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SUMAN NEPALI

Charging Nepal

■ Sonia Awale

Given the government's revenue crunch, there were many ways Finance Minister Barsha Man Pun could have balanced his budget while putting Nepal on a path to green energy. But he chose the easy way out.

Taxes on electric vehicles have been increased once again, including for battery-powered public transport. There are no incentives for electrical appliances to boost power consumption now that generation capacity is going into surplus.

Taxing electric SUVs makes sense since they are luxury vehicles, but making them less competitive vis-a-vis petrol cars means petroleum imports will not go down. There are no tax rebates for electric buses, scooters or home appliances to promote consumption of surplus electricity. Nepali households should have been incentivised to switch from LPG to electrical cooking.

To be sure, the new budget was an improvement on the 2023-2024 tax range. Last year's budget had increased taxes on entry level EVs,

electric public utility vans and battery-operated minibuses, while reducing taxes for luxury SUVs and larger variants.

Nonetheless, overall tax on electric vehicles has increased with excise and customs up by 5-20%, and there is a backlash from importers who had been enjoying a boom in sales. More than 60% of the cars imported in the past six months were electric.

'There is no clarity in the government's intention to support and promote electric vehicles,' said Nepal Automobile Dealer's Association (NADA) in a statement.

On Tuesday, Finance Minister Barsha Man Pun unveiled a Rs1.860 trillion budget for 2024-25 in Parliament and said it would set Nepal on an annual economic growth track of 6%. Yet, he managed to allocate only 0.46% of

the total budget for environmental protection.

In fact, he gave the green light to controversial projects like the Nagmati Reservoir in Shivapuri National Park, and the proposed \$3.5 billion international airport at Nijgad. Both would mean large-scale logging, and lack ecological and economic rationale.

These announcements directly contradict Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal's own commitment to achieve net zero by increasing forest cover and reducing petroleum use in the next 20 years, which he repeated at last week's International Expert Dialogue on Mountains, People, and Climate at Chandragiri.

In light of the budget, the prime minister's speech at that event rang hollow: "We must build upon the momentum of past efforts to translate commitment into tangible action preserving the delicate balance between mountain environments for future

generation... Climate change is a great concern for us who are experiencing the peril of our pristine natural resources."

There were some announcements on renewable energy like the plan to add another 900MW of hydropower to the national grid. Nepal will be generating 6,500MW of power once under-construction projects come on line, and the challenge is to increase household and industrial consumption for which

transmission lines need streamlining. Switching to electric transport would also benefit public health by reducing Kathmandu's atrocious air pollution. Kathmandu was the world's most polluted city on multiple days in the past two months. The life expectancy of Nepalis might have increased, but air pollution has slashed nearly 5 years of our lives.

Nepal's moral high-ground at the climate summit in Bonn next month will be diminished with budgetary policies that directly contradict our public commitments. A clear national policy balance economic growth with ecological preservation would give our negotiators more weight when they demand adaptation or loss and damage funds. 🇳🇵

Capacity (in KW)	2023-24		2024-25	
	Customs	Excise	Customs	Excise
0-50	10	-	15	5
51-100	15	10	20	15
101-200	20	20	30	20
201-300	40	45	60	35
300 above	60	60	80	50

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- Sow distrust so facts don't matter.
- Jail the messenger.

That is the check list of populist demagogues the world over to add a poison tip to social media. The disinformation is to unravel the social fabric, and dismantle trust in institutions. Blocking the way are the liberal democratic system and the press. That is why they are targeted.

It is easy for populism to strike root in democracies, including Nepal, because some in the parties and media have squandered freedom through lack of accountability, and power brokering. The proximity of media tycoons to elected politicians adds grist to an anti-'elite' narrative.

Despots around the world learn from each other how to weaponise social media platforms. Big Tech made this job easy by basing their profits on algorithmic radicalisation that manufactures outrage. Users quickly learn to exaggerate rage and magnify wrath to amass more followers. Facebook, X, YouTube reward them with digital pheromones, turning them into addicts.

In a commencement speech at Harvard University this week, Nobel Prize winning Philippines journalist Maria Ressa blamed Big Tech for coding divisions in society with hate speech, and being "the accelerant to conflict and violence".

She went on: "Without facts, you can't have truth. Without truth, you can't have trust. Without these three, we have no shared reality, no rule of law, no democracy."

Elected authoritarians enabled by Big Tech spread chaos and break down trust. Journalism is in the crosshairs: we stand in the way by standing for rule of law.

Here in Nepal we have survived dark periods when freedoms were crushed under the jackboots of royal-military rulers. The press and the political parties were in the democracy struggle together.

After 1990 and 2006, the media was often critical of those in government, exposing wrongdoing. But for the most part the main parties shared the same values -- that press freedom and democracy are two sides of the same coin.

Now, the leader of an independent party that rose in the 2022 election on an anti-incumbent platform is behaving like autocrats of yore by attacking the media.

Home Minister Rabi Lamichhane of the RSP is a former anchor of a rabble-rousing tv show. He was forced to resign during his first

stint as home minister last year because of media exposures of his US citizenship issue. He deftly wriggled out of that one, and as home minister once again is charged with cheating depositors of cooperatives and investing it in his tv channel.

The mainstream press relentlessly pursued this story, the most persistent being Nepal's largest-circulation daily broadsheet, Kantipur. Last week, Lamichhane used the powers of his office to jail the paper's publisher Kailash Sirohiya, strong-arming state agencies to detain him.

The matter is in the Dhanusha court, and Sirohiya's remand was extended by another three days before the court gave a release order. There is little doubt that the publisher's citizenship discrepancy, which could be a clerical oversight, has been used to hide skeletons rattling in Lamichhane's own closet.

The US Embassy in Kathmandu and international press freedom watchdogs have condemned the arrest.

Troll platoons are cyberlynching anyone who dares question this vindictive abuse of office. The controversy stalled the budget session of Parliament for many weeks, as the opposition Nepali Congress (no saints themselves) demanded a house committee probe into the matter.

All top leaders of the three mainstream parties have scandals to blackmail each other. These cancel out so nothing is ever investigated. Being the fourth largest in Parliament, Lamichhane's RSP has swing votes critical for this Left-led coalition to stay in power.

Top leaders of the Maoist Centre and the UML both looked away when Sirohiya was detained last week because without the RSP the coalition may collapse. They also see benefit from cowing down journalists prying into their scams. There is freedom of expression in Nepal, but not necessarily freedom after expression.

Senior editors met Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal on Monday, and reminded him that this attack on the press was happening on his watch. They handed him a statement that read: "There are serious questions about the manner in which Kailash Sirohiya was arrested and about the charges levelled against him, this is a direct attempt to put pressure on, and silence the independent press."

Kunda Dixit



SUBHAS RAI

There is freedom of expression in Nepal, but not necessarily freedom after expression.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

June First

It has been 23 years since the massacre of the royal family on the night of 1 June 2001. Many Nepalis have still not come to terms with the tragedy, with some maintaining that the monarchy would be intact if King Birendra was still alive.

Nepal is now a republic, but many citizens are disillusioned with the elected leaders and feckless politicians. There is a movement to restore the monarchy.

Excerpts from an editorial published 20 years ago this week marking the third anniversary of massacre published on issue #198 28 May - 3 June 2004:

Initially the country seemed to recover from the nightmare surprisingly unscathed. There was an orderly (given the circumstances) transition to a new king, the institutions of democracy tottered, but stayed intact. The Nepali people, used to suffering misery and shock, moved on. They blamed it all on a bad national karma and tried to put the past behind them while struggling with day-to-day survival. Making a distinction between a king and the continuity of the institution of monarchy, we looked to the future and hoped for the best.



Three years later, it is clear the Nepali people never really came to terms with that tragedy. By trying to forget it, many of our questions remained unanswered and the royal family remained reclusive and secretive. It was an opportunity to make a clean break with the past, adopt a new transparent royalty, reinvent a modern monarchy perhaps with a new mission for national well-being funded by a trust in the name of late King Birendra. It was a chance to

project a kingship that finally took off its dark shades and made eye-contact with the Nepali people, providing benign guidance and being a unifying force.

But there was little effort at damage control. The increasingly shrill republican slogans in the jungles, and lately on the streets, are a delayed reaction to June First. As the country descends into instability and violence, the people want a monarchy that stays above the fray as a respected symbol of unity and neutrality, not as another political power-player.

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

ONLINE PACKAGES



Nepalis breathe some of the dirtiest air in the world. The HEPA filter lungs display at the Ministry of Health last year went dark in five days. When air quality plummets, there are immediate side effects in respiratory ailments especially among children and the elderly. Watch the video and read our air pollution stories on page 10-11. Subscribe to our YouTube channel for more multimedia content.



This year marks 100 years since the 1924 expedition in which George Mallory and Andrew Irvine disappeared on the Northeast Ridge of Everest. Mountaineering was enriched by Mallory, who was awed by Nepal's Himalas that he saw over a high pass from Tibet. Watch the full video on Nepali Times YouTube channel.

MOUNTAINEERING

It is time they started limiting the numbers on this mountain ('Peak season in the Nepal Himalaya', Vishad Onta, #1213).

Christine MacDonald

- Aren't helicopters adding to the problem in Nepal's mountain climbing?

Kay Allan

- If the climate crisis changes things on Everest, climbers will have to climb the rock face of what was covered by the glacier. Taking a helicopter isn't climbing a mountain.

Michelle Bostick

PESTICIDES

As the Bob Dylan song goes: Where have all the flowers gone? ('Playing with poison', Kanchan Kattel and Kishor Atreya nepalitimes.com)

Tony Jones

TRUCK ART

The decoration art on trucks in Nepal is fantastic ('Art and poetry in motion', Shristi Karki, #1213). I am hoping they will never disappear. They are such a delight to see, to read, and to remember, and are a real cultural phenomenon. I know, more Asian countries have lavishly decorated vehicles, but then I love the ones in Nepal most. They bring happiness and good vibes. I hope there are more of them.

Renate Schwarz

INDIA ELECTIONS AND ECONOMY

Things are not all that bad in India ('India's elections and its economic future', Raghuram G Rajan, nepalitimes.com). Until one factors-in climate change such as 50+°C in Delhi and of all that that forewarns.

Tony Jones

CORRECTION

In last week's newsletter 'Kunda Dixit talks Money and Mountains', due to a typographical error we incorrectly published the total number of permits so far this season at nearly 6,000. It should be 600.

1,000 WORDS



BUDGING ON BUDGET: Finance Minister and former guerrilla commander Barsha Man Pun holds up the customary red-ribboned bag with his budget speech in Parliament on Tuesday.

GOPEN RAI



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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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WHAT'S TRENDING

Lessons from Covid

by Sonia Awale
Nepal took part in an important trial that discovered treatment for coronavirus disease. The Oxford University RECOVERY trial with 49,051 patients enrolled and 189 sites with Nepal being the biggest only after the UK, is the largest randomised controlled clinical trial of Covid-19 treatments. Details on our website.

f Most reached and shared on Facebook

Mountains of books

by Kunda Dixit
Visit nepalitimes.com to read reviews of three books about the Himalayan climbing to mark the centenary of the 1924 Everest expedition: The Last Englishmen, Everest Mountain Guide, and Alpine Rising.

x Most popular on X

Peak season in the Nepal Himalaya

by Vishad Onta
Strong pre-monsoon storms lashed the world's highest mountain as the spring climbing season drew to a close. Questions have again been raised by overcrowding and garbage. Follow us for the latest updates.

ff Most commented



Kimff turns 21

The Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival (Kimff) returned to town for the 21st time with movies on adventure, livelihood and climate change in the mountains. Read synopses of notable films online. Happy viewing.

🔴 Most visited online page

QUOTES

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP is campaigning on a fail-safe Hindutva-agenda in India's northern heartland.

Sita lama @Sitalama88
Prime Minister Modi's BJP emphasizes various agendas, including economic development and social welfare. While Hindutva is a significant part of their platform, it's important to focus on inclusive growth and unity to ensure progress for all communities in India. Let's not forget, politics is a dance of ideologies, strategies, and yes, a fair bit of drama. But to paint the BJP as a one-trick pony riding the Hindutva wave? That's like saying cricket is the only sport worth watching in India.

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Budget 2024-2025

Finance Minister Barsha Man Pun unveiled a Rs1.86 trillion budget for the fiscal year 2024-25 this week in Parliament while also setting the economic growth for the upcoming year at 6%. The sum is an increase of 6.2% compared to the previous budget. Among others, the Ministry of Information and Technology got Rs73.50 billion, Agriculture Rs57.29 billion, Energy Rs50.74, Rs12 billion and Industry Rs9.28 billion. The government has set the target for Rs3 trillion worth of IT exports in the next 10 years. It also plans to raise Rs1.26 trillion in revenue, Rs52.33 billion in foreign grants, Rs217.67 billion in external loans and Rs330 billion in internal loans.



Meanwhile, the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI) has welcomed the new budget stating that it addresses the concerns of the private sector. "The budget has programs for economic reforms, it has prioritised agriculture, energy, tourism, startups and IT which can be taken positively," said FNCCI president Chandra Dhakal.



Turkish flatbeds

Turkish Airlines has introduced new sleeping sets for passengers on long-haul flights with light velvet duvet, an ergonomic mattress pad, a pillow and a satin sleep mask. The pieces feature Turkish's FLOW pattern in light colours. The carrier says this new set prioritises home-like comfort and warmth, aiming to offer a superior sleeping environment and an unmatched flight experience on transatlantic flights. The standout piece of the collection, the silk-light duvet, offers a unique sleeping experience with its velvet suede fabric surface and iconic Turkish Airlines' FLOW pattern in light colors, creating a sense of freshness.



Kimff

The 21st Kathmandu International Film Festival (Kimff) kicked off this week with the screening of A Tiger's Nest which was shot in Nepal. The first day also saw a panel discussion on the film Everest: By Those Who Were There directed by Dominic Bush and John Porter. British Ambassador Rob Fenn also inaugurated an exhibition of archival photographs of the 1922, 1924 and 1933 British Everest expeditions.

Heritage Conference

Speaking at the National Conference on Restitution of Heritage jointly organised by Nepal Heritage Recovery Campaign and the Department of Archaeology, Australian Ambassador Felicity Volk implored governments and



communities to work together in returning stolen pieces of heritage to their places of origin, and that Nepal could lead the effort worldwide. A 13th century tympanum was returned from Australia to Ratneshwar in Patan in May 2023.

Cathay partners

Hong Kong flag carrier Cathay Pacific honoured Nepali travel and cargo partners at their 'Wings of Excellence' award night including Osho World Travel Nepal and



Himalayan Travel & Tours. Cathay operates five flights a week from TIA to Hong Kong and beyond and also runs an air cargo service.



NHRC at 24

National Human Rights Commission has celebrated its 24th anniversary during which UN Resident C-ordinator Hanaa Singer-Hamdy commended the organisation for retaining its 'A' status and passing a review. Singer-Hamdy highlighted Nepal's diversity as both a beauty and a challenge, stressing the need to bring equality to the marginalised. She also urged that victims of the armed conflict receive tangible justice.



Suman with eSewa

Comedian and actor Suman Karki is the new brand ambassador for eSewa. Karki, who broke into the Nepali comedy scene through the show 'Comedy Champion,' will represent the company and star in advertisements of eSewa which became the first digital payment platform in Nepal in 2009.

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BARDIA'S BIRDS

The Bardia National Park is a jewel of nature in western Nepal, and a birder's paradise

Changeable Hawk-Eagle.



Orange-breasted Green Pigeon.

Carol Inskipp in Bardia

Bird photographs by **Umang Jung Thapa**

Bardia National Park photos by **Carol Inskipp**

Bardia National Park is naturally famous for being the easiest place in the world to see tigers in the wild. But since visiting this jewel in the plains of western Nepal five times in the last 40 years, what attracts me most about Bardia besides its charismatic mammals is its fabulous birdlife.

The park has recorded over 525 bird species and 61 mammals, and is recognised as an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area and so of global importance for birds and other wildlife.

By area, Bardia is Nepal's largest national park in the Tarai, and much of it consists of the alluvial plain of the Karnali River in the west as it bursts out of the mountains, and the pristine Babai River valley to the northeast.

To the north, the Chure Range rises to 1,440m which means the park has diverse vegetation types ranging from extensive grasslands

to climax forests, and over 70% of the reserve is covered by sal forests.

Then there are riverine forests of acacia and sissoo in the lowlands and deciduous and chir pine forests higher up. The park is dotted with pools, many of them manmade, to provide water for wildlife.

But what makes Bardia special are its birds. Just woodpeckers, there are 16 species, including the globally Vulnerable Great Slaty Woodpecker (*Mulleripicus pulverulentus*): a gangling and prehistoric-looking bird that is one of the largest woodpeckers in the world.

Then there is the scarce White-naped Woodpecker (*Chrysocolaptes festivus*) which is endemic to the Subcontinent.

Great Hornbills (*Buceros bicornis*) are frequently seen, but the loss of large fruiting trees as nest sites and food source, as well as hunting for food and medicinal purposes have put the hornbill in the globally vulnerable category.

Bardia is rich in raptors, and among them is the Steppe Eagle (*Aquila nipalensis*), a winter visitor. Rapid recent declines have led to it being listed as globally Endangered. The rare local Grey-headed Fish-



WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY

Tracking Himalayan wildlife

The Natural History Museum in Kathmandu revives the ancient art of tracking with an exhibit

■ **Alton C Byers**

Animal tracking is an art that has been practised by traditional peoples for thousands of years for hunting and survival. Gathering evidence about an animal with tracks, scat, and other signs, they locate, trail, and interpret its behaviour in the wild.

In Nepal, although indigenous people like the Raute, sikari hunters and a few naturalists use tracking, the knowledge is diminishing.

Between 1993-1995, I lived in what was then the remote village of Khandbari



Silicone rubber moulds of Himalayan mammals presented to the Natural History Museum.

of Sankwasabha district to help establish the 1,500 km² Makalu-Barun National Park. I started making and collecting plaster casts of the mammal tracks encountered along the

forest trails, riverbanks, fields, and alpine areas.

My friend and co-manager was Narayan Poudel who was tragically killed in the



Rai sikari hunters and Makalu-Barun Conservation Project staff deep in the forests in 1993.

PHOTOS: ALTON C BYERS

2006 helicopter crash in the Kangchenjunga Conservation Area. He was enthusiastic about the collection and encouraged me to make plaster casts of as many tracks as possible



Great Slaty Woodpecker, easily located by its distinctive whinnying cackle and often in small groups.



The Great Hornbill in flight when it makes a sound like a steam engine starting up.



Grey-headed Fish-Eagles feed almost entirely on fish, sometimes supplemented by birds and mammals.



Eagle (*Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus*) can be seen on pools and streams.

The Rufous-bellied Eagle (*Lophotriorchis kienerii*) is another uncommon resident in the park and listed as Near-threatened globally because of widespread deforestation. An aerial hunter, it often captures prey on or near the ground or treetops after spectacular dives.

Bardia has an impressive list of 14 resident owl species. The magnificent Mottled Wood Owl (*Strix ocellata*) was only discovered for the first time in Nepal in 2015 when a pair was photographed in Khata Corridor in the Buffer Zone and has been frequently recorded since. India is the only other country where Mottled Wood Owl is regularly seen.

The Dusky Eagle-owl (*Bubo coromandus*) often breeds in a deserted stick raptor nest in the top of tall mature trees, at the forest edge or in grassland.

Brown Fish-owl (*Ketupa zeylonensis*) is a commonly seen resident, usually roosting in the daytime camouflaged in thick foliage of large trees in a secluded site near water in forest.

Bardia supports a host of smaller bird species like the Blue-bearded (*Nyctornis athertoni*) and Asian Green (*Merops orientalis*) Bee-eaters are fairly common

residents, while Chestnut-headed (*M. leschenaulti*) and Blue-tailed (*M. philippinus*) Bee-eaters are common in summer.

Other colourful and fairly common summer visitors are Indian (*Pitta brachyura*) and Western Hooded (*P. sordida*) Pitta.

In March the gorgeous scarlet flowers of the silk cotton tree attract an array of nectar feeders: Hair-crested Drongo (*Dicrurus hottentottus*), Black-hooded Oriole (*Oriolus xanthornus*), Scarlet Minivet (*Pericrocotus flammeus*), and Spot-winged Starling (*Saroglossa spiloptera*), to name a few.

Grassland specialities include Golden-headed Cisticola (*Cisticola exilis*), Yellow-bellied Prinia, (*Prinia flaviventris*), White-tailed Bushchat (*Saxicola leucurus*), Indian Grass-babbler (*Graminicola bengalensis*), and Chestnut-capped (*Timalia pileata*), Striated (*Argya earlei*) and Yellow-eyed (*Chrysomma sinense*) Babblers.

The striking Siberian (*Calliope calliope*) and Himalayan Rubythroat (*C. pectoralis*) are winter visitors to scrub and grassland as well as several wintering bush-warblers: Aberrant, Grey-sided, Pale-footed and West Himalayan Bush-warbler.

The rivers and streams support a rich diversity of birdlife: Greater Painted-snipe (*Rostratula benghalensis*), River Lapwing

(*Vanellus duvaucelii*), Stork-billed (*Pelargopsis capensis*), Pied Kingfishers (*Ceryle rudis*) and Black-backed Forktail (*Enicurus immaculatus*) which are all resident. While in winter there is Blue Rock-thrush (*Monticola solitarius*), Wallcreeper (*Tichodroma muraria*), Citrine Wagtail (*Motacilla citreola*) and many wader species.

While crossing the Babai Bridge on the East-West Highway, there are stunning views of the unspoiled Babai River valley with its forested hills and wild river.

The Critically Endangered Gharial (*Gavialis gangeticus*) and Vulnerable Mugger (*Crocodylus palustris*) can be easily seen in the cold season, basking on sandbanks. The Gharial is exclusively a fish-eater, and it hunts underwater with sharp interlocking teeth and long narrow snout.

The Mugger preys on fish, snakes, birds, and mammals and is also a scavenger. The Himalayan or Golden Mahseer (*Tor putitora*) is an Endangered fish which can reach up to 2.75m and turtles such as the Endangered Indian Softshell Turtle (*Nilssonina gangetica*) can often be seen on the Babai.

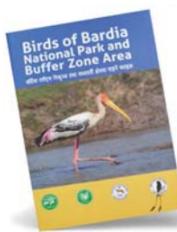
Nepal tripled its tiger population to 360 in the past 14 years, and nearly 160 of them are estimated to be in Bardia and its buffer zone.

The park is one of the best places to see Asian Elephant (*Elephas maximus*) in the wild. Other mammals are: Leopard (*Panthera pardus*), several deer species including Spotted (*Axis axis*) and Swamp Deers (*Rucervus duvaucelii*), Nilgai (*Bosephalus tragocamelus*), as well as Indian Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) which has been successfully re-introduced from Chitwan National Park. If you are lucky, you can spot the Endangered Gangetic River Dolphin (*Platanista gangetica*) on the Karnali River.

Bardia is relatively isolated, and this has helped to protect its wide range of wildlife and habitat, and is much quieter than Chitwan. It is well worth the effort to get there. 🇳🇵



The Mottled Wood Owl is nocturnal, and can be spotted before dusk falls if you're lucky.



Birds of Bardia National Park by Bird Conservation Nepal



Birds of Nepal Helm Field Guides, 2016 by Richard Grimmett, Carol Inskipp, Tim Inskipp, Hem Sagar Baral Available on Amazon 368 pages. \$41 (shipped to Nepal)



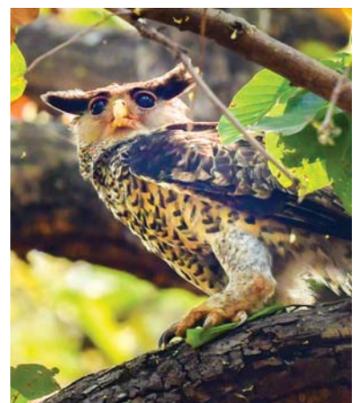
Stork-billed Kingfisher is impressive, with a massive red bill.

Getting to and Staying in Bardia

Fly to Nepalganj from Kathmandu, and take the two-hour jeep ride through the park to the Park Headquarter at Thakurdwara.

There is a range of accommodation in the Buffer Zone from luxury resorts to tented camps and homestays. Some suggestions: Royal Tiger Cottage, Burhan Wilderness Camp, Tiger Tops Karnali Lodge.

Experienced and very knowledgeable local guides are available for safari and jungle walks. Allow at least three days for your visit.



Spot Bellied Eagle Owl.

that could be used in a natural history book about the Makalu-Barun National Park someday. Natural History of the Wild Side of Everest by Frances Klatzel was eventually published.

My main teachers were the Rai sikari hunters who accompanied me on treks through the park. They had grown up learning about the forests, animal tracks, and hunting and trapping (paso) techniques. They were also experts at identifying edible, utilitarian, and medicinal plants, and could live quite comfortably for months if given nothing more than a khukuri and a little salt.

Hunting was prohibited in the national park and buffer zone but there were local people with a hunting background who were among the best naturalists that I had ever encountered. They were fluent in the flora and fauna of the forests in which they lived. They could mimic dozens of bird and animal calls, follow a trail over solid rock, and often knew the names of the birds, mammals, and reptiles in three languages.

I observed my guide Bhakta Ram Rai examine a set of fresh tracks made the night before just outside of our camp near Walung. Just on the basis of that track he could infer that the tracks were rounded, wider than

long, with three-lobed footpads and four, somewhat rounded toes. No claw marks, except occasionally at steep and muddy trail inclines.

The animal was large, walking, unhurried, with a body length of about 1.5m, shoulder height of 40cm, and weight of approximately 50kg, most likely male. The tracks were made between 4 to 6 hours previously, just after the misty rain. It was the leopard which had dined on a barking deer recently.

Fast forward to 2019. I had been to Nepal many times in the interim period and dozens of plaster casts I had made 25 years before remained stored in cardboard boxes in my basement wrapped in Rising Nepal newspapers from 1994.

I was able to make 30 or more plaster casts of bear, leopard, barking deer, tiger, chital, sloth bear, snow leopard, wild buffalo, blue sheep, and pika tracks, and turn them into a silicone rubber moulds to make them durable, so they could be used as a teaching tool for students of natural history.

The Natural History Museum in Kathmandu has a collection of over 50,000 plants, animals, and fungi. Its head Ganesh Bahadur Thapa was enthusiastic about using the track casts as an educational tool and they

are currently on display there together with later collections of snow leopard, blue sheep, Tibetan wolf casts, as well as Tarai species.

Ideally, the next step will be to develop mammal tracking and natural history educational programs for students throughout Nepal as they have in Baltistan in Pakistan.

"Making school children aware of snow leopard behaviour and its habitat, and teaching them about tracks and tracking from a young age will significantly contribute to survival of the species," says Ghana Gurung, director of the WWF Nepal.

Natural history of the planet

'Animal tracks are the transient reminders of who has passed and what they were doing – in short, a paragraph in the maker's life history book. Normally tracks are gone for eternity but casts retain the story of sentient beings for others to read, comprehend and contemplate through a thoughtful naturalist's mind. Learn to read the story. Preserve a track, save the natural history of planet earth.'

Wildlife educational programs are particularly important at a time when Nepal becomes more and more urbanised, with children spending less and less time in the natural world. Tracking opportunities abound even on the outskirts of towns. Common leopard, wild boar, and barking deer tracks, for example, can be found along the sides of the roads on the Kathmandu Valley rim.

A basic knowledge of tracks and tracking would also be of immense value to Nepal's growing numbers of natural history and trekking guides, most of whom seem to be fluent in birds and mammals, but lack the interpretational skills of their forebears. Natural History Museum staff will also be trained in mould making techniques so that its track collection can continue to grow.

Says Ganesh Bahadur Thapa of the Natural History Museum: "The first mammalian silicone rubber moulds amassed over three decades of work in Nepal is now a valuable asset of the museum. It can enhance awareness of wildlife in Nepal, and contribute to conservation efforts." 🇳🇵

Alton C Byers, PhD is Senior Research Scientist at the Institute for Arctic and Alpine Research (INSTAAR), University of Colorado at Boulder in the United States.

EVENTS

**Guilty or Not Guilty**

Watch the mystery unfold in Guilty or Not Guilty, a gripping courtroom drama with intense scenes, complex characters, and unexpected twists.

Until 8 June, 5:30pm (Everyday except Tuesdays)
1pm & 5:30pm (Saturdays), Kausi Theatre, Teku
9861315317

Kimff 2024

The 21st edition of the Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival will feature 60 films from 22 countries. Don't miss out.

Until 2 June, 11am-5pm, Rastriya Sabha Griha/
Nepal Tourism Board (01)5318048

**Deities of Nepal**

Step into the realm of gods at Nepal Art Council's second edition of Deities of Nepal, featuring 235 pieces from 163 artists.

Until 10 June, Nepal Art Council, Baber Mahal
(01)5320735

Burmese Food Fest

Taste Burmese flavours at a food festival hosted by Burmese students from Gyanodaya School. Enjoy the accompanying live music.

1 June, 2pm onwards, Moksh, Jhamsikhel

**Nepal Bike Day**

Revel in the thrill of a motorcycle and connect with fellow riders and enthusiasts from around the country. Karl Wine also joins.

1 June, 12pm onwards, Ticket: Rs500, Heritage
Garden, Lalitpur

DINING

**Belgian Waffles**

Taste mouthwatering waffle creations at Belgian Waffles Co., or get it delivered to your doorstep through Foodmandu.

Darbar Marg, 9843108194

MUSIC

Youthful Rhythms

Set to bring talented young artists together, this event promises an evening of energetic performances and vibrant songs from artists such as Kumar Saga and the Khwopaa.

31 May, 6pm onwards, Ticket: Rs1,000, Turtle
Club, Thamel

**Mid-Bhaktapur Music Fest**

The mid-Bhaktapur music fest blends food and music. Catch John & the Locals, Sushant ra Raga, The Surmount, Amadhyam and other bands.

1 June, 1pm onwards, Ticket: Rs650, Heritage
Palace, Radhe Radhe

**Tribute to AC/DC**

Gear up in rock 'n roll attire and head to Hard Rock Cafe, where the Mark band and Rohit Bomjan will play tributes to AC/DC. Also play some rock trivia. Call to book a table.

31 May, Hard Rock Cafe Kathmandu, Darbar
Marg, 9801986771

**Album Release**

The band Pahlenlo Batti Muni is releasing their second album, Raako Ramita. Hear it live for the first time at Tangalwood.

1 June, 4pm onwards, Ticket: Rs500, Calm,
Tangalwood

POLARIS Acoustic Evening

Have a melodious evening at Rai School this Saturday. Exclusively open to grades 10, 11 and 12, there are also exciting gift hampers for post-SEE students.

1 June, 4pm-6:30pm, Rai School, Naxal,
9801966967

**Flat Iron Grill**

Known for their sandwiches, Flat Iron Grill has equally delicious desserts. From cheesecakes to eclairs, this eatery offers the best of anything sweet.

Hotel Ambassador, Lazimpat 9808200961

Attic

Enjoy Attic's signature Royal Aloo and other tasty dishes from the comfort of your home. Attic's Facebook page has more information.

Gyaneshwar (01) 4517843

GETAWAYS

**Pataleban Vineyard Resort**

An eco-resort with spectacular views, jungle trails, and picnic spots. Rejuvenate from your tedious routine, take a tour of the vineyard and taste the wine.

Chisapani (01) 4316377/ 9841679364

Sacred Valley Inn

This quaint getaway in Pokhara has rustic stone walls and is surrounded by lush greenery. Sit by the beautiful garden, with a cup of tea next time you're in that area.

Lakeside, 984605352

**Bardia Gaida Camp**

Reconnect with nature a stone's throw away from the rhino zone in central Chitwan National Park. Enjoy scenic views of lush forests and glimpses of rare wildlife.

Chitwan, 9858024622

Club Himalaya

Club Himalaya is ideal for amazing views of the mountains and a refreshing weekend escape. Special packages are available for Nepalis and expats.

Nagarkot (01) 4514432

**Hotel Heritage Bhaktapur**

A Newa-style boutique hotel that incorporates the rich art and architecture of the ancient city of Bhaktapur.

Suryabinayak, Bhaktapur (01) 6611628

Kebab & Pizza

Savour kebab and pizza and combinations at Turkish Kebab & Pizza Hub in Ekantakuna.

Ekantakuna (01) 5439733

**Muse Restobar**

A multi-cuisine restaurant and bar with a sophisticated wooden interior, providing a complete family environment.

Uttarhoka, Lazimpat (01) 4545533

WEEKEND WEATHER

**Hot, humid**

As we can see in this NASA Worldview weather image of the Subcontinent, Cyclone Remal has been pushed off by the westerlies after drenching eastern Nepal, and Kathmandu got 10mm on Monday-Tuesday. Henceforth it is going to be a routine of bright mornings with things getting quite hot and humid by afternoon, and then passing thundery showers by afternoon and evening right across the mountains. The southwest monsoon is advancing up from Kerala and so far seems to be on schedule with an ETA in Kathmandu of mid-June. Air quality has improved somewhat, but there is a lot of transboundary smoke coming in from the southwest.

OUR PICK



A 2024 spy action comedy film directed, co-written and co-produced by Guy Ritchie, The Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare, tells a story of top-secret combat unit formed during WWII by UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill and a small group of military officials to strike against German forces behind enemy lines during World War II. The recruits composed of a motley crew of rogues and mavericks go on a mission against the Nazis using unconventional and ungentlemanly fighting techniques. Based on recently declassified files of the British War Department, the movie stars Henry Cavill, Eiza González, Alan Ritchson and Alex Pettyfer.

MISS MOTI-VATION

KRIPA JOSHI

Sometimes, all you need is a little spin to see things from a different perspective.

— abcradio.fm

Miss Moti-vation
© Kripa Joshi 2024

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

In the realm of the gods

Deities of Nepal is an ambitious exhibition giving visitors a tour d'horizon of living faith and divine art

■ Pinki Sris Rana

The ongoing Deities of Nepal II exhibition at Nepal Art Council coincided this week with the Conference on the Restitution of Heritage where questions were raised about whether it is appropriate to charge a fee to look at gods in glass cases in museums and galleries.

The answer from some experts was that a statue of a deity is a work of art until it is consecrated in a temple, after which it attains a divine status worthy of worship. Only 149 of the tens of thousands of sacred objects stolen from Nepal have been returned.

Early guidebooks on Nepal used to say that there were more gods than people and more temples than houses in Kathmandu Valley. That probably has not been true for a long time, but the Deities of Nepal II exhibition tries to do justice to the sheer diversity in the Hindu-Buddhist faith that has enriched Nepal's art and culture.

Much like there are gods and goddesses in every alley corner in Kathmandu Valley, the exhibition's grey-white walls lead us to various depictions of deities in sculpture, paubha, painting and carvings.

In the middle of the exhibit is an intricately crafted wooden temple with a bronze Ganesh at the centre. On both sides are wooden pillars with bells, and there is space to circumambulate as if it were a real shrine.

Nepal Art Council's Sagar SJB



PINKI SRIS RANA



Rana explains that the exhibition's design was a deliberate attempt to recreate Kathmandu's sacred urbanscape in a gallery setting.

He adds, "We are trying to look at art galleries beyond the maths of the selling and buying of arts, to have an exhibition that is new, innovative as well as having an educational element."

This is the second Deities of Nepal show, after the success of the first one in 2022. It features over 200 creations by 163 artists. Except for Nelson Ferreira's Nocturnal Paintings of Kathmandu Valley which gleam only after turning a light on them, all the other artworks are by Nepal-born

artists.

"Deities are popular among both artists and audiences," says curator Swosti Rajbhandari Kayastha. "The first exhibition gave us the confidence to be more ambitious and have a bigger show."

Deities of Nepal II took a year of preparation, and the featured artworks were selected from a pool of over 500 items from more than 400 artists.

"Exhibitions are a way of introducing Nepal's heritage to the younger generation, who may be more interested in seeing art than visiting temples," adds Kayastha.

The audience at the exhibition one afternoon this week was made up of different age groups and from various walks of life. There were art connoisseurs, college students, the middle-aged, senior citizens and even parents with children.

In addition to paintings, thangka, paubha and charcoal drawings, the exhibition features stone and bronze sculptures, and immersive media using the motion graphics of a lotus painting. Says Rana: "Divine art fuses deities and handicrafts, and we have tried to recreate that here."

While the first gallery room is a replica of Kathmandu, an adjacent one is devoted to the stolen deities of Nepal. The second floor has more Hindu gods, and Mithila paintings from the Ramayana and the third floor is mostly made up of sculptures.

The exhibition reaches beyond Kathmandu Valley to Tibetan and Mithila art, with some artists having added their own improvisations to reimagine our gods. All this makes Deities of Nepal II a fine showcase of Nepali faith and craftsmanship. 🇳🇵

Deities of Nepal II

Till 10 June

Nepal Art Council, Baber Mahal

CHOOSE EVERYTHING HYBRID ELECTRIC VEHICLES

The COROLLA CROSS HYBRID ELECTRIC VEHICLE can help you find your next adventure.



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Poisoning children at school

Schools situated along busy roads have air so toxic it is 8 times higher than what is considered safe

■ Ramesh Kumar

On a recent morning students at Darbar High School in the centre of Kathmandu were gathering for morning assembly. Excited chatter rose above the din of traffic outside the school gate.

Nearby, pollution monitoring equipment found the concentration of suspended particulate matter smaller than 2.5 microns (PM_{2.5}) in the school that morning at 211µg/m³. Inside classrooms, the monitor read 126µg/m³ on average all day.

"I get at least three pupils every day with lung problems, it is worse in winter," says Bhavna Ojha Joshi, a nurse at the school infirmary.

Nepal's National Ambient Air Quality Standard considers PM_{2.5} concentration of 40µg/m³ in 24 hours as 'healthy'. But the World Health Organization says it must not exceed 15µg/m³, and says anything over this is unsafe. At the adjacent Ratna Park measuring station, the Air Quality Index (AQI) that morning was 179µg/m³.

Darbar High School is 123 years old, and collapsed in the 2015 earthquake. It has been rebuilt and is located at the busiest intersection in the city centre. All day long, students here breathe poisonous air that affects their health, learning ability, and physical and mental growth.

Six km away at the northwest corner of the Ring Road, students are also gathering for morning assembly at the Shree Kali Devi Secondary School. The PM_{2.5} concentration there measured 89µg/m³, and it dropped to 35µg/m³ during the course of the day since vehicular emission is blown away by afternoon breeze from the west.

It is not just diesel and petrol cars, smoke from wildfires burning out of control all over Nepal made Kathmandu the most polluted city in the world in the IQAir list for several days in a row in April.



ARUN KARKI

Kathmandu ranked 11th in a list of 114 capital cities with the worst air. Diesel exhaust, smoke and dust are visible, but suspended particles smaller than 2.5 microns are most dangerous since they can cross the blood-air barrier in the lungs.

"The particles enter the bloodstream and affect vital organs," says infectious disease specialist Anup Subedee. Toxic air is harmful to all, but especially for children and the elderly.

Because their lungs, brain, organs, and immune systems are still developing, children have weaker immune systems and are more affected by air pollutants.

Moreover, while people over 18 breathe up to 20 times a minute, younger ones breathe 30 times,

absorbing more particles. Pollutants also cause allergic reactions in the respiratory tract, which change the structure of their airways, causing chronic asthma.

"Continuous exposure to toxic air in children is not limited to colds, headaches and shortness of breath, but can extend to chronic heart and lung disease as well as cancer," warns paediatrician Ganesh Kumar Rai, former director of Kanti Children's Hospital.

At Tarun Secondary School, 500m outside Balaju on Kathmandu's Ring Road, the PM_{2.5} concentration was 155µg/m³ in the morning as fifth grader Pramisa Bardeva was walking to school along a dusty road. She has a chronic cough, and wears a flimsy



GOPEN RAI



Breathing kills, even indoors

Household air pollution is a silent killer in Nepal, disproportionately affecting women and children

■ Yugottam Koirala

A middle-aged mother kneels to arrange firewood in her smoky mud stove, unaware that the air she is breathing is shortening her life. Her children play in a fume-filled hut, their eyes burning and throats congested.

Most of the discourse around air pollution involves diesel emissions and urban smog, but dirty air within the household is a silent emergency that is killing people prematurely – mostly mothers and their children who spend more time around the kitchen hearth, especially in winter.

The pollution is the result of incomplete burning of biomass including firewood, crop residue or animal dung, in inefficient stoves that do not allow adequate oxygen for combustion in confined space inside homes.

The smoke has high levels of suspended particulate matter at concentrations worse than in Kathmandu. The result is acute respiratory infections (ARI), chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) as well as cardiovascular



STOVETEAM INTERNATIONAL/ECPA

complications.

Over two-thirds of Nepali households still use biomass as fuel, and the proportion is 90-95% in rural areas removed from the electricity grid or LPG supply networks. As mud stoves belch out smoke, poorly ventilated kitchens trap them indoors, prolonging exposure.

"This triggers inflammation of the airways, causing smoke particles to penetrate deep into the lungs and enter the bloodstream," explains Sudhir Lohani, a Nepali respiratory physician. "Over time, this causes a reduction of the blood's oxygen-carrying capacity and compromises immune response. With time, it can cause stroke, ischaemic heart disease, COPD and lung cancer."

In young children, the same pollutants increase the risk of ARIs which can easily turn fatal since they have not yet built up a strong immune system. The Nepal Demographic and Health Survey of 2016 revealed that 31% of neonatal deaths in Nepal were from respiratory and cardiovascular disorders.

The survey also showed a

mask.

"My daughter's studies have suffered because she is sick so often," says Pramisa's mother Manju. "They say she is sick because of the dirty air, and the hospital bills are piling up."

There are some 650,000 school-going children in Kathmandu Valley, of which 362,000 are students below Grade Five. Kathmandu has 1.6 million vehicles of which 80% are motorcycles. Most of these ply within the Ring Road, which means nearly 200,000 of the youngest students are exposed to the worst pollution all day at school. In 2023, the Ratna Park monitoring station recorded that only 8% of days are 'clean air' days, mostly during the monsoon.

Environmental scientist Uttam Babu Shrestha returned to Nepal with his family from Australia four years ago. His son, now seven, has chronic asthma.

"Although we worried about his health, his respiratory issues worsened after we came back due to the pollution here," says Shrestha. His son has to regularly use an inhaler. Paediatricians said that a quarter of the children they see have asthma, whereas 20 years ago the most common ailments used to be diarrhea or typhoid.

Data from Kanti Children's Hospital shows that 38% of the 2,378 patients admitted in 2022-23 suffered from respiratory diseases. Another 2,951 children were treated in the pulmonary ward in that time. This year, nearly the same number of children had been in the pulmonary ward by February.

Jagat Jeevan Ghimire, a physician at Kanti, specialises in children's respiratory issues

and estimates that one out of five children in Kathmandu Valley has a respiratory disease. Eight out of 12 ICU beds in the hospital are occupied by respiratory patients.

Binod Sapkota's three-year-old son Arogya suffers from asthma and has to use an inhaler up to four times a day. The asthma flares up when pollution levels are high. Physicians do not recommend mask use for children under five because it makes it difficult to tell if a child is having breathing issues.

Air pollution kills more people than all other natural and manmade disasters in Nepal every year. Last year, an estimated 42,100 people died of respiratory issues. Toxic air cuts 4.6 years off the average Nepali's lifespan, in the Tarai the figure is a shocking minus 7 years.

Most physicians we spoke to said that the real culprit is the lack of political will in government to control emissions. Politicians seem not to have grasped the scale of this crisis, and that it is a life-or-death issue for so many Nepalis.

Paediatrician Prashant Prasad Rijal notes how respiratory issues like pneumonia and asthma among children decreased during the Covid-imposed lockdowns, from up to four patients every day to four every month. "As soon as the pollution level dropped, the children were healthier," he recalls.

The number of registered vehicles in Nepal has doubled over the last five years, while petroleum consumption has increased by 160% in the last decade. The major contributors to Kathmandu's toxic air are vehicular and industrial emissions, brick kilns, development construction, crop and garbage burning, wildfires, and

transboundary pollution.

Studies show that emissions from substandard and old vehicles are the major cause of air pollution in Kathmandu. Vehicles need to pass an annual emission test, but only 30% of the total four wheelers took the test last year. Motorcycles do not need to undergo tests even if they emit poisonous gases.

Garbage and agricultural waste burning is another contributor to toxic air in urban Nepal, even though it is prohibited by law. National Statistics Office's 2022 study showed that 1 million tons of waste is produced annually in the country's municipalities, of which 22,750 tons (2.2%) are incinerated. The National Agricultural Census 2022 found that 3 million tons of agricultural residue is burned every year, 90% of it in the Tarai.

Pre-monsoon forest fires also make air pollution worse. NASA MODIS satellite recorded 4,114 wildfires during the first four months of 2024, double the previous years.

The Cabinet four years ago formed the Kathmandu Valley Air Quality Management Action Plan to reduce vehicular emissions, stop waste burning, and use filters in diesel-powered vehicles. Nothing was done. The Ministry of Forests and Environment introduced standards to regulate brick kilns in 2018, but failed to monitor compliance.

On Wednesday, the finance minister increased taxes on petroleum products, but the money is not invested in reducing pollution or promoting clean energy. Electrification of public mass transport is the surest way to clean up Kathmandu air quickly, and reduce petroleum imports. But the new budget raised taxes on electric vehicles.

Clean air is a Constitutional right of Nepalis, but Tek Bahadur Bogati, who moved to Kathmandu from Okhaldhunga, constantly worries about his son whose studies have suffered because of frequent hospitalisation which has drained the family's savings.

Says Bogati: "They told me it was due to dirty air, but where in Kathmandu is it clean?" 🇳🇵

reducing vehicular emissions and indoor pollution.

Environmentalist Anil Chitrakar says the priority should be more on providing cheap energy to households than to subsidise electric cars.

He told us: "Yes, battery-powered cars are needed, but very few Nepalis have cars. Since all Nepalis have to cook, rebates for electric stoves and rice cookers would reduce LPG use and clean up indoor pollution."

Although indoor pollution is of concern mostly in rural homes, Nepal is rapidly urbanising and 66% of the country's 30 million people live in cities – most of them in Kathmandu and the Tarai towns.

In cities, indoor air pollution takes new forms like toxic chemicals and volatile organic compounds, fire retardants used in carpets and upholstery, and smoking family members.

Addressing indoor pollution must start with awareness among policy makers as well as the public. Awareness will lead to behaviour change only if alternatives are affordable and accessible. For example, a mother in Mugu will only switch to an electric stove if it is cheaper than firewood, and if there is cheap power supply.

Says Lohani, "As long as individuals remain oblivious to the poor quality of air they are breathing in their homes every day, things may not get better." 🇳🇵



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The politics of pollution

Air pollution does not respect national boundaries, neither should the solution to it

■ Sonia Awale

Stubble burning in northern India and Pakistan darkens the sky over the region every year in October. We cannot wait for next October to try to fix the problem — planning to resolve the problem should begin now.

Farmers even in the Nepal Tarai have started burning wheat harvest residue because of the shortage of farm hands, and this April the haze combined with wildfire smoke made people sick, blocked off mountain views forced flight cancellations.

Apart from Kathmandu Valley's vehicular emissions, transboundary smoke blown in by prevailing winds from India accounts for much of the pollution in the country.

"The westerly wind cannot cross over the high Himalaya, and remains trapped on the southern side in Nepal, Bangladesh and India," explains R L Verma, a transboundary air pollution expert at the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) in Bangkok. "The pollution cannot disperse and is especially bad during winter due to inversion where it mixes with the fog."

Prabhakar Shrestha, a research scientist at Bonn University, wrote in Nepali Times in 2021 that the long-term average of winter Aerosol Optical Depth (AOD) from December-February over the last 20 years in the region shows that winter haze extends throughout the Indo-Gangetic plains, with higher readings for eastern Bihar, West Bengal and Bangladesh, adjoining the Nepal Tarai.

"This alarming increase in winter AOD is due to an increase in crop-residue burning, rapid urbanisation, and industrialisation in the Indo-Gangetic belt," he stated.

There are now modelling studies that can trace emissions to their source which allow atmospheric scientists to pinpoint how much of certain particulate matter is coming from within Nepal, or from across the border. These models can also be used to predict future concentrations.

"Increasingly we now have more and more pollution data which has empowered people to demand," added Verma, who was in Kathmandu recently to train researchers here on air quality monitoring, forecasting and developing an emissions inventory.

In the 1990s, air pollution levels in China were much

worse than in India, but Beijing systematically improved AQI levels. A similar clean up campaign in northern India would have downwind benefits for Nepal as well.

The Malé Declaration on Control and Prevention of Air Pollution and Its Likely Transboundary Effects for South Asia, signed between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Iran, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in 1998 set a precedent for regional cooperation for transboundary problems.

For the last 25 years, the group has supported national governments in policy formulation and strengthening regional cooperation as well as establishing monitoring networks. But the fact that air pollution levels in the region have got much worse means that the Malé Declaration has failed to meet its lofty goals.

There are now plans to revive regional cooperation in transboundary pollution control, but most policy changes have to be made and implemented within national and sub-national jurisdictions. For example, in October 2023 crop residue burning was much reduced in the Indian state of Haryana because of strict policy, but it increased in Punjab because of laxer controls (photo, above).

All this soot is blown up to the mountains, where it accelerates the melting of glaciers which are already shrinking due to global warming. The 'black carbon' particles are deposited on the ice and snow, making them melt faster.

Black carbon is also a short-lived climate pollutant along with methane, hydrofluorocarbons and tropospheric ozone which are responsible for up to 45% of current global warming.

They are expected to account for half the warming effect in the coming decades if emissions are not reduced, but because of their shorter shelf life, reducing them is a low-hanging fruit that also has public health benefits.

Two factors affect air quality: emissions and seasonal weather. We cannot control weather, but can reduce emissions by switching to cleaner alternative fuels such as hydroelectricity, Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) and solar power. Similarly, farmers need incentives to adopt alternatives to open burning after harvests.

"Every scientific problem has a political solution. We need to involve the government in finding solutions," says Verma. "Air pollution can be controlled, it just needs political will to work regionally." 🇳🇵

POLLUTED SCHOOLS

Tarun Secondary School
155µg/m³
4 February 2024

Shri Kalidevi Secondary School
89µg/m³
8 February 2024

KATHMANDU

Durbar High School
111µg/m³
31 January 2024

glaring disparity: infant mortality rate is higher in rural Nepal with 55 per 1,000 live births, while it is 38 in cities. Likewise, 64 out of 1,000 children in rural Nepal do not survive till their fifth birthday. "Without doubt, a major factor causing this urban-rural gap is indoor air pollution," adds Lohani.

Nepal's child survival rate has improved dramatically in the last 30 years. In 1990, the under-5 mortality rate was 150 per 1,000 live births. However, the national average also masks a glaring geographical discrepancy with the mortality rates in Karnali and Madhes Province much higher than the national average.

In rural homes, women and children disproportionately bear this burden. Patriarchal structures and limited decision making power limit women's access to cleaner fuels, forcing them to make do with firewood and dung cakes.

Says Lohani, "While men typically work outdoors, women shoulder the responsibility of household cooking, exposing themselves and their children to pollutants and carcinogens in smoke. Moreover, as primary breadwinners, men often have better access to nutritious food, leaving women and children undernourished and vulnerable to respiratory illness."

The World Health Organization has long recognised indoor pollution as a gender issue. In 2012 alone, over 60% of premature

deaths from household air pollution globally occurred among women and children.

Limited availability and affordability of cleaner energy sources, such as LPG and electricity, continue to trouble remote Nepali inhabitants. Although government commitments aim for clean cooking by 2030, progress is sluggish.

In cities, Nepali families are moving to electric or gas stoves in modern kitchens. But access to gas and electricity as well as poor purchasing power deprives rural families of cleaner fuels.

LPG costs over 10 times more than firewood with equivalent thermal energy in Nepal. While electricity and LPG provide cleaner options, they are bulky, entail high installation costs, are not available in rural areas.

High initial costs of electric appliances and low awareness impede wider electricity usage in villages. In contrast, firewood, crop residue, and dung remain accessible and affordable without such infrastructural barriers.

Energy experts say that as Nepal's power grid will have an electricity surplus in the coming years, the government's strategy should be to make electricity cheaper for household use within the country instead of exporting it.

This can be a win-win: reducing Nepal's import bill for LPG which is growing exponentially, while improving people's health by





Everest cornice collapse

As spring climbing season closes, climbing guide says deaths are a warning to reduce overcrowding

■ Vishad Raj Onta

Besides traffic jams in the Khumbu Icefall and a spat between Nims Purja and the government over fixed ropes, it should be the cornice collapse near the summit of Mt Everest last week that killed 2 climbers that should be focusing everyone's attention.

It was a busy week on Chomolungma as climbers pushed for the summit in the narrow weather window 20-22 May. More than 500 climbers reached the top this season, most of them last week.

Inevitably, there was a bottleneck on the knife-edged southeast ridge near the top. Videos showed climbers queuing up on the fixed rope on top of an ice overhang that seems to have collapsed under their weight. Of the six climbers who were caught in it, two (a British and Nepali) probably died in the long fall down the Kangshung Face.

Climber Vinayak Jaya Malla was on the summit at 6AM on 21 May, and witnessed the collapse on his way down. He wrote on Instagram: 'The Everest summit ridge felt different than my previous experiences on the mountain. There was soft snow.' Malla's post has a series of photos and videos that shows a line of climbers making their way down the Hillary Step. Another longer line is inching up on the same rope on top of the cornice, a hardened overhanging mass of ice.

After the collapse, some of the climbers are seen to be hanging



Vinayak Jaya Malla at Everest.



Two climbers climb their way back onto the path to the summit after a cornice collapsed below the Hillary Step on Mt Everest on 21 May.

PHOTOS: VINAYAK JAYAMALLA

by the rope and helped back up by others. They eventually self-rescued, pulling themselves up as can be seen in the video.

The collapse could have been much worse, with delays causing climbers to run out of oxygen, had Malla not helped break a new route that allowed traffic to start moving in both directions.

Malla is a veteran rock and ice climber and is one of only about 75 IFMGA/UIAGM (International

Federation of Mountain Guides Association/Union Internationale des Associations de Guides de Montagnes) certified guides in Nepal, a process that takes six to eight years and one of the few non-Sherpas with that certification.

Many of the comments on Malla's posts despaired at the traffic jams on the mountain, and called on the Nepal government to reduce the number of permits. Malla has a more pragmatic view, and told us:

"There is so much money and so many people employed on Everest expeditions that reducing permits would reduce income. How do you tell one Sherpa he can climb and support his family but another that he cannot?"

Malla has other solutions like a two-way fixed rope, and also government flexibility on fixing rigid dates of the climbing season. If guides had been allowed to set up fixed ropes from 1 May instead

of 11 May, as was the case on the North Face of Everest, there would have been a wider weather window.

Malla also thinks there is no reason for the climbing season to end exactly on 29 May just because it is historically set, and it would be safe to extend it till mid-June. A proposal from other mountaineers is to spread climbs around other peaks by pricing Everest higher.

Malla grew up below Dhaulagiri, and had no intention of being a mountaineer. But in the third year of his Bachelor's of Business Studies while completing an assignment related to tourism that Malla wrote a report comparing three mountains, and was instantly hooked. After working six frustrating months as an investment intern, Malla decided that a desk job was not for him. He faced initial resistance both from family and friends when he started climbing.

"When I proved my capability and started making money, those doubts fell away," says Malla. He has summited Everest twice, Lhotse, Dhaulagiri, and Manaslu.

His most memorable summit, however, was a first-ascent of the 5,911m Sisne Himal in Rukum based only on Google images. There are a lot of hurdles climbing in western Nepal, he says: "Permits are never cheap, we need to assemble a team. Route conditions change, and locals think the mountain gods will be angered. Yarsagumba hunters wonder if we are there to steal their business."

Due to his certification and skillset, Malla is often called upon on rescue missions. Malla was also involved in the retrieval of 22 bodies when a Tara Air flight to Jomsom from Pokhara crashed into a cliff in Mustang in 2022. He says, "It has become a pretty normal thing for me to see a dead body, but I can't let it get me emotional when I am carrying out a rescue." 🇳🇵


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