10 films by the acclaimed filmmaker showcasing facets of Nepali life. Entry is free for all. 23-25 Feb, Nepal Tourism Board

Children's Lit Fest

The ninth Bal Sahitya Mahotsav will feature multiple award-winning author Linda Sue Park. Also enjoy performances by Nepali singer Wangden Sherpa and ventriloquist Seema Golchha. 2 March, 10pm onwards, Rato Bangala School, Patan



Art Exhibition

In a new iteration of a special art exhibition, Siddhartha Art Gallery opens its doors to showcase the works of eminent artist Seema Sharma Shah titled – Namami Gange | Homage to the Ganges. Till 11 March, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Babermahal

Photo Exhibition

Yala Maya Kendra's new exhibition Western Nepal in the 1950s will feature photographs taken by Toni Hagen. Swiss Ambassador to Nepal Danielle Meuwly will be the Chief Guest on the opening day of the event. 27 February-2 March, Yala Maya Kendra, Patan Dhoka



Comedy show

Plan ahead and save the date for Indian comic Gaurav Kapoor's stand-up special. Look forward to the laughs. 22 March, 6:30pm onwards, Nepal Pragya Pratishthan



Changu Music

Listen to Nabin K Bhattarai and his band Atripta perform their music during the Changu Music Festival. 24 February, 1pm onwards, Bhaktapur



Himalayan Highway

Himalayan Highway, the Bluegrass and Nepali Folk Fusion band, are set to perform live this weekend. Get tickets through Ticket Sansar. 24 February, 8-11pm, Beers N' Cheers, Jhamsikhel



Privé Nepal

Get ready to party it up at Privé Nepal's Bollywood night with actor Chitrangda Singh. Call for tickets and more details. 24 February, The Soaltee Kathmandu, 984550090 / 9801324782

Rock n' roll night

This weekend, head to Darbar Marg to watch The Heartbreakers perform crowd-favourite classics. Call for tickets. 23 February, 7pm onwards, Sherpa Mall, 9801986771

WEEKEND WEATHER



FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY
18° 4°	19° 5°	20° 8°	20° 10°	19° 6°

Where is the rain?

Another westerly has passed through Nepal with only isolated precipitation. The mountains did get some snow this week, but it has been mostly dry across the parched mid-mountains. Worse, the weather models do not show any substantial front on the horizon. There is still a chance of a passing shower on Friday, but the weekend will be mostly sunny and warmer. This Air Quality Index map of Nepal shows hazardous levels of pollution in Kathmandu Valley from local vehicle emissions, dust from the dry terrain as well as imported particulates from the south of the border. With warmer weather, air quality is expected to improve.

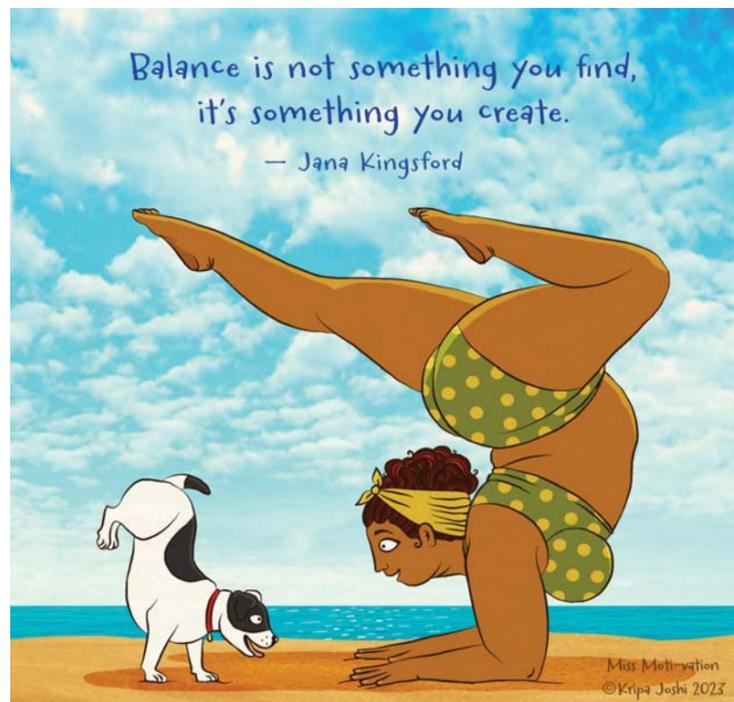
OUR PICK

Writer-director Issa López's True Detective: Night Country, the fourth season of the True Detective anthology series, is set in the unforgiving Alaskan landscape in the fictional mining town of Ennis where eight men working at a research station have disappeared without a trace. Drawn into the investigation are local police chief Liz Danvers and Trooper Evangeline Navarro, who must put aside their past differences to figure out what happened to the men, and how their case is connected to a gruesome murder that took place years ago. Stars Jodie Foster, Kali Reis, Fiona Shaw, John Hawkes and more.



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- 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,
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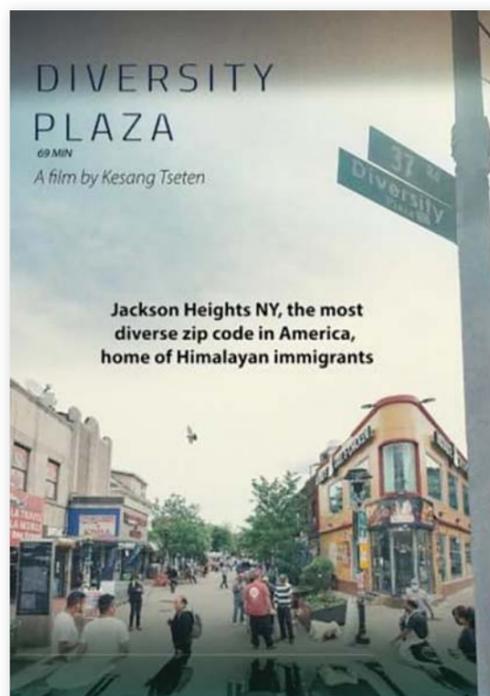
नेपाल सरकार
विज्ञापन बोर्ड

Seeking identity in diversity

■ Sonia Awale

A Flushing Local 7 subway train approaches the platform and commuters get ready to step in. The scene cuts to solid black. These first few seconds set the tone for the rest of Diversity Plaza — this is going to be a film about people in motion.

Movement through time and space is something of a trademark for acclaimed documentary maker Kesang Tseten, with previous films like In Search of the Riyal, We Corner People, Castaway Man and Frames of War. Some of these films will be screened in a retrospective this weekend.



For the next minute or so, Diversity Plaza shows us beauty parlours and nail salons, a kabab king, street vendors, a Covid-19 vaccine centre and a momo van.

We are in Jackson Heights in the New York borough of Queens. A subtitle tells us it is 'the most linguistically diverse zip code in the US and perhaps the world'.

Queens is home to 75,000 immigrants from Nepal, Bhutan and India. More than 60% of the people here are foreign-born and speak 160 languages. They are politically aware, and concerned about their place in a changing America, and an altered world.

There is an intersection in Queens actually named Diversity Plaza, and Tseten films immigrants

campaigning for candidates for city council amidst the Covid crisis, while there are attacks on Asians after President Trump called the bug the "Chinese Virus".

Near the Plaza in a nondescript building is Adhikaar which works for the rights of Nepali immigrants. Among them is Dibya Shori Shakya, who ever so slowly writes her name and address on the board.

A group of women gathers to talk about being ashamed initially of their status as domestic help and nannies. "The children we raise will go on to become doctors, engineers or even presidents someday. So we shouldn't feel lowly or discriminate against ourselves," says one woman.

United Sherpa Association Inc may sound like a mountaineering outfit, but is a monastery. After prayers, devotees do yoga. Some asana are too difficult, and they burst out laughing.

This is an intimate look at Himalayan peoples living in Jackson Heights, their struggles and aspirations. Some are busy celebrating festivals and keeping traditions alive, others try to assimilate and are more concerned with making their voices heard in their new country.

Adhikaar staff are out on the streets of New York including at Times Square in Manhattan, advocating for immigrant rights.

They are also urging fellow Nepalis to fill up census applications.

"Census means numbers. What happens when there are numbers? Power, and when there is power, there is wealth... when there is wealth there is respect and when there is respect, there is recognition," Narbada Chettri of Adhikaar explains on camera.

During the film's hour-long runtime, viewers in Nepal are transported to the other side of the world, almost forgetting that the scenes are happening on a screen. The cuts are rough, almost cinéma vérité style, unlike some of the sleeker films being made today. Tseten does not embellish the stories, the landscape, the people. Like his previous documentaries,

the film lays bare the raw reality of immigrant life in America.

The director himself takes a back seat, his inputs barely discernible. But of course he is there throughout in the composition of the shots, selection of scenes, the final edits. Tseten calls it an 'unprompted' style modelled after American filmmaker Frederick Wiseman. Even though there is no script in Diversity Plaza, the documentary still has a beginning, middle and an end.

In Kathmandu this week, Tseten recalled how he was in New York in 2021, trying to persuade a character for his forthcoming film on the Bön Po, when he heard about Diversity Plaza with its strong Nepali presence.

He was familiar with Jackson Heights ever since he was a student at Columbia Journalism School in the 1980s, and it piqued his attention. "Diversity Plaza is like Thamel," he says. "The restaurants are filled with our own people."

The documentary ends on a high note, literally and figuratively. An immigrant from India performs a Karnatak song as the 7 train clatters above Diversity Plaza. She

translates the verse into English before singing its original:

"Do not seek or mind similarity in identity in the world.

Why is it that we always look for the things that are the same about one another instead of celebrating and valuing our differences?" 🇳🇵

*Diversity Plaza
Directed and Produced by Kesang Tseten
Shunyata Films 2022
1 hour 8 minutes*

*Kesang Tseten Retrospective
Nepal Tourism Board
Social Science Baha and photo.circle
23-25 February*

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Manish Dhoju in hyperrealism

Artistic rebellion in the age of Instagram, instant gratification and visual overload

■ Shaguni Singh Sakya

Manish Dhoju's parents did not see much prospect in art, and persuaded him to study architecture. But the young man's passion and creativity could not be quenched.

The carefully drawn lines needed for architectural designs pushed him to become a self-taught hyperrealist artist. Watching YouTube tutorials and practicing endlessly on his own, Dhoju started by making exquisitely detailed sketches of people's eyes and faces.

Every strand of hair, pore on the skin, and wrinkle was drawn with photographic accuracy. But it was the eyes that were the main focus, mirroring the soul of the person with more depth than mere photographs.

Hyperrealism is a genre of painting resembling high-resolution photography and entails a softer, more detailed focus, differentiating it from photorealism, which is just the copying of a photograph.

Hyperrealism creates the illusion of reality not seen in the original photograph as it also imbues the emotional journey of the artist during the painting process. Through subtle lighting and shading effect, it is a visual illusion that tells a deeper story, not just through the artist's draftsmanship but the ability to bring out the emotion of the subject more intensely.

Hyperrealism is almost surrealistic because, in reality or in photographs, nobody can see or feel such profound depth. Hyperrealists like Dhoju possess the innate talent to understand their subject's core emotions without even knowing them in person.

In the age of Instagram, instant gratification and visual overload, an artist like Dhoju is a rebel. Photographs are no longer 'real enough' and exaggerated depictions of tiny details carry a shock factor.

Dhoju's works, Baa and Maa show the tragedy of senior Nepalis living the remaining years of their lives alone, a story familiar in many households in contemporary Nepal. Every wrinkle and line on their faces, their aching eyes express loneliness. Could this be longing to meet children and grandchildren settled abroad?

Another painting is of temple architecture with careful



Narasimha (2022), Graphite on paper, 6 x 4ft

renditions of carved struts, doors, and windows that seem even more detailed than the carvings themselves.

Dhoju uses hyperrealism to show dimensions that even the carvers may have been amazed by. A sculptor is focused on chiseling the wood, but Dhoju sees beyond this perfecting micro details of the wood, copper, and bronze.

The sculpted work is then enhanced through an array of lenses giving a depth of field to the objects and deities. Dhoju first takes pictures and then enhances them in photoshop before sketching with spatial 3D visualisation.

The Royal Golden Window of Patan Durbar Square above the entrance to Sundari Chowk is one of Dhoju's finest hyperrealist heritage pieces. The central figure is the Buddhist deity Shristi Kanta

Lokeswor with Shiva, Parvati, Ganesh, Saraswati, other deities on top and the Garuda below.

Built in the 17th century by King Srinivasan Malla, it portrays a perfect amalgamation of two religions that the Malla kings promoted to maintain social harmony. The window is an artistic marvel and Dhoju has enhanced the genius of the unknown carver(s) with a three-dimensional effect.

Since there are no old reference drawings of many ancient Newari architecture masterpieces, Dhoju's hyperrealism could serve as blueprints for the future.

The Narasimha statue at Bhaktapur Durbar Square is one of the finest stone sculptures in Nepal. Installed in the 17th century by King Bhupatindra Malla, the half-man-lion is a mythical incarnation of Vishnu. The Narasimha is close to



Baa (2020), Graphite on paper, 66 x 55cm



Maa (2020), Graphite on paper, 66 x 55cm

Dhoju's heart as his mother used to take him to the deity to cure his colic.

Narasimha is believed to cure sick children, and the hyperrealistic version of this ferocious avatar tearing out the stomach of the demon Hiranyakashipu feels more powerful as the disembowelment is enhanced through lighting, shading, and multi-dimensional layers.

Dhoju is now using his interest in science, philosophy, and psychology to explain the complexities of our ancient texts in a hyperrealistic form.

His conceptual art, Bhairava's

Radiant Embrace, depicts the creation of the universe as explained in the Chandogya Upanishad – the Hindu text that unravels the mysteries of the cosmos. Using the new 3D software Blender, Dhoju chose a 16th-century Bhairav mask, now housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, to define the concept of Hiranyagarbha which resonates with the Big Bang theory.

Bhairava represents the divine trinity of creation, sustenance and destruction and Dhoju is syncing religious philosophy with astrophysics on canvas in a dynamic and continuum of parallel universes. This is a novel art form in the hyperrealism genre.

Dhoju's technique requires patience and dedication. He spends up to seven hours at a stretch without rest, so engrossed is he in sketching that he does not feel tired or notice the passage of time.

The 3D visualisation is not just a technical skill, but the ability to convey and capture feelings at a more intense level, almost having an extrasensory perception.

Dhoju has only sketched in black and white, and his next challenge is to paint in colour and further develop the art form. It is said that time and space exist in the 11th dimension, and humans can see and capture only three dimensions.

Perhaps the hyperrealist in Manish Dhoju can see and render the fourth dimension? 🇳🇵

Shaguni Singh Sakya is Director of the Museum of Nepali Arts (MoNA) and KGH Hotels. Manish Dhoju's exhibition is part of the Kathmandu Art Biennale at MoNA, Thamel and is on till April.

nepalitimes.com

More images online.



Artist Manish Dhoju

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Lharkyal Lama's Lumbini, Inc

Private developers with political patronage are still trying to monetise the Buddha's birthplace

■ **Jibraj Chalise** in Lumbini

In what seems to be a replay of an initiative 13 years ago by the shadowy Asia Pacific Exchange and Cooperation Foundation (APECF) to invest billions in the 'development' of Lumbini, a new scandal involves leasing the nearby Buddhist shrine of Ramgram to a private entity.

Hong Kong-based APECF had signed an MoU with a UN office in Beijing in June 2011 for the Lumbini Buddhist Cultural Special Zone to turn it into an international tourist destination with the world's tallest Buddha statue.

The new Ramgram proposal was being pushed by a shady former lawmaker named Lharkyal Lama, head of the Lumbini Development Trust (LDT) and involved leasing 82 hectares of the sacred site for 99 years to the Singapore-based Moksha Foundation to build hotels and other structures (pictured).

Interestingly, both projects involve Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal. The APECF was chaired by Dahal after he resigned as prime minister in 2009, which was his first tenure. And the local counterpart of the Moksha Foundation is Promised Land, owned by the son of Dahal's landlord in Kathmandu.

The vice-chair of APECF Xiao Wunan visited Kathmandu in June last year and met Dahal, after which the prime minister offered to support the foundation's 'core focus' of Buddhist culture.



The APECF project has been in limbo ever since former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon cancelled a visit to Lumbini to endorse it after geopolitical pressure and the controversy in Nepal, reported by this paper at that time.

Last week the LDT cancelled the MoU with Moksha Foundation and Promised Land after a directive from the Parliament's Public Accounts Committee, which also ordered the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA) to probe the deal.

It was Prime Minister Dahal who appointed Lharkyal Lama to head LDT in August 2023, despite his nefarious past. Proximity



LUMBINI DEVELOPMENT TRUST

to powerful leaders across the political spectrum has allowed Lama to keep being reincarnated despite allegations ranging from corruption to sedition.

"With Gautam Buddha and Maya Devi as my witnesses, I will promise to never denigrate this holy place and to uphold the dignity of Lumbini," Lama declared after his appointment last year.

The story about Ramgram, 35km east of Lumbini, was broken in January by a Kantipur investigation which revealed that Promised Land was owned by Nikesh Adhikari, the son of Sharada Adhikari, the Prime Minister Dahal's landlord.

Tourism and Culture Minister Sudan Kirati, who chaired LDT

before Lama's appointment, had previously also attempted to hand over Ramgram to Moksha Foundation and Promised Land, but the deal was blocked by the Department of Archaeology.

One out of the eight relics of Gautam Buddha that were distributed among his disciples after his death was sent to the ancient kingdom of Koliya, where present-day Ramgram stupa is located. Experts have long pushed to archaeologically substantiate the site's history and include it in the World Heritage List.

"What they tried to do with Ramgram is heartbreaking," says Bhairawa-based cultural expert Geetu Giri. "It seems that the prime

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minister has been using Lama and the LDT as proxies to monetise Lumbini in collusion with cronies.”

Lharkyal Lama was hugely controversial even before being appointed to the LDT. His citizenship paper says he was born in Helambu on 28 November 1964. Lama claimed to have a Khenpo degree from the Ngagyur Nyingma Institute in Karnataka in 2000, but the institute's website shows only one person graduated that year and it was not Lharkyal Lama.

During the newly post-Panchayat era, Lama was close to powerful Nepali Congress (NC) leader Khum Bahadur Khadka, who himself was convicted of several counts of corruption in 2012.

In 2001, during his second tenure as prime minister, the NC's Sher Bahadur Deuba appointed Lama as chair of the Monastery Management and Development Committee.

Lama pivoted to the UML in 2007, and was close to Ishwar Pokharel and Amrit Bohara who lined up a proportional representation seat in the 2008 Constituent Assembly election. He was appointed state minister for finance by Prime Minister Jhulanath Khanal in 2011, but had to resign just two weeks into office after it was revealed that he possessed two Nepali citizenships, an Indian passport and a Tibetan refugee ID.

A Home Ministry investigation further revealed ties to an emissary of the Dalai Lama and leader of the Free Tibet campaign. The investigation was never completed due to 'non-cooperation by government agencies'.

Lama then left the UML and joined the Maoist party in 2014, and was appointed lawmaker in 2015 despite the Election Commission objections. Maoist chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal wrote four letters to the Commission on Lama's behalf.

Even Maoist leaders objected to his appointment to the legislature, but Dahal went ahead with it.

Lama was once again investigated by the CIAA in 2016 during his second stint in the legislature after illegal wealth and bullets were discovered in his bank locker. He spent nine days in custody and was released on a mere Rs60,000 bail. The CIAA filed a case in the Special Court, but Lama was acquitted.

Lama's appointment to the LDT was also heavily criticised from within the Maoist party, but Dahal overruled objections. The Promised Land deal that Lama pushed therefore could have the backing of the highest office in the land.

Basanta Bidari, who has worked as an archaeologist at the LDT for 28 years, says that Lama's tenure has been disappointing, but he is not surprised. He says, "There is no need for me to comment on appointments made by Dahal and Kirati. We never had any expectations from Lama."

The LDT was established in 1985 to develop and promote the birthplace of the Buddha, and was under the tutelage of the royal palace. But even then there were allegations of misappropriation of funds, and lack of progress in developing the nativity site.

Four decades on, after many changes in government, political interference in Lumbini's development continues. Meanwhile, the contrast between the heritage site and the surrounding Greater Lumbini region is starker than ever.

Says Bhairawa-based observer Ram Bikas Chaudhary: "There are two Lumbinis here, separated by a wall. Inside it is beautiful, prosperous, and peaceful, while the outside is ugly, poor and chaotic." 🇳🇵





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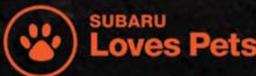


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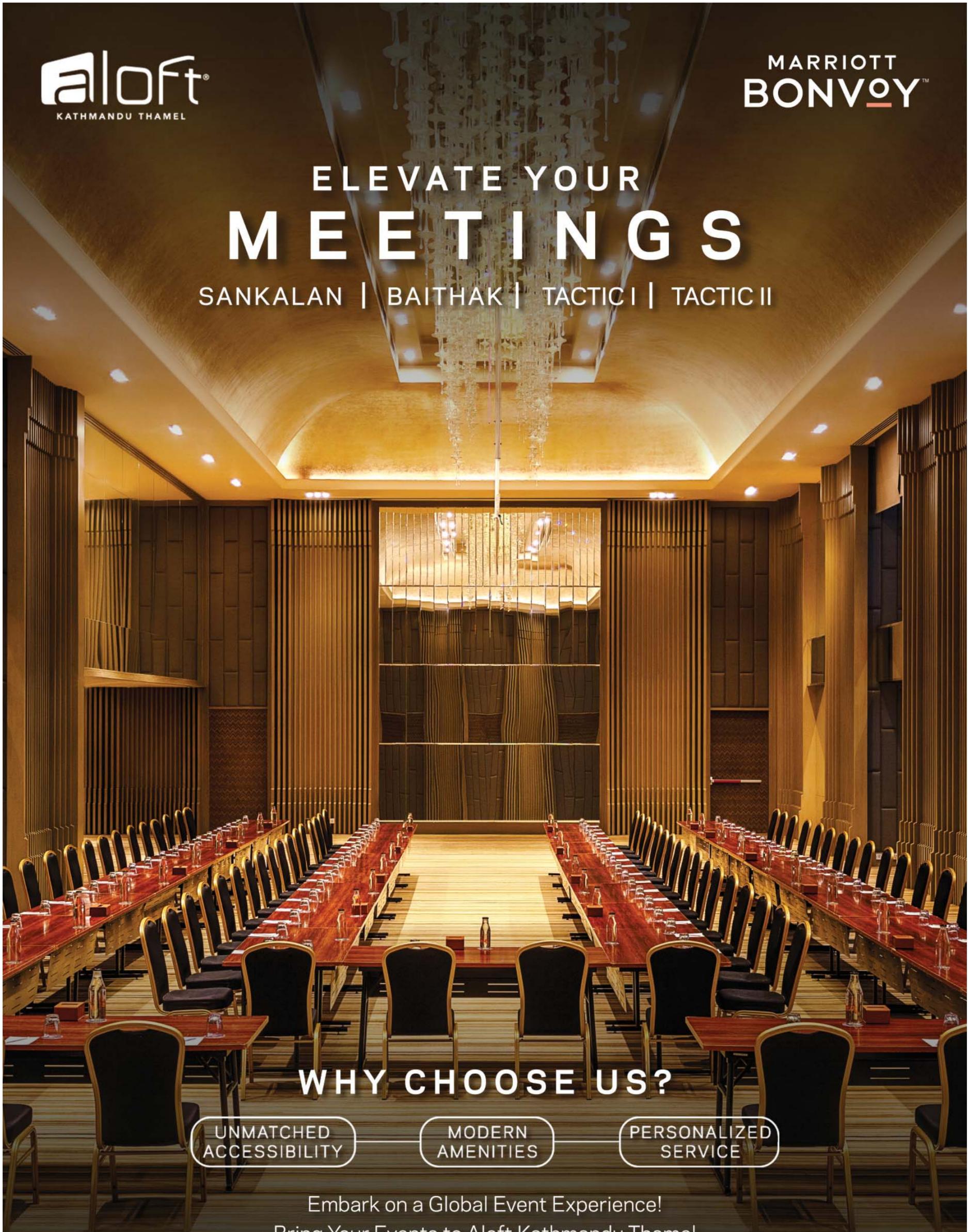
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