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CLASS ACT

■ Shristi Karki

Earlier this week, as students studying in colleges affiliated with Tribhuvan University (TU) awaited results of last year's exams, the Office of the Controller of Examinations issued a sheepish statement saying it had lost hundreds of answer papers.

Students who had sat for the Bachelor's Population Studies and Basics of Education tests in May 2023 were given only a few days' notice to take the exams again.

Such incompetence has been the hallmark of Nepal's education system, that is plagued by hyper-politicisation and patronage.

Postponed exams, leaked test questions, lost answer papers, and delays in publishing results are so common, they are treated as a given. The malaise contributes to the exodus of students leaving for higher education abroad.

Education Minister Sumana Shrestha from the RSP is

determined to undo half-a-century of neglect and political interference.

"Educational institutions are crucial to political awareness, engagement, organisation, and mobilisation," says Rajendra Dahal, editor of Sikshak magazine. "But now politics has taken over the education sector, making it entirely business driven."

Since everyone from university vice-chancellors to community school teachers are political appointees, Shrestha's first order of business has been to decouple schools from politics.

"No investments we make will yield results until the education sector is freed from party politics," Shrestha said in one of her social media monologues this week. "The law is clear ... we just need to enforce it."

Shrestha announced a probe into the missing TU answer sheets, started a process to appoint independent experts as university chancellors and co-chancellors, and

vowed to keep her Ministry free of nepotism and corruption. She said teachers engaging in political activities would be fired, and told local governments to ensure free education in public schools.

Such radical proposals have raised hackles among politically-affiliated faculty, unions and politicians who have long milked the university system, and Shrestha is being heavily trolled on the social web. They say making government schools free would force them to compromise on quality, or close.

University vice-chancellors have historically been political appointees despite efforts to reform the system. There was a chance to do things differently this year but Prof Keshar Jung Baral was appointed vice-chancellor of TU due to his links to Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, who bypassed the first candidate on a search committee shortlist.

Nepal's Political Party Act 2017 prohibits teachers from actively engaging in party politics and the Education Act stipulates that teachers must not hold executive political positions. That rule has

been openly and widely flouted.

Efforts to reform the system with the proposed Education Bill is itself problematic, educators say. The National Examination Board's Chair, for instance, is to be appointed by a committee comprised of Education Ministry officials, as opposed to the current system of selecting the candidate based on recommendation by a Public Service Commission panel.

"It is necessary to recognise that de-politicising education will require administrative, legal political decisions," notes Dahal. There are many who want Minister Shrestha's reform attempt to fail so they can protect their turf. But it also fits with their political aim to cut the RSP's chances in the 2027 elections.

It is not just the RSP that is on an education reform spree. Kathmandu Mayor Balen Shah has stirred a hornet's nest with his directive to all private schools in the capital to adopt Nepali names within 35 days or face penalties.

Says Dahal: "The Education Minister's attempt to de-politicise education is a positive step. But we will have to see if it will be for the benefit of a select few or for society at large." 🇳🇵

**Lessons not learnt,
homework not done**

EDITORIAL
PAGE 2



20th

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Lessons not learnt, homework not done

Early spring sees half a million 10th graders across Nepal line up for the ongoing Secondary Education Examination (SEE). It is not without reason the test is called 'The Iron Gate' since it can keep so many out who do not pass.

The Nepal Education Board restructured the school system in 2016, and replaced the previous School Leaving Certificate (SLC) with the SEE. The curricula and grading systems were changed so that practical and interactive teaching would replace rote textbook-based learning.

Alas, memorising and regurgitating answers in the test paper is still the dominant method of teaching. Cheating with 'chits' is rife. Test questions reflect irrelevant and problematic textbook content.

This week, a young man was caught sitting for the SEE math exam on behalf of his brother-in-law. Mobile phones and smartwatches were confiscated at other test centres. Invigilators and supervisors were themselves found leaking test questions or giving hints to selected test-takers. Chits are smuggled inside pencil cases, and hidden in restrooms.

Nepal has been manufacturing a nation of cheaters who over the generations occupy seats of power. It not only proves just how rotten the country's education system is, but it is also at the root of governance failure and the epidemic of corruption. Cheating extends to higher levels of government, and has even permeated the Public Service Examinations that civil servants are required to take.

Nepal's problem with education does not begin and end at Grade 10. Studies have shown that students have below-average learning achievement even at upper primary levels because of faulty textbooks and mediocre teachers.

Despite numerous attempts at reforms and rewriting, the curriculum is rife with errors, there are embarrassing mistakes and misleading information. The content is not gender and caste inclusive, and does not reflect Nepal's socio-cultural, ethnic and religious diversity.

The official language of instruction for compulsory subjects excluding Nepali and Social Studies is English. However, public schools lack instructors in English, while private schools prioritise English, with students penalised for speaking Nepali or their mother tongue in class.

As a result, Nepal has been producing generations of mediocre students with little command of their native or second language

and with little knowledge of their country.

Every time governments tried to improve the quality of instruction, they made it worse. Educators have raised valid concerns about provisions of the controversial new education bill. They say it takes away the autonomy of local units by reinstating District Education Offices, and benefits private schools.

Not that local governments have done any better when given the authority. They make populist, cosmetic changes like mandating teaching local languages even if the students and guardians do not want it, or change the English names of schools.

Kathmandu Mayor Balen Shah has issued an ultimatum for private schools to change their names to reflect Nepali identity within a month. He is not the first to do so, and probably will not be the last.

He wants the city's schools to be named after deities, shrines, natural resources or historical figures that reflect 'Nepali-ness'.

More unreasonable is the directive that schools with the word 'Public' must have been providing full scholarships to at least one-third of students. Schools with 'National' in their names must have students from at least 25 districts, and

'International' schools must have 33% foreign students. But (wait for this) names of all schools must end with 'Bidyalyaya' or 'Pathshala'.

All well and good. But how is this going to improve the quality of instruction?

Then, the new Education Minister Sumana Shrestha sent out a circular directing all government schools to stop charging fees. Parents cheered, but government schools which get only enough budget to pay staff salaries, nothing for development and upkeep, are in a quandary. We thought the new crop of young politicians were smarter and would not make half-baked decisions. Only 11% of Nepal's annual budget goes into education, and most of it for teacher's salaries.

Better paid, motivated and trained teachers would be a quick, surefire way to improve quality. Tests like the SEE can be done away with and replaced with a more representative grading system. Outdated curricula and gaffe-filled textbooks must be peer reviewed.

Nepal's identity is reflected not by the name of its schools, but by the quality of instruction in them.

Shristi Karki



BIKRAM RAI / NT ARCHIVE

Nepal's identity is reflected not by the names of schools, but by the quality of instruction in them.

ONLINE PACKAGES



DOWNHILL ALL THE WAY

As one of the world's most vertical countries, and with six directions (east, west, north, south, up and down) it was only a question of time before racing downhill on mountain bikes became a popular sport in Nepal. Watch this video and read about the latest development in mountain biking in Nepal on page 6-7. Subscribe to our YouTube channel for more original multimedia content.



THE HIMALAYA MATTERS

National and international figures weigh in why the Himalaya matters and how their accelerated melt is a threat to the entire world, not just Nepal or mountain countries. Watch video and read an exclusive report analysing over 50 years of rainfall data from eastern Nepal and what it says about the fragile Himalaya in the first of the three-part Tamor series on page 10-11.

THARU EXHIBITION

Tharu representation has been filtered through outsiders' perspectives for a long time ('The Tharu story by the Tharu', #1205). Now, the Tharu community is taking ownership of their story, challenging stereotypes, and highlighting the pivotal role of Tharu women in preserving their heritage. The exhibition 'Daule Daule' offers a vital platform for the Tharu community to reclaim their narrative and showcase their rich cultural heritage to the world.

Himanshu Thakur

CORRUPTION

Surely, what you are saying is that corruption as a principle of decency and fairness is nothing of the kind but, instead, is skewed blatantly in favour of the privileged ('Mismeasuring corruption lets rich countries off the hook', Yuen Yuen Ang, #1205).

Tony Jones

NEPALIS IN RUSSIA

A rather sad story of tragic deaths in a war most of us would like to see end soon ('Nepalis play Russian roulette in distant war', Shankar Dahal', #1204).

Bharat Koirala

ADULT EDUCATION

The age factor matters little with regard to acquiring knowledge, education and enlightenment ('Age no bar to go to school', Sahina Shrestha, #1204). My best wishes to the positive approach of learning of women.

Anil Kumar Singh

ECONOMY

Like Nepal, Sri Lanka also suffers from 'Dutch Disease' ('Poor cash-rich Nepal', Sonia Awale, #1203). Migrant remittances dominate manufactured export earnings. And politics compete to sell job opportunities abroad and protect remittance flows, whilst undermining export earning jobs.

Ravi Rannan-Eliya

I agree with the article. There is no shortage of food for Nepalis because the land is fertile everywhere. Even in the Himalayas, some crops are grown, but as mentioned in the article, the government's policies have failed.

Ira Neupane

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING

A portal into Patan's past and present

by Prakriti Kandel
Patan Museum has connected Nepalis and visitors to Kathmandu Valley civilisation for nearly 30 years. The museum also serves educational function for Nepali students, supplementing what they learn at school. Visit nepalimes.com for more on the museum, and watch video.

f Most reached and shared on Facebook

People's Movement

by Ramesh Kumar
Malaysia is slashing foreign worker intake from end-May, conflicts in West Asia risk engulfing the region, and Europe is building higher walls for migrants. Overdependence on foreign employment instead of creating jobs domestically spells disaster for Nepal's economy. Join the discussion online.

X Most popular on X

The Tharu story by the Tharu

by Sahina Shrestha
The exhibition Daule Daule that ended last week highlighted the history, culture and inter-generational knowledge and skills of the Tharu people by the Tharu themselves. The curatorial team plans on taking the exhibition to other parts of Nepal as well. Read the review on our website.

66 Most commented



Who builds Kathmandu?

by Pinki Sris Rana
Kathmandu's construction boom relies on a large number of internal migrants who gather at designated intersections every morning hoping to be picked by contractors. The economic slowdown has reduced jobs and driven down wages, and workers face safety risks and lack social security. Full story on our website with video.

Most visited online page

QUOTES

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
"There are big obstacles to doing business in Nepal, but that is a given. Everyone faces the same challenges, the question is what are you doing to get past those hurdles?" Birendra Basnet, Buddha Air

Rita Thapa @bheribas
Nepal's true hero @AirBuddha Birendra Basnet. If only we had a few more like him, Nepal wouldn't be as it is now!

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
"Society and family should encourage women, they must inspire them and push them to get an education, not judge them for it." Older women who were denied education when young are enrolling in formal education.

Dan Rex @DanMRex
What wonderful and inspiring women!

1,000 WORDS

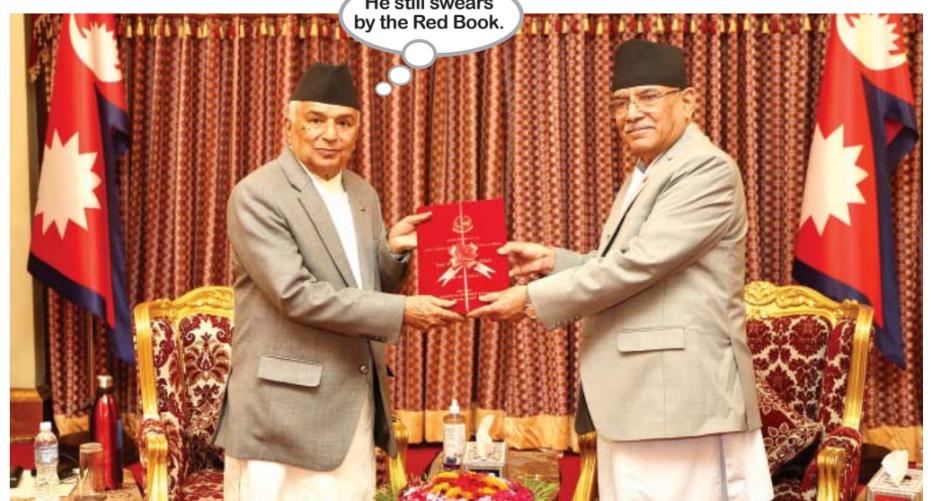


PHOTO OP: Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal presenting the government's fiscal year report for 2023/24 to President Ram Chandra Paudel at Shital Niwas on Wednesday.

PRADEEP RAJ ONTA / RSS

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Selling Sex

During the decade-long Maoist insurgency, many fled to the cities and India for fear of being recruited. A majority ended up in Kathmandu, some forced to take up sex work to survive. This was also the time of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Excerpts of the report published 20 years ago this week on issue #190 2-8 April 2004:

An increase in the influx of people from the districts fleeing the conflict, the lack of jobs and poverty have all contributed to a new surge in prostitution in Kathmandu Valley. But two months ago, the police started cracking down, especially along stretches of street around Tundikhel, Khichapokhri and Sundhara. But that just shifted the action indoors: to massage parlors, cabin restaurants and cheap lodges.

At a cabin restaurant in Maiti Devi, several girls and women told us that they fled their villages fearing the Maoists who were trying to force them to join military training. "My parents are still in the village, but I took the risk and came to Kathmandu, even though I know no one here," says 17-year-



old Sarita Chettri from Makwanpur.

Two of Sarita's friends also joined her and they all work in the cabin restaurant, which is a front for prostitution. The three don't get a salary, but the tips are enough to make a living.

There hasn't been a formal study of cabin restaurants in the valley, but one estimate puts the number of girls at up to 30,000. After 7PM, the streets of Gaushala, Baneshwor, Maiti Devi, Kalanki, Rato Pul and Chahabil are bright with the

glittering lights of restaurants blaring Hindi songs. Inside, the restaurants have wooden cubicles with a girl already inside each of them.

Meanwhile, in the tourist hub of Thamel, local residents are worried that massage parlours are fronting as sex shops... It's not the humiliation, but the threat of HIV infection that is of major concern. Migration, prostitution and unprotected sex are a deadly combination in a valley that is already known for 50 percent HIV infection among injecting drug users.

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

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“Mai commin, Sir?”

Thoo Sir wanted to teach us English in English, while we preferred learning English in Nepali

Thick-framed glasses, a wide nose, and a bushy salt-and-pepper mustache. A front curl peeked out of his cap, a full-sleeved shirt and cotton trousers.

His appearance was unremarkable, lacking the fashion sense of the stylish Dharan people of the day. He seemed like a tired, middle-aged man by the end of class, covered in chalk dust.



ANGREZI
Anbika Giri

He was easily overlooked until he spoke English because his English was impossible to ignore.

This man was dealing with a significant issue. He wanted to teach English in English, while we students preferred learning English in Nepali.

His pronunciation was different from other English teachers, causing students to struggle to understand him. They started calling him Thoo Sir because they heard ‘to’ (/tu:/) as ‘thoo’ (ठू), but no one knows who first started this nickname.

Students had to talk to him in English, or listen to English they could not understand.

I had heard his infamous nickname long before I attended Thulo School, the only secondary school in the village, after passing out from the primary Sano School.

He never inflicted any physical punishment on us, however his frustration was harder to handle. He would say things that friends could use to mock and tease classmates.

Students would dread his presence in the classroom because unlike other teachers who would read slowly and explain in Nepali, he insisted on speaking English correctly and would not let us off the hook until we did so as well.

I only had him as a teacher in my Grade 10 class, and I remember



JIM HOLMES / WIKIMEDIA

being late on the very first day. “Mai commin, Sir?” I asked from the door.

“Say it properly,” he replied, without even looking at me.

I asked again, but he continued dusting the blackboard without paying any attention to me.

“Sir, Mai commin?” I changed the word order.

“Repeat after me,” he instructed. That day, I learnt for the first time that ‘Mai commin’ was actually ‘May I come in?’

“You don’t even know basic English? Silly girl!” he said, and of course, my friends teased me for a long time about that.

His criticism of a student’s pronunciation silenced the class.

While I was usually vocal and asked questions in other subjects, I could not utter a word in his class for fear of being ridiculed again.

I would formulate questions in my mind but struggle to voice them. Sometimes, I would start in English and end up speaking in Nepali, which would upset him even more.

He would not engage in conversations in Nepali, preferring to explain things in English. His excessive use of English gave us all chronic headache.

One day, in the middle of class, I asked in Nepali, “Thoo Sir, my pad is leaking. I will go home, change, and come back in five minutes.”

“What did you just say?” he

asked in English, lowering his reading glasses, revealing a pair of tired eyes and a bruise on the bridge of his nose caused by the frame.

Sanitary napkins were not yet available, so we would have to run to nearby homes to use one of our mother’s old cotton saris as pads.

But these were not absorbent enough for heavy bleeding. There was no door or roof in the school toilet, making it impossible to change at school.

I never felt embarrassed about asking to be excused, and no one made a big deal out of it. I assumed his ‘WHAT?’ was in response to my request to go home to change my pad. I repeated my request, and assured him I would return in

exactly five minutes.

But his “What did you just call me?” was actually about my publicly calling him “Thoo Sir”.

My bench-mate Bishal tried to warn me to keep quiet. But I continued, “Thoo sir. Everyone calls you Thoo sir behind your back. Don’t you know?”

“I know but no one said it to my face before,” he replied.

Quickly correcting myself, I said, “BB Sir, please allow me to go home. I won’t address you as Thoo Sir anymore.”

“Thoo Sir again,” he chuckled, tapping my head with the book in his hand. “Go on, then, run!”

All these years later, I realised that it took a lot of effort for him to respond the way he did. Unlike other teachers who only focused on the top students, he would treat all students equally.

After leaving school and moving to Kathmandu, I began learning English and found the language fascinating. It took years to overcome my hesitation, but I eventually understood why Thoo Sir insisted on teaching English in English. I only wished he was more creative in making us appreciate the language and its importance.

We used to believe that Thoo Sir had the best English in the world and was forcing fluency on us when all we needed was 32 marks to pass.

Thoo Sir was way ahead of his time in grasping the importance of a global language. He knew there was a world beyond our village of Madhesa and the SLC exams.

He was not interested in our test scores, he only wished us to learn English in English. And here I am today, glad we had Thoo Sir as our English teacher. 🇳🇵

Anbika Giri is a novelist and author of children’s books in Nepali. Angrezi is her monthly column in Nepali Times about learning English in Nepal. Go online to read her previous column, titled Thappad.

NMB BANK एनएमबि बैंक



Solidarity with Gaza

Nepal’s health workers on Monday protested Israel’s ongoing assault on Gaza and the Occupied West Bank that has so far killed at least 31,000 Palestinians, most of them children and women. The rally in front of the Israeli Embassy in Kathmandu called for an immediate ceasefire. Israel has targeted hospitals as part of its offensive, killing 685 healthcare workers and injuring thousands more.



Aloft on top

Aloft was awarded the top prize in the City Hotel category at the 2024 MUSE Hotel Awards. Award committee was made up of leading hospitality experts from around the world. Aloft, located in the Chhaya Devi Complex in Thamel boasts, among other features, an indoor pool.

Setting the Standard

Standard Chartered was issued a Triple-A credit rating by ICRA Nepal for the fifth consecutive year. The ranking takes into account the bank’s capital compared to risks, its low non-performing loans, is operated by a well-known and respected international bank and gets deposits.

Tourism up

Nepal saw 128,167 tourists in March, up from 99,426 visitors in the same month last year. Total arrivals in the first three months is now at 304,693 – a 33.7% increase compared to the same period in 2023.



Meanwhile, USAID and the Nepali Tourism Board collaborated to launch the 2024 International Tourism Campaign, and is working with influencers and digital creators from the travel storytelling platform Steller who will document trips to Kathmandu, Pokhara, Bardia, and Ilam to promote Nepal as a destination.

Growth and inflation

The latest World Bank update for Nepal’s economy this week projected growth to increase to 3.3% from last year’s 1.9%. But inflation will remain high at 6.7%. The current account balance is forecast to reach a surplus because of higher remittance inflows and lower imports. For the next fiscal year, the annual economic growth rate is projected to jump to 5%, and inflation to come down to 5.5%.

Viber hi to Pi

Rakuten Viber has partnered with AI studio Inflection to give its users access to an AI Large Language model, Pi. Viber users can chat directly with Pi and also use it in text conversations with other humans. Pi is particularly good at advising users and helping them construct and execute plans. Viber is also launching the fourth season of the ‘Explore Nepal Channel’ travel campaign this Nepali New Year with travel vlogger Ghumante documenting a six-week trip through Nepal. The videos will feature weekly quizzes where viewers have a chance to win bus or plane tickets to Pokhara, a stay at Raniban Retreat, or a mountain flight.

IME and IFC tie-up

Global IME Bank and International Finance Corporation (IFC) have agreed to consult each other about market and loan risk, asset management, and financial issues related to gender and climate. The IFC will also provide expertise regarding sustainable transportation, climate-conscious farming, and solar energy.



Global IME is also working with software company Aloft to implement an effective loan monitoring system that tracks loans for grassroots entrepreneurs. Aloft in collaboration with Fintech Alliance Nepal (FAN), the Nepal Bankers’ Association (NBA) and the UNCDF is working to harness fintech to empower micro, small, and medium enterprises.



Swell HR at Ncell

Ncell received the National HR Excellence and the “Excellence in Learning and Development” awards at the HR meet 2024 organised by independent HR consulting firm Growth Sellers. Ncell is also supporting the Federation of Women Entrepreneurs Association of Nepal (FWEAN) with mentoring and development opportunities, and digital literacy programs. This week, Ncell also secured the 3rd runner-up spot in a Pro-Am corporate golf tournament organized by the Royal Nepal Golf Club. The team, led by pro Sanjay Lama, won Rs10,000.

New Year with Hyundai

Hyundai has announced discounts of up to Rs600,000 on new cars on the occasion of Nepali New Year 2081. The scheme also includes an exchange bonus of as much as Rs1,000,000.

Cimex Nepal

Cimex, the distributor for BYD cars in Nepal, won the Asian Pacific Major Contribution Distribution award at a Dealer Conference in Xi’an. Cimex plans to open three more BYD showrooms to the existing 15 across Nepal, and install more DC fast chargers.

■ **Shamshad Ahmad**

Aliya Bashar finished her Grade 6 exam and swiftly walked over to a room next door at her Kanya Mandir Secondary School in Kathmandu.

Other students join in, and together they offer namaz. This is an important time of year for Bashar, not only because of her annual exams but also because of the holy month of Ramadan.

"It is a relief not to have to rush home for prayers at 1PM," Bashar tells us later. "The school provides a space for namaz, it is easier for us to focus on exams."

With a week left for the end of Ramadan, Muslims eat before dawn and fast throughout the day with afternoon prayers at 1PM. They break fast with a collective iftar feast after sunset.

Recognising the challenges Muslim students face, Kanya Mandir School provides dedicated space for them to offer prayers.

"Having a prayer room makes everything easier," says Salma Khatun, a Grade 8 student. "And the school also allows us to dress in clothes we are comfortable in."

The school's inclusive environment has helped students like Bashar and Khatun thrive. They participate in sports wearing the hijab, something not possible at many other schools.

Jasmin Shaikh in Grade 7 says she faces no hate or discrimination at school.

"Students of all religions are treated equally here," she adds.

Muskan Khatun says being allowed to wear the hijab in class makes her feel safe and supported. Khatun, originally from India, says she feels a sense of belonging at this school. "There are no restrictions here, the school feels like home," she says, smiling.

The Kanya Mandir School's commitment to inclusiveness extends beyond Ramadan, and to the cultural practices of students from all faiths, including Hindu, Buddhist and Christian.

"The hijab does not hinder the students in any way," says Assistant Principal Bhagwan



INCLUSIVENESS NOT JUST THEORY IN THIS SCHOOL

Kanya Mandir in Kathmandu puts inclusiveness into practice by balancing education with religious tolerance



ALL PHOTOS: SUMAN NEPALI

Babu Adhikari. "In fact, our top performers are girls from the Muslim community."

The welcoming environment has boosted the school's appeal, and some 245 of the 1,170 students at the school are from Nepal's Muslim minority.

"School is where children learn compassion, tolerance, and

good behaviour," says Principal Ghanshyam Neupane. "We are simply creating an environment that fosters these values."

This approach also promotes respect for other religions, cultures, and traditions, inculcating tolerance among students, he adds.

Nepal's Tarai plains bordering India, where there are more

Muslims, have traditional madrasa schools which focus mainly on religious studies. Students say they prefer mainstream schools so it helps them get into good colleges.

Not all madrasa have accreditation, limiting career options for students. Many Muslim girls prefer secular schools, but not all have a welcoming environment

like Kanya Mandir.

"We must uphold the constitutional rights of every child and ensure schools become inclusive spaces," says Seema Khan of Nepal Muslim Women Welfare Society. "They should follow Kanya Mandir's example and adopt an inclusive policy that reflects Nepal's rich social tapestry." 🇳🇵

SILK GLAMOR

Glamor that lasts



Nepal pushes mountain bike tourism

Adrenaline junkies ride through Himalayan forests at the Enduro Ratnange in Solu

■ Vishad Raj Onta

There are certain activities that demand absolute focus. The surroundings blur as vision narrows, tension rings in the ears. The closer to danger, the more exciting it gets. Thrill is what adventure sports like mountaineering,

canyoning and white water rafting are all about. Now, a new kind of outdoor activity is taking advantage of Nepal's vertical terrain and scenery: mountain biking.

The sport is going viral as passionate, trailblazing Nepalis turn what used to be trekking paths into biking trails, and post GoPro videos of their adventures. Now, the sport is going international and at the

forefront is Phaplu Mountain Bike Club that held its second Enduro Ratnange Race in March.

"Last year was all about proving the viability of the event. We worked hard to figure out every single detail," says club founder Ang Tsering Sherpa, who this year got support from the local government and sponsors.

Some of the best mountain bikers in the world attended, among them acclaimed French rider Rémy Absalon, who told us: "Ratnange trails are some of the best in the world, the mixture of loam and dust is just awesome to ride on. I have travelled a lot, but never seen a country like Nepal where we are so well received."

The Ratnange Trail Center is a network of 13 routes spanning 60km used solely for mountain biking with a selection of narrow, technical, wide, or single tracks that need the complete concentration of riders. The rest stops offer stunning views of the Everest region.

Sherpa designed the route on existing foot trails, and works with the local community to maintain them. He raises funds by renting out paths to private companies, who name trails after their brand



for Rs20,000 a year.

Explains Sherpa: "The trails roll through the forests and the route is designed based on what you want it to be. Do you want it to flow? Do you want switchbacks? Drops? Jumps?"

Flowy trails have kind curves that allow bikers to maintain momentum and a smooth speed, while switchbacks are zig zags built into a steep trail to reduce speed on descent. Drops are where the trail falls away. Jumps consist of takeoffs and landings, and vary in the time the rider is airborne.

When blazing a new trail, a

good road must always be close by for urgent medical attention. The risk of serious injury is ever present. Safety precautions include helmets, knee and elbow pads, and chest and back guards. Even then, concussions, fractures, discolations, and broken wrists are common.

Sherpa advises matching ability to the choice of trail, but riders always want to push their limits. One way they train, is at pump tracks, which are artificial dirt circuits. The bike club built one of these in Phaplu where young 'rippers' learn to control bikes.

Another way to train for the downhill is actually the uphill. "The uphill builds the mental endurance needed for the downhill," explains Sherpa.

It also builds physical strength. Riders need strong, durable legs, a sturdy core, and a solid grip. "But on the downhills, a state of complete focus and presence washes over you, and all of your sensations and abilities are heightened. It is taxing on the body, but still meditative."

Sherpa runs The Happy House in Phaplu, a family lodge where Edmund Hillary used to stay and call his "happy place". When he

44 ultra-runners to race across the Nepal Himal

■ Vishad Raj Onta

Only the most adventurous attempt to walk The Great Himalayan Trail (GHT), even fewer dare to run all of its 1,800km from one end of Nepal to another. And it is not just the horizontal distance – the trail is a vertical roller coaster from 1,500m to 5,600m.

This week, 44 international and Nepali runners are joining The Great Himalayan Race that roughly follows the GHT in a 51-stage hyper-marathon that will take nearly two months.

The Great Himalayan Race was first staged in 2017, and pushes the mind and body to absolute limits in a one of the hardest endurance tests in the world of sports.

What makes this race special is that every step of the way, they

will have sunset and sunrise views that transform the snow peaks into purple and gold. The runners will be passing sacred, isolated Himalayan valleys rich in heritage.

The participants arrived in Kathmandu this week, and will fly out to Nepalganj and Simikot and then on to Hilsa on the Nepal's northwestern tip bordering China to start the race on 9 April. On Thursday morning, race director Bruno Poirier, a tall, grizzly man, was briefing the runners in his French accented English.

"Be prepared to change plans if the unexpected happens," Poirier tells them. "It is an individual sport, but we also need to look out for each other."

The split between Nepalis and foreigners is about half and half, and most are middle-aged. Lean and fit with striated, veiny calves, these are obviously serious



BRUNO POIRIER



formed Phaplu Mountain Bike Club, Sherpa wrote to bike shops and friends, who donated two-wheelers. Before long, local young children started coming in after school to zoom around the track.

Club members did well at Enduro Ratnange, inspiring a new generation of young riders to dream of careers as mountain bike athletes or biking guides, who make \$25 an hour to a trekking guide's \$15.

Despite the popularity of the

sport and possibilities to compete at higher levels, the bureaucracy, government ignorance, and a lack of infrastructure are setbacks.

The club makes sure that it is inclusive: there is no membership fee, and bikes are set aside exclusively for girls. The main trainer, Mingma Yangzi Sherpa, is a woman.

Mountain biking is also good for the soul, says Ang Tsering Sherpa. "Getting good at this sport

requires discipline, and a sense of camaraderie. Bikers seem to develop a deep respect for the environment."

Mountain biking tourists are great for Phaplu's economy as well. Trekkers who pass through Phaplu stay for a day, while bikers may stay for four or five. Mountain biking destinations in Wales, Canada, and the Alps see millions of tourists every year. Nepal already has the terrain, the trails, the hospitality and unsurpassed views.

Phaplu Club is already looking forward to next year and hopes to organise Asia-wide events with top talents. There is also potential to stage Ratnange-like projects in Makalu and Ilam.

Kathmandu to Phaplu is a now a nine hour drive on the Sindhuli Highway via Okhaldhunga, or a 30 minute flight to Phaplu. Riders can then pedal up to the start of the trail or take a shuttle for themselves and their wheels. Just so you're not, you know, two tired. 🇳🇵



ALL PHOTO: PHAPLU MOUNTAIN BIKE CLUB

Where have all the mountaineers gone?

Till presstime on 4 April, there were only 7 expeditions with 86 mountaineers who have got permits to climb Mt Everest this spring climbing season, much lower than the 47 expeditions and nearly 478 foreign alpinists in spring 2023 (graph).

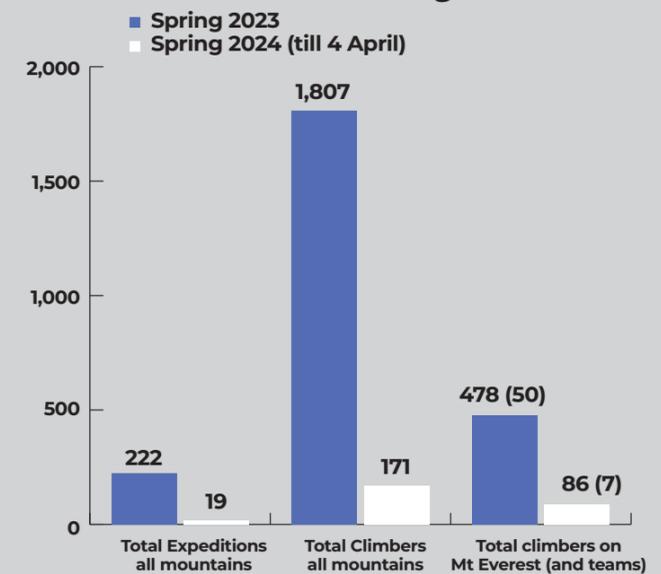
It is not clear why the Department of Tourism starts processing applications for Everest climbs only in March when expeditions prepare for years before they plan to climb the world's highest mountain. It also seems insensitive to include total royalties collected in its tables which suggests that it is only interested in cash and not mountaineering.

The Department has been updating its list of expeditions almost every other day this week, and the latest one shows that besides the seven expeditions on Everest, there are three on Ama Dablam, and another three on Annapurna I. Smaller peaks like Himlung (7,126m), Jugal III (6,184m), Putha Hiunchuli (7,246m), and Khangri Shar (6,811m) have one permit each.

"It is too early to speculate if there is a drop in numbers," says Dawa Steven Sherpa of Asian Trekking. "Many expeditions sign up at the last moment, anyway."

Surprisingly, Manaslu (8,163m) which is usually the most popular mountain after Everest does not have a single expedition in the Department's list. In 2023, there were 23 expeditions with 266 foreign climbers on Manaslu.

Low Numbers on High Mountains



The drastic drop this year also translates to a big decrease in the total number of climbers, and the amount of royalty the government collects from climbing fees. This spring's 19 expeditions total only 171 climbers, compared to last year's 61 expeditions bringing 512 foreign climbers.

Despite this, the average number of members per expedition this year (9.00) to last year (8.14) is comparable. While the difference in number of expeditions and peaks is stark, mountaineering experts think there is no need for premature fretting.

Everest summiteer Alan Arnette, who has covered Himalayan climbing for 20 years, agrees that the numbers could pick up: "There is a trend for teams to arrive later and later for Everest. Some start with Annapurna, others just get their permits later. It will pick up."

Nepali mountaineering companies have become more efficient. Ten years ago, an Everest expedition used to be eight weeks long. Now, it takes three weeks and many expeditions climb Annapurna, Dhaulagiri or Cho Oyu early before moving on to Everest, trying to climb two eight-thousanders in one season.

March-May is when most mountaineers try to climb Everest because of gentler winds and higher temperatures on the slopes. Sometimes weather windows are open in May for only a few days, leading to traffic jams near the summit. 🇳🇵

Vishad Onta

Himalaya from west to east in 60 days

runners. They sport a wide variety of headwear: hats, visors, bandanas, snoods. Visitors are in shorts, but most Nepalis are in jeans with colourful running shoes. Many don wrap-around sunglasses.

There is no easing into this race. The first stage is 41km, virtually a marathon. From Hilsa at 3,650m, runners will climb to Nara Lagna at 4,580m, and drop back down to Taplung at 2,880m. The race will get as high as 5,694m at Ghami La

in Mustang during Stage 15, on Day 22.

Runners will get to Muktinath on Day 27, and Manang on Day 30, exactly halfway into the race. On Day 41, they will be at the Last Resort on the banks of the Bhote Kosi northeast of Kathmandu. On Day 60, Stage 51, they will finally reach Kanchenjunga Base Camp at 5,143m approximately on 21 May.

Nervous excitement is palpable among the runners. The race will take them through 27 high passes in the Himalaya, most of them above 5,000m elevation. Weather up there can change dramatically and suddenly, and participants will have to improvise, take new routes and even find places to take shelter.

Vincent Minier from France completed the race in 2017, and tells us: "It's like parachuting. The first jump is always the scariest."

French organisers of the race have a slightly laissez-faire approach to safety, attests Jagan Timilsina, winner of the 2017 race. Which means they will get along with the happy-go-lucky Nepalis.

Greek couple Lazaros Rigos and Asimina Inglezou say the reason they signed up was because of the history and the mystique of the Himalaya. Also in the cohort are accomplished Nepali long distance runners Upendra Sunuwar, Bhim Bahadur Gurung, and Sher Tharu. While Sunuwar and Gurung also took part in 2017, it is Tharu's first attempt in the competition.

"It's a hard race but when you finish it, it is the best feeling in the world," says Sunuwar.

Swiss runner Jules-Henri Gabioud is in Nepal for the seventh time, and ran the race in 2017. He runs in the Alps and says the biggest difference is that the

Himalaya is higher and rougher, the huts along the way do not have heating, and the food is basic. "I like dal-bhat but it can get a little monotonous," he says.

Lazaros Rigos from Greece agrees: "There are some ingredients missing: protein, vitamins and minerals. You have to supplement these, so your stamina holds up."

Rest and recovery after a gruelling stage consists of food, a wash, perhaps a couple beers, and good sleep. The runners also have to carry backpacks with sleeping bags, heavy jackets, meal packs, and first aid kits weighing upto 20kg throughout the race.

Jagan Timilsina is from Sarangkot and won the 2017 race a whole 45-hours faster than anyone else. He now runs several businesses, including Himalayan Trail Running, and spends his summers teaching outdoor

leadership in Alaska.

He tells us, "The physical part of the race in 2017 was manageable, but as a Nepali for me it was an opportunity to see the culture and the beauty of the untouched and remote Himalayan valleys."

In 1983, British cousins Richard and Adrian Crane ran across the Himalaya from east of Kanchenjunga to west of Nanga Parbat, taking 100 days. Forty years since, Nepal is capitalising on the growing interest in ultra-running and adventure sports worldwide.

Timilsina is familiar with the challenges of organising a trail race, and says Nepal's bureaucracy is the biggest hurdle for adventure sports like the Himalayan race.

He adds: "Visitors need multiple permits from multiple committees. Policies regarding running tourism are outdated, and hard to change." 🇳🇵



EVENTS



Nature hike

Be one with nature. The trek from Budhanilkantha to Dada Gaun passes through Shivapuri National Park, offering visitors magnificent vistas.

6 April, Tickets: Rs700 - Rs1,350, 9843004999

Boundaries Reimagined

Taragon Next presents Object in Focus: "Boundaries Reimagined", a site-specific installation by artist Viola Bordon in collaboration with weavers from Nepal Knot Craft Centre.

5 April, 4pm onwards, Boudha



Toyota Women's Rally

Register now to participate in the Toyota Women's Rally, open to all the women out there. Visit <https://www.toyota.com.np/en.html> for details.

20 April

Game night

Join Hostel Next Door for the weekly board games night every Thursday. A great opportunity to unwind, socialise, and enjoy some friendly competition.

Every Thursday, 7 pm onwards, Hostel Next Door



Yoga wellness

Recharge your energy with yoga, a full vegan meal, detox water, and more to align your mind, body, and soul.

6 April, 9am onwards, Tickets: Rs1,899, Avata Wellness, Baluwatar

DINING



Hand Brew Coffee

This store offers the best specialty coffee options like aeropress and pour-over, perfectly complementing their delicious breakfast meals.

Jhamsikhel, 9851342924

MUSIC

Music launch

Space is launching their music video Aafulai and performing their music along with musical performances by Nishchal Gurung, and The Act.

5 April, 7pm onwards, Supper Club, Thamel



Beers N' Cheers

Get ready for an electrifying performance with Backdoor Man from Pokhara taking the stage this weekend.

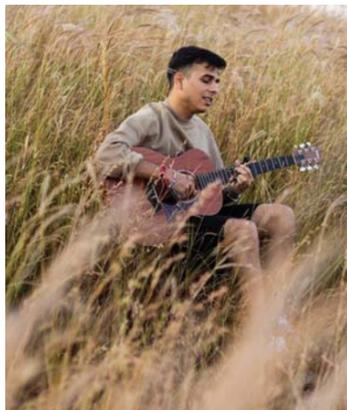
6 April, 6pm, Beers N' Cheers, Jhamsikhel



Atif Aslam

Atif Aslam is in town, bringing his soulful voice and unforgettable melodies to mesmerise the Nepali crowd.

12 April, Hyatt Regency Ground, Boudha



Anuv Jain

Start the Nepali New Year on a dreamy note with Anuv Jain and his mesmerising tunes.

13 April, Hyatt Regency Ground, Boudha

Music and dance

Enjoy live music six days a week, ladies night every Wednesday and Salsa dancing on Thursdays at London Pub.

London Pub, Darbar Marg



New Orleans Cafe

Indulge in your favorite continental delights, from burgers to scrumptious noodles and chicken dishes. Don't miss out on the mouthwatering chocolate cake.

Thamel (01) 4700736

Fati's

It's hard to resist the allure of biryanis, and Fati's is the place to go for all types of delicious biryanis. Head over there and satisfy your cravings.

Jhamsikhel, 9801464607

GETAWAYS



The Lapsi Tree

A mere 25km from Kathmandu, The Lapsi Tree Resort is perfect for anyone looking to escape from the city's hustle and bustle.

Batase Danda, Nagarkot, 9844888116

The Dwarika's Resort

The Dwarika's Resort is the place to go for an overnight getaway, or even just for a meal outside the city. Once there, spend a couple of hours in the salt room for Crystal Salt. Therapy and come back ready to tackle the chaos of the city.

Dhulikhel (01) 4579488



Deumadi Mountain Cottage

The 2-bedroom cottage situated just 4.1km from Begnas Lake is within walking distance of Thulakot hill. A picturesque getaway for your short stay.

Pokhara, 9804156184

Nakabahil Garden House

The south-facing Nakabahil house operated by Cosy Nepal boasts modern architecture and design. Experience home away from home within the city.

Nakabahil, Patan, 9860111757



Noumenal Camps

Nestled amidst lush greenery in Nagarkot, these luxurious tents offer everything guests could desire, including peace and tranquility.

Nagarkot, noumenalcamps@gmail.com

The Lawn

Treat yourself to momos, Nepali snacks, and Chinese delicacies for a trip down the memory lane at The Lawn by the Nanglo chain.

Jhamsikhel, 9801088356



Koto

Experience authentic Japanese cuisine at one of Nepal's oldest Japanese restaurants. Try Koto's cold chicken, sashimi, gyoza, and katsu don for a delightful culinary adventure.

Darbar Marg (01) 5320346

WEEKEND WEATHER



FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY
28° 13°	27° 12°	27° 12°	27° 11°	26° 12°

Summer is here

The temperature in Kathmandu Valley will continue to climb over the weekend, touching 28°C with bright sunshine most days. By afternoon, some haze from the plains will pile up as well as smoke from forest fires that have re-ignited, especially along the East-West Highway in Parsa and Rautahat. Afternoons will be breezy and pleasant. Some light precipitation is forecast from Wednesday next week with the arrival of the next moisture-bearing westerly front.

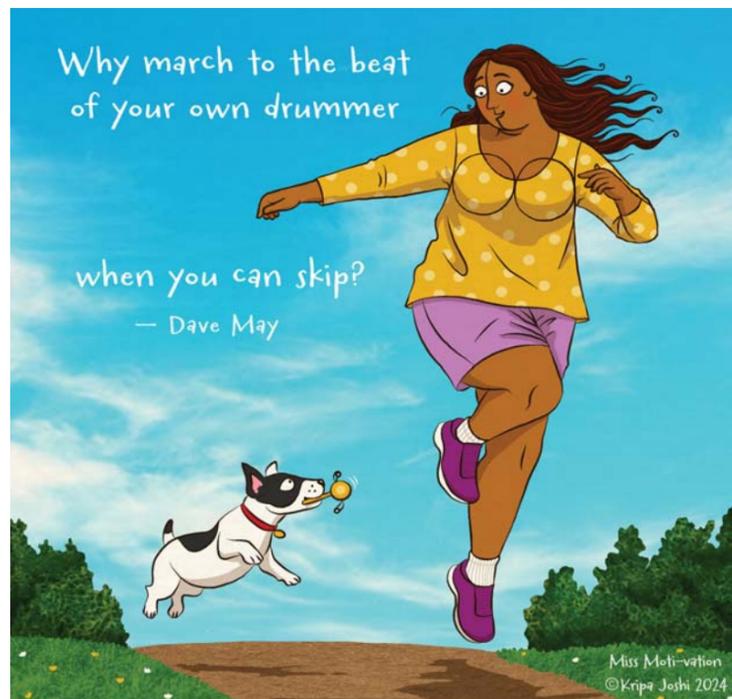
OUR PICK

In her isolated home in southeastern France, novelist Sandra Voyer is forced to reschedule an interview because her husband Samuel is playing music loudly in the attic. Things take a turn for the tragic when the couple's son Daniel and his guide dog Snoop find Samuel dead, apparently having fallen from the open attic window. Sandra is then suspected of murdering her husband, with her son as the main witness. The acclaimed 2023 French film Anatomy of a Fall won Best Original Screenplay at the 2024 Academy Awards and stars Sandra Hüller, Swann Arlaud, Milo Machado-Graner and Messi the dog, who became the darling of the awards circuit this year.



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

Families that farm together stay together

Households take to small-scale sustainable agriculture to adapt to climate change and improve income

■ **Durga Rana Magar** in Kailali

Like many Nepalis, Surendra Dhama left his home village in Darchula for Malaysia in the hope of improving his family's quality of life.

He returned in a few months because the work and pay were not what he had been promised by the recruiter. But there were no jobs in Darchula, and farming in the rugged arid mountains would not feed his family.

So, like many other mountain farmers Dhama, 36, migrated with his family down to the Tarai to settle in the village of Gharkheda in Kailali's Chure Rural Municipality.

It was a good move. He sold 10,000kg of oranges last year, and Surendra and his wife Bhaka have diversified into vegetables.

"So far, we can make a living with our farming. At least, it is better than in Darchula," says 30-year-old Bhaka Dhama.

Neighbour Krishna Devi Kandel and her husband Devendra have involved all five of their children in their farm. The orange trees are not doing well because of infestation, and the failure of winter rains affected crops.

"We do not have irrigation and do not get as much rain as we used to," says Devendra.

Chure village is full of families who have moved down from Darchula, Baitadi and other mountain districts to the north. But even here, erratic rains due to the climate crisis have impacted farming.

Diversifying crops is the best way to cope, which is what Pabitra Sapkota (pictured, right) has also done. After her orange trees died, she has moved to vegetables.

"The tomatoes that my son planted in this greenhouse are nearly ripe," she says, clutching a lush bunch of mustard greens.

The Chure range in western Nepal rises to elevations of 2,500m, unlike in the east where it is less than 500m. It is the youngest, lowest and weakest of the folds that form the



Himalayan range, and the first ridges to rise up from the plains.

The Chure covers nearly 13% of Nepal's area, and runs through 37 of the 77 districts from Jhapa in the east to Kanchanpur in the west. It is a fragile range, where deforestation has led to frequent landslides and floods.

"The Chure watershed is deteriorating and there are frequent droughts, further declining farm productivity," explains Sushmita Dhakal of the President Chure Terai-Madhes Conservation Development

Board set up in 2014.

One way recent migrants from the mountains to Chure are adapting to the crisis is through family farming, without hired labour for better food security, nutrition and to protect the environment.

The United Nations declared 2019-2028 a Decade of Family Farming to preserve traditional agriculture, increase the involvement of youth, recognise women's leadership, promote sustainable agriculture and improve livelihoods.

In doing so, family farming also protects households from the climate crisis by diversifying crops. It is also an antidote to water-intensive commercial farming with its use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides.

At one point, more than 80% of Nepal's population depended on agriculture, and most were family farms. But the figure has come down to 62%. Agriculture now contributes only 25% to the GDP.

Agronomists say that family farming can reverse the decline by making agriculture profitable again. Vegetable farmers of Lisbeli village prove that: their products have a ready market in the towns of western Nepal.

Dammari Bhatta works on her vegetable patch with her family and does not hire anyone else. The cabbages, cauliflowers and tomatoes are enough to feed her family all year around, and she sells the surplus to pay for the education of her children.

Her husband Madanraj Bhatta leads the Lisbeli Farmers' Group which sold 1,700kgs of cabbage and 700kgs of tomato this winter.

None of the 30 families here in Lisbeli use chemical fertilisers, and apply organic manure instead. This in turn has reduced pest infestation and diseases in the crops all the while restoring soil quality.

"Home fertiliser has increased harvest, and made the soil more fertile," says Manju Jagriti, an ex-teacher, now a full time farmer.

"The whole family farms, and we do everything together," says Manju proudly.

Family farming is nothing new in Nepal, it has been the traditional method of agriculture. But many families moved away as commercial farming using agrochemicals took over. Now, families are moving back to the old method of growing food.

Says agriculture scientist Binayak Bhandari: "We need to go back to our old sustainable farming ways, protect the environment and find the fine balance between nature and livelihood, especially to adapt to the climate crisis." 🇳🇵

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Climate crisis → drought →

Half-century of eastern Nepal's rainfall data points to a link between chronic drought and depopulation

■ Mohan Mainali in Taplejung

Rainfall data from eastern Nepal collected over the past 70 years point to a strong correlation between chronic drought and outmigration. Repeated and more frequent monsoon failures forced more and more people to abandon villages.

Terathum, Dhankuta, Panchthar and Taplejung districts lost more than 40% of their population between 2001 and 2021. Archival data of the Department of Hydrology and Meteorology shows that rainfall was below the annual national average for almost every year since the 1960s in what is supposed to be the wettest part of the country.

In Panchakanya village of Terathum 40% of residents left in those 20 years. A nearby village, Thoklung, lost 42% of its population. Across the Tamor River, 44% of the people left the village of Kurule. A third of the inhabitants of Symbarumba in Panchthar left for the plains or cities.

"People are still leaving. Those who have not migrated are also thinking about going down to Dharan or Damak," says Chathar Ward 4 Chair Pushpa Karki, who says there were 2,500 votes cast in this ward in 2017 and in the 2022 local election there were only 1,125 ballots.

To be sure, there are other factors behind this exodus which is happening right across Nepal's mountains, such as a dearth of well-paying jobs, poor health care, and few opportunities for higher education. But the main reason is that droughts destroy crops.

"There was a severe drought in the summer of 2018, the maize plants dried in their stalks and turned to straw," remembers Tara Kharel Dhakal, Deputy Mayor of Chathar in Terathum. "People ran out of food and were desperate. We declared an emergency."

Rainfall data for Terathum in 2018 corroborates that there was almost no rain in winter, and to make things worse, the district only saw half of its usual rain that monsoon.

The rainfall gauges are located near the tops of mountains, where there is usually more precipitation. So the slopes below likely got even less rain than was recorded.

Farmers had no irrigation systems to fall back on. Springs are rare and have gone dry, and the Tamor River is too far down the mountain.

Prevailing wisdom suggests that Nepal is drier the more west you go, and the Karnali and Sudur Paschim regions are most drought prone. Outmigration due to water scarcity in Mustang district has emptied villages. But it looks like the climate crisis is causing dry spells even in the usually wet mountains of



HIGH AND DRY, LOW AND WET: Parched fields above the Tamor River in Panchakanya village in eastern Nepal in March (above) and irrigated bamboo-fringed terrace farms in Taplejung.



ALL PHOTOS: MOHAN MAINALI

eastern Nepal.

Only a quarter of arable land in Nepal is irrigated, and most of that is in the Tarai. Subsistence farmers in the mountains depend on rain-fed agriculture, so when it does not rain their only option is to migrate for work.

Rainfall data from measuring stations over the past 50 years or more across the eastern mountains shows that winter rain and monsoon failures have become more frequent.

Only 80% of the normal annual rain fell in 2018 in Mulghat, and the corn and buckwheat harvests were reduced in nearby Kurule. The local government gave cash

handouts to farmers, but this did not convince people to stay.

In an average year, Jhapa and Ilam in the east get about 3,300mm of rain. Kathmandu Valley sees about 1,400mm, and Darchula in the far-west receives 700mm. The least precipitation is in Mustang and Dolpo in the trans-Himalayan rainshadow, although even these districts have seen some freak rainfall of late.

Even though the total annual precipitation may still be the same, often the quality of rain is different: there are damaging torrential downpours and then weeks of no rain at all.

Watershed expert Madhukar

Upadhyaya describes eastern Nepal's micro-climates, where wide variations exist even within small geographical areas: "The clouds tend to drop most of their moisture on the southern slopes of the Mahabharat Range, so there is less rain on the other side."

Dharan, for instance, gets 1,700mm of rain, but 15km to the north in Mulghat, the annual precipitation is half that.

Elderly farmers can recite from memory the years in which rains have failed: 1961, 1965, 1972, 1975, 1982, 1994. Their recollections tally with archival precipitation data for the region. For example, there was a downpour that dumped 385mm

of rain on 23-24 June 1961, but for the next two months there was only 180mm.

"I was young in 1961 and there was always either too much rain or too little, the fields were fallow and we had no food," remembers Dikura Devi Thapaliya in Terathum. "Only those who had springs and could irrigate their fields had harvests that year."

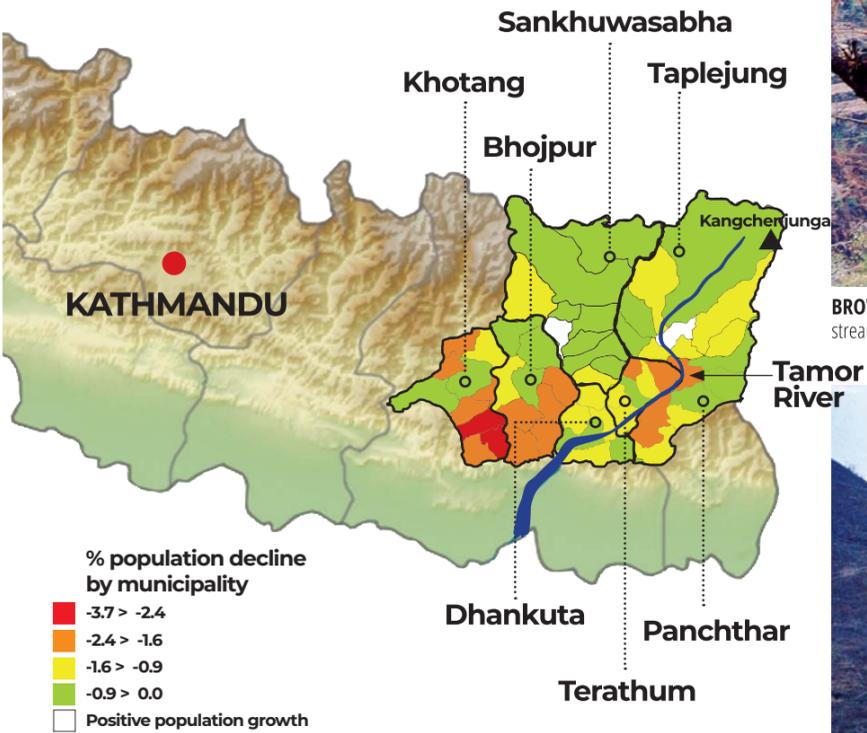
Four years later, there was another drought that caused a famine, forcing families to forage for wild roots. In Iwa, the town council asked households that had extra grain to sell it to neighbours, but no one was willing. The villagers did not have food for the 10-day

food deficit → migration

This is the first of a three-part series in Nepali Times analysing meteorological, hydrological and demographic data from eastern Nepal, showing the impact of the climate crisis on rainfall, farming and outmigration. The second and third installments will appear on 12 and 26 April respectively.

SQUEEZED DRY

No Water = No People

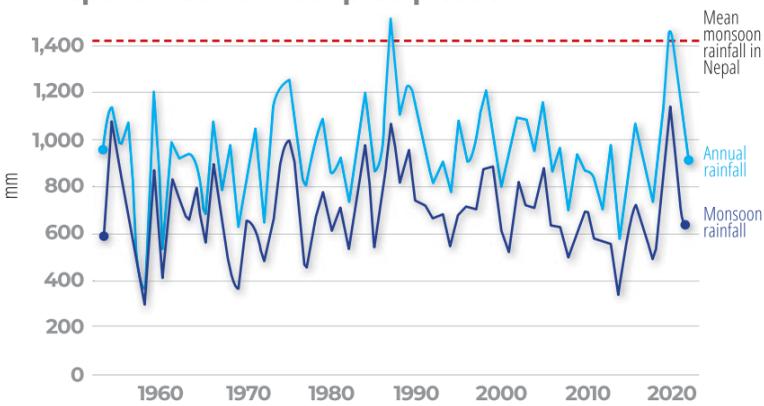


BROWN AND GREEN: Contrasting colours of fields in Terathum between those without irrigation (foreground, above), and with irrigation from a side stream. The glacier-fed Tamor River has plenty of water in the dry season (below) but it is too far down to be pumped up the mountain.



THE RAIN IN DHANKUTA

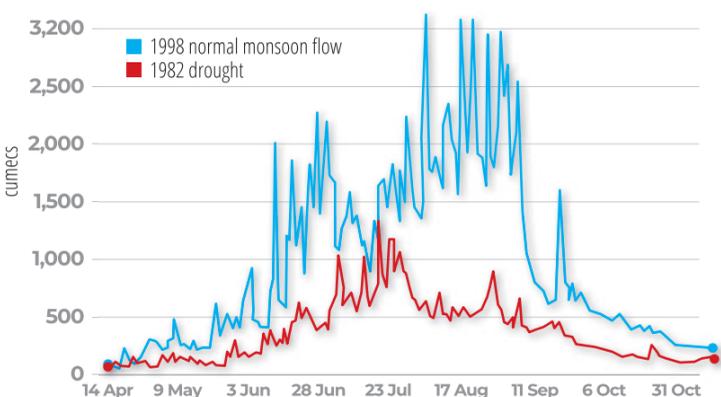
Dhankuta's total rainfall is less than Nepal's mean annual precipitation



SOURCE: DHM

TAMOR RIVER

Monthly discharge at Mulghat



trek down to Dharan to collect government rations, so food was air dropped by the state.

Even worse was the nationwide drought of 1972, when the British Royal Air Force helped Nepal with Hercules aircraft to drop grain by parachute in what it called Operation Khana Cascade. Some 52 tons were dropped on Taplejung and Terathum alone.

This was the Panchayat era, and even the usually-understated government controlled news agency, RSS, filed a report from eastern Nepal about the terrible conditions: 'The harvest of corn and buckwheat has failed in villages around Dhankuta. Rice harvests are one-third of normal. There is starvation in Terathum. Many have migrated to the Tarai or elsewhere, or are working as coolies along the Dharan-Dhankuta road.'

The next serious drought was in 1982, with Terathum getting a record low of only 254mm of rain – only 38% of normal monsoon precipitation.

The Tamor had never been so dry before that, nor has it since. Hydrological data acquired by Nepali Times show that in September 1982 river flow was only 15% of mean for that month. Ninety percent of the maize crop in the east was destroyed, paddy wilted before it could be

transplanted. The rice terraces were barren.

Nepal's two neighbours donated grain so that villagers would not starve. More than 2,500 farmers from Terathum made the four-day trek down to Dhankuta to collect 100kg sacks of wheat from India, or maize from China. Even the desert kingdom of Saudi Arabia donated 5,000 tons of rice and 2,500 tons of wheat.

Not much has changed in the villages of Terathum and along the banks of the Tamor since – except that there are fewer people. Farmers who remain still depend on timely and adequate rain to keep their soil watered.

"If the gods send rain, we get to eat. Otherwise we starve," Naramaya Tamang in Terathum puts it simply. Her farm grows enough food to feed the family for only half the year.

Those who have property have sold it to move to the plains. The government has stopped food aid, citing new roads and letting market forces ensure supply. However, there are many like Naramaya who have fallen through the social safety net.

The other thing that has changed in these mountains is that people are migrating not just to the plains, but overseas to the Gulf or Malaysia. The villages on both sides

of the Tamor River are devoid of young men, and increasingly, young women. Every family has a member abroad. It is the money they send back that helps the elderly relatives survive.

Over the last 20 years, Panchthar saw the second highest number of permits to work overseas in proportion to the district's population. Terathum ranks third on this metric and Dhankuta is sixth. The adjoining district to the west, Khotang, is number one.

Dhanusha in the Tarai has the highest numbers of people migrating out, but most of those workers return. Here in Dhankuta, Terathum, Panchthar and Taplejung, when young people leave, most leave for good.

The main result of the climate breakdown is the lack of water. Deficient rain and springs going dry are the main reasons why farmers are migrating, explains the Chair of Ward 3 of Chaubise village, Madan Tumsa.

He says: "These are climate migrants. The soil is too dry to farm, and there is nothing to eat. People are not leaving to earn more, up to 80% are leaving because they cannot grow food due to the lack of water." 📌

Research for this three-part series was supported by the Barbara Foundation.

