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**ECONOMIC POWER:**  
An electric bus and bicycle lane in Lalitpur on Thursday morning. Reducing Nepal's petroleum import bill should be a priority for sustained growth.



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## Poor cash-rich Nepal

■ **Sonia Awale**

Nepal is not poor, just poorly governed. Never has this been more true than now.

A spurt in remittances and a slowdown in imports means foreign exchange reserves have hit an all-time high of \$14 billion. Just in the past seven months, diaspora dollars totaled \$6.35 billion, a 21.6% increase over the same period last year.

The black cloud in the silver lining is that while macroeconomic indicators are strong, they also point to deep malaise within.

Imports are down because purchasing power has declined, and banks are not lending. Government revenue has dropped. Most remittance money is spent on household expenditure.

Investment fell by 11% in 2023, impacted by tighter financing conditions post-Covid and global factors following the Ukraine war.

"Nepal's economy grew at 1.9% in the fiscal year 2023. Is that too low? Yes, very low. Are we in an economic crisis? No. But we are stuck in a situation where aggregate demand is low. Nepal is in a crisis

of 'low economic growth,' says economist Sameer Khatiwada.

Banks have cash, and loan rates are down, but there is no demand from the private sector because of poor investment climate, and a large chunk of the middle class has left.

Nepalis are migrating in droves, but fewer consumers means less economic activity back home, which in turn pushes people out.

Nearly a million young Nepalis left for jobs and study overseas last year. More than 400,000 left on work permits in the first seven months of this fiscal year.

Nepal's economy is suffering a form of 'Dutch Disease' where high income from one source paradoxically keeps other sectors of the economy down. Remittance growth has increased savings, but there is nowhere to invest it except to speculate on the real estate bubble, which has burst.

Economist Khatiwada says we have to go beyond the symptoms to the disease: "Nepal is caught in a trap of low productive capacity, lack of competitiveness, lack of foreign investment and lack of business dynamism."

Experts recommend more

competition in the private sector, and promoting industrialisation by leveraging areas where Nepal has comparative advantage like the service sector, information technology and exports of high value niche products.

"We complained when foreign exchange reserves were low, and now we complain when reserves are up. We are sitting on all that money instead of investing it," says Sujeev Shakya of the Nepal Economic Forum.

If there was hope the new coalition would bring solutions, that has fizzled. Finance Minister Barsaman Pun is Prime Minister Dahal's left-hand man, but he is already under a cloud for his alleged involvement with a gold smuggling ring (page 2). He has reportedly been brought in to pass a budget favourable to cronies.

With the new government's priorities so centred on personal and partisan gain, there is little time to solve the other crisis: underspending the development budget. There is money for infrastructure and service delivery, we just cannot seem to spend it. Only 25% of the development

budget has been spent in the past seven months of this fiscal year. Delays in infrastructure have further undermined economic growth and job creation.

Underspending is related to corruption. Public procurement is lubricated by kickbacks, and delays are caused by rival cronies with political patronage. Contractors abandon half-finished projects by bribing officials.

Nepal's crisis of low economic activity is directly related to governance failure. The new coalition has a chance to set things right at the third Nepal Investment Summit on 28-29 April, but don't hold your breath.

"No matter how many laws we revise to make doing business easier, unless infrastructure is improved we will not attract foreign investors," says Khatiwada.

Shakya takes a broader view: "It all really comes down to our mindset. We think of Nepal as a small, poor country but it is a potential \$100 billion economy. We have to think like one. Take risks, reform business, break away from a rent-seeking approach." 🇳🇵

**Skeletons in the Cabinet**  
EDITORIAL  
PAGE 2

# SALE

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# Skeletons in the Cabinet

This new season of Singha Darbar looks set to be action-packed: back-stabbing, betrayals, break-ups, patch-ups, repeat cameo appearances by tainted characters.

All but two members of the new Cabinet have been ministers at least once before. No one remembers any accomplishments from their previous tenures. But we do recall allegations of misconduct, nepotism, incompetence, or conflict of interest.

Summary of (some) Cabinet members who have become ministers (again) despite their nefarious pasts:



**Barsaman Pun, Minister of Finance**  
Maoist Centre  
Has been finance minister twice, energy minister once and served as Minister for Peace. Implicated in a previous term in

the purchase of six Chinese aircraft for Nepal Airlines.

Just in his first week again as finance minister, Pun has found himself again in the middle of a scandal. An investigation by Nagarik links him with a smuggling racket in which his relative, former Vice President Nanda Kishore Pun, is already under investigation. Both Puns are former Maoist guerrilla commanders, and are close to Prime Minister Dahal.

**Raghubir Mahaseth, Minister of Physical Infrastructure and Transportation**  
UML

Why this man keeps coming back despite past scandals is a mystery. But there is credence



to the theory that his relative, billionaire and Belarus resident Upendra Mahato, is a UML donor. Mahaseth holds the dubious honour of being given the boot by his own party chair K P Oli for 'poor performance'

during his previous 18-month term in the same ministry in 2019. But he is back.

In 2020, Mahaseth retaliated against Oli by publicly denouncing the UML. Oli placated him by giving him the Foreign Ministry in 2021, despite Mahaseth's total lack of experience in foreign affairs. Oli has stuck by Mahaseth despite influential party members like Ramchandra Jha leaving the UML because of this mollycoddling.



**Rabi Lamichhane, Minister of Home Affairs**  
RSP

Even party insiders were against Rabi Lamichhane joining the government at this time. Just about

everyone knows he wanted to be back in the powerful Home Ministry to clear his name in

a citizenship caper and a cooperative scam. The Supreme Court invalidated his previous MP position due to his US citizenship issue, but he rectified it easily by obtaining new citizenship and winning a by-election that reinstated him. In early 2024, Lamichhane was accused of misappropriating funds from several cooperatives to bankroll the media company he owned. He is now back in charge of the very ministry that oversees agencies investigating him.



**Dol Prasad Aryal, Minister of Labour**  
RSP

The fact that Dol Prasad Acharya returns as Labour Minister after his previous 20-day stint last

year, is indicative of how close he is to Lamichhane. Aryal does have interest in the labour sector, or shall we say conflict of interest. In 2023 he was appointed minister while still listed as CEO of a remittance company and International Marketing Director at a recruitment agency, one of

41 investigated by the Department of Money Laundering.

**Pushpa Kamal Dahal, Prime Minister**  
Maoist Centre

Throughout his career Dahal has juggled two jobs: chair of the Maoist party as well as a one-

man recruitment agency giving jobs to his children, in-laws, even the son of his

landlord. He made sure his daughter Renu Dahal had ample chances to be elected mayor of



Bharatpur twice. His other daughter Ganga handles his secretariat and is a photo-op buddy in Dahal's high-profile engagements.

Daughter-in-law Bina Magar was previously the

Minister for Water Supply, and his sons-in-law and nephew have held positions ranging from personal secretaries and political advisers to politicians. The son of his landlord was given a 99-year lease on the sacred Buddhist Ramgram site, a deal struck down by Parliament's Public Accounts Committee last month.

This week, Prime Minister Dahal pushed his cousin Narayan Dahal to be appointed chair of the National Assembly despite criticism of nepotism from within his party.

At least there are some fresh faces in the Cabinet including Education Minister Sumana Shrestha and Youth and Sports Minister Biraj Bhakta Shrestha, both of the RSP. Shrestha has been vocal about education reform as an opposition MP, and it will be worth watching if the two Shresthas will be allowed to bring positive change, now that they are in government.

**Shristi Karki**

**Some Cabinet members who have become ministers again despite nefarious pasts.**

## ONLINE PACKAGES



WOMEN IN THE DRIVING SEAT

Driving three-wheelers has allowed Nepali women like Indra Maya Shrestha, Saraswati Moktan, and Sunshang Ghising to stand on their own two feet. Sava Tempos have dissuaded many Nepali women from migrating overseas for work by providing a well-paying alternative job at home. Watch this video on YouTube.



WORKING FROM HOME

Tanka Nath Ghimire returned to Nepal from Qatar determined not to migrate anymore. He decided his destiny was in his own country. Now, Tanka and his wife Laxmi own and run the Ranimahar Resort in Awal of Palpa. Watch the video on our YouTube channel and subscribe for more multimedia content.

### NEW GOVERNMENT

Nepalis, like the rest of the World, need to stop looking at things horizontally ('What difference does it make?', Editorial, #1202). Rotate the view by 90 degrees to the vertical plane and realise that the real struggle is the 99% against the 1% ruling Syndicate.

**Gus Ferguson**

■ This is exhausting. Is this country the property of Pushpa Kamal Dahal, K P Oli and Sher Bahadur Dubea to divide among themselves? When will they think about the Nepali people? Leaders who should be sacked are being given ministerial portfolios and opportunities to rob the country some more.

**Suraj Pradhan**

### POKHARA

This rivalry between India and China has become ever more palpable in the everyday lives of Nepalis ('Pokhara epicentre of Sino-Indian rivalry', Durga Rana Magar, #1202). Ordinary Nepali are all experts at geopolitics and have knowledge about every major player's interests. Two years ago, I got schooled on regional and international geopolitics by folks on the street.

**Samaya**

### TONI HAGEN

His book is one of my treasures ('West is West', Alisha Sijapati, #1201). Decades ago, I attended one of his lectures where he showed old films and slides from his time in Nepal. The stories he told were amazing.

**Gerda Pauler**

### GREAT HIMALAYAN TRAIL

Good luck to them ('The great Himalayan trial', Pinki Sris Rana, #1202). That was once my dream, but I have aged out. Grab your dreams when you have them.

**Candace Kolb**

### MANISH DHOJU

What wonderful talent in hyper-realistic art ('Manish Dhoju in hyperrealism', Shaguni Singh Sakya, #1200).

**N H Manandhar**

### SINO-GURKHA WAR

This story is so interesting and so little analysis had been done in the past ('Neither side lost, both sides won', Axel Michaels, #1201).

**Bharat Koirala**

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### WHAT'S TRENDING

#### The great Himalayan trial

by Pinki Sris Rana

Marinel de Jesus and Mingmar Sherpa shared not just a love for nature, but a desire to prove themselves as women. Which is when they decided to walk the 1,700km Great Himalayan Trail. Follow their trek on Facebook and on nepalitimes.com



Most reached and shared on Facebook

#### Sino-Indian rivalry in Pokhara

by Durga Rana Magar

Nepal's tourism capital is on the main geostategic fault line between India and China where their rivalry is openly played out. Both powerful neighbours have strategic interests in Pokhara and are concerned the other will exploit it. Read more on our website.



Most popular on X

#### Catapulting to Singha Darbar

by Kunda Dixit

We are now on Season 3 Episode 1 of Nepal's endless political saga. The more things change in Nepali politics, the more they remain the same. For the past 18 years, the three men of the three main parties have been playing musical chairs. Join the discussion online.



Most commented



#### Women on the move

by Shristi Karki

Travel content creators like Sirjana Sizzu, Vedica Gajurel, Divya Dhakal, and Pratikha Karki are vloggers who trek. They have learned to manage everything themselves, from planning adventures to filming and editing to posting photos and videos on YouTube and Instagram. Read about them online.



Most visited online page

## QUOTES



**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**

Catapulting to Singha Darbar  
The more things change in Nepali politics, the more they remain the same. @kundadixit



**Alok K. Bohara, PhD @NepalUnplugged**

Oh yeh! Same actors, different alliances, more mind-twisting justifications from all sides, and yet, somehow, the people of Nepal still end up with the short end of the stick. No point crying foul about the foreign interference! @kundadixit @NepaliTimes



**Kashish Das Shrestha @kashishds**

Nepal Govt "change". What for?  
Will it have any relevance for the very basics of air, food, water security?  
ITMT list of economically ecologically bad mega plans waiting to be implemented, kickbacks to be shared. Environment Ministry long a token seat for coalition handout.

## 1,000 WORDS

And the Oscar for Best Supporting Daughter goes to...



EMBASSY OF NEPAL, LONDON / X

**SAY HI TO DAD:** Bharatpur Mayor Renu Dahal, daughter of Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, receiving a memento from London Mayor Sadiq Khan last week during an event by the little-known International Mayor Award last week.

## 20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

### Collateral Damage

The total casualties of the Maoist insurgency surpassed 10,000 in March 2004. At least 7,000 more would be killed before the Peace Accord was signed in November 2006.

Maoist supremo Pushpa Kamal Dahal has once again cobbled a coalition so that he can be prime minister for a little longer. The fact that the 10-year-long Maoist war that killed 17,000 Nepalis has all but culminated into Dahal's political dynasty that most recently saw his cousin Narayan Dahal becoming the National Assembly Chair is the greatest tragedy of our times. Excerpts of the editorial published 20 years ago this week on issue #187 12-18 March 2004:

At the rate we are going, with 30 reported deaths a week on average, it won't be long before we hit 20,000. Then, 30,000. And then, what? Will the Maoists be any nearer to a republic? Will the Royal Nepali Army be any nearer to wiping out the Maoists? All we will achieve is more Nepali deaths, thousands upon thousands will be orphaned and widowed, millions will be forced to leave their homes. What kind of Maoist utopia commands that sort of a price in blood and



misery? The comrades have to ask themselves this question and find an honest answer.

The Maoists gave their revolution an ethnic edge with the declaration of seven autonomous zones in January. It is now in danger of going the way everyone feared: turning a class war into a caste war. The Maoists have enlisted the support of their wavering allies in the east by

announcing the Kirant Autonomous Region, and crowned it with a major attack on Bhojpur. The Tamuwani and Tamasaling are blockading highways to strangle the towns.

It is now getting more and more difficult to believe that this revolution is moving along a pre-determined game plan. It looks seriously out of control. Giving the struggle an ethnic tint smacks of desperation, pointing to fatigue at its political centre. In any civil war, hardline militant or ethno-separatist elements gains supremacy when the political part of the struggle erodes or gets sidelined.

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



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# Nepal's 'Tiger Economy'

Every \$1 spent on nature conservation can yield up to \$6 in economic development

Nepal's Terai Arc Landscape (TAL) was recently recognised as one of the seven UN World Restoration Flagships for involving local communities to protect the 2.5 million hectare biodiversity hotspot on the border with India.

Despite the region's 7.5 million human population growing rapidly, the transboundary conservation effort has tripled the number of tigers in Nepal from 121 to 355 in the past 14 years, and doubled it on the Indian side to 819.

"The success is all the more remarkable because of the rising human population and new infrastructure," said Ghana Gurung of World Wildlife Fund (WWF Nepal) at the Saving Nepal's Tiger and Livelihoods Dialogue in Kathmandu on Tuesday.

The Terai Arc Landscape initiative was launched by the Nepal government in 2001 at a time when the country was going through a conflict. It has mobilised local communities in forest protection and anti-poaching units, and promoted eco-tourism — benefiting 500,000 households.

"Conserving tigers was the key component of poverty reduction, this was not conservation for conservation's sake, but contributed to Nepal's development," said Valerie Hickey, Global Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Blue Economy at the World Bank, which co-sponsored the Dialogue. "Nepal has grown faster because you have grown greener."

Studies around the world have shown that every dollar spent on nature conservation can yield up



to \$6 in economic development, creating jobs and raising living standards, and in the process communities on the fringes of national parks understand that protecting nature is good for the ecology and economy.

Chitwan is a prime example of this. After tigers were nearly driven to extinction because of hunting, poaching and logging up to the 1960s, Chitwan National Park's success in reviving its tiger population has boosted the economy, with 3% of the adults in the district and beyond depending on eco-tourism jobs.

Tiger range countries met in St Petersburg in 2010 and set a target to double their big cat populations in 12 years. Nepal did not just double its tiger numbers but nearly

tripled it. As a keystone species at the top of the food chain, saving tigers has also meant that its native habitat was protected.

The World Restoration Flagship awards are part of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration led by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). It aims to prevent, halt, and reverse the degradation of ecosystems on every continent and in the ocean.

Other ecosystems awarded were a mangrove project in Sri Lanka, an initiative to re-green African agriculture, community forestry in Peru, and restoring Mediterranean forests after devastating fires.

Speakers at this week's Dialogue, however, pointed out that Nepal's success in tiger

conservation is presenting new challenges: increase in human-wildlife contact, ensuring that over-development of nature areas does not damage what has been saved and also preserving the conservation knowledge of indigenous people.

"We should not kill the goose that lays the golden eggs," warned WWF's Ghana Gurung, highlighting the dangers of new roads, transmission lines and irrigation canals going through national parks, the need to also protect upstream watersheds, and the threats posed by climate breakdown.

Wildlife-friendly infrastructure including underpasses for animal movement on the upgraded Narayanghat-Butwal Highway was cited as an example of the way

forward. Camera trap images have shown overpasses over irrigation canals in Bardia are being regularly used by tigers.

"Structures allowing wildlife movement may make projects costly now, but in the long-run they will save money," said Gurung.

He added that while Nepal could take soft loans from the World Bank and other creditors for new national highways and transmission lines, wildlife friendly infrastructure should be grant components, since Nepal will be protecting endangered species for the whole planet and not just for itself.

Nepal has doubled its forest cover to 45% of the country's area in the past 30 years, and 23% of the area is protected. It reflects a high priority given to nature conservation by successive governments since the 1980s.

However, poor governance and lack of accountability are still a problem. The Ministry of Forests, for instance, appears to regard forests as a resource to be exploited and not protected.

Nepal's previous Forest Minister Birendra Mahato of the JSP floated a proposal last year to allow trophy hunting of tigers, which would have violated the CITES treaty and Nepal's own laws. It was not allowed to go through.

He was also for permitting tourist resort licenses inside national parks and dismantling other achievements like community forestry by allowing 'forest management'. The Nijgad airport proposal would log the last native forest in the eastern Tarai.

The JSP is back in the Cabinet with Minister of Forests Nawal Kishor Sah Sudi.

The threats to Nepal's internationally recognised successes in nature conservation therefore stem not from the people living on the fringes of protected areas, but from government officials themselves pushing unsystematic infrastructure and reversing past legislation. 🇳🇵

## NMB BANK एनएमबि बैंक

### Turkish with MVFC

Turkish Airlines has announced a new three-year partnership with Melbourne Victory Football Club, becoming their Principal Partner starting from the



2024/25 season. The airline's logo will be prominently displayed on the front of shirts for both the men's and women's teams, along with stadium activations and digital presence. Turkish inaugurated its first flights to Australia this month with Istanbul-Melbourne flights via Singapore.

### Spring Exchange

Tata Motors extended their Spring Exchange program by one day due to customer demand and Gyalpo Lhosar. The program allows trading in any brand car for a new Tata Nexon EV or Tiago EV, with additional benefits like one year insurance and a chance to win an iPhone 15.

### HBL new Location

Himalayan Bank relocated two branches after acquiring Civil Bank: Gongabu branch to Hattigaunda, Kathmandu and Kawasoti Branch-2 to Nawalpur. The bank now has 174 branches and other service points across Nepal.

### NMB's GESI Plan

NMB Bank launched a Gender Equity and Social Inclusion (GESI) plan to promote diversity and inclusion within the bank and the communities it serves. This includes creating a more diverse workforce, offering special loans for women entrepreneurs, and launching women-led branches in each province.

### Seres Showroom

Seres opened a new showroom in Naxal, Kathmandu to showcase their electric vehicles (EVs) and offer test drives. This is part of their plan to expand their presence in Nepal, with showrooms already in Pokhara and Butwal, and more planned for other cities.

### MG App

MG Motor Nepal launched a new app called Paramount Charging Solutions for their EV users. The app allows users to find and access MG's DC charging stations throughout Nepal, pay for charging with Khalti, and use an RFID card for easier charging.



### Aloft and Hatti Hatti

On the occasion of International Women's Day, Aloft Kathmandu Thamel partnered with Hatti Hatti Nepal to host a fashion show featuring designs by Nepali women



and an award ceremony recognising outstanding women in various fields. The event also included a women-led bazaar showcasing Nepali products and entrepreneurs.

### Prevent Cervical Cancer

Ncell, Marie Stopes, and the Australian government launched campaign to raise awareness about cervical cancer prevention in Nepal. This preventable disease claims many lives each year, and the campaign targets women and girls with educational materials, events, and messaging through Ncell's network. The goal is to empower women with information so they can make informed choices about their health.

### Malaysia migrant curb

Malaysia has said it will suspend work visas for migrant workers from 1 June since the labour market has reached saturation. Work permits will be issued only till mid-May, and the Malaysian government wants to limit foreign workers to only 15% of the labour force. Nearly 260,000 Nepalis went to Malaysia for work in the past year alone. About 7,000 of them were women.



### Toyota Motor Rally

The Toyota Women's Motor Rally, held annually in Nepal, is back for its 2024 edition on 20 April. This event empowers women in motorsports by allowing them to compete and showcase their driving skills. Open to all women drivers, the rally offers cash prizes and aims to break stereotypes and inspire participants. Registration opened 13 March and costs Rs3,000 per team, with any vehicle.

### Everest and OnePoint

Everest Bank and OnePoint Financial Services have partnered to improve digital banking services for Everest



Bank. OnePoint will provide Everest Bank with API Management System-APIMS which will help organise the bank's API system and strengthen their digital banking infrastructure.

# Non-barbwire borders

As boundary walls go up around the world, the open Nepal-India border should be a model

Across the world, borders are being increasingly fenced. The US-Mexico border wall is being extended to 1,200km to keep migrants out. Israel has walled itself off from Palestine. The floodlit India-Pakistan iron curtain can be seen from space at night. Bangladesh is almost completely fenced off from India.



**BORDERLINES**  
Chandra Kishore

Now, India's Home Minister Amit Shah has announced that a barbed wire fence is going up along India's 1,643km border with Burma. The announcement has raised fears it will disrupt age-old cultural and family ties that predate British rule.

Ethnic violence in Manipur, as well as anti-government insurgencies on both sides have made the border a flashpoint. Even so, the barbed wire proposal has spread despair among residents of the Indian states of Arunachal, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram that border Burma.

Most of the India-Burma border is dense mountain forest, and the scene of epic battles between the Japanese and British forces in which many Nepali soldiers in the British Army were killed. A barbed wire fence is not just difficult to build in this terrain, it will be hard and expensive to maintain.

New Delhi has security concerns, but

here in the Burmese borderlands there is worry that families and communities will be torn apart. There is some debate about the need for a border fence in India, but in Burma's controlled society there is not even a murmur. A fence will likely block supply lines for rebels fighting repression of the Burmese military junta.

This boundary is similar to the Nepal-India border, where there are marriage ties, families own property on both sides.

Hard borders separate the territories of nation states, and in doing so they also divide people that were once one. Over time, borders tend to slowly erase these historical bonds and a collective culture of lived experience.

A national boundary is already an artificial construct, barbed wire makes it even more artificial. Politicians fanning populist nationalism are obsessed with border security, and want to build walls to barricade historical people-to-people ties.

Nations and their rulers, even if they are world powers, are ultra possessive about territory and take umbrage at maps that do not accurately represent their claim. There is something almost primordial about this mindset, like wild animals marking and defending the perimeters of their domain.

Ever since I started writing this column from Birganj in Nepali Times last year, I have been trying to find a Nepali word that describes the cultural, social, economic, ecological ties that bind the peoples of the borderlands.

The best word I have come up with is सीमांचल (Simanchal) which by coincidence

is almost an exact translation of this column series: Borderlines. The word has the connotation of a political demarcation, it denotes citizenship, but it does not allude to any barbed wire fence, it means being able to crisscross a national boundary without any fear or hindrance.

Such a borderless world now exists between Schengen member countries, but then Fortress Europe is now building a dozen new 'Berlin Walls' to keep out outsiders, while giving its own citizens complete, but one-sided, freedom of movement back and forth.

There may be an international border running between them, but Nepalis and Indians of the सीमांचल speak the same language, observe the same festivals, and marry each other. Border people have an identity different from the centre. A border may have been defined by a treaty (usually after war) to separate people, but people of the borderlands keep transboundary ties strong.

A barbed wire fence arouses fear and suspicion, but the people of Simanchal spread hope and trust. The capital sees the border as the line where its jurisdiction ends, borderland people see it as the place where sovereignty begins. The Simanchal melds political and cultural identities into one.

When the nation state is weak, and the centre cannot hold, it is the periphery that defends the border. They are the true writers of history.

In 2018, India and Burma agreed on free movement for people living up to 16km on

either side. This made it convenient for Burmese border dwellers to come to India for trade, education, medical service. But there was also inflated security concern in India about refugees, human traffickers, weapons, and drugs coming across.

Former Nepal-based Indian diplomat and expert on the Northeast, John S Shilshi who is himself from Manipur, told me recently: "As long as local sentiments are not addressed, this barbed wire border fence will not work. It could also go against India's own 'Look East' policy."

Although the Nepal-India border is seen as a model for openness, there are new challenges. The Vajpayee government stationed SSB border police along the Nepal border, and now with India's elections approaching, another BJP government has tightened security. Meanwhile, extremism and religious intolerance is seeping across.

Bilateral nation-to-nation ties between India and Nepal have always been tangled, so there is a move to build local initiatives. While we wait for Kathmandu and New Delhi to sort things out, border cities on both sides are getting together on their own: Biratnagar-Jogbani, Birganj-Raxaul, Nepalganj-Rupedia, Bhairawa-Sonauli. Jai Simanchal. 🇳🇵

Chandra Kishore is a Birganj-based commentator who writes this monthly column Borderlines for Nepali Times.





Singha Darbar after the 1973 fire. Most of the building was undamaged, and the author called unannounced on several officials there in 1974.



Registers of Rana-era government employees were at Kitab Khana in Patan. They are now at the

# Bureaucratic hurdles to re

From this account of Nepal's government offices from

## ■ Daniel W Edwards

In 1974, I was in Nepal conducting research for my PhD thesis on the country's bureaucracy from 1850 to 1950. Tribhuvan University approved my research project and wrote letters on my behalf to government officials.

Since I had taught as a Peace Corps volunteer here from 1966-1969, I could speak and understand basic Nepali, and had some knowledge of the culture and bureaucracy. But I was hardly prepared for the bureaucratic obstacles to study the bureaucracy of the Rana era for which I needed access to original government archives.

The records I sought were held by Goswara Tahvil (GT), an office under the Finance Ministry. Its Hakim reported to the Accountant General (AG). The AG reported to the Joint Secretary (JS), who reported to the Secretary, who reported to the Minister of Finance appointed by King Birendra.

At that time, many of His Majesty's Government offices were in Singha Darbar, and one could enter that vast building without an ID, wander its dark halls at will, casually look into an office, and, showing proper deference, often be ushered in to meet an official without a prior appointment.

Some months after beginning my research, I heard there was a collection of historical documents held by Goswara Tahvil. It took me six months to obtain permission to access those records useful for my thesis. Fifty years later, I wonder if the government bureaucracy has changed very much: Nepali readers will know better.

### 6 March, 1974

An elderly former civil servant informs me a collection of old government records is stored at a former Rana residence in Patan. I go to GT to meet the head and inquire about these records. Offices open at 10 o'clock, but I never go to meet government officials before 11. The Hakim is not there.

### 11 March

I return to GT. Again, the Hakim is out.

### 13 March

I meet the Hakim, and he allows me to copy from a panjika or general list of the records I seek. He says the Accountant General can give me permission to read the records. I go to the AG's office in Singha Darbar. He is out.

### 14 March

I go to see the AG. He is not in the office.

### 15 March

I write a letter to the Finance Ministry (enclosing copies of my sponsoring letters from Tribhuvan University and the University of Chicago) asking permission to see those records.

### 16-30 March

I am away from Kathmandu.

### 1 April

I plan to go meet the AG only to find out it is a government holiday.

### 2 April

I locate my application in another office (Mal Pot) of the Finance Ministry. Someone there had initialed my letter of request, but the office director quotes a rule that no documents could be shown to me without an order from his superiors. He promises to resubmit my file. I meet the AG. He says he will need a letter from his superiors. I locate the office of the Joint Secretary, who rings up the two officials I have talked to today.

### 3 April

The president of France died, so for the second time in four days it is a government holiday.

### 5 April

I meet the AG and write an application to see the documents. I affix a 1-rupee stamp to comply with the regulations. He promises me a letter on the 8<sup>th</sup>.

### 8 April

I meet the AG. He says approval has been given, but he has not yet received authorisation.

### 10 April

The Hakim allows me to see some records in his office but points out that in my application I wrote that I wanted to 'look at' the records, but had said nothing about 'copying' them. Therefore, he must seek clarification. There are no photocopy machines available, nor can cameras be used. Laptops and scanners have yet to be invented. Records must be copied by hand.

### 11 April

I meet the AG. He says he has submitted my application but has received no response.

### 12 April

I go to GT. I can't write in Nepali so I can't copy records by hand in Nepali. The Hakim says he will have to check whether I am allowed to have my research helper copy documents.

### 15 April

I call the AG by phone regarding the documents stored in Patan. He still has not heard anything, and in the midst of our conversation the phone line goes dead. Back at the GT, my helper can copy parts of the documents as long as I sign at the top and bottom of each page of material he writes in my notebook. This is progress!

### 18 April

I meet the AG in Singha Darbar and have a friendly chat to try to win him over. I tell him I hope he can visit me in America some day.

### 21 April

I decide to go again and talk to the Joint Secretary in the Finance Ministry. He is out. I return after lunch. He is still out.

### 22 April

I meet the JS. He says my file is at higher levels, but I can look at the records in Patan. I go to GT. The Hakim won't be back for a week. His assistant says they have received no instructions but that the AG can give me permission.

### 23 April

I meet the AG and tell him I've heard he could give me the

necessary permission. He promises to do so by 1PM tomorrow.

### 25 April

Another president of a foreign country died, so again government offices are closed.

### 26 April

The records I seek are stored about three miles from the GT office. I hail a taxi, and an office piun with keys rides with me. He opens the door to a large room which is full of several hundred cloth sacks (poka) piled on top of each other. I step onto a pile and pull out some sacks, on each of which is written a year that identifies the date of the documents inside. I untie some bundles; I suspect documents in the bundle marked 1957 (1900 AD) have not been consulted since they were copied 74 years ago. Some groups of records are identified, such as 'West No. 2, 1942' (1885 AD), but none has an index. Other records are rolled up like scrolls and tied with string. All the documents are handwritten in Nepali on strong, locally-made paper. Most are amazingly well preserved. However, much of the handwriting is illegible. I am not permitted to copy anything, but do note down some sacks that may contain material of interest.

### 29 April

I go again to the record warehouse near Patan, but by noon no one has come from the main office to unlock the door. My helper goes to GT to find out the problem and returns with the news that since I have asked to look at so many bundles, they cannot let me look at any of them. They need an official order to do so.

### 5 May

I go to GT after lunch. The Hakim is out. I never know whether he has come in and gone out on an errand and will return; whether he has come in and gone home for the day; or whether he has not come to the office that day and has no intention of doing so.

### 7 May

I go to GT. The Hakim says I must bring him a written order and that



The seals of Chandra Shumsher and Bhim Shumsher in Nepali and Arabic script authenticated a 1920 government document for

the AG and Joint Secretary should not make verbal requests of him.

### 9 May

I ask a Research Section Officer at Tribhuvan University whether the government has a policy on making its historical records available to bona fide researchers and why I'm having such difficulties. He offers to write a letter on my behalf to the Finance Ministry.

### 12 May

I leave a letter at the University explaining what records I want to see and ask the University's assistance in obtaining the necessary permission.

### 14 May to 18 June

I am in Tansen, Palpa, previously governed by a Rana Bada Hakim, to search for old government records. The Chief District Officer (CDO) is a friendly, educated young man who has traveled abroad and understands what research is all about. He immediately gives me permission to look at all the historical records, including the Adalat (Court) and Revenue (Mal) offices. Aware of the CDO's



at the National Archives.



Tansen, Palpa in 1974.

ALL PHOTOS: DANIEL W EDWARDS

# Research the bureaucracy

From 50 years ago, not much seems to have changed



in Nepali, English and  
ent found in the archives.

blessing, other local officials are very cooperative and welcome me into their offices.

I engage an elderly man to copy records for me. He lives in Tansen, worked for years as a bahidar, and can easily decipher and understand the documents. He sits by the hour and labouriously copies the material I put before him. I know he is pleased that a foreigner values his ability of an era that most younger Nepalis know little about and dismiss as the 'Dark Ages'. To demonstrate his personal loyalty to me and his gratitude for his temporary employment, the scribe addresses me using high honorific forms of speech (sarkar and baksinu) and follows respectfully two steps behind me as we go to visit the other offices. After my struggles in Kathmandu, I feel I deserve some sycophancy.

**20 June**

Back in Kathmandu, I meet the University gent who wrote a letter on my behalf last month. He says no reply to his letter has come from the AG or anyone else.

**21 June**

I meet the AG. He says the

Ministry has asked him how secret documents could be kept out of my hands. I have no idea, and doubt anyone does, how thousands of documents could be 'declassified' and by whom. I offer to submit another list of what I want first if I can look through the sacks again to do this. The AG asks me to make such a list.

**25 June**

I give a brief list (based on my April 26<sup>th</sup> search) of records to the AG. He says he will submit this list with my application.

**27 June**

I meet the AG. He is visibly nervous and tells me it will not be possible to see any of the records, and that anyway the sacks of records are unavailable as they are being moved from Patan.

**28 June**

I go to Singha Darbar and ask for an appointment with the Minister of Finance. Since the annual budget is being prepared, I am told the Minister has no time for the next two weeks. His personal secretary thinks my file has reached their office, but wonders about confidential documents falling into my hands. I reply that since most records are 30-150 years old and have nothing to do with the King or his administration, it is difficult to imagine what 'secrets' they contain.

**19 July**

I have let the dust settle for three weeks. Today is a busy day. I meet the Joint Secretary. He calls the AG and demands to know what has happened to my application and why I cannot see the records. He hangs up and cheerfully tells me everything will now be all right. I go to meet the (now chastised) AG and give him another list (the third?) of what I want to see. Newly energised, I go to meet the Hakim. He says all the old records will be moved on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. Then they will have to be arranged, so that it will be a week before I can see them.

**5 August**

I give the Hakim two weeks, but when I go to GT, the records have still not arrived. I go to meet the

AG. He says to come back next week, as the Hakim has promised to have the records available by then. The AG casually mentions that I could 'look at but not copy' anything in the records. So I'm back to the 26 April situation.

**11 August**

I meet the Hakim. The records have not been moved yet, he says to come back on the 14<sup>th</sup>.

**14 August**

I return to GT. Still no sign of the old records. I take two clerks by taxi to the Patan warehouse. I make a more detailed list of the documents I want to read. The clerks say that I am not to copy the documents. I try to explain in Nepali the difference between writing down the title of a group of documents and copying their contents. Indignantly they seize my list.

**15 August**

I go to GT. The assistant is upset because I made a list yesterday. We go together to see the AG. I say, "Let's get this decided today, one way or the other." The AG brightens up and calls for my file. After it is located, he goes off to the Finance Ministry to talk with the Secretary. I leave to meet the Minister's personal secretary to see if I can meet the Minister in case the Secretary refuses to give permission. At the Minister's outer office, the AG walks in. After talking with the Joint Secretary and the Secretary (obviously neither one was willing to make a decision and instructed him to see the Minister), the AG has come to get in line. The AG sends me back to his office, while he sits outside the Minister's office. The AG waits there for two hours, but the Minister leaves his office. The AG tells me he will take my file to the Minister tomorrow.

**16 August**

Resorting to a common practice (chakri) observed 50 years ago in Nepal, I go out to the Minister's house early in the morning in hopes I can have an audience (darshan) with him and persuade him to cut through the bureaucratic

red tape and approve my application. In the Rana days, I might have come bearing a basket of fruit or other offering, but I simply hand over my letter of introduction from the University and my business card. The guard at the gate takes them and gives them to someone else for delivery inside the house.

Word comes back the Minister currently is getting dressed and that I am to come to his office later today. I realise there is some risk in bypassing all the lower-level authorities I have met. I want my application to be a routine request to examine some ancient records so unimportant that few people even know they exist. Later, I get cold feet and decide to let the AG approach the Minister first. If the AG does nothing or is unsuccessful, then I will call on the Minister.

**18 August**

I meet the AG. He has not yet been able to see the Minister.

**21 August**

I go to meet the AG. He has been sick since I last saw him and has not met the Minister.

**23-28 August**

I am away from Kathmandu.

**29 August**

I meet the AG at his office. He says he has met the Minister. I will probably get the necessary permission, but my file remains at the upper reaches of the bureaucratic maze.

**5 September**

As I am approaching the GT, I am hailed on the road by an official who works for the AG. He informs me His Majesty's Government has granted me permission to use the records in my research. In triumph I take a signed copy of the order to GT. The Hakim is not there. The assistant says he will say nothing from now on and admits that the old records are not secret. He tells me to go to the Patan warehouse (the records still have not been moved) on the 8<sup>th</sup> to begin work. The office also will provide a man who will copy the records I need.

**8-30 September**

Not everything is smooth sailing. The office scribe works for two days, then tells me the work bores him and he is quitting. Since no office piun will carry sacks of documents on his shoulder from Patan to Kathmandu, I pay for a taxi to and from the warehouse to GT. Due to rotted beams, a large section of GT's ceiling collapses, so my work comes to a halt. Then the office assistant claims there is secret material about the King in records he has never read. I ignore him. Subsequently, I find no reference to anything a king ever said or did.

Looking back, I am grateful to the Government of Nepal for permission to access its official records. In Nepal if one remains polite, shows respect and not anger, combines unfailing patience with dogged persistence, things can work out in the end.

In the mid-1970s, twenty-five years after the fall of the Ranas, the Nepal bureaucracy had changed in significant ways, yet still retained characteristic features of the old regime. New and greatly expanded departments (ministries) were charged with implementing new programs to advance public welfare and promote 'development'.

The purpose of government had changed for the better. But the bureaucracy remained highly centralised, bureaucrats felt loyalty to one powerful leader, the king who had replaced the Rana Prime Minister. They were still reluctant to take initiatives or to make decisions. It was more important for them to defer to and please superiors than to respond to the needs of the public.

The Ranas at least maintained tight supervision over functioning of the central government in Kathmandu. Under the Panchayat it was unclear just how and by whom ordinary civil servants were being held accountable.

In some Nepal government offices today, there still are thousands of historical documents in Nepali, and many in the Foreign Ministry are in English. I hope government officials will facilitate access to them by Nepali and foreign scholars as well as by anyone with an interest in history.

## EVENTS



## Japan to Nepal

The Japanese Film Festival 2024, presented by the Embassy of Japan in Nepal, will feature five distinctive selections of the finest Japanese cinema.

15-16 March, Rastriya Nachghar, Jamal / 20-21 March, Japanese Embassy Hall

## Book Fair

Join the Nepal Feminist Book Project for a one-day book fair celebrating Nepali women authors, scholars, artists, and publishers. Connect with women writers and their readers in this free event open to all book lovers, celebrating women's writings this March.

16 March, Nepal Art Council



## Kathak workshop

Unleash your inner dancer and explore a journey of creativity at the workshop series, led by Kathak dancer Ranjana Phadke from Mumbai.

15-20 April, 9:45am onwards, Manisha Choreography, Imadol

## 5k run

Take an opportunity to be part of positive change, and join the 5k run celebrating inclusion, gender equality, and diversity.

16 March, 7am onwards, St Xavier's School, Jawalakhel ground



## NIFF 2024

The seventh iteration of the Nepal International Film Festival offers audiences a cinematic journey with 89 films from around 40 countries.

Until 18 March, QFX Cinemas

## DINING



## Mezze by Roadhouse

Mezze by Roadhouse sets the perfect ambiance for a memorable dinner with friends. Be sure to try the smoked mo:mo paired with grilled chicken and linguine vegetables.

Mercantile Plaza, Darbar Marg (01) 4223087

## MUSIC

## Funky at Moksh

Experience Funky Tuesdays with 'G' and The Fly, as they bring to life notable artists and popular genres with electrifying performances.

Tuesday, 7:30pm onwards, Moksh, Gyan Mandala



## Music and dance

Check out The Genesis Band this Friday, followed by a belly dance performance by Emiko and Mamina from Japan.

15 March, 6:30pm onwards, London Pub



## Kathmandu is cooking

Enjoy a day with Bollywood singer Papon and his popular tunes, accompanied by performances from Vek, Prajina, The Elements, and more.

15 March, 11am onwards, Hyatt Ground, Boudha



## Acoustic session

Paul Jude Wilson is set to take the stage this weekend with his captivating live acoustic performance.

15 March, 6:30pm onwards, Hotel Himalayan Oasis

## Everest Echoes

Musicians including Neetesh Jung Kunwar, Samridhi Rai, Monkey Temple, Pahlenlo Batti Muni, Kavi Jii, Faithom and Flying Spirits are coming together this Holi in celebration of music and art.

24 March, 11am onwards, Hyatt Regency Boudha



## Chez Caroline

Retreat to this Nepali gem for authentic French cuisine. Don't miss the signature Profiteroles au Chocolat—choux pastry with vanilla ice cream and hot chocolate sauce.

Baber Mahal Revisited (01) 4263070

## New Orleans Café

With an extensive selection of delectable yet nutritious Western dishes, this eatery promises a unique culinary experience. Indulge in favourites like rosemary chicken, hamburgers and more.

Thamel (01) 4258454

## GETAWAYS



## The Pavilions

Indulge in luxury at this boutique eco resort featuring villas, a pool, an organic farm, and a restaurant lounge. Enjoy meandering walks, and try some authentic cuisine.

Pokhara (61) 462222

## Kathmandu Guest House

Kathmandu Guest House, a cherished retreat for Nepal's trekkers since 1967, offers comfortable rooms, and lush gardens within a historic Rana mansion.

Thamel (01) 4700800



## Jagatpur Lodge

Experience two distinct offerings at Jagatpur Lodge: the 5-star tents that immerse guests in nature, and the rooms with private viewing decks that offer breathtaking vistas.

Jagatpur, Chitwan (56) 411151

## Hotel Barahi

Located just beyond the banks of Phewa Lake, Hotel Barahi offers stunning views and luxury rooms. The rooms are decorated with rustic pieces, earthy tones and a clean design that will leave visitors feeling relaxed.

Pokhara (61) 460617



## Dhulikhel Mountain Resort

Seamlessly blending culture and comfort, Dhulikhel Mountain Resort features well-designed bungalows adorned with Newa accents, reflecting a dedication to authenticity and luxury.

Dhulikhel (11) 490612

## Raithaane

Savor the flavours of Nepal at Raithaane, where locally sourced ingredients are the star. Experience a culinary journey across the nation, from east to west, with each dish on the menu representing different communities.

Kupondole (01) 5015064

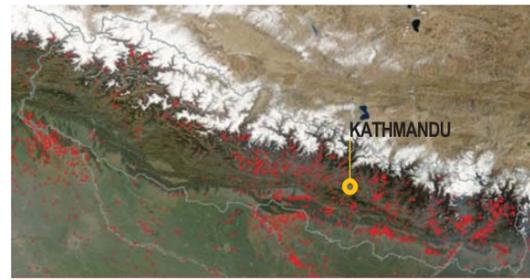


## Over Easy

Indulge in fluffy pancakes, refreshing smoothie bowls, and healthy Buddha Bowls at this all-day breakfast spot.

Bansbari, 9801281720

## WEEKEND WEATHER



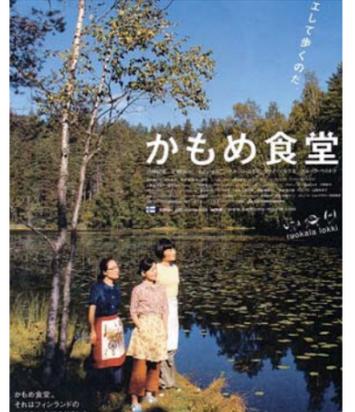
## Wildfire Season

Kathmandu Valley is going to see early spring warming this weekend with the maximum temperature rising to up to 26°C and the minima also climbing to 11-12°C. There is no sign of any westerly low pressure system till at least midweek next week, which means the undergrowth is dry and soil moisture is low. With stiff afternoon up-valley winds, these are ideal conditions for wildfires spreading out of control. A NASA FIRMS infrared image of Nepal this week shows many fires burning in the central and eastern mountains (image, left). Smoke from the fires has reduced air quality in Kathmandu as well.



## OUR PICK

Sachie, a Japanese woman living in the Finnish capital of Helsinki, opens Kamome Diner where the featured dish is rice balls. However, day after day the only customer is a young Finnish anime enthusiast who eats and drinks for free. One day, two Japanese ladies—each with some personal issues—come to help at the diner. Over time, the number of customers gradually increases, but the diner seems to attract only those with problems. Kamome Diner is a 2006 Japanese comedy directed by Naoko Oigami and is based on a novel by Yoko Mure. It will be screened at Rastriya Nachghar in Jamal on 16 March at 3:20PM as part of the Japanese Film Festival 2024.

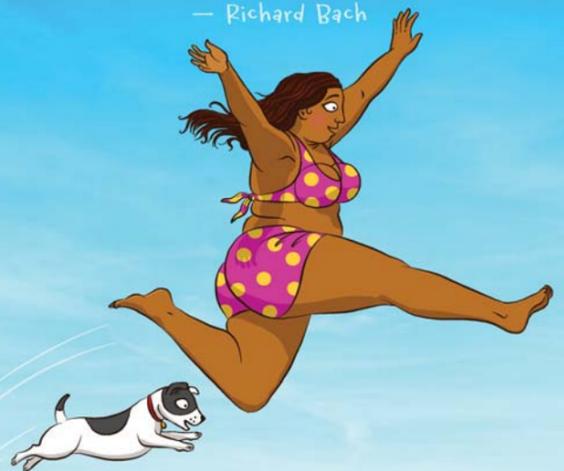


## MISS MOTI-VATION

KRIPA JOSHI

The best way to pay for a lovely moment is to enjoy it.

— Richard Bach



Miss Moti-vation  
© Kripa Joshi 2024

## 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

# Alternative lifestyle, alternative art

■ Alisha Sijapati

A dedicated exploration of natural dyes in artwork. Reusing discarded items to produce art. The Kala Salon at Chhaya Center in Thamel is the newest haven for art lovers with green hearts.

On the lower level is Foraging Chroma by Nepali fashion designer Meena Gurung. The exhibit reminds one of a home décor store with the walls adorned in intricately artful fabric, only much more vibrant. Meena Gurung has woven each fabric from natural materials such as plants, leaves, and barks of trees.

Founder of Bora Studio, Gurung studied fashion design in Ireland and was set to follow in her chosen path. But when the Rana Plaza garment factory in Dhaka that was supplying apparel to Louis Vuitton and Zara collapsed in 2013, killing 1,134 mainly women workers, everything changed.

Wracked with guilt, Gurung realised she was part of an industry that promoted wasteful and exploitative fast fashion, contributing to a superficial lifestyle and to environmental degradation and climate breakdown.

Upon returning to Nepal, Gurung started experimenting with natural dyes. Through trial and error, she mastered techniques to produce vibrant organic colours and textures.

She uses naturally dyed cotton sheets made via an iron bath process as her canvas. Eucalyptus, guava leaves and invasive species are then used as printing tools. Over the past seven years, Gurung has moved through Dolakha, Nuwakot, Tanahu, and Chitwan collecting materials and inspiration.

Fallen leaves of invasive species are a prominent theme in her work: collected from paths inside Nepal's community forests. The dyes are also on display at the exhibition, and Gurung is on hand to explain her techniques.

"In today's world, we need to think critically about what we're leaving behind for future generations, how we are shaping the world, and how we can live more consciously," says Gurung. "There are always alternative solutions available. By being more mindful of our behaviour and attitudes towards living, we can make a positive difference."

Gurung credits Sophia L Pandé,

The Kala Salon is the newest haven for art lovers with green hearts in Kathmandu



PHOTOS: SUMAN NEPALI



a fan of her work on Instagram, for encouraging her with the exhibition. Pandé, who is also the founding director of The Kala Salon, recognised the artistry in Gurung's creations.

Says Pandé: "Meena's work transcends fashion, it's art. People need to see this."

Gurung herself hopes that

seeing the work firsthand will spark lifestyle changes so that people have smaller ecological footprints.

On top of the airy expanse of the Salon, Italian artist Cinzia awaits with her exhibit Zero to Sunya, a mixed-media exhibit using photography, paperwork and copper.

Cinzia, a globetrotter originally from a now-deserted village in Italy, finds herself constantly drawn back to Nepal. Her travels fuel her artistic spirit, she collects unique items and transforms them into captivating creations. The copper jewelry she crafted in Italy has journeyed with her across the world and now finds a home in this exhibition.

Cinzia defies categorisation as a mere jewelry designer or artist, embracing all art forms. A standout piece is a surprising combination of hard paper, a face mask, and cable wires found on a busy road in Kathmandu. These transformed elements create a captivating figure with "hair" fashioned from the wires, resembling a tree with leaves.

"Wherever I travel, I carry a piece of myself. And I seek out kindred spirits, people who share my passion for creation," Cinzia explains. "This exhibition isn't just a showcase of my efforts, but a testament to the collaboration with my friends who have refined my work and introduced me to new

techniques."

Another installation titled Purusha-Prakriti is crafted from salvaged cardboard and metal mesh from a construction site, showcasing beauty in unexpected places.

Both exhibitions at the Chhaya Centre leave a lasting impression and invite open interpretation, prompting viewers to question wasteful and energy-intensive modern lifestyles, demonstrating the potential for artistic expression to inspire positive change.

Says Sophia Pandé: "Cinzia's exquisite jewelry and Meena's hand-dyed shawls transcend mere function. These wearable artworks hold a value equal to that of a traditional canvas, serving as powerful reminders of the transformative power of artistic expression." 🇳🇵

*Foraging Chroma by Meena Gurung  
Zero to Sunya by Cinzia Battistel  
Everyday 11:00AM to 6:00PM  
Until 24 March  
The Kala Salon, Chhaya Centre*

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# NURSING GRIEVANCES AGAINST THE STATE

Nepal has an over-supply of nurses, but nursing positions at hospitals are vacant because of low pay and overwork

■ Sagar Budhathoki

Ritu got her nursing licence in 2017 and started working at a hospital in Bansbari for a monthly salary of Rs15,000. She had a heavy workload, had no overtime pay and could not always get a day off.

Two years into her job, Ritu's brother fell ill and she took two days' leave to go to Pokhara to care for him. Nursing her sibling back to health took her two additional days, and when her hospital demanded clarification Ritu was so outraged she quit.

Ritu then approached another clinic, where she had to work two weeks as a trainee without pay. After that she was offered a salary even less than her previous job. She was so overworked, she left that job after three months even though she had got only a month's pay check.

Ritu went back home to Pokhara and has been out of work for six years. Her mental health has deteriorated during this time. She told Nepali Times: "Experiencing the exploitation and abuse makes me want to tear up my nursing certificate."

Puja is another Proficiency Certificate Level (PCL) nurse from Nepalganj who got a job through a recruitment office that paid only Rs12,000 a month. Her middle-income family is in debt after spending Rs1.2 million on her nursing education. Puja reluctantly accepted the job, which was harrowing.

There were only seven nurses in the 50-bed hospital, and Puja had 18-hour shifts with no overtime. She quit after a year, and has been without a job at home in Nepalganj

for the last six months. "Becoming a nurse was a dream that turned into a nightmare," she told us by phone.

Anjali Pokharel from Dang got the same nurse job in the same hospital as Puja, but she was offered only Rs11,000. Her monthly hostel rent in Kathmandu alone was

Rs12,000.

"There is no earning, respect, or professional satisfaction in nursing," says Anjali. "I never imagined that the nursing sector in Nepal was so bleak."

Another nurse with a decade of nursing experience is working at Ihsan Children's Hospital in Kathmandu for Rs18,000, and says she was threatened with dismissal when she spoke out about low pay and overwork. She told us confidentially: "Despite great dissatisfaction, nurses are forced to keep working because there is no other choice."

All 20 nurses Nepali Times spoke to for this story said they were subjected to exploitation at their workplaces. Says a nurse currently at Norvic Hospital in Kathmandu: "Most nurses fall ill due to the workload, and many speak of wanting to go abroad for more respect and money."

For Nepal's aspiring nurses, exploitation begins in the classroom. While the government has set a fee of Rs475,000 for the post-SEE three year PCL diploma course, many nurses spend up to Rs1.5 million to complete the course. The four-year BSc nursing fee is capped at Rs750,000, but nursing colleges set fees as high as Rs2.2 million, tacking expenses for food, accommodation, educational tours, etc.

Female students are also subject to harassment and disciplinary practices that put restrictions on how they can dress, as well as how they do their hair and make-up.

Nurse training itself is book-based with outdated curricula, and many nurses will not have interacted with actual patients throughout their academic career. Seema KC, who works at the Civil Hospital in Bhaktapur, says that the lack of practical knowledge means nursing graduates are incapable of the real-world working environment.

This is one reason why even the country's largest, international-level hospitals keep new nurses on probation at very low wages. The government also does not have a fixed minimum wage for nurses, a loophole private hospitals have taken full advantage of.

A nurse interviewed for this story said she had been offered

merely Rs4,000 at Megha Hospital despite having had previous work experience, while Norvic pays PCL nurses up to Rs16,000 and nurses who have a Bachelor's in Nursing Science (BNS) Rs25,000.

Although working hours for nurses at private hospitals are supposed to be only six hours, many work for twice as long daily. The Nepal Health Service Regulations stipulate that health workers should only work 40 hours per week, and are entitled to compensation and additional service leave if their working hours are extended beyond the set hours.

Salaries at government hospitals are better compared to private hospitals, but nurses are reluctant to work there because of lack of opportunities for career progression, and are forced to tolerate lower pay at private hospitals.

Exploitation, low pay, high nursing college fees, lack of academic or professional growth are driving Nepal's nurses overseas in droves.

"Most nurses at Teaching Hospital have decided to go abroad because there are more academic and professional opportunities outside Nepal," says Sarita Poudel, a nurse there. Government hospital directors say three to five nurses resign every week, some to pursue nursing abroad, and some to leave the sector entirely.

Nepal's Department of Labour granted work permits to 40 nurses to go abroad in 2013. This number increased to 160 in 2019, 109 in 2020, 287 in 2021 and 582 in 2022. In 2023, 607 nurses received permits to go overseas.

However, many nurses who go abroad do not appear in these official statistics. Some have gone abroad on student visas to study other subjects. A nurse working at Vayodha Hospital says she is going to Canada on a non-nursing student visa, adding that she will need nothing more than her Nepali nursing license to sit for the nursing license exam there.

Data from the Ministry of Health and Population states that there are 14,099 vacancies for nurses across the country, while there are only 9,951 nurses currently employed. The shortage of nurses is affecting medical care across Nepal. In



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NARESH NEWAR



**NO COUNTRY FOR NURSES:** (left) A nurse after delivering a baby in Udaypur in Nepal. (above) Nepali nurses working in the UK. Nurses have started leaving Nepal in search of better professional and academic opportunities abroad.

government hospitals, the nurse-patient ratio is 1:40.

The Health Institution Operating Standards stipulates one nurse for four to six beds in the general ward, one nurse per two beds in emergency and postoperative rooms, and one nurse per bed

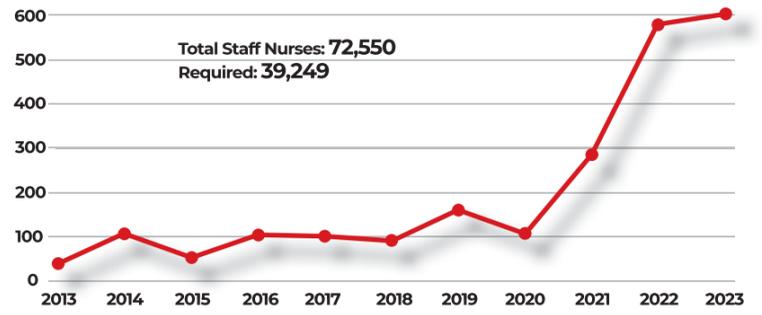
in ICUs and CCUs. Meanwhile, there must be two Skilled Birth Attendants (SBA), trained nurses or midwives per patient in delivery rooms. None of Nepal's hospitals – private or government – meet this requirement.

Bir Hospital alone requires

at least 938 nurses for its 550 beds, but only 400 are currently employed. The 350-bed Kanti Children's Hospital requires 600 nurses but has only 169. It is even worse at the Prasuti Griha maternity hospital which needs at least 735 nurses but only has 154.

## Nurse Haemorrhage

Number of permits annually from the Department of Foreign Employment



The minimum service standards of the Health Ministry means Nepal's government hospitals alone need 32,000 nurses, but have only half that number. The irony is that while the nursing posts remain vacant, many nurses are unemployed.

The Ministry of Health's Nepal Health Workforce Projection, (2022-2030), states that Nepal had produced 72,550 staff nurses until 2021. Excluding those who went abroad or had retired, 50,785 staff nurses were available against an estimated requirement of 39,249 professionals. This means that Nepal should theoretically have an excess of 11,536 staff nurses.

According to the report, Nepal will need 43,056 nurses by 2031, including 22,255 who have completed the Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM) diploma course as well as 240 graduate nurses and midwives. There are currently 115,793 registered staff nurses and ANM professionals in Nepal.

Meanwhile, new nursing colleges are mushrooming with little regard to meeting accepted standards. They produce 7,000 nurses every year, but few get jobs overseas because they are not deemed qualified enough.

The Ministry of Health in 2012 gave medical colleges a deadline until 2016 to build their hospitals of up to 100 beds to employ graduating nurses, but most never followed this directive even after multiple deadline extensions. In response, the Medical Education Commission stopped admissions to institutions that did not have 100-bed facilities, but colleges have been lobbying to be allowed to teach students without meeting those standards.

The Nursing Association of Nepal has forced the government to agree to reforms in the sector, but few of those agreements were ever implemented. Nurses who spoke with Nepali Times said that many of their problems would be solved if the Nursing Association of Nepal and the Nepal Nursing Council took more initiative.

Mana Kumari Rai, president of the Nursing Association blames the Health Ministry for failing to meet past commitments. Last week's government change has again brought in Upendra Yadav of the JSP as health minister, but few nurses have hope that things will change for the better any time soon. 🇳🇵

*Some names have been changed.*

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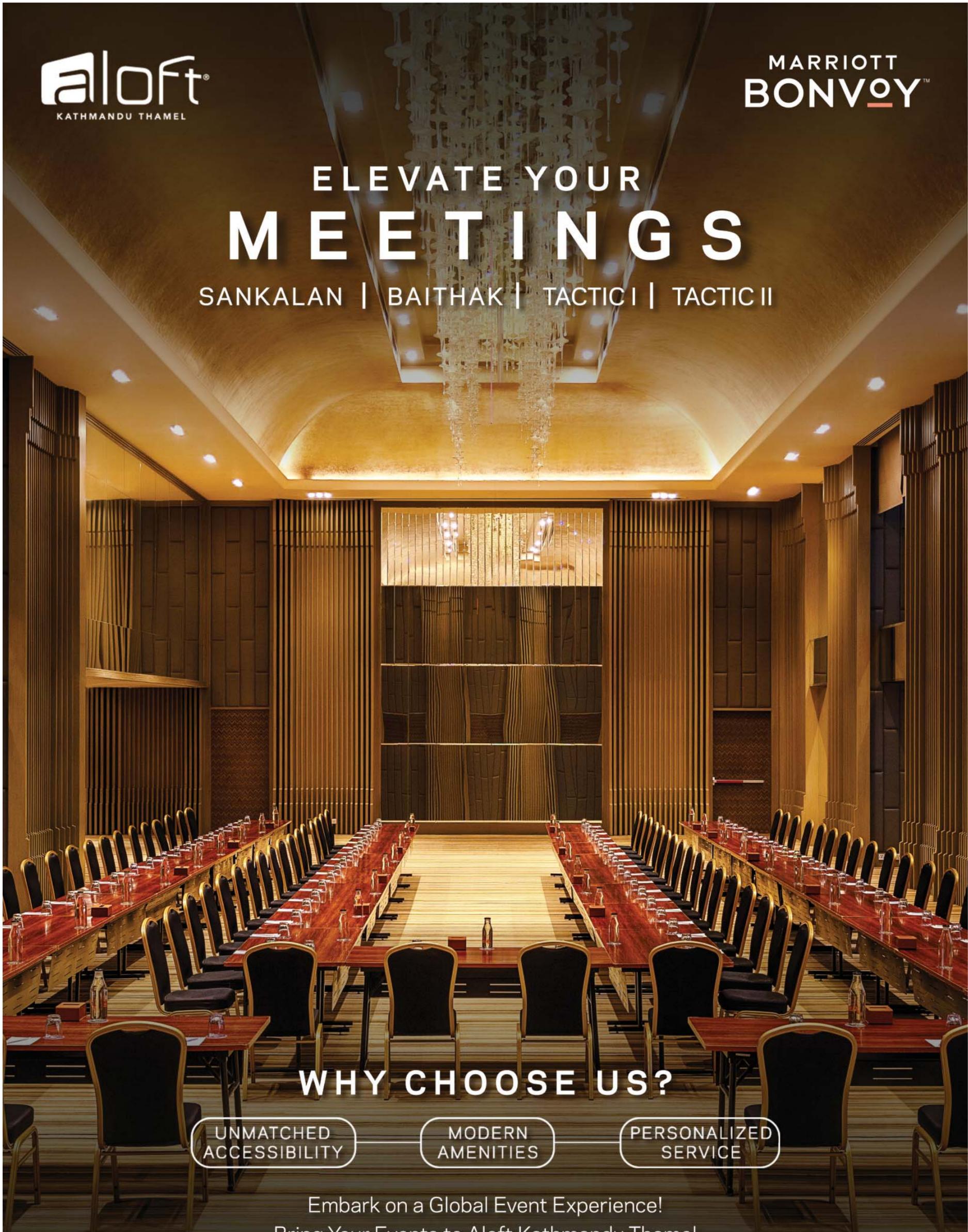
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