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ON THE LOOKOUT:
A day labourer waiting to be hired at Chakrapath Labour Chok in Kathmandu this week.

GOPEN RAI

People's movement

■ Ramesh Kumar

Malaysia is slashing foreign worker intake from end-May, conflicts in West Asia risk engulfing the region, and fortress Europe is building higher walls for migrants.

All this means that Nepal's economy, almost completely dependent on money its workers send home, is as fragile as a house built on sand.

Malaysia has capped foreign workers to only 15% of its 17 million strong workforce. The restrictions do not apply to security guards, most of whom are Nepalis.

Malaysia's visa curb is related to domestic unemployment as well as an EU decision to phase out import of palm oil as a renewable biofuel because of rainforest destruction.

There are up to 500,000 Nepali workers in Malaysia. Of the 771,000 Nepalis who got labour permits last year, 259,000 went to Malaysia.

"The fact that a major labour

destination country is cutting back is not good news," says migration expert Ganesh Gurung. "It will seriously impact on remittance and the economy. And the government does not seem to have any concrete plans to deal with this issue."

Rajendra Bhandari of the Nepal Association of Foreign Employment Agencies (NAFEA) says labour demand from the Gulf is also decreasing, and this could prompt more Nepalis to go abroad illegally and end up doing dangerous work. Case in point being Nepalis fighting in the Russian Army.

Even as Foreign Minister Narayan Kaji Shrestha is demanding that Russia send back Nepali soldiers, Labour Minister Dol Prasad Aryal reopened work permits for Russia on Wednesday.

Ganesh Gurung says that even though Malaysia's decision might seem abrupt, such overwhelming dependence on remittances has always been risky. Remittances make up an equivalent of 25% of

Nepal's GDP – one of the highest ratios in the world.

There are an estimated 2 million Nepalis in the Persian Gulf region, and a change in policy or a regionwide conflict could jeopardise their jobs and in turn impact on the national economy.

"This reliance on foreign employment has meant that Nepal's rulers have not had to create jobs domestically," says Gurung.

Nepalis are increasingly looking to work in Europe despite restrictions. Croatia was a springboard for Nepalis seeking to go to Western Europe, but it joined the Schengen area last year. There are an estimated 15,000 Nepalis in Romania, and more hope

to make it there before the country also joins Schengen on 31 March.

The hurdles for migrants are not just from Schengen states in Europe, but also from the Nepal government which requires workers to present demand letters verified by a Nepal embassy to obtain exit permits. But most European countries do not have resident embassies.

"If the demand letters could be verified in Nepal itself, it would open the door for a lot of Nepali

workers to go to Europe," says Bhandari of NAFEA, adding that although the Labour Ministry is open to the idea, the Foreign Ministry is not.

Unlike migrant workers who go to other Asian countries to earn money, send remittance back home, and eventually return, Gurung says, most Nepalis who go to Europe more often than not settle there.

Overseas migration has been seen as a safety valve for Nepalis, but as our special report on page 10-11 shows, there are many thousands of domestic migrant workers at construction sites all over Kathmandu. Ensuring a decent wage, insurance, and labour rights protection for them would open up more meaningful employment within Nepal in semi-skilled jobs, many of which are going over to migrants from India.

Says Gurung: "Continuing to depend on other countries to give Nepalis jobs, instead of providing jobs in Nepal for Nepalis, will mean trouble for us down the line."

Who builds Kathmandu?
PAGE 10-11



20th

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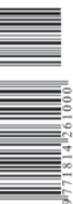
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Homecoming

In the past year, about 260,000 Nepali workers flocked to Malaysia to work in factories, service stations, and palm and rubber plantations. A similar number were preparing to go in the coming 12 months.

But the Malaysian government has abruptly capped the proportion of foreign workers in its labour force to 15%, and will stop issuing worker visas after May.

Making up more than one-third of all departures last year, Malaysia is the top overseas labour destination for Nepalis. An estimated 500,000 are working there (page 1). Now, many Nepalis may choose to overstay, and join the ranks of their undocumented compatriots.

The reliance of Nepal's economy on remittances is precarious. West Asia has nearly 2 million Nepali workers, and is chronically gripped by regional tension. A populist anti-migrant wave is sweeping Europe. Donald Trump has vowed to deport illegal immigrants if re-elected.

How will Nepal accommodate a future surge of returnees? The National Planning Commission, the Labour Ministry and other branches of government

must start preparing for this contingency, if they have not already. Maybe, just maybe, they could turn a potential disaster into a dividend.

Short, medium and long-term strategies need to be in place to make the best of returning migrants. Most immediately, returnees from Malaysia and those affected by its visa curb need to be accommodated before they start knocking on the doors of recruiters for jobs in the Gulf or Europe.

The homecoming of semi-skilled Nepalis with overseas exposure can be turned into a national asset. Many returnees have worked in modern agriculture and factories. They have picked up and honed new skills at construction sites, and they have excelled in the service industry.

Many will be returning with hard-earned savings and dreams of running their own enterprises. Local governments must provide them support to re-assimilate, encourage their entrepreneurial spirit, and identify outlets for their skills and investment.

When the subject of migration and remittance comes up, Nepali politicians and media tend to forget that there are 2.5 million Nepali workers in India. Most are seasonal migrants who cannot even afford recruitment fees to 'manpower' agencies.

And as we saw during the Covid lockdowns, hundreds of thousands of Nepalis were sent back from India under dire circumstances, harassed and stigmatised on

both sides of the border. Nepalis in India may not remit as much money as from elsewhere, but they constitute the largest population of Nepali migrants abroad.

As our Special Report on page 10-11 shows, construction jobs in Kathmandu and other cities are increasingly filled by domestic migrants from the mountain districts. Interestingly, many semi-skilled jobs in construction in Kathmandu Valley are taken up by Indian migrant workers. Nepal, in fact, is the seventh-largest source of remittance for the Indian economy.

That statistic alone proves that there is work for Nepalis in Nepal itself. If the economy picked up, if Nepalis got more meaningful wages, if labour rights were protected, if they got help to start up businesses, many would prefer to stay in Nepal.

That is a lot of if's, for sure. But it is possible with the right policies and the political will to implement them.

Last week in this paper we published an investigation into Nepali recruits into the Russian Army. At least 39 Nepali soldiers of

the estimated 2,000 who enlisted have been killed in action on the Ukraine front. Families in Nepal are demanding the return of their bodies. After loopholes in migration routes were uncovered last year, the government

banned work permits for Russia.

Inexplicably, on Wednesday the Ministry of Labour re-opened labour permits for Russia knowing fully well that many will end up enlisting into the military again. Labour Minister Dol Prasad Aryal, who

already has a conflict of interest because of his involvement in recruitment and remittance agencies, has to explain why his office has allowed this at a time when his cabinet colleague Foreign Minister Narayan Kaji Shrestha is demanding that Russia send Nepali soldiers home.

Successive governments in Nepal have treated foreign employment as a safety valve, and a cover for their failure to kickstart the economy. Worse, many politicians and bureaucrats are in cahoots with recruiters and profit from the blood, sweat and tears of desperate Nepalis.

A Marshall Plan for investment in infrastructure would be the most effective long term strategy. It would produce jobs during their construction, and generate more multiplier employment downstream as connectivity, a revived agro-economy and cheap surplus energy revs up the economy.

Sonia Awale



BIBEK MISHRA / RSS

Nepal has to plan for the day when more migrant workers start coming back, so they can contribute to the economy.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Battle of Beni

On 20 March 2004, Nepalis woke up to the news of one of the biggest and bloodiest battles in the Maoist conflict till then. The night before, a 5,000-strong guerrilla force attacked government and military targets starting 10:30PM in a battle that lasted all night long and left 140 dead.

The Maoists also abducted CDO Sagar Mani Parajuli, DSP Rana Bahadur Gautam and other 40 security personnel, bargaining for the release of their commanders including Netra Bikram Chand, and Nanda Bahadur Pun who went on to become Vice President. Excerpts of the report by Thomas Bell published 20 years ago this week on issue #189 26 March - 1 April 2004:

It is the morning after in Beni and a scene of utter devastation. The police station is a blackened wreck. The barbed wire had been clipped away and the perimeter wall blasted open at several points. Sandbags at the sentry posts are torn to shreds. Near the army base, a woman is washing the bloodstain from the steps outside her shop, while her daughter looks on.

Police and soldiers fought all night until six the next



morning against thousands of Maoists, until their ammunition ran out. Those who survived either fled, or were taken prisoner. Down the road, the soldiers at the army base kept fighting till daylight and most of their casualties took place in the morning.

Next door, the CDO building has been reduced to rubble, and is still smouldering. People pick their way around in silence, their faces covered, glancing at the grotesquely disfigured Maoist corpses that lie strewn about.

Some 25 mortar rounds and a rocket landed here, fired from the mountains above. Whoever decided to put the district headquarters here at the confluence of the Kali Gandaki and Myagdi wasn't thinking of security.

"They came in waves, like the sea, one after another, one after another," said Lt Col Raghu Nepali, looking exhausted after two nights without sleep. "There were more women than men. And many, many child soldiers, below 14. I saw them while I was shooting back."

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

ONLINE PACKAGES



Patan Museum is more than just the most popular of Kathmandu's destinations for visitors, it also serves an educational function for students. The carefully curated bronze, stone and wooden figures span Nepal's religious faiths, historical periods and geographical zones, providing a striking experience of exploration and learning. Watch the video on our YouTube channel and read the story on page 6-7.



Not all of Nepal's migrant workers go abroad, many are day labourers on construction sites in Kathmandu. The foundation of Kathmandu sits atop the blood, sweat and tears of these workers but they have no benefits, no insurance and have to make a living from one day to the next. Watch the video and subscribe to our YouTube channel for more original multimedia content. Story on page 10-11.

ADULT EDUCATION

The narratives of these extraordinary women resonate deeply ('Age no bar to go to school', Sahina Shrestha, #1204). Their stories are not just about education, they are about resilience, determination, and the unwavering pursuit of dreams. Their courage to defy societal norms and pursue education at an age when many would hesitate is both remarkable and commendable.

Rak Hee

■ What a profound image of lifelong learning and its ripple effect on younger generations. Witnessing grandparents in school underscores the value of education at any age, leaving an indelible mark on children about the significance and respect it deserves. This not only enriches the lives of the elderly but also instills a sense of responsibility towards education in children.

Ashutosh Mani Dixit

■ How lovely and inspiring whenever we see this happen, whichever the country, the dream and determination of people is the same.

Kusum Athukorala

CORRUPTION

No one knows when the heads of those identified for their involvement in corruption will be rolling ('Heads Roll', #1204).

Binod Sijapati

■ Nepal's political leaders have so much freedom that everyone else is held in captivity ('Nepal's corruption carousel', Editorial, #1204). Is this another form of tyranny being introduced to us? If those held responsible are busy playing political games with one another, how we expect any development in this country?

Suniva Hada

NEPALIS IN RUSSIA

We owe the situation some candour - they don't look like men who have been deceived ('Nepalis play Russian roulette in distant war', Shankar Dahal, #1204). Nor are they so naive as to have no inclination as to what has been happening between Russia and Ukraine.

Tony Jones

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING

Denmark's best baker is a Nepali

by Vishad Onta

The first instalment of Nepali Times' new series Home Abroad tells the story of Copenhagen-based Nepali baker Sanjiv Giri. After years of carving a name for himself in Denmark, Giri now wants to open a baking school in Nepal to help a new generation of Nepali bakers. Visit nepalitimes.com for the full story.

f Most reached and shared on Facebook



Unholy developments at holy sites

by Alisha Sijapati

While it is difficult to be struck off the List of World Heritage, UNESCO can put some landmarks in the list. The spotlight is now on Lumbini and Pashupati because of recent corruption and commerce. Follow us for the latest updates.

X Most popular on X

Age no bar to go to school

by Sahina Shrestha

Even as female literacy rates have improved, education has not always been accessible to girls in Nepal. But now, older women in Nepal who were denied education when young are enrolling in school. Read the story and watch the video on our website.

66 77 Most commented



Nepalis play Russian roulette

by Shankar Dahal

Nepalis in the Russian military tell harrowing tales of combat on the Ukrainian front. Those caught deserting are tortured and sometimes shot. And as more Nepalis are killed in action, returnees and families express outrage at traffickers and the government. Join the discussion online.

🔥 Most visited online page

QUOTES



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Nepal's economy is suffering a form of 'Dutch Disease' where high income from one source paradoxically keeps other sectors of the economy down.



ART @AmulyaSir

the doctors the lawyers and the lawmakers are at fault for closing this loophole for big bad fishes of nepal



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

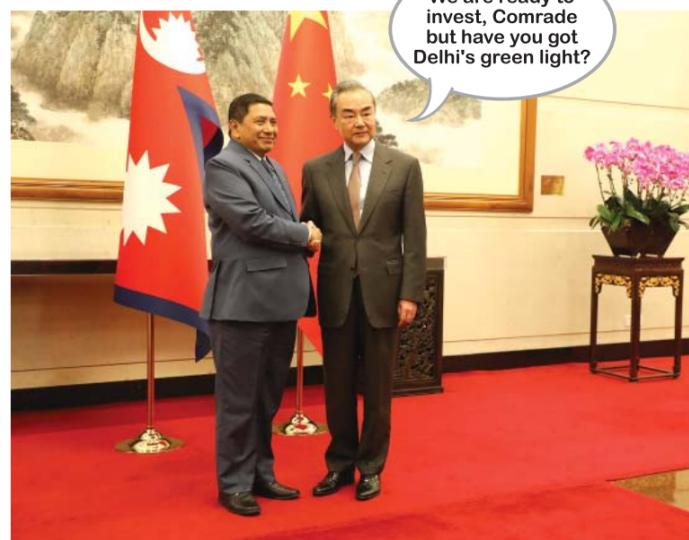
Nepal is not poor, it is just poorly governed. At no time has this been more true than today.



Binod Pradhan @BinodPradhan2

There are lots of investment opportunities in Nepal itself. First of all Government shud protect Nepalese industry and promote it. Ban foreign products which Nepal could do.

1,000 WORDS



RSS

BHAI-BHAI: Foreign Minister Naryan Kaji Shrestha met his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi in Beijing on Tuesday and discussed expediting infrastructure projects with Chinese investment in Nepal, Pokhara airport debt, as well as future aid.



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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@nepalitimes.com | www.nepalitimes.com | www.himalmedia.com | Tel: +977 1 5005601-08 Fax: +977 1 5005518



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Trials and tribulations

Nepal must bring technology, critical thought and best practice to restore public faith in its judiciary

■ Aastha Dahal

The waning faith of the public in Nepal's courtrooms and (in)justice delivered should invoke a debate in the legislature about what the philosophy of our legal system should be.

When foreigners ask what legal system Nepal follows, we lawyers stumble and repeat what we were taught in law school: 'It is mixed with influences from the common legal system, civil legal system and Hindu legal system.'

Nepal was never colonised, so we have neither fully embraced the civil legal system from continental Europe, nor common law from Britain. Until 1990, the legal process resonated more with civil law traditions, switching abruptly to common law. There has not been much legislative discourse on why we had that change of heart.

Take a criminal trial as an example. The basic premise of the adversarial format is that judges sit as neutral umpires. They use the arguments, facts and evidence of defense lawyers and prosecutors to reach a decision and ruling.

Compare this to a judge in a civil law/inquisitorial tradition. The judge is an active member of the trial process who participates in fact-finding public inquiry by questioning defence lawyers, prosecutors, and witnesses. They can even order evidence to be examined if the presentation is inadequate.

In Nepal's criminal cases, the judge is neutral so the police and prosecutors are charged with gathering evidence. The law states that the prosecutor should supervise the police as they investigate a case to ensure the police use only legal methods to obtain information.

However, in reality the police and prosecutors are too busy to



BHANU BHATTARAI / NEPALI TIMES ARCHIVE

coordinate with one another. They also tend to dislike each other. In most cases police investigation reports are copied in whole by the prosecutor who adds a few short paragraphs at the end. And that constitutes the charge sheet.

When Nepal's legal system was more inquisitorial before 1992, our trial procedure was governed by the 1961 Government Cases Act. Prosecutors who served under this law speak fondly about their partnership with the police.

I have spoken to prosecutors who recall walking together with the police across the rural mountains to examine crime scenes.

Together they would examine bodies and draw up reports. They never forgot the smell of death.

This practice was abruptly brought to a halt when the Government Cases Act 1992 repealed the 1961 law. The new law was predicated on adversarial practice. The police did the field investigation, prosecutors now sat in their offices and gave directives to the investigation team. The shift in power dynamics did not sit well with the police, and their relationship became frosty.

What this means for a criminal case is that evidence is not verified for its thoroughness during

investigation. The disintegration of the process continues into the courts. One of the primary methods of obtaining evidence in a criminal case within courtrooms is through witness accounts. According to Nepali law, witness answers must be verified by the opposing lawyers through cross-examination, and through the presiding judge.

Alas, procedure is often completely subverted. The 2017 Muluki Criminal Procedure Code states all witnesses who testify in court must be examined in front of a judge. This provision sought to rectify the longstanding practice in Nepali criminal trials whereby the judge is mostly absent from witness examinations unless it involves the rich and powerful.

In practice, witness examinations are conducted by the courts' administrative staff. We are not taught how to conduct witness exams in law school or in any legal professional training. So witness exam, which tends to be critical to a criminal trial, is just a formality.

This is evident when the court administrator snipes at us to finish questioning, prevents us from introducing all listed witnesses, and summarises what our witnesses say in their own often truncated language as opposed to verbatim. The judges have the power to question and verify statements but this is impossible when they are absent from the proceedings.

In our 'mixed' legal system I've understood judges to have a varied perspective on their roles in the criminal trial. Many perceive themselves as neutral umpires envisioned in the common law adversarial system. Yet, some of their conduct says otherwise.

For example, every day after 2PM in the District Courts, suspects arrested by police are brought before a judge to obtain permission to keep the suspect in detention as their case is being investigated.

Nepal's Constitution mandates

that these suspects should have their lawyers accompanying them. The judge has a role to ensure this. But no lawyers are present in most of these proceedings. The judge asks the suspect whether they committed the crime, and how many kilos of drugs they carried—an action not permitted by the adversarial common law philosophy of practice.

If the leaning is towards the inquisitorial system and we argue that judges can be proactive then we do not have a system built for this either. Judges get cases they are to hear about an hour before the proceedings begin. They do not preside over evidence taking events such as witness examinations so they are realistically unable to control any part of the investigation or evidence gathering.

The legislator's role has to start from drawing out the philosophical basis of our legal system.

Lawmakers need to seriously consider whether it suffices to leave investigations to the police alone, or we need all parties like the prosecutors and judges taking on active roles in the investigative and trial processes. The fundamental consideration should be based on a practice that will increase the likelihood of getting to the truth and contribute to restoring public faith in our judiciary.

The legislature of course need not be confined by influences of any one colonial legal system. Like the International Criminal Court, it can draw lessons from major legal systems across the world, and combine it with local experience to formulate a legal system and trial practice uniquely suited to Nepal.

The opportunity to bring technology, critical thought and best practice to reform trials in Nepal is urgently needed. 🇳🇵

Aastha Dahal is a Kathmandu-based lawyer with a PhD in criminology from the University of Cambridge.

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Ncell Early Warning

Ncell has been cited by the government for its contribution to the Early Warning System that sends text alerts about floods, rainfall, landslides, and forest fires. Ncell works with the Department of Hydrology and Meteorology to make this possible and has sent over 9 million text warnings since 2016, saving lives in the process.



A Level results

Cambridge and the British Council announced Outstanding Learner Awards for 43 students with exceptional academic performance in exams held in November 2022 and June 2023. The awards were High achievement, top in country, and best all-round and winners are from schools in Kathmandu and Pokhara. Some students were top in the country in as many as three subjects.

Global IME EV loan

Global IME bank is offering loans at lower and stable interest rates to EV customers as an incentive for Nepal's energy transition. A loan for under 5 years would be at 9.49% interest rate and for longer periods at 9.99%. Global



IME also started a nationwide financial literacy campaign in 111 locations with more than 14,000 participants including farmers, small to medium business owners, migrant workers, and remittance recipients.

Pepsodent Oral Health



As a part of World Oral Health Day, Pepsodent conducted educational campaigns and free dental screenings, and distributed samples of its toothpaste. The programs were held in Kathmandu Valley to increase dental knowledge and brand awareness.



Sustainable Unilever

The Nepal Unilever factory in Hetauda has abandoned fossil fuels, and started using an electric boiler for steam generation and heating in a move towards sustainable energy. Currently the factory uses 90% through solar and hydro energy, and there are plans to convert its generators to biodiesel.

Everest money matters

Everest Bank carried out economic awareness initiatives across Nepal as part of Global Money Week with the slogan 'Protect your money, secure your future'. The Bank educated 3,000 students about the importance of financial discipline and online banking.



BYD EVs

BYD manufactured its 7 millionth electric vehicle, becoming the first electric car company to do so with a Denza N7 made at BYD's Jinan factory in China. The



company has been improving manufacturing efficiency and plans to expand with assembly plants in Thailand, Brazil, Uzbekistan, and Hungary.



Nabil financial literacy

Nabil Bank also conducted a countrywide financial literacy campaign as a part of Global Money Week in all 7 provinces and 1,900 participants learning about budgeting, investments and digital financial literacy. The program in Pokhara incorporated an art competition for 10th and 11th graders.

Ending TB is possible, and cost-effective

But not unless Nepal is serious about treating latent and active cases in tandem



PHOTOS: BNMT



■ Sonia Awale

One in every three Nepali carries the tuberculosis bacillus. There may be no active symptoms, but they can at any point progress into a full blown infection.

TB kills up to 47 Nepalis daily. If so many people died every day in road traffic accidents, it would make headlines every day. But they do not because tuberculosis afflicts the poorest people in the poorest parts of Nepal.

The annual 17,000 fatalities from tuberculosis in Nepal are preventable with cost-effective treatment. A new pilot study in Chitwan and Piuthan in the past two years showed that of the 1,173 people given a Tuberculin Skin Test (Mantoux Test), 1,127 were positive. Following a Mantoux test and chest x-ray, 509 were diagnosed with latent TB of whom 95% were willing to take preventive therapy.

Researchers were pleasantly surprised. As in other countries in the region, they were expecting very few to agree to take preventive therapy medicines because they did not have TB symptoms, so a 95% agreeing to the treatment was exceptionally high.

“People in Chitwan and Piuthan who participated in the study were not sick, they were just carrying the TB bacteria, but they agreed to take the preventive drugs because they have all known of relatives who had died of TB,” explains Buddha Basnyat, a physician who advised the Birat Nepal Medical Trust (BNMT) that conducted the research.

BNMT is now extending the study to Nawalparasi and Rupandehi with the National Tuberculosis Control Centre. Latent TB is more prevalent in the Tarai districts because of their higher population density.

With Nepal suffering such an enormous disease burden from tuberculosis, one would have thought World TB Day on Sunday 25 March would have got more attention. But it was overshadowed by Holi celebrations. It would have been interesting to see how many in the crowds attending the concert at Darbar Marg would test positive.

Scientists worry that the World Health Organisation’s END TB strategy of reducing global tuberculosis incidence by 90% and deaths by 95% in the next ten

years is too ambitious unless latent tuberculosis cases are also treated.

What makes this failure all the more tragic is that tuberculosis is a completely preventable and treatable infection. Every \$1 invested in TB gives a \$39 return, yet there is little investment and advocacy to combat this biblical illness.

South Asia accounts for some 40% of all TB cases and 38% of all TB deaths — most of them occurring in the thickly-populated states across the Nepal border in India. The region also has a high burden of multi-drug resistant TB, one-third of global cases.

In the past, Directly Observed Therapy Short Course (DOTS) drug therapy in which patients were administered medicines at health posts was considered a cure-all for tuberculosis. Nepal had a high success rate for DOTS, but there were loopholes in the program: latent cases remained hidden and only the cases that came to the health system were treated.

DOTS also added to the pre-existing stigma that patients travelling to the health posts would be identified as having tuberculosis. In one instance, a patient in Bardia chose to take a dangerous tiger-infested jungle route to reach the health post.

Meanwhile, BNMT had been setting up a strong community network of health volunteers, and was tracking active TB cases. Unlike DOTS, it involved meeting family and friends of patients, allowing more case detection and treatment. Even so, they were not looking for latent infections.

Latent cases can progress to active tuberculosis especially when a patient’s immune system is weak because of malnutrition, illnesses like HIV, or age. In fact, half of TB worldwide can be attributed to undernourishment.

Latent TB can be confirmed in two simple steps: a Mantoux test with an above 10 score and a clear chest x-ray. If positive, the patient is given the 3HP preventive therapy — a once-weekly treatment with isoniazid-rifampentine for 12 weeks. This treatment can prevent reinfection for as long as six years, and is not to be confused with the one for active cases which requires daily treatment for six months.

“On an individual level, you can still get reinfected if you are living in a house with active cases. But if you treat the community

at large with preventive therapy, you drive down the prevalence of TB and in turn, people won’t get reinfected,” explains Maxine Caws of BNMT. “If we can use preventive therapy to push down the reservoirs of infection then we extend the amount of time people are protected as is the case in Europe for example where people don’t get TB anymore because they are not exposed to the bacteria at all. We have to eradicate

that reservoir.”

The traditional BCG vaccine given within 28 days of birth is effective against childhood tuberculous meningitis and miliary disease, but does not prevent TB in adults. Efforts are underway to develop a new effective vaccine but there are many challenges.

TB vaccine development is difficult because exposure to the tuberculosis bacillus does not seem to induce sufficient protective immunity. A new viable vaccine could take a decade, but in that time 13 million more people would die.

“We cannot wait and do nothing until a new effective vaccine is developed. Preventive therapy is a vaccine until we have one,” adds Basnyat. Indeed, the 3HP preventive therapy

after diagnosis costs only \$5 per regimen. So, Nepal’s strategy should be a simultaneous focus on 3HP preventive therapy and case finding.

The problem has been a lack of priority for preventive therapy at national and international levels because it does not involve costly research and interventions, and the patients are poor.

Explains Caws: “On paper, we have very strong policies but the commitment in terms of funding from the governments has not materialised, essentially because it is not affecting the rich unlike with Covid when we threw everything at it to have a vaccine developed in a year.”

TB’s main problem, unlike Covid and HIV/AIDS, is that it is a disease of the poor. 🇳🇵

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■ Prakriti Kandel

The intricate lattice window on the western facade of the palace must have been through which Malla kings of Patan looked down at the square below.

Today, visitors to Patan Museum can sit at the exact corner and see the same square which, several centuries later, remains largely unchanged. Except for the tourists and cotton candy sellers in front of Krishna Mandir.

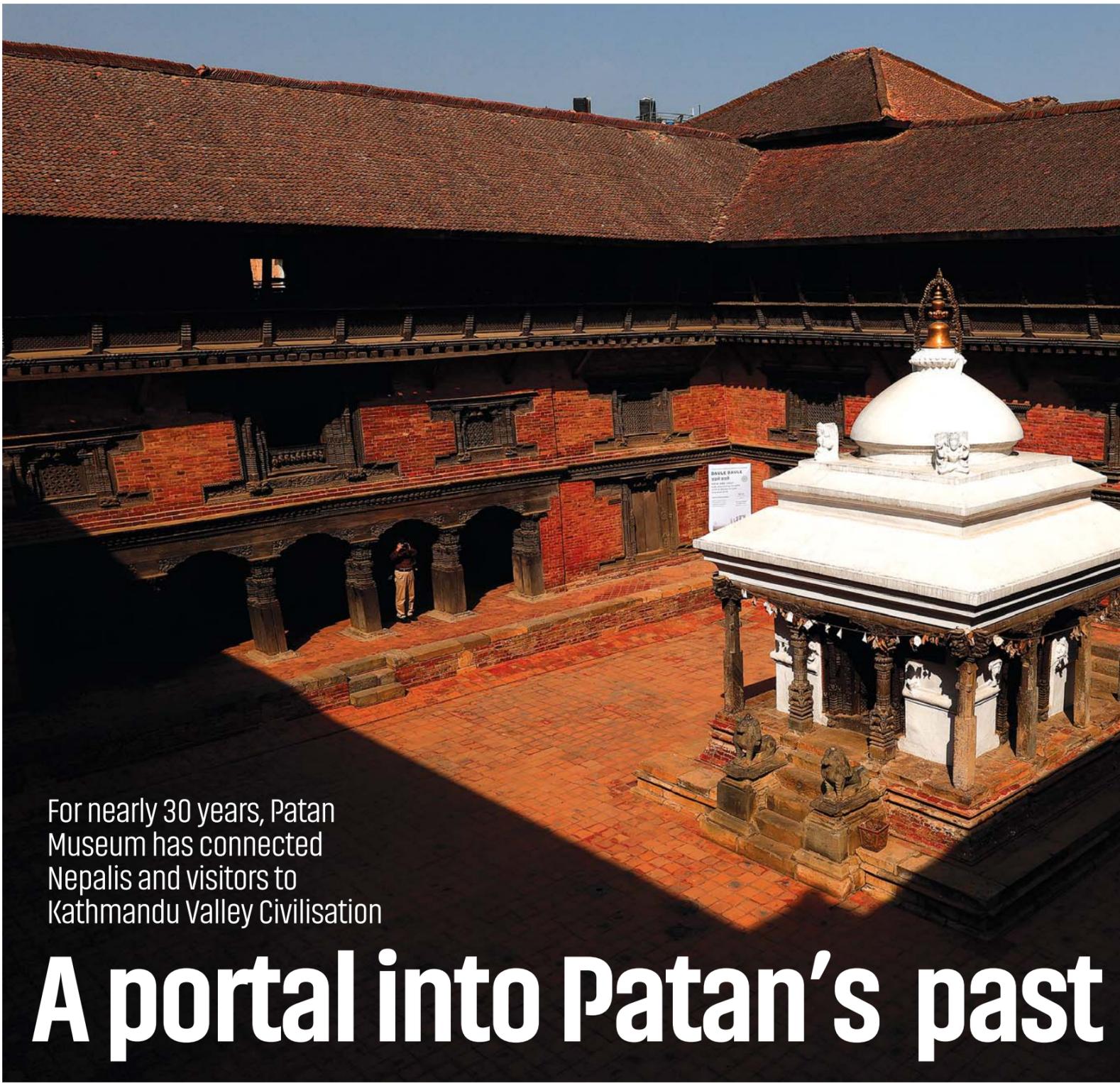
Inside is the best designed museum in Nepal, the work of Götz Hagsmüller, who died in February after living in Bhaktapur for the past 40 years. Hagsmüller and his team did not just restore the palace, but also designed the museum interior, and curated the exhibits.

Most importantly, the team ensured that the museum would have an independent board to use revenue from fees and events for its upkeep. This has given the museum a rare longevity for an institution in Nepal.

As a result, more than just being the most popular destination for visitors, the museum serves an educational function for Nepali students, supplementing what they learn in social studies and history classes in school.

The carefully curated bronze, stone and wooden figures span Nepal's religious faiths, historical periods and geographical zones, providing a striking experience of exploration and learning.

Hagsmüller led the restoration project of the Keshav Narayan Chok and the dilapidated palace structure, preserving the traditional architecture of the palace while modernising it to suit modern museum necessities.



For nearly 30 years, Patan Museum has connected Nepalis and visitors to Kathmandu Valley Civilisation

A portal into Patan's past

At a time when technology has taken over, and patience to learn by real experiences has decreased, Patan Museum is a space for young students and visitors to relive Nepal's glorious past and its culture, and observe the intricate craftsmanship of our forebears.

"Patan Museum is a place of learning regarding two major aspects: heritage and art,

specifically relating to Hinduism and Buddhism," explains the museum's Suresh Man Lakhe. "Students may learn about Buddha's life in their textbooks, but the museum supplements that learning by letting them visualise his legacy."

Only 200 of the museum's expansive collection of 1,100 objects are currently on view, and

they are spread across eight themed galleries. Images range from major gods of the Hindu pantheon such as Vishnu, Shiva and Ganesh to benign or fierce representations of Bodhisattvas.

The section on Buddhist chaityas has clear explanatory notes about the significance of their design. No student will look at Swayambhu or Boudha the same

way after learning why the spire and cupola are built the way they are.

All the exhibits have bilingual captions with comprehensive backgrounds about the myths and symbols present in the art pieces and their approximate age.

The composition, medium, symbols, and expressions of bronze gilt copper repoussé are explained in detail, including the craftsmanship



The Tharu

Multimedia exhibition of Nepal's indigenous people told through their own voice

Patan Museum is a repository of Kathmandu Valley heritage, but in its gallery wing is a temporary multimedia exhibition devoted to the indigenous Tharu people of Nepal's southern plains.

As the largest ethnic group in the Tarai, and because of their connection to US-funded malaria eradication in the 1960s, trans-migration of mountain dwellers to their forests in the Rapti Valley, as well as the Maoist conflict, the impact on the Tharu has been extensively analysed.

But most of this research has come from non-Tharu academics. Now, the exhibition Daule Daule aims to highlight the history, culture and inter-generational knowledge and skills of the Tharu people by the Tharu themselves.

"Exhibitions about the Tharu community were mostly from other people and sometimes they gave wrong information,"



and present

ALL PHOTOS: SUMAN NEPALI



HOSTING THE DIETIES: The Dipankara Buddha and Uma-Maheswar (below) are among the 200 of 1,100 objects currently on view at Patan Museum.



lectures.”

Museum staff are planning interactive worksheets as learning devices with colourful and interactive cards called ‘Let’s Discover Patan Darbar’ that allow students to navigate the historic square.

Lakhe says the museum can expand its instructional function with a separate education department. “With additional resources devoted to education, we can focus on creating much more learning opportunities for students,” he adds.

There is a story behind every exhibit at the Museum. Gallery B, for example, hosts a 12th century limestone sculpture of Uma-Maheswar depicting Shiva’s divine family on Mount Kailash (pictured, below left). This statue was stolen in 1982, and then returned by a museum in Berlin in 1990.

Another piece shows Vishnu carried by the Sunbird, a copper alloy sculpture dating back to the 17th century, adorned with metallic Garuda wings. Students can learn in detail the process of creating a repoussé mask, from an initial pencil design to the feeling of the hammer hitting the bronze sheet.

Patan Museum provides an open-air experience, it is not limited to a building, but has access to multiple courtyards including the Mul Chok and Sundari Chok with the exquisite Tusha Hiti step well, and the Bhandarkhal Tank.

One of the treasures of the museum is the sunken water source of Tusha Hiti where King Siddhi Narsingh Malla used to pray and meditate in the 1640s overlooking a gilded copper spout depicting a Garuda and Laxmi Narayan, and embellished by over 50 carved stone deities in thrones of carved foliage.

Visitors can retrace the steps of past royals and their courts, treading the same stone steps that have been polished by the passage of feet and time. 🇳🇵



Patan Museum is more than just the most popular of Kathmandu’s destinations for visitors, it also serves an educational function for students. The carefully curated bronze, stone and wooden figures span Nepal’s religious faiths, historical periods and geographical zones, providing a striking experience of exploration and learning.

of the lost wax process.

Gallery B has explanations of Ganesh in a military avatar, ablaze with a flaming backdrop, and another of the elephantine god with six heads and six arms. He rests on snakes in one sculpture and is part of an oil lamp in another. There are nuanced variations in the depiction of Ganesh’s eyes and trunks in each of the objects.

“Patan Museum, and indeed the whole Darbar Square, is a living heritage where our students learn history through the architecture, art, culture, festivals,” says Rekha Pandey, a social studies teacher and educator at Rato Bangala Foundation. “It is ideal learning as the museum exhibits provide a multi-sensory experience that cannot be found in textbooks or

u story by the Tharu



says Birendra Mahato, one of the curators. “We thought it was important to tell our stories on our own.”

The exhibition starts with a section dedicated to the Tharu women because it is the women who carry forward the culture. Says another curator Lavkant Chaudhary: “When you enter a Tharu village, women are the first people you see and even inside the house from cooking to medicine, they are the

ones who have the responsibility.”

Indeed, the very first photograph by Vivek Chaudhary is of Tharu women walking on a foggy morning in Dang with firewood balanced on their heads. Other images play with the same theme: women carrying a water pitcher, grass, baskets.

Tharu women are perceived to be freer and more empowered because they do not face gender restrictions prevalent among

Nepal’s other ethnic groups. Researchers have even called Tharu society matriarchal.

Indu Tharu in her note accompanying the photographs begs to disagree. She writes that Tharu women are not so much free as ‘persistent’. Women still need a husband’s permission to decide matters, and the Tharu are not matriarchal unless matriarchy means ‘leaving parents’ house and staying at the husband’s house after marriage ... or giving birth to as many babies as the family wishes ... or until a son is born’.

Tharu women are often photographed in full traditional regalia of ornaments. But the exhibition has pictures of Tharu women working at home, in fields and participating in political movements from the abolishment of the Kamaiya and Kamlari system to the Tharuhat movement, showing their resistance.

In the corner of the exhibition hangs a painting of a Tharu woman, Parbati Chaudhary, with her baby on her back. During the Tikapur riots, Parbati’s husband, who has a disability, was also apprehended by the police. Parbati then joined the movement carrying her baby with her. The photos from the movements and the painting serve as a reminder of the historical injustices at the hands of the state.

Tharu women are now venturing into fields that were once male-dominated. There are photos of female mahouts bathing elephants, showing the continuity of the human-animal relationship that the Tharus traditionally practiced.

Also included in the exhibition are photos of body art that adorns the back, hands and legs of the Tharu women. In the community, tattooing is a skill passed to daughters by their mothers and is not only an artform but is also used as therapy, the belief that it eases pain.

“Tattoos are not only an important way of sharing inter-generational knowledge, but there is also a belief that when one dies, the tattoo travels into the afterlife,” explains Lavkant Chaudhary.

One wall of the gallery is festooned with fishing nets and tools, providing a glimpse of the Tharu lifestyle in forests, grasslands and rivers. With changing times, traditional Tharu fishing areas are protected, threatening a way of life and the skills and knowledge amassed through generations.

Most of Tharu activities are collective, and are sustainable. They do not fish alone, the women go to the forests in groups to collect clay which they beat into pottery. This skill is dying, which is why photographic documentation is so important.

The curatorial team is later planning on taking the exhibition to other parts of Nepal as well. Younger generations of Tharus who grew up in the capital and non-Tharus not able to visit the Tharu museum in Chitwan will learn a lot from this show. 🇳🇵

*Daule Daule
Curated by Birendra Mahato, Indu Tharu, Sanjib Chaudhary,
Lavkant Chaudhary, Anab Chaudhary, Maria Bossert and Tom
Robertson
Patan Museum
Until 31 March*

EVENTS

**Walk in Patan**

This weekend, discover Patan's rich heritage. Explore iconic sites like Pimbahal, Akibahal, and Patan Dhoka to uncover their history, and have some Newa lunch afterwards.
30 March, 3pm onwards, Patan Dhoka

Write for films

The Nepal Cultural International Film Festival is hosting a screenwriting workshop led by Serbian screenwriter Ljubinka Stojanovic. Don't miss this opportunity to hone your craft.
30 March, 10am, Film Development Board

**Bollywood night**

Join the Jane Goodall Institute's charity event Big Bad Bollywood, featuring iconic theme songs from the 70s, 80s, and 90s. Dance the night away for a good cause.
30 March, 4pm onwards, Edn, Sanepa

Outdoor theatre

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

**The Sovereign Forest**

After an extraordinary four-month run, The Sovereign Forest exhibition concludes in Kathmandu this weekend. Don't miss the last chance to experience the showcase.
31 March, Nepal Art Council, Babermahal

DINING

**The Yard**

Make your way to the Yard to sample its Mustang aloo, pork chili, and other authentic Nepali delicacies.
Sanepa (01) 5432965

MUSIC

Folk enchantment

Experience the melodies of Manipur-based band Siyom as they take the stage with their folk-based ensembles.
30 March, 8pm onwards, Shisha Lounge & Bar, Thamel

**Dance party**

Join the Theme Night hosted by the British College featuring DJ Nani, Prajita and the Pariwarta band. Go with loved ones and create new memories.
29 March, 5pm onwards, Club Platinum

**Atif in Nepal**

Welcome the new Nepali year with the soulful tunes of Pakistani singer Atif Aslam.
12 April, Hyatt Regency Ground

**Manose live**

Grammy-nominated musician Manose, will be live this Saturday at Patan Museum, with Ani Choying Drolma set to make a special fund-raising appearance for Ek Ek Paila.
30 March, 6pm, Patan Museum

Funky at Moksh

Experience Funky Tuesdays with 'G' and The Fly, as they bring to life notable artists and genres with their performances.
Tuesdays, 7:30pm onwards, Moksh, Gyan Mandala

**Bakery Cafe**

Revisit the cherished memories of childhood and indulge in The Bakery Cafe's cheesy pizza, or the momo and achar enhanced by the cafe's secret ingredient.
Harihar Bhawan, Pulchowk, 9849642736

Cafe Swotha

For the ultimate relaxation and a digital detox, escape to Swotha and immerse in a good book while savouring the tranquil ambiance and continental cuisine.
Swotha, Patan (01) 5451184

GETAWAYS

**Aloft Kathmandu**

Modern ambiance, vibrant decor, cozy rooms, rooftop bar, fitness center, delicious dining options, and warm hospitality await guests at Aloft.
Chhaya Centre, Thamel (01) 5252000

Prakriti Resort

An eco-friendly retreat surrounded by lush nature, Prakriti Resort & Organic Farm offers sustainable lodging, organic farming experiences, and serene relaxation.
Shivapuri Nagarjun National Park, 9801041896

**Sarangkot Mountain Lodge**

Sarangkot Mountain Lodge is a tranquil hilltop escape boasting panoramic mountain views, cozy accommodations, outdoor adventures, and a peaceful ambiance for relaxation.
Sarangkot (01) 4511113

Dusit Thani Himalayan

A luxurious escape nestled amidst Himalayan vistas, Dusit Thani Himalayan features state-of-the-art accommodations and unforgettable experiences.
Dhulikhel (011) 665988

**The Terrace**

Spend a weekend at The Terrace, the hillside retreat offering stunning views, luxurious accommodations, gourmet dining, and rejuvenating spa experiences.
Lakuri Bhanjyang, 980232755

Musicology

Look no further than Musicology for a spot to grab some popcorn, unwind and relax. The burgers and noodles are a must-try.
Bakhundole (01) 5423642

**The Urvins**

Discover a serene garden nestled amidst the bustling streets of the Bhatbhateni area, offering an extensive Italian menu.
Bishalnagar, 9845228569

WEEKEND WEATHER

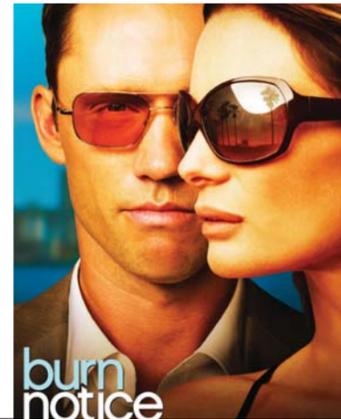
**Dry, hot next week**

The spell of rain was a blessing before the corn planting and wildfire season. Now, we are heading into a dry and hot week ahead. But not before this westerly front (left) interacting with a lingering low pressure system over eastern India brings more rain and snow to higher elevations till Saturday. Readers may have noticed that despite the rain, the Air Quality Index is still poor, that is because winds associated with the trough are bringing smoke and pollution from eastern India up to central Nepal. Maximum temperature in Kathmandu next week will top 25°C, although mornings will still have a nip in the air.



OUR PICK

American spy Michael Westen finds himself dumped in Miami after a burn notice is issued against him, cutting him off from his agency, contacts, and finances. Dumped in his hometown of Miami—from where he cannot leave—and constantly watched by those responsible for his fall from grace, Michael takes odd jobs as an unlicensed investigator to earn money. In the espionage series Burn Notice, Michael Westen becomes a problem solver for those unable to depend on law enforcement, all the while trying to solve the mystery of who burned him and why. Stars Jeffrey Donovan, Gabrielle Anwar, Bruce Campbell, and Sharon Gless.



MISS MOTI-VATION

KRIPA JOSHI



गर्मी मौसममा संक्रामक रोगबाट बचाउ र बचाऔं

- गर्मी मौसममा मलेरिया, कालाजार, डेंगी, हैजालगायतका विभिन्न संक्रामक रोगहरू फैलिन सक्छन् ।
- संक्रामक रोग फैलाउने झिँगा, लामखुट्टे, भुसुना आदिको नियन्त्रण गरौं ।
- संक्रामक रोगबाट बच्न शुद्ध र उमालेको पानी पिऔं ।
- बासी तथा सडेगलेका खाना नखाऔं ।
- घरभित्र र वरपरको सरसफाइमा ध्यान दिऔं ।

नेपाल सरकार
विज्ञापन बोर्ड

Mismeasuring corruption

Corruption did not disappear in rich countries, it just evolved, becoming more sophisticated

Corruption is conventionally – and misleadingly – measured as a one-dimensional problem. Global corruption indices, including Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) and the World Bank’s Control of Corruption Index, assign a single score to countries.



OPINION
Yuen Yuen Ang

These metrics consistently show that rich countries are ‘very clean’ while poor countries are ‘highly corrupt’. For example, the 2023 CPI ranks the United Kingdom (scoring 71) as the world’s 20th least corrupt country, much cleaner than China (42) and Brazil (36). Most CPI users, including media outlets, companies, and analysts, interpret these numbers as a fact.

But are richer countries really less corrupt than poorer ones? One-dimensional metrics like the CPI obscure the fact that qualitatively different varieties of corruption cannot be reduced to a single score.

These metrics also systematically underestimate the corruption of the rich, which tends to be legalised, institutionalised, and ambiguously unethical.

In poorer countries, corruption takes clearly illegal and outrageous forms, such as stealing public funds and taking bribes. In rich countries, by contrast, many believe the problem has disappeared.

In *The Quest for Good Governance*, Alina Mungiu-Pippidi even concludes that advanced economies have reached an end state of ‘ethical universalism’, where ‘equal treatment applies to everyone’. Britain is ‘the classic historical performer’ in this respect, followed by ‘British empire splinters populated mostly by populations of European descent’. In short, the rich West is clean.

But given the rise of populism in high-income democracies today, much of it a backlash against the outsize advantages enjoyed by the rich and politically connected, ‘ethical universalism’ seems more illusory than real. As a blistering 2020 exposé by the *New York Times* revealed, half of UK government contracts for medical supplies during the Covid-19 pandemic went to ‘companies run by friends and associates of politicians’ through a special ‘VIP Lane’.

How, then, did the CPI rank the UK as the 20th least corrupt country? The score is based not on surveys conducted internally by Transparency International, but a combination of various third-party polls. Almost all of these come from Western organisations such as the Economist Intelligence Unit, and they tend to rely heavily on responses from Western business executives.

Moreover, the wording in these surveys

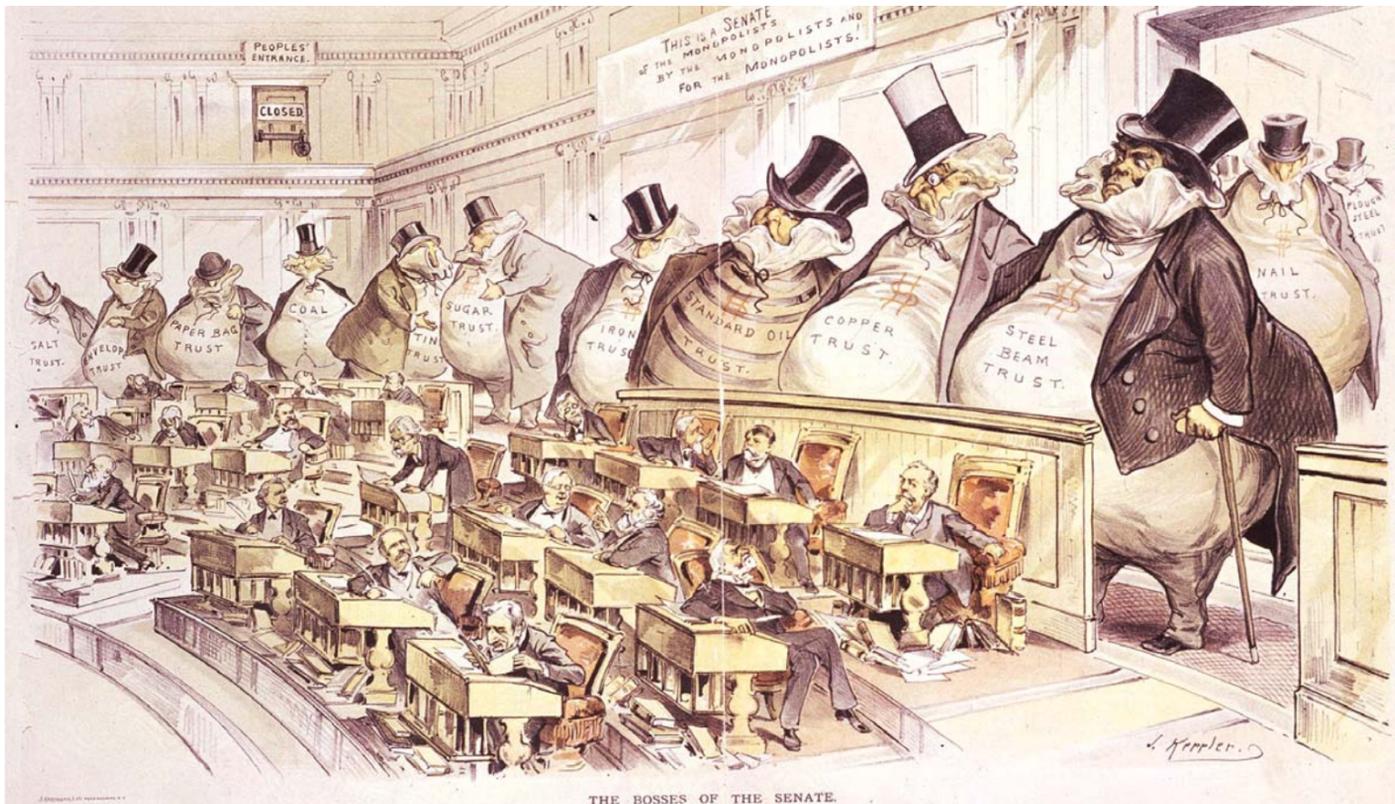


ILLUSTRATION: JOSEPH KEPPLER

is often vague. For example, the World Competitiveness Yearbook, one of CPI’s sources, presents business executives with a crude binary choice: ‘Bribery and corruption: exist or do not exist.’ No wonder the CPI shows rich countries as ‘very clean’ year after year, even as their ordinary citizens disagree.

Recognising that there were no alternatives to these conventional metrics, despite numerous critiques, I piloted the Unbundled Corruption Index (UCI), a perceptions-based metric of corruption that relies on expert surveys.

It unbundles corruption into four distinct varieties: petty theft (extortion by street-level officers), grand theft (embezzlement by politicians), speed money (small bribes to overcome bureaucratic hurdles or harassment), and access money (big payoffs in exchange for exclusive, lucrative privileges such as contracts and bailouts).

While the first three varieties of corruption, the ones endemic in poor countries, are brazenly unlawful and directly harmful, access money might be illegal (as with bribery) or permissible (as with campaign finance). Sophisticated methods of buying privileges may involve entire institutions where no individual is corrupt.

For example, money laundering, for which London is a known hub, can involve moving funds seamlessly across borders through widely respected financial

institutions. In the United States, banks collectively spent billions lobbying for lax regulations, leading to the 2008 financial crisis, yet only one banker was indicted.

The UCI uses an original expert survey to rate all four types of corruption. To improve the quality of measurement, I employ stylised vignettes that ask respondents to rate the prevalence of specific representative scenarios rather than overall corruption levels.

In my prototype covering 15 countries, each country’s total UCI score appears at the top and is broken down into the four categories of corruption. Now we can compare not only aggregate levels of perceived corruption, but also the type and configuration of corruption across countries.

One illuminating comparison is between the US and China. The US is less corrupt than China overall, but the gap is narrowest in the category of access money, the dominant type of corruption in both countries. Notably, America’s access-money score is higher than that of lower-income countries like Thailand and Ghana. If we relied solely on bundled scores, we would conclude that the US is clean. But once the scores are disaggregated, we can explain the appeal of populist promises to ‘drain the swamp’.

Even more interesting is that different forms of access money prevail in the US and China. In a comparison based on a vignette about bribe-taking through politicians’ personal networks, China clearly dominates.

But the US leads in revolving door practices and regulatory capture through lobbying.

In short, while access money in the US is primarily institutional, in China it is still enmeshed within personal relationships involving bribery and piles of buried cash. China isn’t necessarily more corrupt than the US, but its corruption has a different quality.

Mismeasuring corruption is no mere technicality. Fundamentally, it reinforces the illusory, hypocritical, and often Eurocentric message that high-income countries have achieved a lasting state of ethical purity. In reality, corruption did not necessarily disappear as countries grew richer – rather, it evolved, becoming more sophisticated and imperceptible.

We must continue to fight ‘corruption of the poor’, but by unbundling corruption, capitalist democracies can also direct urgently needed attention toward some of their most pressing problems including rising inequality, declining public trust in government, and the ‘modern corruption’ of transnational networks of illicit finance.

Overcoming these challenges requires measuring them accurately, rather than pretending they don’t exist. ■

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Yuen Yuen Ang, Professor of Political Economy at Johns Hopkins University, is the author of *How China Escaped the Poverty Trap* (Cornell University Press, 2016) and *China’s Gilded Age* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

नयाँ वर्ष, नयाँ ठाँउ

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 PENSONIC AIRPOT 3L FIFTH PRIZE	 PENSONIC RICE COOKER SIXTH PRIZE	 PENSONIC BLENDER SEVENTH PRIZE	 DAISUKE INDUCTION COOKTOP EIGHTH PRIZE
 NIKAI SLICE TOASTER NINTH PRIZE	 MILUX JUG TENTH PRIZE		

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WHO BUILDS KATHMANDU?

Not all of Nepal's migrant workers go abroad, many are day labourers on construction sites in the capital



■ Pinki Sris Rana

It is 6AM on a recent chilly morning at a bus stop on the Ring Road. The eastern sky lights up as a smoggy capital stirs awake.

The sidewalk is already crowded with people huddled along the concrete plinth of a building. They carry cloth bags with tools, and glance expectantly at passersby, perking up when a pickup slows down on the road.

At the other end of town at Mahalaxmi intersection, it is a similar sight. Hundreds are gathered on the sidewalk. One of the men has a navy blue crossbody bag with 'PLUMBING' emblazoned on it.

The bag makes him stand out, and sure enough, an approaching motorcycle slows down and the helmeted rider talks to him. Soon the man heaves the bag on his back and rides pillion as the motorcycle drives off. The plumber has landed a job for the day because he advertised his profession.

The others wait. Another motorcycle stops, and the men crowd around. It is a competitive market, the supply of labour is greater than demand with the slowdown in Nepal's economy affecting the construction industry.

By the time the sun comes up, there are still those who have not been hired, and they head back to their rooms, disappointed that it is another day without income.

Ram Gurung, 62, rents a room in a crowded Asan alley and gets up before dawn every morning to walk to a Ring Road intersection that now even has a name -- Chakrapath

Labour Chok.

There are at least five other outdoor labour markets in Kathmandu Valley, and although Ratna Park is closer, Gurung prefers the drive-through labour recruitment sidewalk at Chakrapath. Workers have figured out the characteristics of each of these hubs, and the kind of recruiters who frequent them.

Gurung came to Kathmandu from Chitwan with the dream of getting a job and earning money like many domestic migrant workers who make up the majority of freelance labourers in the capital.

Not on regular salaries, daily wage workers at sidewalks end up wherever their one-day employer takes them. If fortunate, they land jobs for week-long gigs. Sometimes, it can even be for a month on projects outside the Valley.

Gurung has spent half his life repeating this drill of waiting for a day job by the roadside, toiling till evening, buying a meal with the day's pay, and getting up the next morning for another job hunt.

"I was one of the workers who was involved in rebuilding Bir Hospital with an Indian company," recalls Gurung. "I was paid Rs20 a day. The rent in those days was only Rs100."

Today, monthly rent for a small room in the city is Rs5,000, and the daily wage of in-migrant workers is anywhere between Rs800-Rs2,500, depending on their skill. A more common day wage is between Rs1,000-1,500 per day.

Gurung does not know for sure how many years he has spent waiting for work on the sidewalk

every morning. "It must be over 25 years," he estimates. He has not moved up the ranks or gained any specialised skills. The only thing that has changed is his daily wage which sounds like it is more, but has barely kept up with inflation.

The foundation of Kathmandu sits atop the blood, sweat and tears of construction workers in the informal economy like Gurung who have no benefits, no insurance and have to make a living from one day to the next. Kathmandu's buildings are designed by famous architects, but they are built by day labourers.

Most have migrated from the countryside, the Tarai and even from neighbouring Indian states. The city has no count of how many workers there are, and did not care much for their struggle to survive during the pandemic lockdown, nor the economic downturn since then.

"There are no official figures about the number of day labourers, but I believe it is in the five digits," says Rameshwar Nepal at Equidem Research which works on human rights and labour. "A transient population this size cannot be ignored by the government."

The past is the present

Kathmandu's street labour hubs expanded with the construction boom of the past decades, but the oldest ones are at Chakrapath, Mahalaxmi, and Ratna Park.

"Some 20 years ago, the number of labourers gathering here

sometimes reached 2,500 each morning. But they would disperse to work sites before anyone woke up," remembers Hari Prasad Dahal who has been running his tea shop at Mahalaxmi intersection for 32 years. Today, because of the work slump, there are workers all day.

Dahal reckons that most labourers used to be from the Tarai or India, but that has changed with an increasing number of men from the eastern mountains. There is also an increase in women workers looking for construction jobs.

This new demographic is different from earlier workers from the plains. Mountain in-migrants tend to move to Kathmandu with their families and make a living from their daily earnings.

Located at the intersection, Dahal's tea shop is where labourers gather around every morning. He does brisk business selling tea. But Dahal is not very fond of the new breed of workers, saying they are "lazy and out to make a quick buck".

"If they had been hard-working like in the old days, they would not be here waiting for a day job," is his somewhat unfair assessment.

There may be bad apples in the crowd. The odour of alcohol is strong among some labourers, but there is also the whiff of desperation as workers wait out every morning for jobs that may or may not happen. Getting work for a day is not easy, and they would not be here if there was an easier way to get a job.

The newcomers seem lost, they follow whatever the more experienced ones do. Their families back in the districts are so destitute, they cannot even afford to pay recruiters to find them jobs overseas. Others are in transit, hoping to save enough to go abroad. However, like Gurung has discovered, Kathmandu's living costs are so exorbitant that whatever he earns a day evaporates by the next morning.

"It takes a while to build your network in Kathmandu, be it with the employer to establish trust or with fellow workers who will call one another when there is a big construction project," says Bikram Moktan, 30, who came here from Sindhuli three years ago.

Finding work seems to be easier for day labourers from India, since many are skilled plumbers, electricians or masons. It is a profession passed down through the generations, and some are descendants of workers whose fathers worked in Kathmandu.

Yusuf Ansari, 17, came from a village in north India to work in Kathmandu with his father, who started out waiting for day jobs at construction sites but eventually became a tailor. These days Ansari comes to Ratna Park with his uncle Rajendra Sah from Lucknow.

Networks of workers and contractors make it easier to find jobs, but despite that, some days there are no contractors. If they have not been hired by 10am, it is too late.

Living in the present

Construction workers sell their labour to pay for a frugal life in Kathmandu, desperately trying to





ALL PHOTOS: GOPEN RAI

support families. Often they share a tiny room with up to four others.

Just a day without a job can mean scrounging for the evening meal. On a good month with regular jobs and timely payment, day labourers can earn up to Rs45,000. But that is without any weekends, sick leave, or time to rest. The pay, nevertheless, is still better than a salary in a formal occupation back home, or even here in the Valley.

Rina Magar, 32, came to Kathmandu from Makwanpur when her family's farm was infected with a crop disease. She worked on a farm and was paid Rs10,000 a month. A year ago, she got sick and had to take a few days off. Her employer fired her.

Since then, she has come every morning to Mahalaxmi intersection looking for construction jobs. She tells us, "At least I get paid much more here, the only problem is the uncertainty of finding a day job."

The labour market is seasonal, and most construction halts during the monsoon. The economic crisis has meant banks have tightened loans for real estate and construction, reducing number of jobs available.

Jugeshwar Ram from Sarlahi remembers it being much easier to find jobs. "Even in Dasain, there were lots of jobs painting or home repairs," he recalls. Last Dasain, he was at Thapathali every day for 12 days, and did not land a job.

To make matters worse, Ram was robbed the same night he arrived in Kathmandu this time. He spent the night with the homeless inside Ram Mandir in Thapathali.

Iswar Basnet says he is careful because robbers know he is returning to his room with cash. "We really have to be vigilant because they know we have our day's earnings with us," says the 40-year-old while waiting for work at Baneswar intersection.

Police have no time to attend to complaints of migrant workers.

Umesh Kushuwa, 22, was robbed recently and suspects the police must be in on it with the looters. "They just do not take our complaints seriously," he tells us.

Several robbery victims say police are dismissive, and tell them that the robbers have already vanished without a trace and they have no time to go look for them. The risk is greater because many of the thieves also live at close quarters to the labourers.

Other problems of day labourers are more mundane. Like the lack of toilets. A room with an attached latrine is a luxury, and workers sometimes spend entire mornings waiting for their turn at rented quarters, nearby temples, or shops or pay Rs5 at a public toilet.

Female day labourers face an even greater problem, since they have no privacy. Mana Kumari Thapa, 53, has been a day wage labourer in Kathmandu for 15 years, and says, "We have to tag along with other workers. And when we reach the site there is no place to change."

The present is the future

Construction work needs stamina and endurance, and contractors are on the lookout for the physically fit. Nanda Kumar Rai, 52, has

been working as a day labourer in Kathmandu for 25 years. He looks emaciated from a life of hard work and undernourishment, which is why he does not get hired anymore.

"People do not give me work assuming that I will not be able to do it. There are some employers who know me, and that is how I survive," says Rai.

Sunil Silwal knows his fate will be the same as Rai's in a few years. "This job is enough to keep us going but there are hardly enough savings, and no safety net for the future," he says.

Mechanisation of the construction industry has made work easier for some, but is also taking away other jobs.

"Concrete mixers took away jobs of 3-4 labourers who did the work manually," says 62-year-old Jiwan Tuladhar who started out as a labourer and has now risen to become a contractor.

Only the more astute workers are unionised, and are members of GEFONT (General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions), NTUC (National Trade Union Congress), and ANTUF (All Nepal Trade Union Federation) all affiliated to different political parties.

Unions provide workers with identity cards for a minimal fee of Rs150 that has to be renewed every year, but there are no tangible benefits other than compensation for job accidents which has a lengthy process. Workers who are too busy waiting for work every morning have no time for unions.

Article 43 of Nepal's Constitution guarantees the right to social security. But for many

waiting here for work every morning, those are empty words.

Migration expert Ganesh Gurung describes freelance workers as "poorest of the poor" and more at risk of exploitation.

"They have the highest vulnerability both financially and physically because of the nature of their work, but there is no protection from the government," he says. "The fact that Nepal's Labour Act has no provisions for the informal sector itself says a lot."

Last year, municipalities were made responsible for including informal workers in the Social Security Fund (SSF). "The idea is to bring in municipalities who can contribute to the amount of money that has to be paid to the SSF for informal workers," says Uttam Raj Pandey at the SSF. But there appears to be little progress in implementing the plan.

Ganesh Gurung says the solution could be to provide incentives to ensure proper pay and bringing the workers under the tax bracket so they get social security protection. While most labourers are willing to pay taxes if and when the government decides to provide incentives, they will not do so unless they see tangible benefits.

Days of future passed

The pull factor for day labourers in Kathmandu was its dramatic urbanisation during the conflict years as people fled the war for the city. Later, it was for jobs and to invest in real estate in the Valley.

The migration trend out of the mountains to the Tarai and cities is continuing unabated, with districts

like Parbat, Tanahu, Bhojpur or Khotang losing up to 4% of their population every year.

Some 80% of Nepalis are said to be involved in agriculture, but 1.5 million families are still landless. People who do not have land or job options are the ones migrating to Kathmandu.

"If we had our own land, why would we bother to be on the streets every morning scrounging for a job," asks Manoj Mahato, 28, from Parsa who has been a daily wage earner for 14 years now.

The other demographic consists of people who have small parcels of land or limited income, but not enough to take care of families.

"Even if we grow rice, pulses and vegetables, we still need things like salt and oil. And to buy those, one needs cash," adds Iswar Basnet.

"Fertiliser cannot be bought without cash," agrees Gopal Ghimire from Dolakha who stopped farming when his crops were destroyed by monkeys after which he moved to Kathmandu to find work. "In the villages, we live from harvest to harvest, here we live from day to day."

Two-thirds of Nepal's agriculture-dependent population are subsistence farmers who do not have access to markets, or do not grow a surplus to sell. Many labourers on the streets of Kathmandu have given up on farming as a way to make a living.

Infrastructure like roads and buildings are now tangible measures of development. And as the road network spreads to the remotest villages, it has made it easier for construction contractors to source cheap labour not just for Kathmandu, but other districts.

Akash Yadav, 24, has been working as a mason since he was 16 and was technically a child worker. He has noticed that there is now an oversupply of labour in Kathmandu and this has driven down wages.

"Back then, there was a lot of work in Kathmandu. Many buildings were being built. Now, there's not much land here to build houses, so the contractor takes us to the districts for construction work," says Yadav, who is from the plains and not used to mountain slopes.

Yamlal Bhusal of the National Planning Commission sees this as a positive trend. "To ensure balanced regional development across the country, we have to prioritise rural projects," he says.

Indeed, this could mean that the concentration of construction work in Kathmandu will finally ease as more jobs come up in newly-connected rural areas. But local rural youth seem to be leaving the districts anyway, and the new jobs are being filled by outsiders.

"This clearly means we haven't been able to deliver the development the youth seek," says Mahesh Chandra Neupane of the Department of Local Infrastructure (DOLI) which has earmarked more than half of its 11 main projects for rural Nepal. "The work is temporary and does not guarantee more construction jobs in future so the youth leave for the cities."

Sitting on the steps of the Chakrapath Labour Chok recently, 52-year-old Nanda Rai echoed the views of many of his friends, "हामी कामदार मान्छे, हामीलाई काम भए पुग्छ!" (We are workers, give us jobs.)



BUILDING KATHMANDU

Not all of Nepal's migrant workers go abroad, many are day labourers on construction sites in Kathmandu. The foundation of Kathmandu sits atop the blood, sweat and tears of these workers but they have no benefits, no insurance and have to make a living from one day to the next. Watch the video on YouTube.



Flying and farming

For an airline executive, Birendra Basnet has his feet firmly planted in Nepal's soil

Nepalis are flying out by the thousands every day, but one recent morning Birendra Basnet was on seat 17A of an ATR-72 domestic flight, to Biratnagar.

In these cynical times, Basnet is an example of how persistence, ingenuity and vision can help the national economy, providing employment to 1,500 Nepalis through his endeavours.

Basnet was flying on Buddha Air, which he established 26 years ago. The company has grown to become Nepal's biggest airline. With the carrier now on autopilot, Basnet has time for his other passion: agriculture.

Not a small kitchen garden, but mechanised agro-industry to raise farm productivity and serve as a model for community enterprises in Nepal. His Arju Rice Mill in Morang buys from his own and surrounding farms to produce 80,000 tonnes of rice a year.

"There are obstacles in Nepal, but those are a given," Basnet says, gesturing animatedly. "Everyone faces challenges, the question is what are you doing despite those hurdles?"

Indeed, after Buddha Air's takeoff, Basnet feels he can also transform agriculture to make Nepal self-sufficient in rice again. Eighty percent of Nepalis depend on farming, and a fair price for produce can lift them out of poverty.

Basnet puts his money where his mouth is. He has so far ploughed Rs500 million of personal savings from Buddha



Air into his agriculture enterprise, and hopes Arju will go into profit from next year. Nepalis consume 140kg of rice per capita annually (compared to 105kg in India, where wheat is a staple) so there is plenty of scope for business.

"I could have done anything with my 500 million, why did I have to take the risk to invest in agriculture?" Basnet asks rhetorically. "To show that it can be done. Our community enterprise model cuts out the middleman and buys directly from subsistence farmers, helping them make a profit. Every rural municipality in Nepal could adopt this model."

Basnet says that a country like Nepal has to move away from the current crony capitalism with its winner-takes-all attitude to one where social entrepreneurs look towards the larger societal benefit. For this, businesses have to be sustainable so wealth creation is more equitable.

Basnet now wants to apply his model to other agricultural products like oranges in Bhojpur, apples in Jumla, and ginger in Salyan. He also plans to develop a network of solar-powered cold storage centres to preserve products, so farmers do not have to sell when prices are low.

Deep down, Basnet is frustrated with bureaucratic hurdles that put off entrepreneurs willing to invest in Nepal. Despite this, he says there are many hidden success stories in Nepal, heroes who have persevered to realise their dreams.

"The reason I am optimistic about Nepal is that people are embracing alternative politics by electing leaders passionate about genuine change. Leaders who do, and not just talk," he says. "Also, people like us have to be more involved in nation-building."

Back at Buddha Air, Basnet has decided to shelve plans to



OTHER PLANS: Buddha Air's founder Birendra Basnet in the company hangar at Kathmandu airport (left) and with his family at the Arju Rice Mill he established in Morang. His daughter Arju, after whom the rice brand is named, is in the middle.

expand to remote area STOL fields or connect regional hubs with international flights. The carrier is retiring two of its ATR-42s, and replacing them with new generation ATR-72 600s.

Last week, Buddha Air got top credit ratings from ICRA Nepal for 'controlled business performance' rather than risky expansion post-Covid. Buddha's domestic market share has grown to 67%, as the poor state of inter-city highways in Nepal mean people prefer to fly.

The airline's provisional revenue was Rs3.83 billion last year. It flew 7.1 million passengers on 150 daily flights. 🇳🇵

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