



Experience

our 24x7 Client Care Centre at +977 1 4791800/5424198

#1204 22 - 28 March 2024 12 pages Rs 50

## HEADS ROLL



BARSAMAN PUN NANDA BAHADUR PUN DIPESH PUN AMALA ROKKA

### GOLD SMUGGLING



KRISHNA BAHADUR MAHARA RAHUL MAHARA DAWA TSERING ONSARI GHARTI MAGAR

On orders of Home Minister Rabi Lamichhane, police on Monday arrested Maoist vice-chair and former House Speaker Krishna Bahadur Mahara in Bhairawa while he was trying to escape to India. He is accused of involvement in smuggling 60kg of gold concealed in motorcycle brake parts from Hong Kong last year, as well as 9kg of gold concealed inside vape devices in December 2022. Mahara's son Rahul has been in custody since last August.

Police arrested customs officials, Chinese and Indian nationals, and middlemen involved in smuggling the 60kg, while a Chinese trader was detained for gold hidden in e-cigarettes. Police uncovered phone records of Mahara and his

son apparently pressuring customs officials to release the seized gold.

Other Maoists, including Finance Minister Barsaman Pun, former Speaker Onsari Gharti Magar, son of former vice-president Nanda Bahadur Pun Dipesh Pun, are also implicated in the investigation report.

Dipesh Pun was found to be directly linked to Dawa Tsering, the Belgian national thought to be the mastermind behind gold smuggling, who was arrested again last week after being released earlier.

Finance Minister Barsaman Pun and his brother are alleged to have been in touch with one of the people said to be directly involved in the smuggling. They are so far not under investigation.

Almost 14.45 hectares of real estate in Baluwater nationalised by the government was parcelled out to private owners by brokers since the 1990s under the guise of returning it to Subarna Sumsher's family. Former prime ministers, ministers, party leaders, bureaucrats, and land revenue officials are all said to have their hands in the honey pot.

In 2023, the CIB recommended that the government prosecute those implicated, including former prime ministers Baburam Bhattarai and Madhav Kumar Nepal whose Cabinets allowed ownership of the land to be transferred to private entities. Senior UML leader Bijay Gachhadar was named, as was Bishnu Poudel of the UML who later returned a part of the property.

Middlemen Ramkumar Subedi and Shobhakant Dhakal, Bhatbhateni Supermarket owner Min Bahadur Gurung, as well as officials of the Land Revenue Office were arrested for alleged involvement last year. Baburam Bhattarai and Madhav Kumar Nepal have been spared, and Bishnu Paudel cleared.

### COOPERATIVES



RABI LAMICHHANE GB RAI DIPESH PUN

Last September arrest warrants were issued for Galaxy TV co-founder and former chair of Suryadarshan Cooperative G B Rai for embezzling deposits to fund business ventures. Rai is also alleged to have misappropriated more than Rs1 billion from Supreme Cooperative in Butwal and other microfinance institutions in Chitwan, Birganj and Kathmandu. Rai is on the run. Home Minister Rabi Lamichhane was co-founder of Galaxy TV, and was also accused of cheating cooperatives to bankroll the media company he co-owned. Lamichhane has refuted all allegations and since becoming Home Minister again transferred Kiran Bajracharya, the CIB officer investigating the cooperative fraud case. Instead, he jailed Maoist vice-chair Krishna Bahadur Mahara for his reported involvement in multiple gold smuggling scams and appears to be going after big fish in the NC next.

Dipesh Pun, son of former vice-president Nanda Bahadur Pun was arrested last week for his involvement in gold smuggling is also one of those named in the Supreme Cooperative fraud case.

### LAND SCAM



BINOD CHAUDHARY ARUN CHAUDHARY

In February, the CIB arrested Arun Chaudhary of CG Holdings over alleged involvement in the illegal acquisition of 0.51 hectare of the government-owned Bansbari shoe factory. His brother, Nepal's richest man and NC MP Binod Chaudhary, was also questioned on Thursday.

The land was transferred without government approval in 1986 to the Chaudharys' Champion Footwear which is defunct, but the assets are owned by CG Chandbagh Residency, which also runs a school on the land. The CIAA was investigating, but the CIB took over after an investigative report by Deepa Dahal in Ukaalo.

## FAKE REFUGEES



TOP BAHADUR RAYAMAJHI TEK NARAYAN PANDEY SANU BHANDARI KESHAV DULAL INDRAJIT RAI ARZU RANA DEUBA RAM BAHADUR THAPA BAL KRISHNA KHAND MANJU KHAND PRATIK THAPA

Reporter Devendra Bhattarai for the Centre for Investigative Journalism Nepal broke the story in Kantipur in March 2023 about top politicians and bureaucrats in cahoots with human traffickers to provide Nepalis with fake refugee papers so they could emigrate to the United States pretending to be from Bhutan.

The masterminds were said to be Keshav Dulal, adviser to former Foreign Minister Sujata Koirala, and Sanu Bhandari who worked with former Home Minister Bal Krishna Khand with then home secretary Tek Narayan Pandey.

In May, police arrested Khand as well as

UML leaders Top Bahadur Rayamajhi and his son, as well as the son of UML vice chair Ram Bahadur Thapa. Those arrested implicated Arzu Rana Deuba, wife of former Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, and Manju Khand, wife of Bal Krishna Khand.

Both have denied the accusations and the CIB did not investigate them despite leaked tapes purporting to prove they were paid millions. Bal Krishna Khand was released on bail in December, while Top Bahadur Rayamajhi remains in custody.

**Nepal's corruption carousel**  
EDITORIAL PAGE 2

Breakfast @ Dhokaima  
Patandhoka, Lalitpur, Nepal  
01-5422113

20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
Outsource Your Non-Core Staff Through Suvridha Staffing  
Licensed Company by DOL, MOLESS  
ISO 9001:2015 Certified  
100% Statutory Compliance  
+977- 9851247213  
www.suvridhasewa.com.np

zen garden  
Available at SalesBerry

New Orleans Cafe  
THAMEL: 01-4700736

eScan Anti-Virus  
TOTAL PROTECTION for Computers, Mobiles & Tablets  
An ISO 27001 Certified Company  
Contact no.: 01-4330980  
www.escanav.com

# the last of winter

As the winter winds whisper their final farewells, there's still time to indulge in the warmth and elegance of Natureknit Cashmere. Wrap yourself in the unmatched softness and luxury of our finest cashmere garments, crafted to elevate your experience.

**NATUREKNIT**  
CASHMERE REDEFINED

01-5354812 | Sanchaya Kosh Building, Thamel, KTM | Shop #204, 205, 206 | fb.com/natureknit @nature\_knit info@natureknit.com www.natureknit.com

# Nepal's corruption carousel

Just two weeks into the new Maoist-led 5-party coalition government, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal has found a new best friend in Home Minister Rabi Lamichhane.

So desperate is Dahal to stay on as PM that he has sacrificed his bishop, comrade-at-arms Krishna Bahadur Mahara who is Maoist vice-chair and has given new meaning to his party designation.

Lamichhane is out to show that he has the pluck to go after high profile politicians, and has convinced Dahal that he had to do what he had to do to restore flagging public support.

It was convenient that Lamichhane could use an inquiry commission report implicating Mahara in 60kg of gold being smuggled in from Hong Kong as motorcycle brakes last year, and another 9kg gold a Chinese passenger was caught hiding in a consignment of e-cigarettes in 2022.

Lamichhane met the Prime Minister last Friday, and the two seem to have agreed that Mahara was expendable. Mahara got wind of this, and was caught while trying to escape to India via the Kapilvastu border. He is currently being detained in a hospital in Kathmandu.

Lamichhane is said to be targeting senior opposition Nepali Congress (NC) leaders next, and Mahara's arrest was necessary to prove that he is not sparing party figures from his own coalition. His predecessor, Narayan Kaji Shrestha who is now Foreign Minister, had selectively gone after UML and NC leaders.

Dahal's decision to sacrifice Mahara may have been easier because the former House speaker was already a tainted figure, with ties to telecom kickbacks and accusations of syphoning off money meant for ex-guerrillas. There was no probe into either allegation.

In 2010, an audio recording was leaked to the press of him demanding Rs500 million from a Chinese national to buy lawmakers to keep the Maoist coalition intact. Despite this, he became House Speaker in 2017.

Mahara was finally arrested in 2019 after a female staffer of the Parliament secretariat accused him of rape. He resigned as Speaker, but was eventually acquitted by the courts.

Former Maoist leader Muma Ram Khanal says this time, too, the case against Mahara may fizzle out. "It could just be another stunt that the Prime Minister is pulling with his Home Minister," he told our sister publication, Himalkhabar.

As of press time Thursday, it was not clear whether Mahara's four-day arrest would be extended. The evidence against Mahara that he pressured customs officials to release

smuggled gold, and made multiple phone calls to the accused may not be deemed enough by the courts to convict him.

Seeing that Lamichhane may be coming after its own Arzu Rana Deuba and Binod Chaudhary next for their involvement in the fake refugee scandal and the Bansbari land grab, the NC is trying to snare the Home Minister in a case involving the misappropriation of funds from cooperatives to fund a media company Lamichhane co-founded with businessman G B Rai. (See chart page 1)

Suspiciously, one of Lamichhane's first acts as Home Minister was to transfer CIB chief Kiran Bajracharya who was heading the investigation of the cooperatives fraud case. Bajracharya was blamed for his unwillingness to investigate Mahara and others in gold smuggling.

The NC has threatened to obstruct Parliament unless Lamichhane is investigated in the cooperatives case even though Prime Minister Dahal this week staunchly defended his Home Minister.

If all this was an attempt by the RSP to show that it is serious about curbing corruption, the public does not seem all that convinced. Many see the investigations as vendetta and political drama. The web of corruption is so tangled that every politician has something on another politician, and they all tend to cancel each other out.

Mahara was questioned about his alleged connection with the smuggling racket last year, and his son Rahul has been in police custody since August for his involvement in the case. Other political leaders including incumbent Finance Minister Barsaman Pun, former speaker Onsari Gharti Magar, and Dipesh Pun, son of former vice-president Nanda Bahadur Pun, have all also been accused of being a part of the gold trafficking ring.

Former prime ministers, ministers, and political leaders have been questioned, even detained, for their involvement in cases ranging from the Baluwater real estate scam to the fake refugee scandal, but they have either been spared completely, released on bail, or the investigations have hit a dead end.

All the leadership seems to care about is to push probes into corruption cases when they are in power and rivals are in the opposition. In that respect, though, Mahara's detention is an outlier — he has been taken in while his own party boss is Prime Minister.

Shristi Karki

LAND GRAB

GOLD SMUGGLING

COOPERATIVES

LAND SCAM

FAKE REFUGEES

Public pressure to curb graft is making heads roll, but is it all just political drama?

## ONLINE PACKAGES



GRANDMAS IN SCHOOL

Inspiring grandmothers are breaking barriers and enrolling in school. Meet these incredible women as they achieve their lifelong dreams of getting an education, and see how their journey is paving the way for a brighter future. Watch the video on YouTube and read the story on page 6-7.



NEPALIS IN RUSSIAN ARMY

Nepali families who have lost relatives in the Russia-Ukraine war want their bodies brought back. Others have not heard from the soldiers, and are worried about them. Watch the video on our YouTube channel and subscribe for more original multimedia content. Story on page 10-11.

### NEPALI ECONOMY

We need to encourage Nepali companies to invest, especially in sectors like energy and ICT where we have strength abroad ('Poor cash-rich Nepal' Sonia Awale, #1203).

Dolraj Poudel

It is not only a lack of visionary leadership, it is also the inability to appreciate knowledge about the country and look beyond the group of yes-men and cadres.

Vishwa Bhusan Amatya

Nepal's government and its Lok Sewa bureaucrats only know how to raise tax, not the quality of its services.

Bishnu Puri

Other doors will open up if the economic mindset to invest outside is widened, combined with encouraging policies.

Ranjan Dhungel

It's high time for the government to incentivise IT startups and companies to go global. We'll see the impact soon.

Ashis K S

Nepal needs an investment mindset, along with the development of risk diversifying and mitigation avenues.

Sunayna Tamrakar

### DAVID BREASHERS

Sad to hear of the passing of David, climbing legend and a staunch Climate Action advocate Breashears ('Climber-activist David Breashears, 68', page 4).

Gordon Oz Osinski

Numbing news. Great respect to the departed. What a great life, full of stories.

Tony Jones

### MIGRATION

Nepalis abroad make significant contributions but we cannot ignore the negative impacts of mass migration ('Brain drain into brain gain', Editorial, #1200). The brain drain deprives Nepal of talent vital for innovation and development. The reliance on remittances also masks underlying economic weaknesses, hindering sustainable growth strategies. While the private sector's role in job creation is emphasised, structural reforms and targeted policies are needed to foster an environment helpful to entrepreneurship and investment.

Joel Ghale

Times.com

## WHAT'S TRENDING

### Climber-activist David Breashears, 68

by Nepali Times  
Five-time Everest summiter and climate activist David Breashears died last week, aged 68. He specialised in repeat photography of old images of the Alps and the Himalaya to visually document the impact of climate breakdown. Obituary on page 4.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

### Nursing grievances against the state

by Sagar Budhathoki  
Nepal has an over-supply of nurses, but nursing positions at hospitals are vacant because of low pay and overwork. Exploitation, high nursing college fees, lack of academic or professional growth are driving Nepal's nurses overseas. Visit nepalintimes.com for the full story.

Most popular on X



### Poor cash-rich Nepal

by Sonia Awale  
Nepal's crisis of low economic activity is directly related to governance failure and lack of accountability of high elected officials. The country's coffers are full, but the economy is anaemic because of a poor investment climate. Join the discussion online.

Most commented

### Non-barbwire borders

by Chandra Kishore  
Hard borders separate the territories of nation states, and divide people that were once one. As boundary walls go up around the world, the open Nepal-India border should be a model, writes Nepali Time columnist Chandra Kishore. Read the story on our website.

Most visited online page

## QUOTES

**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
Nepal has an over-supply of nurses, but nursing positions at hospitals are vacant because of low pay and overwork. Nursing Grievances Against the State | Sagar Budhathoki

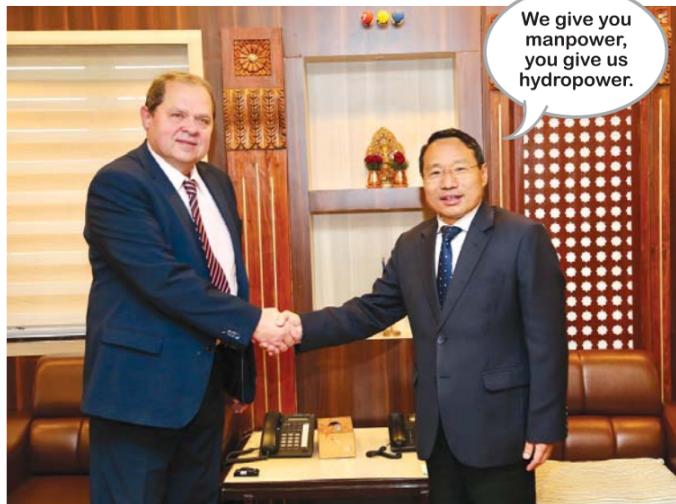
**AirlineGuy @GuyAirline**  
Nurses and teachers in Nepal are criminally underpaid.

**Samaya @Samaya290**  
Add Doctors to the list.

**Nepali Times@NepaliTimes**  
The Great Game between China and India is being played out in this scenic tourism capital.

**Javi Delgado @JaviDelgado00**  
Sticking a tight balancing act between its two giant, and antagonist, neighbours is Nepal's doom.

## 1,000 WORDS



We give you manpower, you give us hydropower.

PRADEEP RAJ ONTA/RSS

**FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE:**  
Finance Minister Barsaman Pun and Russian Ambassador Aleksei Novikov during a meeting on Wednesday where the two discussed Russian investment in hydropower as well as Nepalis in the Russian Army. Novikov said Nepalis went voluntarily and many did not want to return.

## 20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

### Driving each other nuts

Kathmandu's streets are busier than ever before with nearly 2 million vehicles, 1.5 of them just two wheelers. This has worsened air pollution, roads have become a public hazard, while highway accidents are a major killer of young Nepalis. Following is an excerpt from a spoof traffic Q&A in the satire column Under My Hat published 20 years ago this week on #188 19-25 March 2004. Enjoy:

Q: On which side of the road does one drive in Nepal?  
A: Those of you who thought that in Nepal we drive on the left side of the road are wrong. That rule has just been changed, and all motorcycles are henceforth required to drive on the right side (which used to be the wrong side) of the street at all times and weave suicidally in and out dodging oncoming trucks and buses. The left side of the road will now only be used to park bricks, cement, steel rods and other construction material.

Q: What is the latest on helmets and visors?  
A: As we go to press at 1900 hrs GMT on Thursday, you are not required to wear a helmet if you have a visor on. The pillion rider must have a helmet prominently displayed, but not necessarily on the head.

24

### Driving each other nuts

Q: On which side of the road does one drive in Nepal?  
A: Those of you who thought that in Nepal we drive on the left side of the road are wrong. That rule has just been changed, and all motorcycles are henceforth required to drive on the right side (which used to be the wrong side) of the street at all times and weave suicidally in and out dodging oncoming trucks and buses. The left side of the road will now only be used to park bricks, cement, steel rods and other construction material.

Q: What are the rules on overtaking?  
A: We never overtake in Nepal, we always takeover. It is a part of our glorious culture to be territorial about a 10m radius of asphalt around us on the street, and woe betide anyone who deigns to trespass this space.

Q: Besides chickens, are there any other things crossing the road that we need to watch out for?  
A: Buffalos, goats, ducks and other livestock have right of way and can cross the road at any time anywhere and without warning. It is up to the driver behind the wheel to use telepathy to figure out what their intentions are. Dogs, on the other hand, don't cross the road but will race you while barking their heads off. Don't worry about them, unless they are wearing visors.

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

Times

Nepali Times on Facebook  
Follow @nepalintimes on Twitter  
Follow @nepalintimes on Instagram

Editor Online: Sahina Shrestha Executive Editor: Sonia Awale Layout: Kiran Maharjan  
Publisher: Kunda Dixit, Himalmedia Pvt Ltd | Patan Dhoka, Lalitpur | GPO Box 7251 Kathmandu  
editors@nepalintimes.com | www.nepalintimes.com | www.himalmedia.com | Tel: +977 1 5006501-08 Fax: +977 1 5005518





TURKISH AIRLINES

# HAPPY HOLI

Touch every color of spring  
with Turkish Airlines

A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER 

01-4538363 | 01-4538436 | ktmsales@thy.com

# Climber-activist David Breashears, 68

Five-time Everest summiter and climate activist David Breashears died on 14 March at his home in Massachusetts in the United States, aged 68.

Breashears shot the IMAX film Everest about the 1996 tragedy when eight climbers were killed, and also co-produced the movie Everest in 2015 starring Jake Gyllenhaal and Josh Brolin about the 1996 deaths. While shooting another documentary in 2015, he had to be rescued by helicopter from Camp I on Mt Everest when an avalanche triggered by the earthquake killed 19 people at Base Camp.

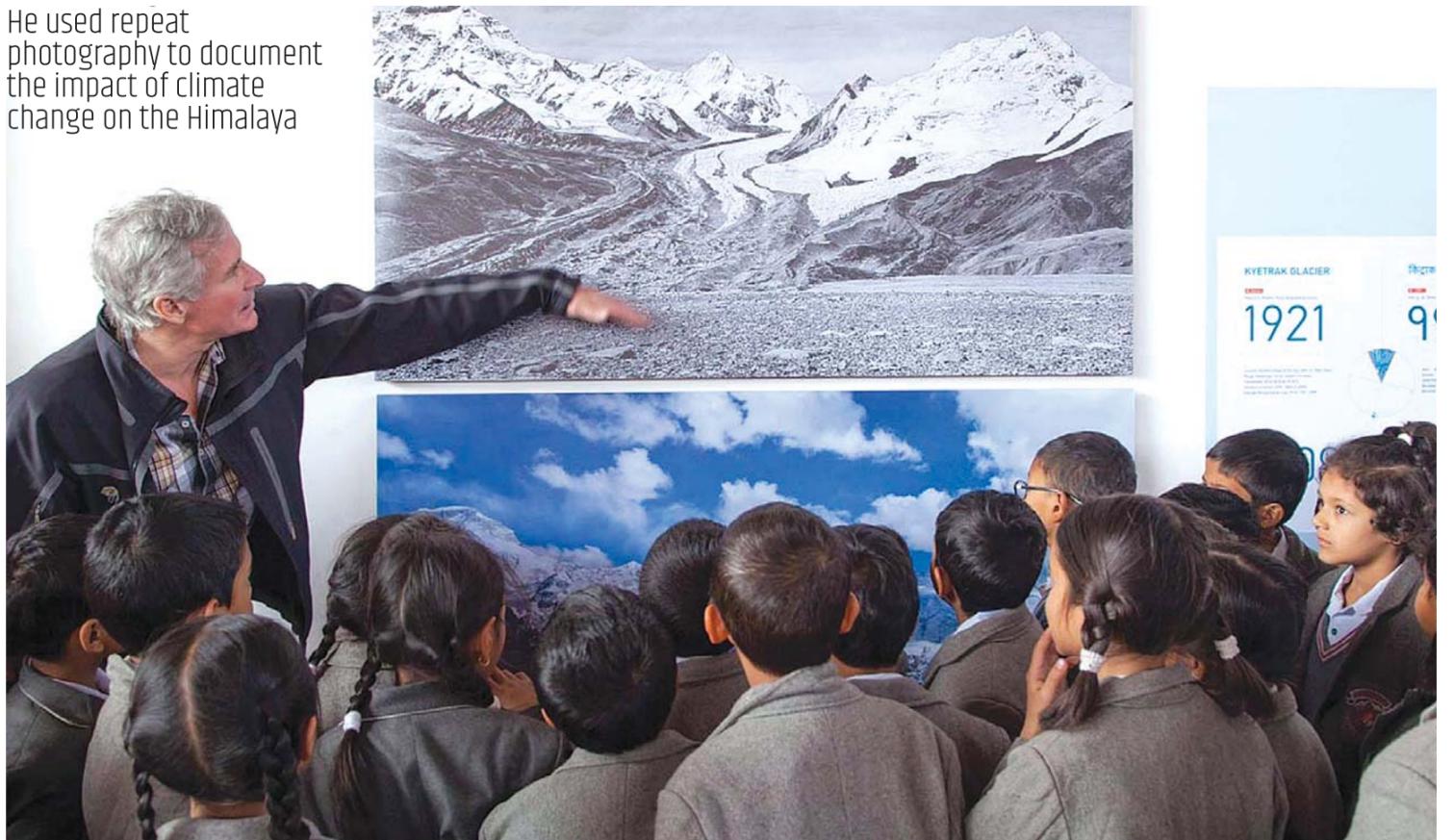
Breashears specialised in repeat photography of old images of the Alps and the Himalaya to visually document the impact of climate breakdown, and through his group GlacierWorks took part in the multimedia Climate+Change exhibition in Kathmandu in 2014.

The exhibition had Breashears' before and after photography of Himalayan glaciers, comparing pictures taken in 1921 by George Mallory of the Rongbuk Glacier on the north side of Mt Everest to show how much it had shrunk by 2009. The exhibition was put up at the Nepal Art Council in Kathmandu and the Mountaineering Museum in Pokhara and helped spread awareness about the climate crisis.

Breashears was worried what the Himalaya would look like in 100 years, and told Nepali Times in an interview ten years ago: 'Those of us who have climbed Everest for the past 33 years have seen the changes taking place under our own feet. Now our crampons scrape and scratch across hundreds of feet of exposed rock and the snow arête that Hillary climbed no longer exists. The route is entirely on rock.'

Himalayan glaciers are retreating and shrinking much faster than what was forecast ten years ago, and just as Breashears predicted, garbage and bodies of

He used repeat photography to document the impact of climate change on the Himalaya



CLIMATE+CHANGE



DAVID BEASHEARS

**LEAVING A LEGACY:** David Breashears at the Climate+Change exhibition in 2014 in Kathmandu (above), explaining his mountain photographs to Nepali students.

Breashears holding up a print taken by George Mallory of Mt Everest in 1921 to show how much the Rongbuk Glacier had receded by 2009.

dead climbers are being exposed by thawing ice high on the mountains. In spring a river now runs through Everest Base Camp.

In a brief statement to Outside Magazine this week, Breashears' family said: 'It is with tremendous sadness that we share the news of David Breashears' untimely passing. David was a beloved brother, uncle,

father, friend, and colleague and a caring, impassioned advocate of adventure, exploration, and the health of our planet.'

The statement added: 'What fulfilled him the most – where he'd want his legacy to lie – is his non-profit organization, GlacierWorks, which he founded in 2007 to highlight the Himalayan glaciers through art, science, and adventure. He used his climbing and photography experience to create unique records revealing the dramatic effects of climate change on the mountain range.'

Breashears once said in a Reddit interview: 'Nepal is my favourite place on earth.' 🇳🇵

**NMB BANK**  
एनएमबि बैंक

## Turkish colour



Turkish Airlines Red  
Color created by PANTONE

To celebrate its inaugural flight to Australia, Turkish Airlines has partnered with the Pantone Color Institute to name its signature red color as 'Turkish Airlines Red'. The carrier started flights between Istanbul and Melbourne via Singapore this month, expanding its network to all six continents and 130 countries.

## Buddha credit ratings

Buddha Air, Nepal's largest domestic airline, has got one of the top ratings from ICRA Nepal. The carrier scored A2+ on short-term loans and LA- on long-term loans, two ranks down from the topmost credit ratings. The airline said it would have got top marks had it not been for the overall high financial risk of the airline industry



globally and particularly in Nepal. 'We are very proud of our credit rating achievement, which we think is in the top 1% of the global scenario,' Buddha Air said in a statement posted on social media. The airline's operating revenue was placed provisionally at Rs3.83 billion, and it now has 67% market share, up from 56% in 2022. ICRA Nepal said the 27-year-old airline's 'controlled business performance' contributed to its positive numbers.

## Zonta Yellow Rose

The Zonta Club of Kathmandu carried on its annual tradition of 'Yellow Rose Day' which commemorates International Women's Day. It recognised women who are exceptional in their fields and have advanced gender equality. Among this year's awardees were television presenter and activist, Bandana Rana, and Deputy Mayor of Kathmandu, Sunita Dangol.

## Ather prize

Ather Energy Nepal is holding an Ather Community Day 2024 on 6 April for customers, with the winning prize being a fully-paid trip to Bangalore and an opportunity to join the celebrations there.



## Toyota

United Traders Syndicate held the 17th Toyota Dream Car art contest at the VOITH complex. Some 780,000 children participated and winners got prizes and certificates.

## Soaltee food festival

The Awadh food festival is on-going at the Indian restaurant Kakori at The Soaltee, Kathmandu. Featuring Indian master chef Anirudh Sethi, the festival includes vegetarian and meat dishes from north India and will continue to be open for dinner until 24 March.



## MG EVs

Paramount Motors have put its electric MG4 EV under an endurance test in adverse road conditions at an off-road race track in Dhulikhel. It showed the car can handle speed bumps, potholes, and steep gradients. The EV has a motor capacity of 99kW, a range of 440km, and a price of Rs49,99,000.

## New Galaxies

Samsung Electronics launched two new models, the Galaxy A55 5G and the Galaxy A35 5G in the price range of Rs46,999-Rs67,999 and offer improved security and camera features. The models are said to have better night-time photo and videography capabilities.

## Coke record

Coca-Cola marked a Guinness World Record for the largest momo party as part of the second edition of the 'Kathmandu is Cooking' event at the Hyatt Regency Ground in Boudha. Over 500 people were served varieties of momo along with a bottle of Coke. Coca-Cola recently celebrated its 50-year presence in Nepal and has been holding Momo-Utsav events for the last nine years.

## Mountain Dew summer

Mountain Dew launched a new Summer Campaign featuring brand ambassador Anoop Bikram Shahi who features in a tv commercial in which he saves his friend from the path of a destructive tornado as per the motto 'Darr ko agadi jeet cha'.

## Nabil Wonders

Nabil Bank is collaborating with Wonders Nepal, the operators of Skywalk Tower in Kamaladi, to provide an exclusive discount of 10% to bank customers. The discount is available through Nabil Bank's debit or credit cards, as well as the nBank mobile app.

## Mahindra Utsav

Agni Group held a lucky draw as part of the Mahindra Utsav where three winners were awarded a Mahindra Treo electric rickshaw, a Mahindra Jawa motorcycle, and a Mahindra Powerall generator.



## Rural Health Meet

Nick Simons Institute held its 12th Rural Healthcare Worker's Conference in Kathmandu on 20 March with discussions on thematic issues affecting hospital support in district areas. The annual Nick Simons Award was presented to Auxiliary Nurse Midwife Kanchan Mala Shrestha from Nuwakot.

# Warning: Snakebite season

Fatalities are preventable and caused by a lack of awareness among the poorest Nepalis

■ Lisa Choegy

There is nothing quite so green as a green pit viper, so distinctively designed as a banded krait or so exquisitely patterned as the scales on the hood of a spectacled cobra. Despite the chilling beauty of these ancient creatures, for centuries snakebites have caused thousands of deaths and continue to do so.

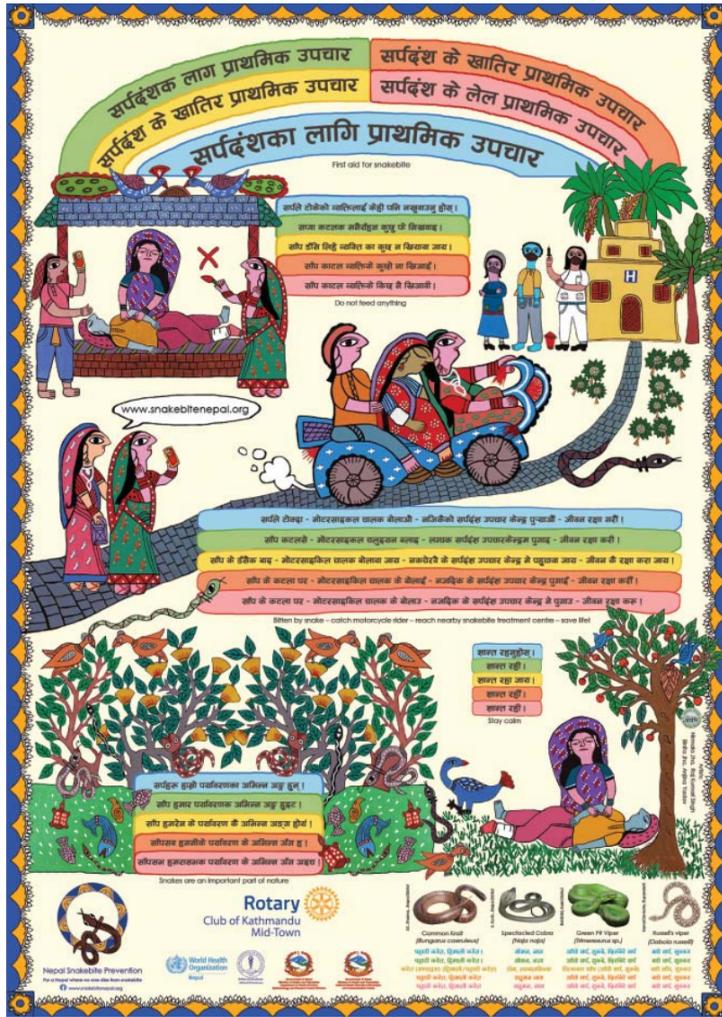
Living in the wild jungles of Chitwan and Bardia, we rarely saw any snakes except during the monsoon off-season when they were flooded out of their homes, so mishaps were minimal. Alerted by the vibrations of our stomping footsteps, keeping well out of the way is every snake's preferred option. But for us any close encounter triggers an instinctive frisson recoil, no doubt inherited from ancestors and honed by deep-rooted survival mechanisms.

Nepal has a specially complex relationship with serpents. They are heralded in mythology, revered as powerful protective deities, valued for medicinal properties and feared as potentially lethal. They are diligently worshipped during Nag Panchami and their venom compounded into lifesaving drugs.

But snakes are generally destroyed at any opportunity, even though most species are harmless and make valuable contributions to Nepal's natural ecosystems. Of the 89 varieties found in Nepal, only 21 species are venomous.

Harmful species of vipers, cobras and kraits annually kill mainly farmers and children in the rural Tarai, particularly during the hot wet summer months. An estimated 40,000 persons are bitten and more than 3,000 die from snakebites every year in Nepal.

The tragedy is that these fatalities are preventable and caused by a lack of understanding, often among the poorest of the poor. Thousands of lives can be saved by spreading awareness about the venomous snake species in Nepal, how



accidents can be prevented and the immediate steps to take when someone is bitten.

"Over three quarters of victims die before they reach help by not acting fast enough, being delayed by jhankris, lacking transport or having to travel too far," says Hemantha Chandra Ojha of the Epidemiology and Disease Control Division. This despite a network of snakebite treatment centres supplied with antivenom.

The Rotary Club of Kathmandu Mid-Town with member Isabella Khadka has tirelessly cajoled, rallied, fundraised for the Rotary Snakebite Prevention Project 2022-2026 to reverse the lack of knowledge, and address this neglected and preventable public health issue.

"We aim to eliminate the myths," says Khadka. "We are using high tech social media and communication solutions country-wide to tackle an age-old problem. No one should die of snakebite in Nepal."

Less than two years since inception, the Rotary initiative has already reached over 25 million listeners with radio spots on 41 local FM stations, Radio Nepal and Kantipur FM discussion programs, outreach meetings, local champions, and orientation sessions for teachers, health workers and journalists.

The knowledge products feature vibrant Maithili artwork using five colour-coded languages (Nepali, Paschimi Tharu, Awadhi, Bhojpuri and Maithili), and include posters,



AMERICAN CHEMICAL SOCIETY

social media, Facebook, YouTube action clips, training videos and the bilingual website [www.snakebitenepal.org](http://www.snakebitenepal.org).

Partners include the B P Koirala Institute of Health Sciences in Dharan, and Snakebite Research Centre with Sanjib Kumar Sharma, the Epidemiology and Disease Control Division, National Health Education Information and Communication Centre, World Health Organization and WWF Nepal, amongst others. The implementers are Digital Broadcast Initiative Equal Access.

In 2019 a High Level Meeting and Workshop on Snakebite was convened in Kathmandu to seek consensus on best practice methods to tackle the problem. Experts from Oxford, Frankfurt, Melbourne and India, as well as Nepal's many herpetologists, endorsed the need for increased public awareness.

Since then, collaboration has been secured from government, embassies, development agencies and NGOs as well as medical institutions, civil society and local communities. Last month, an awareness event was held for donors and diplomats at the APF Headquarters in Kathmandu. Training is ongoing in all seven provinces to health workers on the management of anti-snake venom and the improvement of snakebite treatment centres. 🇳🇵

## PREVENTION STRATEGIES

Reading this may save your life, or someone else's.

- Keep surroundings clean since snakes hide in tall grass, rubbish and firewood
- Snakes are attracted to food storage and hidden rodents
- Beware while walking around at night, use a torch and tap the ground in front
- Beware while working outdoors, in fields and use a long stick to tap the ground
- Stay away from areas where snakes might hide
- Sleep under a mosquito net to help deter snakes
- Avoid sleeping at ground level

## FIRST-AID MESSAGES

- To help snakebite victims stay calm, don't panic or move the bitten part
- Do not feed the victim anything
- Quickly transport victim to health care facility, on a motorcycle between driver & pillion rider
- Don't play with or touch dead snake, take a photo to show health workers
- Use tables on the website ([www.snakebitenepal.org](http://www.snakebitenepal.org)) to locate the closest antivenom treatment center
- Use website to find a health worker to advise over phone

# SILK GLAMOR

## Glamor that lasts









ALL PHOTOS: GOPEN RAI

## Indra Kumari Ale, 71

Every morning, Indra Kumari Ale walks half an hour from her home in Kusunti to Prerana Mahila Secondary School in Satdobato, carrying a blue and purple backpack. Once inside the brown gates, she makes her way to the second floor and takes her place inside the classroom.

Growing up in Syangja, Ale got basic education, but her father thought girls did not need education and married her off at the age of 18. Her husband was in the Indian army, and Ale took care of her in-laws while he was away serving.

For 25 years, the two maintained a long-distance relationship. Because she herself could not go to school, Ale made sure all her children did. Her two older daughters were married off

after completing high school, and her youngest daughter is in medical school.

During all the time she was home looking after the family, Ale yearned to go to school herself. In 2015 her daughter convinced her to join the school for women.

She started in Grade 1, and excelled in studies, got the highest scores in class and was promoted. "It was easy in the lower classes, but it is more difficult now more so because of my age," she says.

Last year, Ale sat for her SEE exams, which was "fun" giving the test with other students who were her grandchildren's age.

"The students and teachers in the test showed me love and respect. I did not think I would pass, but I did," she says.

Not many outside Ale's family

knew she was going to school. When the results were announced, neighbours came to know that she had passed the exam, and they honoured her.

Now in Grade 11, she is proud of her decision to go to school. "In the past when my neighbours asked where I was going carrying a backpack, I would say I'm going for a walk," says Ale. "These days I tell everyone I go to school and they respect me for that."

Education has not only given Ale recognition in her family and society but has also helped her become more independent.

"From reading signboards to hailing buses, I can do it all by myself," she says. "I understand English even if I can't speak it properly yet. I did not think I'd be able to do all this at this age."



## Prem Kumari Rajkoti Magar, 55

In the mountains of Palpa, Prem Kumari Rajkoti Magar was known for her dulcet voice and an interest in singing. Villagers would invite her to perform in rodhi, dohori and other programs. She happily obliged.

Over the years, she published two albums and played small roles in Nepali tele serials but she was troubled by the fact that she did not know how to read or write.

She came to Kathmandu 25 years ago, where her husband landed a job. She also looked for jobs in offices, but they said the most she was capable of was cleaning and mopping floors.

"I faced a lot of humiliation because I could not read or write," recalls Magar. Once, while auditioning for a role in a movie, she was handed her lines. A woman read them out so she could memorise them, but not before remarking, "Why would a person who cannot even read apply?"

She was embarrassed, and the comment damaged her confidence. She fumbled through the audition and was not surprised when she did not get the role.

"Even when singing, I kept thinking that if I knew how to read, I wouldn't have to struggle to memorise all the words, I could even write my own songs," says

Magar, who always wanted to study but never had the chance to growing up because "education was never a priority in the village". Once married, she was too busy with the household.

Magar had given up on ever learning to read when she learnt of Shradha Mahila Alternative Secondary School in Swayambhu, and enrolled in Grade 1. Her husband and sons were supportive.

"I did not feel embarrassed to study with young students, but there were others my age or older," she says.

For two years now, she has been taking care of her family and rushes to school every morning. Recently, she had to take two months off when her daughter-in-law gave birth but is back in class.

Now in Grade 2, Magar diligently attends school from 11AM to 3PM every weekday and says she can now confidently sign her name in both English and Nepali, and use her mobile phone.

"I am happy that I get to study at this age," says Magar. "Women should study so that they can be financially and socially independent. When they are educated they will know the ways of the world, they won't get cheated, they can maintain their privacy and more importantly they can voice their opinion."

# Age no bar for school

Meet the Nepali women fulfilling their lifelong dream of getting an education

■ Sahina Shrestha

Nepal now has near-equal enrollment rates for boys and girls at primary level. But dropout rates for young women are still high. The female literacy rate is 69% compared to 83% for males. Socio-cultural norms, poverty, child marriage and lack of sanitation facilities in schools hinder equal access to education. Now, women who were denied education when young are enrolling in school.

"We have studied that men and women are wheels of the same chariot. How can the chariot move forward when one wheel is well oiled and the other is not," asks Anjana Maharjan, Principal of Shradha Mahila Alternative Secondary School in Swayambhu. "When a man is educated, the house prospers, when a woman is educated, the family is empowered. When a family is capable, the village becomes capable. When a village becomes capable, the country develops," she adds.

But being back in school is not always smooth for older women.

Household chores leave little time for studies. Social stigma of starting school late and the fear of being judged can be deterrents. Many lack support from families.

"There are students who tell their family they are going to work," says Prabha Chalise, Principal at Prerana Mahila Secondary School in Sattobato that provides classes for women 14 years and older.

Some stay after class to finish homework and leave books at school so no one at home finds out.

On this page, meet women who are achieving their lifelong dream of attending school. 🇳🇵



GRANDMAS IN SCHOOL

Inspiring grandmothers are breaking barriers and enrolling in school. Meet these incredible women as they achieve their lifelong dreams of getting an education, and see how their journey is paving the way for a brighter future.



## Surya Kumari Shrestha, 67

As a child, Surya Kumari Shrestha attended kindergarten, writing on slates with chalk. But she dropped out soon after.

Later when her contemporaries went on to hold jobs, and some worked as teachers, she regretted not studying, and spent most of her life thinking 'what if'.

She moved to Kathmandu 20 years ago, and there was a telephone that her family used. "Everyone dialed numbers to talk to people and I wondered how they did that," remembers Shrestha. "I had no idea how it worked."

Today, she is comfortable

using her mobile and talks to her daughters and video calls her son in Japan. "I dial the numbers myself and call whoever I want," she says. "Maybe I cannot do everything, but I can do more now than before."

Shrestha is now enrolled in Grade 8 at Shradha Mahila Alternative Secondary School, and that was not just to study but also for companionship.

With her son abroad and her daughters married, Shrestha lives alone with her dog Pinki. "If I don't come to school, I don't have anyone to talk to. Here I have friends and I

get to learn new things," she says.

Her children, relatives and neighbours all know that she is attending school and support her decision. On days when she is at home, her neighbours ask why she is missing class.

Education has given her the confidence to face the world as a single woman. Recently when she was asked for thumbprints on a document, she replied that she could sign her own name.

Says Shrestha, "I want to sit for SEE exams and then go to college. Education has brought so many positive changes in my life."

## Shobha Thapa, 60

When young, Shobha Thapa learnt the alphabets by peeking at her siblings' lessons. She never got to go to school, and once married was too busy raising her children. She has sent her children to an English medium school.

"But the teachers would talk to me in English," recalls Thapa. "I couldn't understand anything but was too embarrassed to admit it."

At home she often felt excluded when people said she would not understand the issue because she was uneducated. "There were too many humiliations to recount. But it taught me that education is important," says Thapa.

She could not muster up the courage to tell her husband about her desire to go to school. But one day he himself brought home a newspaper featuring a story of Prerana Mahila Secondary School. She told him she wanted to enroll, and he agreed. Thapa finally started school at age 50.

"I cannot describe the happiness on that first day," says Thapa who is now in Grade 11. Her zeal was so strong she had her books open while cooking or doing laundry.

Thapa was the top performing student till the pandemic hit. "I did not know how to use a laptop, but managed to take online classes," says Thapa who was much happier when physical classes resumed. She says she still needs to work on her English.

After passing her SEE exams last year, she has felt a shift in people's attitude towards her. People who used to shun her now respect her.

Thapa is proud of what she has achieved and tells everyone she is in school to encourage other women to start studying also.

She adds, "Education opens doors. It is what makes us human beings and it is especially important for women because they need to be strong to face the world."



## Nirmala Chhetri, 56

Nirmala Chhetri worked at various hotels, opened and operated a women's cooperative, ran her own tailoring business and is now with the Godavari Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

On the outside, her life looked good, but Chhetri secretly yearned to continue her education.

After her high school exams, she had learned to type. Her accuracy and speed brought in an offer for a government job, but she had to turn it down because of her family's disapproval.

In 1985, she passed the SLC

and joined college but had to put her studies on hold and get married. Her home life took precedence as she brought up her children.

Because she could not study, she made sure all three of her children, especially her daughter, went to school. Two of her children are now in Australia and her son works for Nepal Airlines.

"I always wanted to continue my studies," says Chhetri. "When I joined the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the men there were much more educated than me. This made me feel a bit inferior, but it also made me more determined."

She joined Prerana Mahila

Secondary School in Grade 11 and plans to do a Bachelor's in Law.

"I feel happy. I feel proud of myself and have regained my confidence," says Chhetri. "I now think I can do much more in life."

Chhetri's family is supportive, and with her children all grown up, she feels this is the time to invest in her own personal growth.

"We women have reached this point by sacrificing a lot, so our family and children had opportunities," says Chhetri. "Why should we give up opportunities at this point in our lives too? Women are now free, we should make the most of it."



## EVENTS



## Spring fest

Shake off the winter blues and embrace the changing seasons at Nepal Craft Beer Club's event featuring a selection of craft beers, perfect for enjoying with friends.  
23 March, 1pm, La Terrasse, Chundevi

## Easter fun

This Easter break, spend quality time with family, children, and friends at a celebration filled with egg-citing activities and games, and Easter bingo.  
31 March, 11am-4pm, Le Sherpa, Lazimpat



## Movie night

Join KTM Film Club for an evening under the stars at Taragaon's amphitheater, and experience the enchantment of Kubo and the Two Strings in a cozy outdoor setting.  
30 March, 6pm, Taragaon Next, Boudha

## Nelson Ferreira

Nelson Ferreira specialises in 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century drawing and painting techniques. He exhibiting this week and giving a talk.  
24 March, 3pm, Nepal Art Council, Baber Mahal



## Earthhour

This Saturday, courtesy of WWF Nepal, revel in a day of sunshine, music, art, and sustainability at the Earth Hour event.  
23 March, 1pm onwards, Jawalakhel ground

## DINING



## Hankook Sarang

An array of Korean staples await at Hankook Sarang, including teokbokki, gimbap, bibimbap, and Korean BBQ. Pair the dishes with an assortment of Banchan--traditional Korean side-dishes.  
Tangal (01) 4521711

## MUSIC

## Music and heritage

The eighth iteration of Echoes in the Valley is back in full swing this weekend, featuring artists from across the globe. Journey to Kathmandu's historic sites and immerse in a world of music and heritage.  
22 March, 5:30pm, Hanuman Dhoka / 23 March, 1pm, Itum Bahal



## Beatlemania

Join for a nostalgic night as Dinesh Rai, Patrick Wilson, Sujan Manandhar, and Prajwal Lama pay tribute to the Beatles.  
23 March, 7:30 pm onwards, Moksh



## Holi fun

Get tickets to the Everest Echoes Holi celebration, with a lineup of artists including Neetesh Jung Kunwar, Samridhi Rai, Monkey Temple, Pahleno Batti Muni, Kavi G, Faithom, and Flying Spirits.  
24 March, 11am onwards, Tickets: Rs1,500, Hyatt Regency



## Colourful celebration

This Holi, catch live performances by Yabesh, VEK, and many more.  
24 March, 10am onwards, Durbar Marg

## Colour splash

Colour Splash 2024 will feature performances by international and local artists like Aayna, Meraki, Dash and others.  
24 March, 10am onwards, The Malla Hotel, Lainchaur



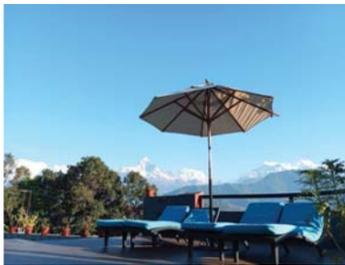
## Bricks Café

This café at the heart of bustling Lalitpur is a multi-cuisine gem offering flavourful dishes like a must-try lasagna, and many more.  
Kupondole (01) 5521756

## Akari &amp; Koko

Experience the culinary delights of Vivanta Hotel's Asian-inspired fusion restaurant and bar, offering an array of East Asian dishes with contemporary flair. Don't miss the opportunity to sample the sushi and pad thai.  
Jhamsikhel (01) 5525002

## GETAWAYS



## Himalayan Front Hotel

Perched atop Sarangkot Hill, this contemporary hotel offers unparalleled views of the mountains and the Phewa Lake. The viewing deck provides a vista to behold.  
Sarangkot, Pokhara, 9801166370

## Balthali Village Resort

This intimate retreat offers a bird's-eye view of lush terrace fields adorned with ochre-painted houses, providing a tranquil escape from the hustle and bustle of everyday life.  
Panauti, Kavre (011) 416022



## Meghauli Serai

Unwind with fine dining and thrilling wildlife safaris at Taj Safari's luxurious lodge.  
Chitwan National Park, 9851218500

## Shivapuri Heights Cottage

Pamper yourself with a rejuvenating Ayurvedic massage and a soothing soak in the hot tub, followed by nutritious meals for both lunch and dinner at Shivapuri Heights Cottage. Complete the day relaxing by the fireside.  
Shivapuri Hills, Budhanilkantha, 9846232271



## Riverside Springs Resort

Situated approximately 100 kilometres from Kathmandu en route to Pokhara and Chitwan, this resort boasts a sprawling swimming pool, and thrilling activities such as horse-back riding and rafting.  
Kurintar, Chitwan (01) 5544263

## Grill Durbar

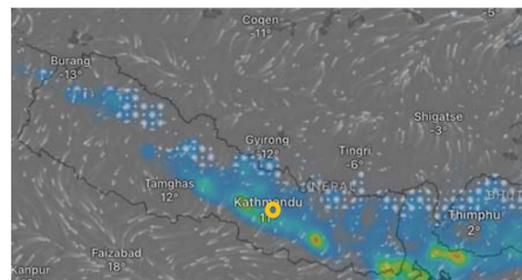
At Grill Durbar, anything goes on the grill. Try the menu from succulent slow-grilled chicken to flavourful grilled vegetable shawarmas.  
Shankhamul, 9801123303



## Cibo Bistro

Savour dishes crafted from fresh ingredients, including a diverse selection of pastas, pizzas, sandwiches, and desserts. Cibo Bistro also offers kid-friendly options to ensure a smooth dining experience for the whole family.  
Pulchowk (01) 5541940

## WEEKEND WEATHER



## Wet Saturday

The broad lower pressure system sweeping across north India has brought welcome rain that has hopefully doused brush fires sweeping across Nepal in the past weeks. Friday and Saturday will be wet, with some of the showers turning thundery towards afternoon and evening. The precipitation forecast map (left) from Windy.com for Saturday afternoon shows storm buildup along the mid-mountains. The sun will peep out on Sunday, but there will likely be passing showers Monday, with the rains tapering off by midweek.



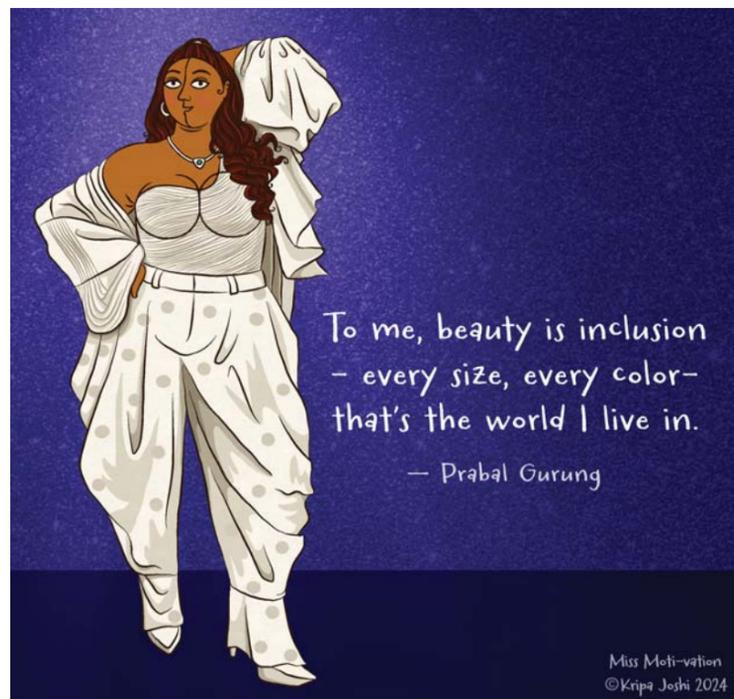
## OUR PICK

Mary & George is a 2024 British historical drama based on Benjamin Woolley's non-fiction book *The King's Assassin* about the love affair between James VI and I and George Villiers, 1<sup>st</sup> Duke of Buckingham. Julianne Moore is Mary Villiers, a scheming mother who grooms her beautiful but unrefined second son George Villiers, played by Nicholas Galitzine, to infiltrate the English court. The Villiers become richer, more titled and more influential than all of England, and George becomes the King's all-powerful lover and political ally. The limited miniseries opened to much critical acclaim and also stars Tony Curran, Mark O'Halloran and Laurie Davidson.



## MISS MOTI-VATION

KRIPA JOSHI



## भूकम्पको जोखिमबाट बच्ने उपाय

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



नेपाल सरकार  
विज्ञापन बोर्ड

# Unholy developments at holy sites

Corruption and commerce threaten World Heritage Site status of Lumbini and Pashupati

■ Alisha Sijapati

Nepalis are proud to proclaim that the Buddha was born in Nepal, but the over-development of Lumbini may mean that the nativity site could be struck off the World Heritage Sites listing.

Nepal is internationally recognised for its cultural landmarks and their protection, but corruption, commercialisation and over-development are endangering sites like Lumbini and Pashupatinath Temple.

World Heritage Sites are designated by UNESCO for their historical, cultural or natural significance, and Nepal has four landmarks in the listing: Kathmandu Valley, Sagarmatha National Park, Chitwan National Park and Lumbini.

It is difficult to be struck off the list, but UNESCO can put some landmarks in the List of World Heritage in danger. The spotlight is now on Lumbini and Pashupati because of recent construction.

U Thant, the United Nations Secretary-General from Burma who visited Lumbini in 1977, hired famous Japanese architect Kenzō Tange to devise a masterplan for the site. It has taken nearly 40 years for Tange's scheme to more or less be put together, but the Lumbini Development Trust (LDT) has been flouting the Tange design.

For example, a concrete and glass structure is coming up right next to Mayadevi Temple, an area of unexcavated archaeological significance. More recently, LDT



SAGAR PANDEY

announced that it was leasing out to a private company for 99 years the sacred Ramgram Stupa, 35km east of Lumbini, one of eight sites in the Subcontinent with corporeal remains of the Buddha.

The plan was cancelled in January by Parliament's Public Accounts Committee which also demanded a corruption probe into the Rs7 billion deal to lease 81 hectares around Ramgram for 99 years. The deal was to the Singapore-based Moksha Foundation and its Nepali counterpart The Promised Land, owned by Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal's landlord's son.

LDT is now headed by political broker and shady former lawmaker Lharkyal Lama, who was appointed by Prime Minister Dahal despite knowledge about his murky past.

Neither the Ministry of Culture nor the Department of Archaeology had prior knowledge of the Ramgram proposal, and this lack of oversight and accountability has further eroded the LDT's credibility, increasing concern about conflict of interest and political patronage. After the controversy erupted, an LDT executive committee meeting shelved the Ramgram agreement.

The Heritage Site listing doubts come just as another ancient Buddha-era settlement of Tilaurakot near Lumbini is about to be added to the UNESCO Heritage List.

Meanwhile, in Kathmandu, the Pashupati Area Development Trust (PADT) also faces the risk of having one of Hinduism's holiest shrines delisted from the World Heritage Sites.

The reason is similar to what has tainted Lumbini: political interference. LDT and PADT are chaired by the Minister of Civil Aviation and Culture, but are supposed to operate autonomously from the government. The minister has just been replaced by another Maoist confidante of Dahal, Hit Man Tamang.

PADT's director Laxmi Pun was suspended soon after her appointment because she did not meet qualifications for the job. There is also a brewing controversy involving the Digital Copyright Act about the right to film the Ganga Arati evening prayer ritual at Pashupati by the entertainment company Budha Subba Digital.

The company says it signed a deal with PADT, but this is denied

by spokesperson Rewati Raman Adhikari whose signature is on the agreement between Budha Subba Digital and PADT. Now, both PADT and Adhikari vehemently deny any ownership or knowledge of such an agreement.

"We don't know how they got the stamp, this is nonsense," Adhikari told Nepali Times. He added that PADT is working on crowd management at the evening prayers after several near stampedes.

Adhikari says the Ganga Arati is not under the jurisdiction of PADT, but organised by a separate entity. He notes that the prayer ritual adopted more than a decade ago is not inherently a part of Nepali culture.

Our investigation shows that on 15 June, 2023 former Minister of Tourism and Culture Sudan Kirati signed an agreement permitting the Kirat ethnic group to bury their dead within the sacred Shleshmantak forest until a permanent burial site was found in three months.

Six months have passed but no alternative site has been designated. Nabin Manandhar of Kathmandu Metropolitan Office had no idea about the agreement Kirati signed. Rewati Raman Adhikari also had no idea about an agreement.

PADT has already been wracked by a corruption scandal over missing gold used to make a new necklace for the main Pashupati deity. Thapa is facing charges related to corruption in that case which goes back to when K P Oli was Prime Minister in 2021. 🇳🇵

**TATA MOTORS**  
Connecting Aspirations

**TATA**

**go.ev** with **Tiago.ev**

DOWNPAYMENT

4.39 LAKHS\* ONLY

# Nepalis play Russian roulette

As more Nepalis are killed in action, returnees and families are outraged at traffickers and the government

■ Shankar Dahal

When Maya BK's husband Somesh asked for Rs500,000 so that he could apply for a job in Russia, she was taken aback. He was already working in Qatar, why did he need another job?

"Opportunities like this won't knock again," he explained to her on the phone. Russia was Europe and he would get a higher salary, and perhaps even citizenship.

A month later the family's dreams are dashed. A colleague of Somesh BK called from Russia with news that he had been killed in action on the Ukraine front, one of as many as 39 Nepali mercenaries so far thought to have died in the conflict, according to activist Kirtu Bhandari. Six others are prisoners of war with the Ukrainians.

Maya is in Kathmandu with her four-year-old son to provide a DNA sample so her husband's body in Russia can be matched. Somesh BK is among 15 names on a new list of Nepali KIA provided by the Russians.

Although Nepal discouraged nationals from going to Russia in July last year to prevent enlistment, unscrupulous recruiters tempted serving and retired security officials with high salaries, military training and promises of citizenship after six months.

TikToks posted by Nepalis already in Russian Army training centres clad in smart uniforms and wielding modern weapons is also attracting many, but the clips do not tell of the death and suffering on the frontlines.

"Nepalis have nothing to do with the war between Russia and Ukraine, but our young men are being lured with attractive salaries



Somesh BK, his wife and son in Nepal (left), and with the Russian Army in Ukraine



Unidentified Nepali soldiers in a trench

to join the Russian Army. They have no idea about how fierce the battle is," says Rabi Lawoti, who paid Rs800,000 to a middleman for a visa and ticket to Moscow via New Delhi last year, but deserted and returned. He estimates there are about 2,000 Nepalis in the Russian Army.

After coming back to Kathmandu, Lawoti tracked down his recruiter, took him to a hotel room where he demanded his money back at knifepoint. The agent agreed to pay back half of the Rs500,000.

"The real bosses in this business live in Moscow, the ones in Kathmandu, Delhi or Dubai are small fish," claims Lawoti. "My local recruiter only got Rs10,000 for linking me to the international agent in a tea shop in Kathmandu. But I paid most of the money to the kingpins in Moscow."

Lawoti doesn't want to reveal their names for fear it will put Nepalis in Russia at risk. But he is frustrated over the Nepal government's inaction.

Nepal Police arrested 12 agents engaged in the trafficking of Nepalis to the Russian Army in January, but they were later freed.

"This is undeniably a case of fraud but we have not received complaints from the victims or their families so far," says Om

Rana who heads the Human Trafficking Investigation Bureau in Kathmandu. "Since no one had filed any complaints, we had to let go of those we arrested."

Sub-section (1) of Section 4 of the Human Trafficking and Transportation (Control) Act 2007 has no provision related to the trafficking of Nepalis to Russia. Nepal Police has therefore filed an amendment to Section 4 so it can make arrests and charge illegal recruiters.

Most traffickers make a double profit on the Nepalis they recruit on behalf of the Russian Army. Lawoti paid Rs800,000 to be taken to Moscow, and the same recruiter demanded Rs300,000 to bring him back. It is not known if the Russian Army also pays recruiters a fee.

Nepalis tell harrowing tales of Ukrainian drones dropping bombs on trenches, wounded soldiers being left to die, and the Russian Army using human wave attacks in the battles for Bakhmut and Avdiivka. Nepalis caught deserting are tortured and sometimes shot. Returnees complain of freezing weather, lack of food and poor morale.

Suman Rai deserted the Russian Army after finding out that he had been misled by recruiters. He is now in

Kathmandu, and says traffickers are still enlisting Nepalis in Dubai and taking them to Moscow.

"They identify themselves as non-resident Nepalis, medical students or businessmen," says Rai who also paid Rs300,000 to the agent who took him there to bring him back. A bilingual Nepali helped him take a taxi 300km from the Donbas region to Moscow for his flight home.

Min Dahal's brother joined the Russian Army last year, and told us he knows of an agent who goes by the name 'Sachin' who says he is a doctor, and was in Kathmandu four months ago.

To find out the fate of his brother, Dahal called the agent on WhatsApp pretending to be an aspiring recruit. He was asked to pay Rs500,000 to be taken to Moscow. "I tried calling him again, but he smelled something fishy, and left the country," Dahal said.

Roji Pun, a mother of two infants, is in Kathmandu and has joined the campaign pressuring the government to act. A friend of her husband in Russia messaged to inform her that her husband had been killed, but she is waiting to get his DNA sample so she can get confirmation and perform his last rites.

Superintendent of Police Bhubendra Khatri, who led the raid against the recruiters arrested earlier this year, also says his hands were tied because of the lack of laws and the fact that victims have not filed complaints.

Many families of Nepalis in the Russian Army have not heard from them, and fear the worst. Some are injured and in hospitals, while others are in custody for trying to desert and make furtive calls on WhatsApp to their families.

They are not allowed to use phones on the frontlines. An eyewitness who returned said a fellow-Nepali who was taking a video was shot by the Russians.

Others in training camps have been posting videos on TikTok of singing and dancing in uniforms. Although it is now banned, many Nepalis use a VPN to access the platform which, by all accounts, has been the main medium through which recruiters are reaching young Nepali men.

Rabi Lawoti had always dreamt of joining the British or Indian Armies like his forebears, and regarded the military as an honorable occupation. He first found out about the Russian Army after seeing his friend Suman Rai on TikTok, who



## Families of Lahure on the Ukraine Front

So far, 39 Nepalis serving in the Russian Army are known to have been killed. Families of 27 have conducted the final rites based on the confirmation from friends and the government. Fifteen of them are in Kathmandu to submit DNA sample to confirm the identity of their dead kin.



**Gita Gharti Magar, Piuthan**

Bhim Bahadur Gharti Magar was in contact with his wife Gita for one month after he reached Moscow. Then for the last five months, nothing. A Pathao driver in Kathmandu, Bhim Bahadur was in a deep financial crisis and had tried to migrate unsuccessfully. When a local agent

**Roji Pun, Myagdi**

"I won't be online for the next three weeks," was the last message Roji Pun received from her husband in the Russian Army last June. Six months later, he was still out of touch. On 19 February, his colleague reported that he had been killed in action on the Ukraine front.

Roji's husband left in search for a better life not knowing the real conditions in

Russia, leaving behind two young children. He borrowed Rs800,000 to pay recruiters for the Russian job, and the family is now saddled in debt, unable to pay back the money.

"My four-year-old still tries to call his father on WhatsApp," says Roji who has been living in a hotel room in Kathmandu for two months, trying to pressure the government to at least help bring her husband's body back and claim the compensation promised by the Russians.



approached him about the Russian Army job that promised a handsome salary, he promptly applied. Gita now lives in a rented room in Kirtipur with her eight-year-old son. She has not been able to pay back the loan Bhim took to pay the recruiter.

"Every night, I wait for his calls but not knowing about how he is breaking me every day," she says.

# in distant war



Rabi Lawoti



Suman Rai

was wearing smart camouflage fatigues in Russia. Even better, the TikTok video said that after the war recruits could settle in Russia and live in Europe with their families.

Suman Rai now regrets posting those videos and misleading so many fellow Nepalis. He told us, "In those initial days in the training camp, it was fun, and posting on TikTok was part of the excitement. But reality set in as we got to know about the war and being forced to the frontlines."

Purna Bahadur Gurung was a bus driver in Dhading and found out that there were jobs for Nepalis in the Russian Army through TikTok. The videos promised a huge salary. He called the agent, paid the fee and flew off. His wife Lili heard from a Nepali that Gurung was killed in January.

"My husband died in someone else's war, a war that took everything from me," she says. "I hope the government will help bring his body back. I have nowhere to go, I have knocked on all doors."

TikTok and WhatsApp are also how anxious families of Nepalis still in Russia get updated about their wellbeing.

"We only share happy moments on TikTok," a Nepali soldier told us this week from the frontlines. "We do not want to worry our

families back in Nepal. But every moment here is filled with horror. We are just trying to stay alive."

The soldier's wife Simran Thapa has appealed for his safe return and has reached out to Foreign Minister Narayan Kaji Shrestha, saying "My husband is waiting for his return but he hasn't been able to."

As the pressure grows from families to bring their young men home, both Russia and Nepal have only hollow gestures. Finance Minister Barsaman Pun had a photo-op with Russian Ambassador Aleksei Novikov on Wednesday, who maintained that most Nepalis had gone to Russia voluntarily and did not want to return to Nepal.

Nepal does not have any kind of recruitment agreement with Russia like it does with India or UK, but for the moment unemployment and the desire to leave is making many Nepali men vulnerable to human traffickers.

Nepalis say they knew about the government's ban on travel to Russia, but admit it was their only choice. However, they say they were misled by recruiters about salaries, conditions and benefits, and had to pay hefty fees.

"My husband is a 48-year-old returnee from Afghanistan and he tried going elsewhere but nothing worked out. A ride-sharing job can only provide so much, especially when our child needs to be educated," says Gita Magar. "He had no choice but to give Russia a try"

Most families say that it is the government's responsibility to bring them home, as it couldn't give them a good life in Nepal.

Gita Magar often gets WhatsApp calls from her husband in the Russian Army, and he tells her not to worry.

Cradling her baby, she tells us, "My husband is ready for any punishment for the mistake he made joining the Russian Army, but now I just want him back home." ❗

*Some names have been changed.*



NEPALIS IN RUSSIAN ARMY

Watch Nepali families who have lost relatives in the Russia-Ukraine war and want their bodies brought back. Others have not heard from the soldiers, and are worried about them.



## Kin seek astrologers

■ Sujata Dhungana in Jhapa

As the afternoon sun blazed down one afternoon last week, neighbours gathered at the house of Raghu Nath Adhikari in Kapurthan village of Jhapa district in Nepal's southeastern plains.

Raghu Nath got off his bicycle, and joined the crowd at his house. Breathing heavily, he told his neighbours, "The astrologer said that nothing has happened and that we will receive news by next Saturday, but the person himself will not come back to us."

The well-wishers were crestfallen, not knowing what words they could offer the elderly man. Adhikari then quietly entered his house.

The day before, Nepal's Foreign Ministry had published the names of seven more Nepalis who had died fighting in the Russian Army on the Ukraine front. The fourth name on the list was: Ganga Ram Adhikari, Jhapa.

The name of Raghu Nath Adhikari's son in family circles is Gopal so family and neighbours of 33-year-old Ganga Ram are still hopeful that it is mistaken identity and he is still alive. Which is why his father went to see the astrologer with his son's horoscope.

This was not the first time the family has visited the astrologer. Ever since Ganga Ram left for Russia in October last year, they have taken his horoscope to the fortune teller and his answer had always been the same: "Don't worry, nothing has happened to your son."

Villagers had received word from fellow Nepalis in Russia on 26 January that Ganga Ram (seen at extreme left in photo, above) had been killed in action. But while Ganga Ram's wife Anuradha (pictured right, above) and mother Manmaya collapsed in tears, Raghu Nath refused to believe the news because two days earlier he had heard that his son had been injured.

Anuradha and Ganga Ram were high school sweethearts and got married in Grade 9. Anuradha dropped out after she got pregnant, but Ganga Ram completed school and went to Qatar as a migrant worker where he was recruited for the Russian Army.

Ganga Ram and Anuradha had spoken on the phone daily since he reached Russia, much like they did in the ten years he was in Qatar. But that stopped two months ago.

"I don't remember him ever missing our daily check-ins," says Anuradha, eyes red-rimmed from crying. "How can I believe that he is dead?"

Ganga Ram formally joined the Russian Army in November and underwent combat



training for the next two months. He spoke on the phone with his wife and family after completing training on 18 January, telling them that he would be in the battlefield and may not be in touch for months. "Don't worry about me," he told them, "I will call you when I get back."

Sleep was hard to come by for Ganga Ram's family that night, and they prayed to the gods for his safety. Anuradha has not let her cell phone out of her sight after that last conversation with him, hoping that her husband will call once again.

She tells neighbours, "I have heard that Ganga Ram is wounded in his arms and legs and is in hospital. But even so, he should remember me."

Family and neighbours have begun to come to terms with the fact that the Ganga Ram Adhikari on the government's list and their Gopal are one and the same person. Raghu Nath is still trying to gather evidence about whether or not it is his son's name on the list. "Maybe the old man had been trying to be strong and convince himself that his son was fine all this time," says Raghu Nath's neighbour Tika Maya Tawa. "The radio is always on at my house, but I have turned it off now because I cannot bear to hear news."

Ganga Ram's relatives know that his remains cannot be brought back, as has been the case with other Nepalis who died fighting for the Russians. They are hoping that the government officially releases his photo or the names of his parents, so that they can begin to perform his last rites.

"We have no hopes of the government bringing back his body, we just want confirmation that Gopal is the Ganga Ram Adhikari mentioned in the list," says a neighbour.

Raghu Nath has not been to the astrologer again since last week. Heartbroken, he seems finally to have accepted that his son is not coming home. ❗



### Maya BK, Pyuthan

Somesh BK, a migrant worker in Qatar pressured his wife to send him Rs500,000 to pay an agent to be enlisted in the Russian Army. Initially, Maya refused, but later put her jewelry among other precious items as collateral to take out a loan. In total, Somesh paid Rs750,000 to the recruiter as fee, visa and ticket. Somesh left for Russia from Dubai.

A month ago, one of his injured colleagues reached out to Maya and told her by phone that her husband had been killed in battle.

"I felt like I had fallen off a cliff, and even now we do not have his body," says Maya who is in Kathmandu to provide a DNA sample.



### Shobha Rai, Gorkha

A former Nepal Army soldier, Madan Kumal surprised his family when he suddenly posted a TikTok video of himself in Russian Army camo fatigues six months ago. He looked happy, but soon he was sent to the frontlines. He managed to escape by paying Rs300,000 to a recruiter, but was arrested by the police in Moscow and detained for 35 days.

"We were hopeful for his return but now we are worried that he will be sent back to the battlefield," says Shobha Rai, Madan's sister-in-law.



### Min Raj Dahal, Dhading

Min Raj was waiting to join his older brother in Russia who had been posting proud pictures from a Russian Army training camp. His brother was formerly with the Nepal Army and was working as a security guard in Dubai.

"I'm waiting for my turn to get killed, we were all lured here with false promises," his fearful brother tells him in WhatsApp calls. The local agent had told the brothers they were being recruited for a volunteer army. Min wants to take his brother's place and have him back home. But that is not an option.



### Jasodhan Rai, Morang

Jasodhan Rai is in Kathmandu to pressure the government to rescue his brother who enlisted for the Russian Army through an agent. "Deep financial crisis in the home was the reason," says Jasodhan, who is also a former migrant worker.

Jasodhan also wanted to join his brother when he saw TikTok posts and saw fancy photos of uniforms and guns. But once his brother was taken to the front, the family realised all was not well. His brother had gone missing for a month, is now in touch but wants to return.



# Denmark's best baker is a Nepali

This first episode of the new Nepali Times series 'Home Abroad' is of a famous Nepali baker in Copenhagen

■ Vishad Onta

This week, Sanjiv Giri came second as he defended his Best Baker in Denmark crown, which he won in 2022.

The Nepali also holds separate titles for the best baguette and the best cake in the Scandinavian country. This was no cake walk since the country that gave us the 'Danish' takes baking seriously.

Giri has baked his entire adult life, working at some of the best bakeries in Copenhagen as well as studying the craft in Paris. Just last month, he opened Maison d'Brød (House of Bread) in Charlottenlund in the greater Copenhagen area.

"I have always dreamed of running my own bakery," says Giri, 39, who works 18 hours a day starting at 2AM to prepare bread, croissants, baguettes, and pastries. Word of mouth helps, and there are customers galore.

Before starting out on his own, Giri was Head Baker at Andersen Bakery in Copenhagen, working 16 hours a day. By this point, he had already gained a lot of experience and individual accolades, and was looking for a new challenge.

It all started over 20 years ago in Kathmandu when Giri signed up for training at the Chef's Association of Nepal. Initially, he tried Indo-Chinese cuisine and even banquet catering, but liked neither. Once he started baking, the trajectory of his career, and life, changed.



Giri was also studying engineering at the time, but his heart was not in it. "I did poorly in my exams, so I decided that I would have to succeed in cooking as I couldn't fail in all areas of my

life," recalls Giri. It helped that his uncle was a chef and his family was supportive.

Giri then got into a 'Learn and Earn' program at Soaltee Crowne Plaza in Kathmandu, where he also



SANJIV GIRI

worked in the bakery department of Sky Chefs, preparing airline meals. He had access to a kitchen with cutting edge baking equipment.

He joined a group that went to Doha to work in baking, and in 2010 moved to Denmark with his wife, who was studying there. Jobs for formally untrained bakers were difficult and he had to contend with a part-time apprenticeship.

Giri finally enrolled in a baking course at the Zealand Business College in Denmark. He was able to sprint through the course in 18 months, and got the highest mark in all his papers. He was even awarded a silver medal from the Danish Queen at the city hall.

On the recommendation of Copenhagen's Baker's Guild and his college, Giri then got the A P Moller Foundation's 100,000 Danish kroner grant for young craftsmen,

the equivalent of Rs1.9 million.

"I considered going to the US, but I wanted to refine my baking even more," recalls Giri. So he continued his education by joining the Advanced Boulangerie course at the Le Cordon Bleu in Paris, which is among the best cooking schools in the world.

This coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic which allowed him to focus on his studies. Before long he had mastered making baguettes and croissants.

Giri credits his discipline, curiosity, and passion to his success. It takes long work hours, and relationships suffer too.

"From 2010-2017, I did not have a social life, and I never get to spend a lot of time with my kids," he adds.

Ideas for new recipes come to Giri at various locations. It usually takes a lot of trial and error to create a successful new product. His pumpkin-cake filled croissant was an instant hit among customers. His mousse cake that combines apple, creme fraiche and the Japanese citrus fruit yuzu, won him a competition for the best cake in Denmark in 2022. In 2021, he won another competition for the best baguette in the country.

After years of carving a name for himself in Denmark, Giri wants to open a baking school in Nepal and pass on his skills to a new generation of bakers back home.

It may not be long before we have a Maison d'Brød in Kathmandu. 🇳🇵

**TOYOTA**  
**WOMENS' RALLY**  
20th April '24

₹ Rs 3,000 Per Team

**REGISTRATION OPEN**

WE ARE OPEN TO ALL VEHICLE BRAND

**For winner**



CASH PRIZE



TROPHY



GIFT HAMPERS

9843295190

