

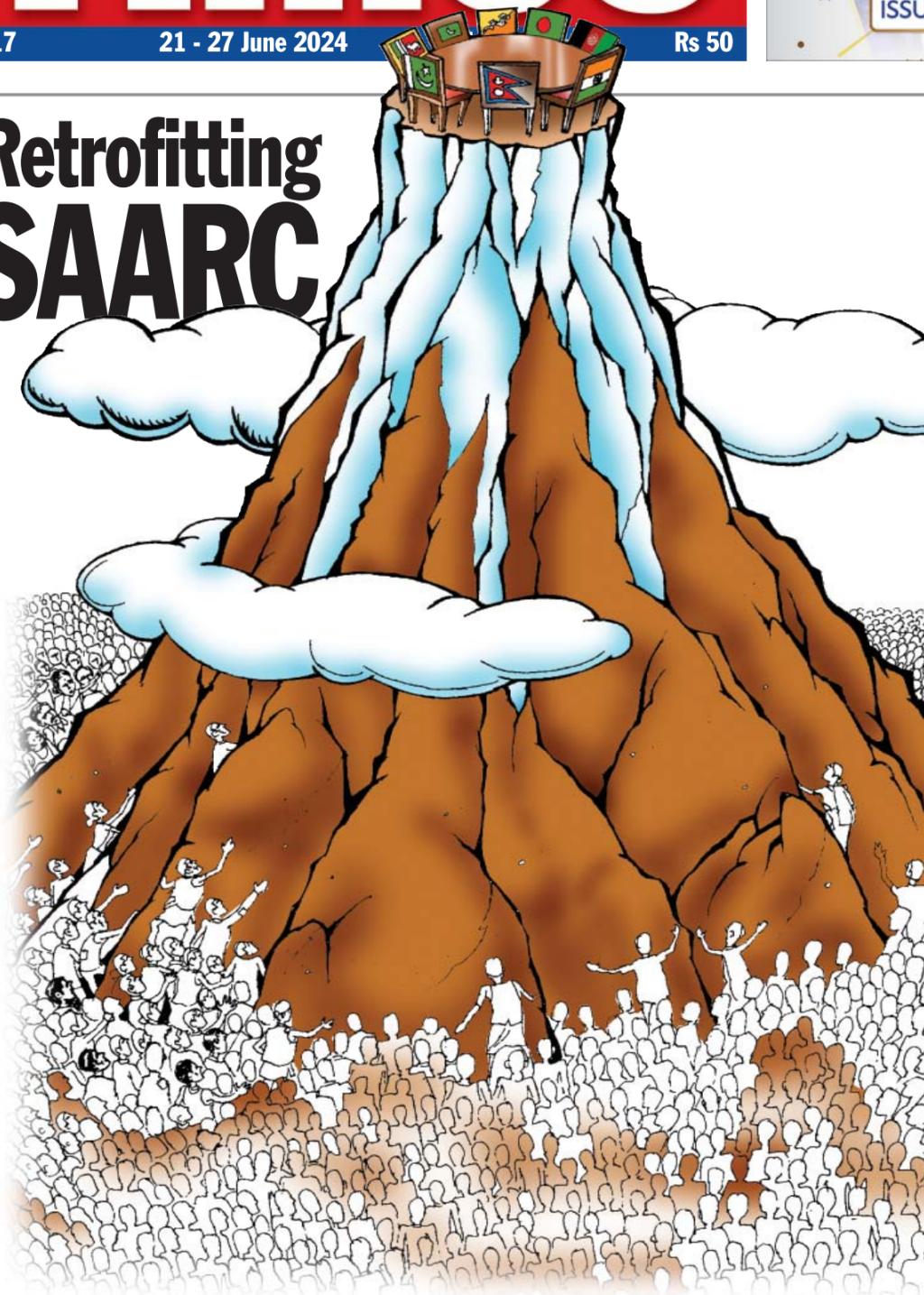
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## Retrofitting SAARC



SUBHAS RAI

■ Shristi Karki

There is cautious optimism after the Indian election results that the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) can be revived.

The Kathmandu-based bloc has been in limbo since November 2016, when Pakistan was set to host its 19<sup>th</sup> Summit, but India pulled out after an attack in Kashmir which it blamed on Pakistan.

"Bilateral grievances should not stand in the way of advancing the regional organisation," says Arjun Bahadur Thapa, who was secretary general in 2014 when the last SAARC summit was held in Kathmandu. "India's foreign policy is not dictated by politicians, but bureaucrats. Modi's decreased

political clout may dent his confidence on the global stage, but will most likely not affect his stance towards Pakistan, or SAARC."

In the past 10 years, New Delhi bypassed SAARC to pivot eastwards through overlapping sub-regional fora like BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal Initiative) and BIMSTEC (the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) with Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.

The new SAARC Secretary General Golam Sarwar from Bangladesh is touring South Asian capitals to try to resuscitate the regional organisation. This week he was in Colombo, after visiting Islamabad and New Delhi.

"To interpret recent elections

in India as a weakening of PM Modi will be a faulty premise for a revival of SAARC," says Nishchal Pandey at the Centre for South Asian Studies in Kathmandu.

Indeed, as long as SAARC is held hostage by geopolitics, not much may change. India-Pakistan tension and turmoil in Afghanistan have kept SAARC in limbo, and New Delhi prefers bilateral dealings rather than multilateral ones.

"Modi 3.0 has great power ambitions, including redefining India's identity on the world stage," Pandey adds. "But this will not be achieved unless long-standing disputes are resolved."

India's preference for BIMSTEC serves to strengthen ties with ASEAN, and also offset China's growing influence in the region. Other countries like Nepal which

are members of both SAARC and BIMSTEC have also been pulled along by New Delhi.

"For Nepal, SAARC seems to have taken a backseat to partnerships like BBIN and BIMSTEC," said Nepali Congress leader Minendra Rijal at a geopolitical conference in Kathmandu last week.

After being elected first time in 2014, Modi invited all SAARC leaders to his inauguration to launch his 'Neighbourhood First' policy. For his second swearing-in in 2019, he invited only BIMSTEC members with a 'Neighbourhood First and Act East' policy. Last week, Modi invited SAARC leaders (except Pakistan), but added Mauritius and Seychelles to his list, highlighting the Indian Ocean as another geopolitical priority.

"Global challenges demand collective action," Secretary General Sarwar told a recent Indian Ocean Conference in Perth. "Investing in international partnership, diplomacy, and development initiatives foster peace, stability and shared prosperity."

Pessimists say SAARC is as good as defunct, but optimists still see a role for the group since many of the region's problems can only

### Hindutva juggernaut hits a speed bump

### In the heat of the moment

PAGE 4-5

be resolved through cross border collaboration to improve connectivity, trade, poverty, and coping with the climate crisis. Other foreign policy experts see a weaker BJP forcing Modi to mitigate attacks on minorities and the media at home, but may compensate by being more hawkish on Pakistan and in the neighbourhood.

As current chair, Nepal should play a catalytic role, says Nishchal Pandey: "It is the obligation of the chair to ensure the organisation is not dismantled through inaction and indecision. We must be able to impress upon the Indian leadership that Nepal has been chair for a decade and we need to earnestly pass the baton to the next country."

Bangladesh was a prime mover of SAARC when it was founded in 1985 in Dhaka. Zafar Sobhan, founding editor of the Dhaka Tribune brought his family for a holiday to Nepal this week.

He told Nepali Times: "The disintegration of SAARC has been a tragedy for all South Asian countries. It would be in everyone's interests to revive it, but with the prevailing political winds in India, I don't see it happening. We are all the poorer for this loss, both literally and figuratively."



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NATUREKNIT

# Crime against humanity in Gaza

The 7 October Hamas attack on southern Israel near the Gaza border killed 1,139 people, 764 of them civilians, and 251 were taken hostage, with Nepali student Bipin Joshi possibly among them.

Of the 17 work-study Nepalis at Kibbutz Alumim, 10 were mercilessly murdered by Hamas. This newspaper covered the tragic deaths, profiled the students describing their hopes and dreams, and spoke to their grief-stricken families in western Nepal.

Although the conflicts in West Asia may seem distant, the deaths proved that they directly impact Nepalis. There are thousands of Nepali caregivers and students in Israel, and at least 2.5 million others employed in the Gulf region who will be affected in case the conflict spreads. A larger conflagration would affect food and fuel prices, and further harm Nepal's struggling remittance-driven economy.

The Israel-Palestine conflict is rooted in history that goes back to the British mandate by the League of Nations and the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 following the Holocaust. Although the Jewish people were granted a national home, they were also supposed to protect the rights of the Arab majority in the land.

The conflicts in Gaza, Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq today are essentially proxy wars between Saudi-UAE vs Iran. And because an enemy of an enemy is considered a friend, Israel patched up with Saudi-Emirates which explains the muted response from Gulf governments (and the West) about what is happening in Gaza.

Since 7 October, the world has watched the unending horror of Israel's asymmetric and disproportionate retaliation against Palestinian civilians. Nearly 38,000 people have been killed in Gaza alone, more than 15,000 of them babies and children.

The Israeli state cannot use Hamas terrorism as an excuse for its own war crimes. The air time and column inches the Western media devoted last week to the freeing of four Israeli hostages was much more than the collateral killing of 274 civilians during the rescue.

More journalists (mostly Palestinians) have been killed in eight months than in all the six years of World War II. Nearly all schools and hospitals have been destroyed. Journalists in Gaza are risking their lives to bring the humanitarian catastrophe to the world's attention. Without them, we would not know the truth.

But even as a military strategy this is not smart. Israel does not have an exit plan.

This is not war, it flouts all international conventions on the rules of warfare. A genocide perpetrated 80 years ago cannot justify another one today.

The Israeli government must know what it is doing is wrong because it is thin-skinned about any reference to 'genocide' and labels everyone from student protesters at US universities to world leaders who speak out 'anti-Semites'.

When António Guterres only obliquely said the Hamas attack "did not happen in a vacuum", it was intolerable for the Israelis. The government lashed back at the United Nations Secretary-General. Israel has also hit back at South Africa for filing a genocide case at International Court of Justice in

The Hague for its conduct of the war.

After nearly eight months of relentless bombardment, many Gazans are so fed up that there is reported resentment to be growing against Hamas for using them as human shields. It is clear Hamas does not care much about civilian lives either.

But there is also deep distress among ordinary Israelis about how Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has sullied their country's international image.

Netanyahu himself is not fighting Hamas, he is fighting for his political longevity by appeasing extremist coalition partners.

On Monday, he dissolved the war cabinet after former general and opposition leader Benny Gantz resigned, Netanyahu is replacing it with a smaller war council made up of hard-right members who now want to go after Hezbollah in Lebanon.

During his acceptance speech at this year's Oscars in March, Jonathan Glazer, the Jewish director of the movie Zone of Interest set in Auschwitz during the Holocaust, said: "Right now, we stand here as men who refute their Jewishness and the Holocaust being hijacked by an occupation which has led to conflict for so many innocent people. Whether the victims of October 7 in Israel or the on-going attack on Gaza — all the victims of this dehumanisation, how do we resist?"

Nepal recognised the Palestinian state in 1988, and was only the second Asian country to establish bilateral relations with Israel in 1960 at a time when the Jewish state was regarded as a pariah by most of the world. B P Koirala's friendship with David Ben Gurion was an important factor behind the move.

We wonder what B P would say today of the annihilation of Gaza.

**Sonia Awale**



NATIONAL PHOTO COLLECTION OF ISRAEL

## Wonder what B P Koirala would say today about the annihilation of Gaza.

## ONLINE PACKAGES



### ELEGANZA EXTRAVAGANZA

For the LGBTQIA+ community in Nepal, drag has provided a powerful platform to express, explore and celebrate their own identities. Although at a nascent stage, Nepali drag queens, drag kings, and drag performers are taking the culture in stride and using it for visibility and representation. Watch the video on our YouTube channel.

### RESIDENTIAL VISA

I always thought this was a great mistake. Most long stayers are real friends of Nepal ('GO AWAY', Sonia Awale, #1216). This is poor messaging and all too often discriminatory behaviour.

**David Seddon**

Great article. Just imagine the possibility of jobs and income for Nepal. I would love to retire in Pokhara in a couple of years.

**M E Smaeker**

Really powerful article. I always find it so strange that this country forces people out who invest so much in it.

**T Teacher**

This shows how narrow-minded and shortsighted the policies of the government are. It is important to be confident and welcoming to well wishers, as it will add more goodwill.

**Bishow Parajuli**

It is extremely sad how our bureaucrats are treating friends of Nepal who have dedicated decades of their time to helping and supporting Nepal. This is embarrassing.

**Airline Guy**

It's down to a bizarre preoccupation with race/lineage. This happens elsewhere too, but not as blatantly. Look at NRN legislation, which gives you full right to live/work if you have at least 25% Nepali blood, yet other foreigners who are actually married in Nepal are entitled to nothing. I'm not aware of any other country that specifically denies sons-/daughters-in-law of the country basic residence rights.

**Fraser Sugden**

I first arrived here over 45 years ago and have applied for a residential visa twice. Like many, I continue to wait — for over two years. Waiting is particularly arduous because one has absolutely no idea whatsoever regarding the status of their application. Secondly, my passport country, annually, grants thousands of Nepalis permanent residency leading to citizenship. I would conjecture that the ratio of my country's expats seeking a residential visa in Nepal might be something on the order of 1:500. I am told there are bilateral government-to-government "Reciprocity Agreements." Are they, defacto, unilateral?

**Name withheld**

### NEPALIS IN RUSSIA

The deaths of Nepalis in the Russian Army is really tragic ('Nepalis dying in someone else's war', Sagar Budhathoki, #1216). When will we understand that "brave Nepalis" is a tag given by colonialists to turn us into cannon fodder?

**Shreya Paudel**

They knew very well that they would be thrown on to the frontlines with basic training, yet they still went.

**Max Gurung**

Nepalis have always died for someone else's wars.

**South Asia Journal**

It is so sad that young men would be so desperate for a job. Please spread the word that Russian recruiters are liars. Bless the families whose sons come home in a box.

**Slow Trekking**

## Times.com

## WHAT'S TRENDING

### Beyond pre-conceptions of Nepal

by Aisha MacDougall  
There is something magical about Nepal - a sense of comfort and innumerable possibilities. It is a rare thing to visit a new country and immediately feel at ease. Read a Nepali Times intern's reflections of her time in the country.

**f** Most reached and shared on Facebook



### When yaks go, so does culture

by Tanka Dakhal  
Yaks which used to be the mainstay of the culture of Himalayan communities in Nepal have been in steady decline due to lifestyle changes, outmigration, inbreeding, and the impact of the climate crisis. Get the details at nepalitimes.com.

**X** Most popular on X

### Nepalis dying in someone else's war

by Sagar Budhathoki  
We tracked down the families of the 22 of Nepalis in the Russian Army who were killed in the Ukraine front and most of their stories was the same — many were lured by recruiters, seeking to repay debt. Read their full stories on our website.

**66** Most commented

### 'GO AWAY'

by Sonia Awale  
Why is Nepal driving away its best friends? The country is undermining international goodwill and losing revenue by driving out long-staying foreigners. Join the discussion online.

**7** Most visited online page

## QUOTES

**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
Nepal is undermining international goodwill and losing revenue by driving out long-staying foreigners. Read the full story:

**Neil Pande @neilpande**  
Nepal could be created as an amazing retirement hub and place of healing and recreation. It will boost economic indicators in a massive way. Why are we driving them away and making it impossible to stay here.

**Sujev Shakya @sujevshakya**  
The inward looking citizenship myopia has also meant Nepalis with spouses with non-Nepali citizenship find it difficult as children have problems with inheritance of assets and in case of divorce your settlement is stuck in Nepal

## 1,000 WORDS



**OF THE RECORD:** Home Minister Rabi Lamichhane after inspecting a photo exhibition on infrastructure and development at the head office of the state-owned news agency RSS in Kathmandu last week. Lamichhane used to be a tv talk show host before founding the RSP party.

RATNA SHRESTHA / RSS

## 20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

### Collateral Damage

Children are often 'collateral damage' in any conflict, be that in Israel's war on Gaza where more than 15,000 have been killed (Editorial, above) or during Nepal's insurgency where school-going children were recruited by the Maoists. Most of these child soldiers now say they were manipulated by the Maoists and regret taking up the arms.

In this report published 20 years ago this week, the reporter came across a group of young Maoists with schoolbags full of grenades in Dailekh. Excerpt from the issue #201 18-24 June 2004:

The mornings are freezing at 2,500m in the mountains. Nearly 65km northwest from the administrative headquarters of Dailekh, 55-year-old Laxmi Shahi is wracked by a terrible cough that kept her awake all night. She is still in bed when someone knocks on the door. Fifteen-year-old Bishnu Shahi enters, whispers something in Laxmi's ear and leaves. All Laxmi does is nod yes. A few minutes later, a dozen young boys with large backpacks come to the house with loud greetings of 'lal salam'. All of them look like they belong in school, but instead of books, their bags are packed



full of grenades.

They seem immune to the cold. Most of them have no shoes or warm clothes. Their stoicism extends to showing no fear. They follow Bahadur Thapa, 'Comrade Samman', their 13-year-old commander. He has a red homemade cotton belt full of explosives strapped to his waist, he spouts Maoist slogans and is ever ready to kill or be killed. An army helicopter sweeps overhead and his hand reaches automatically for his belt.

Before he became Comrade Samman, Bahadur was a sixth grader at the local government school. His father Ram Lal Thapa was a farmer till he was forcibly recruited for the 'People's War'. With the sole breadwinner gone, it fell upon Bahadur's mother to earn money. He says, "One day, the security forces came to our village and arrested many young boys and girls, including her, and they were beaten and tortured. Later, I was told that she was killed on the way to Dailekh, accused of being a Maoist."

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

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# Hindutva juggernaut hits a speed bump

Message to Nepal's leaders: mixing politics with religion does not work and voters will see through it all

■ Shreya Paudel

A few years ago, at a training workshop in Janakpur for political parties to deepen their internal democracy, an LSP leader openly declared that he was a member of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Indian group promoting political Hindutva.

The RSS is notorious for its anti-Muslim sentiment, and some elements of Nepal's political class have since been influenced by the inflammatory rhetoric and ideology, as well as by its political front the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP).

Fast forward to 2024, and the dust is beginning to settle after India's 'festival of democracy' in which the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by the BJP did not do as well as planned.

INDIA (the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance) led by Rahul Gandhi's Indian National Congress (INC) recovered from a dismal performance in 2019 with 231 seats.

Most India-watchers have concluded that Indian voters have stopped the BJP's Hindutva juggernaut in its tracks. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP has ruled India since 2014 with an increasingly authoritarian style, gagging a once-vibrant free media.

Muslims were bulldozed, sometimes quite literally as the Uttar Pradesh (UP) Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath of the BJP used heavy earthmovers to raze homes and businesses.

Farmers in Punjab and Haryana repeatedly marched on Delhi to protest the BJP's agriculture policies. The Covid-19 pandemic



FROM NEPAL WITH LOVE: Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal presenting a sacred rudraksha garland to his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi after the latter's swearing in in New Delhi last week.

EMBASSY OF INDIA KATHMANDU / X

caused millions of unacknowledged deaths. The youth and the working class did not benefit from India's impressive economic growth, but the Ambanis and Adanis did.

More than anything else, this election result showed the BJP a red line: the party has coalition partners who do not share its ideology. It cannot anymore bulldoze its way.

Pundits in Nepal have been analysing what a downsized BJP means for the country. Officially, Indian ex-diplomats have said that no matter which party is in power in India, its neighbourhood policy

maintains continuity.

But Nepal's royal right parties got a boost in trying to roll back secularism. Yogi Adityanath, the high priest of the Gorakhnath shrine, openly backed the restoration of monarchy in Nepal.

But it was in UP that the BJP suffered its most humiliating defeat, its candidate losing even in the constituency of Ayodhya to a Dalit. The BJP lost 29 seats in UP alone.

A weaker BJP in India, and particularly UP, could mean that the influence of political Hindutva will wane in Nepal as well. This may mean a less aggressive RSS/

BJP presence in Nepal.

This shift in Indian politics also means Nepal's ruling class cannot continue to do what it has been doing since 2014. For the past ten years, our leaders had been kowtowing at Modi's feet when in Delhi, while ignoring opposition leaders.

This continued when Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal was invited to New Delhi last week to participate at Modi's third oath taking. While there were photo-ops of Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina hugging Sonia Gandhi, Dahal and his daughter

Ganga did not bother to meet any opposition leaders. It was as if Nepal's prime minister did not even bother about the outcome of India's election result.

Ideologically, Nepal's liberal and leftist political parties are supposed to be closer to the INC and its allies. After all, Nepal's 2015 Constitution was written at a time that spanned regime change in Delhi ten years ago.

When it rains in Delhi, Nepal's leaders unfurl their umbrellas. Indeed, our political leaders have resorted to performative Hindutva rituals during India visits, making it a point to worship at temples and don saffron robes just to appease the Delhi Darbar. But the political class now needs to revive its close ties with the Indian opposition.

Back at home, the saffron flags, angry Hanuman stickers, and sword-wielding Hindutva demos in Janakpur, Birganj and Kathmandu do not really showcase Nepal's more tolerant brand of Hindu culture. These are the symbols of the proponents of 'Akhanda Bharat', the mythical greater South Asia that includes Nepal, maps of which the BJP leaders display on their walls.

Perhaps it is time to rethink what Hinduism means to us: an inclusive religion that seeks to bestow liberation to believers, not a political campaign to gain state power and marginalise other religions.

The Indian election results have also sent a message to Nepali liberals and leftists that mixing politics with religion does not work, nor does hollow populism. Sooner or later, voters see through it all. 🇳🇵

Shreya Paudel is Program Manager at the Centre for Investigative Journalism- Nepal.

## NMB BANK एनएमबि बैंक

### Green Turkish

Turkish Airlines has launched a new sustainability initiative called 'Tomorrow On-Board', which will involve a new commitment to sustainability, along with green inflight products. The announcement was



made on 5 June on World Environment Day at a special event held at Istanbul Airport where sustainable inflight products and services, along with an exhibition titled '41.2607° North and 28.7424° East', which was a curated selection of artworks created by interdisciplinary artists, made from repurposed aircraft parts. The initiative was created to enhance brand image, communicate environment-friendly ideas to passengers, and to reduce the ecological footprint. "The Tomorrow On-Board initiative embodies our commitment to reducing our environmental impact and enhancing sustainability practices across all our operations to leave a better world for future generations," said Turkish chief investment officer Levent Konukcu.

### UK education

Education consultancy International Study Partners held a program about studying in the UK. Students met admission officers from UK universities and attended group and one-on-one counselling. There were online sessions for students based outside Kathmandu.

### EV price change

The price of all models of Tata's Tiago.ev has increased by Rs100,000 because of the new budget. The base model Tiago EV LR XT now costs Rs2,649,000. Tata is running a 'Now or Never' campaign from June 20-22 as part of which customers can test drive and buy a limited stock of Tiago EVs at pre-budget prices.

### Experience Toyota

Official Toyota distributor United Trades is holding the 'Experience Toyota' event until 21 June at its Anandanagar and Dhumbarahi showrooms. Customers can test drive vehicles, get exchange bonuses, free accessories, insurance and road tax, and other free gifts. Toyota cars can be financed

through Garima Bikas and other banks.

### Speedy Worldlink

In support of Nepal at the T-20 World Cup, WorldLink ran 'Beat the Speed' to find the fastest bowlers across the country travelling to 15 cities including Birtamode, Dharan and Mahendranagar. The fastest bowlers won cricket jerseys signed by the national team. WorldLink vlogged the campaign on YouTube.

### IME discounts

Customers holding debit or credit cards from Global IME or using Global Smart Plus mobile banking will get discounts of 10-15% on staying or using services at Hotel Aikawa in Chitwan.

### Love Your Eyes

Australian Ambassador Felicity Volk and Reeta Gurung of Tilganga Institute of Ophthalmology (TIO) launched 1,000 copies of Love Your Eyes: Children's Activity Book which promotes eye health in children. The book will be available in paediatric facilities at TIO, and was designed by Australia-based social entrepreneur and Rotarian, Sandra Fiedeldy and a team of Mithila artists from Relative Nepal with funding from the Australian Embassy.



### Nepali Hyundai

Laxmi Motor Corporation has rolled out the first cars assembled at its new Hyundai facility in Parasi which produces two variants of the Hyundai Venue and will soon expand to the i10 and Creta models. The Venue FL 1.2 S will be available at Rs4,496,000 and the FL 1.2 SX at Rs5,356,000.

### Free Bolero Servicing

Agni Group is organizing free servicing for Mahindra Bolero pickup trucks through Balaju Auto Works. To participate, customers need to have bought spare parts worth Rs1,000 or more. The workshop will run from 23 June-5 July but will not cover denting-painting.

### Free health camp

The Nepal-Philippines Society conducted a free health camp at Divalaya Nepal's school compound in Budhanilkantha where 700 people got checked out for joint pain, heart disease, and kidney malfunction, among others. The society plans to hold similar camps across Nepal.



### Outreach Rebrands

Advertising agency Outreach is rebranding for its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, with a new logo that features an ice axe, website, and philosophy--'The Sherpa Philosophy'-- which aims to guide global brands to success in Nepal through strategic marketing and insights about the Nepali consumer and market.

### Choose Ncell #

Under Ncell's "My number, my choice," scheme, subscribers may choose any meaningful combination for the last six digits of their number, with the first four being 9705. This can be implemented on the Ncell app or website on a first come, first served basis.

### Yoga Day

Indian Embassy in Nepal organised a yoga demonstration and a health consultation with Ayurveda doctors in Pokhara on the occasion of the International Day of Yoga on 19 June this week. Over 450 people participated in the yoga demonstration held on the banks of Phewa Lake.



# In the heat of the moment

Climate breakdown was the missing agenda in Indian election held during a record-breaking heatwave

■ Robert Mizo

The 6-week voting period in India's election coincided with one of the worst heat waves yet recorded. But there was hardly any discussion of climate change among Indian voters and politicians or in the media.

The worst of the heatwave this year in northern India was in late May while many parts of the region went to the polls. Near Delhi temperatures soared to 52.9°C. The Indian Meteorological Department issued a clarification days later that there was an error in the weather sensor and it was 'only' 49°C.

Regardless, the heat took its toll. As of early June, the total number of heat-related deaths in India for 2024 was 219. Among these, at least 33 were officials and personnel on election duty who succumbed to heat stress. Public sector workers in India are compulsorily bound to perform election duties.

While the sweltering heat engulfed northern India, the north-eastern states of Assam, Manipur,

Mizoram and Tripura were battling the wrath of Cyclone Remal which flooded multiple cities, destroyed homes, drowned railway tracks and washed away bridges, cutting off the region from the rest of the country.

The heatwave only registered in the media as a factor in the low voter turnout. Analysts speculated how this would affect the prospects of the ruling party. Some argued that the Election Commission should have taken care to ensure that voting days did not coincide with heat-wave conditions.

But there was hardly any discussion on what was causing extreme temperature and weather, nor any debate on the responsibilities of the government to address the climate crisis.

The election manifestos of both major parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (INC) did mention the climate crisis in passing. The BJP's manifesto had a section titled "Modi ki Guarantee for Sustainable Bharat", outlining a broad range of plans to address environmental

issues including climate change.

The Congress' manifesto had a section titled 'Environment, Climate Change and Disaster Management' to set up an 'independent Environment Protection and Climate Change Authority to establish, monitor and enforce environmental standards and to enforce the National and State Climate Change plans'.

However, no politician brought up climate change or environmental issues in their electioneering, not even when a prominent leader fainted due to heat stress during campaigning. While the Congress and its INDIA alliance partners campaigned on issues of rising prices, unemployment, crony capitalism and corruption, and the dangers to constitutional democracy, the incumbent party based its campaign on rebutting the allegations of the opposition while trying to whip up religious and communal sentiments.

According to a pre-poll survey conducted by a New Delhi based Lokniti-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in 2024,

employment, inflation, and taxation were the primary concerns for the average Indian voter. Further, a survey of young Indians by Deloitte in 2023 found that Indian Gen Z place climate change as their fourth key concern after education, unemployment and mental health.

The Indian millennials do find climate change to be a major concern but not on the same plane as economic growth and unemployment. Perhaps this explains why climate change and ecological issues are still absent from the political thinking of the masses. Perhaps the green agenda is yet to find resonance with the average Indian voter who places more emphasis on what is rather controversially called the 'brown agenda' concerning the fulfilment of basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter.

However, in the larger scheme of things, this is rather dangerous. Climate change is an existential crisis for a country like India where the majority of the population are poor and thus particularly vulnerable to climate

change induced disasters. It is a country that still depends largely on agriculture for employment and food security – all affected by climatic conditions.

In the face of a changing climate, the future of the present and forthcoming generation is at best uncertain. The public has the responsibility to demand that their representatives and governments address issues of environmental degradation including emissions, air pollution, clean and safe drinking water, demand afforestation programmes and resist unnecessary clearing of forests for 'development' without relocation or alternatives being planned.

The media should do its job by holding governments accountable and informing the public about the state of the environment rather than being beholden to the powers that be. Indian public political discourse should no longer remain limited to a rhetorical and polarising agenda of religion and caste, but the existential threats of climate change. India's future might depend on it. 🇮🇳

*Robert Mizo is Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Relations at the University of Delhi and a Research Fellow at the Toda Peace Institute.*

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## HYBRID ELECTRIC VEHICLES

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As mountain biking takes off in Nepal, a new guidebook for cross-country bicycling aficionados

■ Vishad Raj Onta

People are doing three-month treks across Nepal's mountains along the Great Himalayan Trail, they are even running ultra-marathons from east to west. Now, make way for mountain bikers.

It took Welshman Richard Williams (pictured, above) 29 days to bike west-to-east across Nepal (see map) from Dadeldhura to Phidim -- 1,650 horizontal kilometres, but we are left to calculate how many vertical metres up and down that meant.

Williams has chronicled his journey in a book titled simply, *The Road*, which is not just a description of his journey but also a guidebook for cross-country bicycling aficionados.

Each day is chronicled like

a diary, capturing the culture and current mood of the country through cuisine and conversations, and it is well illustrated with photographs and useful maps and graphs.

Williams lives in Switzerland and started biking in the eastern Himalaya in India because he was spooked by reckless bus drivers on roads with nightmarish drops.

He then did the Yak Attack in Nepal in 2013, a multistage mountain bike race in the Annapurnas. After the 2015 earthquake, he came to Nepal frequently to help rebuild schools, and the idea for *The Road* started to develop.

"Nepal is associated with extreme adventure, but there are plenty of opportunities for

mellower activities," Williams told us in Kathmandu. He hopes this book will open up mountain biking in Nepal to a wider demographic. "Roads are much better now, and drivers are safer."

*The Road* is ideal to see as much of the country as possible while having a challenging enough ride in not-so-extreme temperatures. Biking across the country along The Great Himalayan Trail, has been done but it is cold, high, and sometimes requires carrying the bikes over high passes.

Biking on the East-West Highway along the Tarai is hot, flat, and dangerous. The road across the mild climate of the scenic mid-mountains is much more enjoyable.

Since Nepal's rivers mostly flow north to south, traversing the

country does mean lots of ups and downs for bicyclists.

*The Road* starts with an introduction to Nepali culture, a history of mountain biking, and Williams fills the middle with journal entries. Interviews with professional Nepali mountain bikers serve as a bookend.

Photographs by Manish Maharjan and Ananta Poudel are appealing, and drone shots of the trail and landscapes of the remote far western Nepal are blown up over two pages. Portraits of Nepalis work and play means that the book is not just about biking, but also about the people and places along the way.

On maps, the routes are marked as small red lines that zig-zag through serpentine roads, and

elevation graphs depict altitudes gained and lost. Cartographer Mark Murphy who rode alongside Williams put the maps together.

Most days, the events are pretty similar: tough 'undulating' climbs, steep descents, great views, and conversations with locals often over food and beer, chyang, or tongba.

Williams turned 61 during the trip and observes Nepal perceptively. He notices that there are very few men in the villages because of outmigration, and the remittance economy is buoyant.

Another time he talks to a group



# Rhinos bowled over on a sticky v

Despite defeat, the Nepal team won fans all over the cricket world during the T20 World Cup

On paper, Nepal had a terrible time at the ongoing ICC T20 World Cup in the Americas. Three defeats in games against The Netherlands, South Africa and Bangladesh. One game washed out against Sri Lanka and Nepal was out of the group stage, with a grand total of just one point.

Yet, Nepal overperformed. None of the three defeats were remotely embarrassing. In the last match against Bangladesh, Nepal had a fighting chance right till the last overs. If only a few things had gone right, the Rhinos would have beaten both the Dutch and South Africans.

Frenzied Nepali fans packed stadiums in Dallas and St Vincent and the Grenadines. The audience was overwhelmingly blue and red, festooned with dhaka topis and flags. The diaspora flew in from New Hampshire, Texas, Indiana, and even the UK.

"Even the locals and neutrals wanted Nepal to win," says Shrochis Karki, who travelled from Oxford for the South Africa and Bangladesh matches.

"You could feel the emotional connection between the fans and the team. There was so much joy at every boundary," describes BBC Nepali sports correspondent Niranjana Rajbanshi who is covering the games. "Ultimately, the





PHOTOS: ANANTA POUDEL



at a chiya pasal who are frustrated with the government (surprise, surprise) and vent their ire.

The book is dotted with colloquial Nepali phrases like “Tei ta,” “Ek Chin,” “Estai ho,” and “Ke Garne” – perhaps summing up a stoic Nepali spirit somewhere between helplessness and sarcasm. Williams find the Nepalis’ resignation to their fate remarkable.

Perhaps these attitudes are also behind what Williams admires about Nepal. “There is a much stronger sense of community, and people are so friendly,” he says. “Life in the West is good but everybody is individualistic, and working all the time.”

He notes his appreciation for the laid back, content culture, and marvelled at how resourceful

Nepali biking guides could be. “Once during Yak Attack a guide used a coke bottle to fix a puncture and the biker went on for 40km like that,” he remembers.

The book is also ethnographic. Williams stayed with Dalits and met Rautes, and especially liked biking through the remote parts of Western Nepal that haven’t yet been reached by mass tourism.

In one entry he details locals amused at the sight of the team, and two children initially apprehensive about meeting a stranger hijacked his bike for a quick joyride.

A lot of Williams’ descriptions are of food and drink on the go. He describes scrambled eggs for breakfast and the uniqueness of every dal bhat along the way.

“This was real, authentic

Nepali food,” he says. Williams is especially taken with tongba, the warm fermented millet drink that one has to sip through a bamboo straw. Then he passes the outsized cement monument of a giant tongba container at an intersection in Myanglung.

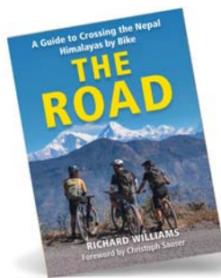
The book is a guide as well, and advises readers on where to stay and eat, and what to expect. While an ‘intrepid’ rider might want to ‘bikepack’ the route independently, Williams strongly recommends a guide and a support vehicle.

Packages for The Road are currently offered at Himalayan Single Track, a bike shop and mountain bike tour company in Thamel.

“It is hard to sell the entire trail because of how long it is, but we have packages for people to do parts of it, with different levels of support,” explains Australian expat and co-founder Jenny Caunt, who also wrote several chapters of the book.

Mountain biking tourists are on the rise in Nepal, and they mostly come from Germany, Denmark, the UK or the US. Caunt reckons 90% of them come to Nepal exclusively for a mountain biking holiday.

“Routes on the Annapurna Circuit and Upper Mustang are popular. Most of our clients are foreigners, but many Nepalis like to bike independently,” she adds. “Some of the back country routes between Kathmandu and Pokhara are perfect to ride.”



*The Road: A Guide to Crossing the Nepal Himalayas* by Richard Williams  
Graffeg Publishing, 2024  
301 pages  
Rs2,500  
Available at Himalayan Single Track, Pilgrims and Wisdom Book House in Thamel

## The Great Himal Race

The multistage race across the length of Nepal Himalaya was first held in 2017 by Bruno Poirier from France who himself ran from one end of the country to the other in 1994. Outdoors instructor and tourism entrepreneur Jagan Timilsina was the winner in 2017 when participants ran from Khang La on the eastern border between Nepal and Sikkim, to Hilsa in the country’s northwestern corner. This time, the runners went west to east instead, starting at Hilsa and ending at Kangchenjunga Base Camp.

Ultrarunners from France, Switzerland, the US, Greece and Nepal participated in this 51-stage, 60-day journey that borrows much of its routes from the Great Himalayan Trail. There were three joint winners: Swiss national Jules-Henri Gabioud, Frenchman Fleury Roux, and Nepal’s Upendra Sunuwar, all with a time of 264 hours and 31 minutes. Two women: Asimina Inglezou from Greece and Rachele Komarnisky from Canada also finished the race.

After the race, the runners walked from the base camp to Taplejung over a few days before taking a bus to Bhadrapur and flying back to Kathmandu. Awards of victory and completion were handed out at Hotel Manaslu.



FLEURY ROUX

## Everest Marathon

The Everest Marathon honours Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay’s first successful ascent of the highest peak in 1953 being held every year on 29 May for the last 19 years. The route goes from Everest Base Camp to Kala Patthar and Namche Bazar.

Runners may choose between three categories: a standard 42.195km route, a 21km half marathon, or a 70km ultramarathon. There were participants from all over the world, including the UAE, Australia and Lithuania, but most of the top finishers were Nepalis. Arjun



TENZING HILLARY EVEREST MARATHON / FACEBOOK

Rai Kulung was first in the standard category with a time of 03:53:02. Kulung is a professional runner who started out as a porter and ran his first Everest Marathon at 19, finishing in the top ten despite running in trekking boots. He is signed to The North Face Asia Pacific Adventures.

Gopal Tamang finished first with a time of 08:18:04 in the 70km extreme ultra category.

## Everest 135

The Everest 135 is an ultramarathon which, as the name suggests, is 135 miles long, more than five times longer than a standard marathon. This is the first race longer than a hundred miles in the Everest region.

An annual race was held for the first time since 2019 last month because of the pandemic, and was jointly organised by Nepal’s Himalayan Trail Running and the Guwin International Sports Club in China.

Participants ran from Jiri to Thame, Rinzo La Pass and Everest Base Camp before looping back to Lukla. They experienced a cumulative elevation gain of 13,900m and a total descent of 12,800m while reaching a maximum height of 5,517m. There is a cutoff at 150 hours, anybody taking longer is considered as a ‘did-not-finish’.

For runners who want a more manageable challenge, the race has a 100km category as well. Elite runners from China, Australia, Japan and the US participated. This year, 49-year-old Wang Xiaolin from China won the 135-mile category with a time of 85:41:40. Runner-up to him was Niwa Kaori, also a 49-year-old from Japan and the only woman in the top 10.



EVEREST 135 / FACEBOOK

# wicket

difference in experience between the established test-playing nations and Nepal as an associate country led to the defeats.”

The tournament seemed to generally favour bowlers and part of the reason lies in the pitches. The US is not much of a cricketing country and despite imported Australian experts, its turfs were not the most conducive for batting.

“Nepal’s strength has always been its bowling. This is the strongest possible group of Nepali batsmen and they did as well as they could. They will get better at these situations as they play more against good teams,” explains Rajbanshi.

Nepal had a much better fielding performance against Bangladesh on Monday, with four catches and a runout, restricting the Tigers to 106. It was looking at a tough but doable chase at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> — 30 off the last four at 7.5 runs an over.

However, tight death bowling from Bangladesh speedster Mustafizur Rahman who went for one run and two wickets in overs 17 and 19 meant that Nepal was all out for 85. Kushal Malla scored 27. Sompal Kami, Dipendra Singh Airee, Rohit Paudel and Sandeep Lamichhane picked up two wickets apiece.

“Airee’s game is three-dimensional. He can win the game with the bat or the ball, or in the field,” observed Karki. Airee took six wickets across the three games and

against Bangladesh he scored 25.

Despite the losses, Nepal has been The Story of the Tournament. The team showed it is just about ready to play in the Tests - the tradition-soaked five-day epics considered the summit of the sport.

“To become a test-playing nation, you can’t just have talented players,” pointed out Rajbanshi. “There needs to be extensive domestic cricket infrastructure, government support, and stadiums that can host test matches.”

New stadiums are being built in Kathmandu, Chitwan, Rupandehi and Morang. And Nepal is already planning to tour Afghanistan once the T20 World Cup is over.

“I enjoyed the low-scoring thrillers,” says Karki, who has played cricket his whole life and follows the Rhinos everywhere. “The end of the South Africa game was a complete rollercoaster, the battles between bat and ball.”

South Africa is a top team, ranked fifth in the T20s. Nepal is at 18 on that list. Excellent bowling by Nepal held the Proteas to only 115 — a seemingly paltry score in the IPL era, where 180 is almost below par. At one point Nepal needed thirty to win and could have gone at a pace of less than a run a ball. Under tremendous pressure, with humiliating defeat looming, the South Africans bowled precisely, triggering a collapse in the Nepali lower order.

With two required off the last ball, Ottneil Baartman hurled a high bouncer at Gulsan Jha that should have been called a wide. The ball carried to keeper Quinton de Kock. Jha was caught in confusion but as he saw Kami thundering towards

his crease he had to sprint to the opposite end.

The keeper threw the ball which hit Jha as he ran down the pitch. It ricocheted to a South African fielder, who ran the batter out and won the game. Jha seemed to cut his running abruptly short instead of diving to complete the game-tying run.

The game against the Netherlands also went until the end, with the Netherlands eventually making 109 to Nepal’s 106 in 18.4 overs. Had the Nepali fielders held onto some crucial catches, they would have won.

Throughout the tournament, there were some standout individual performances from the Nepali team. Captain Paudel hit 35 runs against the Netherlands. Aasif Sheikh scored 42 against South Africa, and Kushal Bhurtel took four wickets in the same match.

Leg-spinner Lamichhane is one of Nepal’s best bowlers, but 23-year old is fighting rape allegations in court back home for which he was ousted from the national team by Cricket Association of Nepal (CAN).

After the US denied him a visa, he joined his team in the Caribbean, and he got there in time for the games against Bangladesh and South Africa (more on this, page 9). He took two wickets against Bangladesh with googlies.

Karki was disheartened at the support that Lamichhane got in the games and wished CAN had stuck more to the code of conduct which is all-important in cricket.

“It didn’t seem to matter to anyone what he had done,” he said.

**Vishad Raj Onta**

## EVENTS

**Yoga/Meditation Retreat**

Take a break from your hectic life and let your mind and soul relax this weekend with this one day retreat program. Don't forget to take a yoga mat and a water bottle.

22 June, 6pm, Fee: Rs3,000, Naxal, 9801121956/9801121963

**Hues and Treasures**

For art lovers, the ongoing exhibition Hues and Treasures features artwork from five Nepali women artists.

Until 20 July, 10am-6pm, Classic Gallery, Chakupat, 984-1224753

**Play द सिस्टम**

An adaptation of Theresa Rebeck's What We Are Up Against, this play takes a satirical approach to gender discrimination in the workplace.

Until 15 July, 5:15pm (except Tuesdays) / 1pm also (on Saturdays), Kausi Theatre, Teku, 9861315317

**Art Exhibition**

From the private collection of Pratima and Prithwi Pandé, 'Examining the Line: Old and Young Masters' features artworks of Birendra Pratap Singh and Prashant Shrestha.

Until 7 July, 11am-6pm, Kalā Salon, Chhaya Center, Thamel

**Kolkata meets Kathmandu**

Kolkata's Kalighat Paintings are being displayed at Siddhartha Art Gallery. Experience a part of Bengal right here in Kathmandu.

Until 30 June, 11am-5pm (Sunday to Friday) / 12pm-5pm (Saturdays), Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal

## DINING

**Prazada**

Enjoy Prazada's selection of chilled draught beers in the lush garden with aromatic food and rustic pizzas accompanied by relaxing music on Fridays or a pop-up market on Saturdays.

Baluwatar (01) 4510473

## MUSIC

**Women In Concert**

Get ready for an electrifying showdown of the seven finalists for this year's Women In Concert. DJ Graze, Abhaya and the Steam Engine and Parijita Bastola will also join.

22 June, 3pm-7:30pm, United School, Imadole

**Cigarettes After Sex Tribute**

Enjoy an indulgent, romantic evening as the Last Wish performs a tribute to Cigarettes After Sex. Buy tickets through IME Pay.

28 June, 6pm onwards, Ticket: Rs1,000, EDN Sanepa, 980798431

**Friday Sessions**

Celebrate World Music Day with food, drinks and music of choice. The band Ko: Kaa will be on the stage playing their recent hits.

21 June, 8pm onwards, Namase Pub, Thamel

**Rota Jive 2024**

Rota Jive is bringing old and new innovative musicians together. Artists such as Anuprastha, Prashna Chinha, Chakravayu and Satish Ghalamn are performing: buy tickets through Khalti.

29 June, 12am-8pm, Ticket: Rs850, Club Platinum, Darbar Marg

**Rendezvous**

Rendezvous will celebrate a mix of pop culture, music and diverse Nepali art and culture during a musical Saturday afternoon.

22 June, 12pm onwards, Ticket: Rs999, Hotel Annapurna, Darbar Marg

**Raithaane**

Eat your way through Nepal at Raithaane, a restaurant that is committed to using locally sourced foods. Each dish on the menu is connected to the different communities of the nation, from east to west.

Patan, 9801002971

**Himali Farmer's Kitchen**

This restaurant serves classic Nepali dishes like bhatmas sadeko, aloo jeera, sukuti and khaja sets.

Chaksibari Marg, 9823556622

## GETAWAYS

**Shinta Mani Mustang**

With elegantly designed interiors using local materials, hand-picked art and rich textiles, the newly-opened Shinta Mani Mustang is an experience steeped in opulence and comfort.

Marpha, Mustang, 9802336386

**Lake View**

Escape to Lake View Resort's cosy wooden huts for a weekend of rest and relaxation. One of Lakeside's oldest establishments, the resort features traditional, rustic designs and modern accents.

Lake Side, Pokhara (061) 451477

**The Pavilions**

The Pavilions is a luxury boutique eco resort with boutique villas, swimming pool, organic farm, restaurant, lounge and bar. It is ideal for therapeutic day-ins, authentic gastronomic experiences and quiet nights.

Chisapani, Pokhara, 9856027997

**Maya Manor**

This Rana palace turned boutique hotel offers a Victorian gazebo, manicured gardens, highly-rated restaurants and an exclusive rooftop garden overlooking the city.

Darbar Marg (01) 4528028

**Shivapuri Heights Cottage**

Only a quick half-hour drive and a little stroll from Kathmandu leads to a peaceful oasis. Visitors can enhance their stay with additional activities like yoga, massage at Neeru's spa, and hikes to the nearby monastery, stupa, or national park.

Budhanilkantha, 9846232271

**Mezze by Roadhouse**

Smart interiors and a chic terrace with a view of the palace provide a great atmosphere to enjoy dinner with friends. The chef's specials – smoked mo:mo and grilled chicken with linguine vegetable – are must tries.

Mercantile Plaza, Darbar Marg (01) 5323087

**The Chocolate Room**

Enter a world of chocolate cupcakes, decadent brownies and chocolate of every size and shape. Between the chocolate, try the Peri Peri fries and milkshake.

Jhamsikhel, 9823837885

## WEEKEND WEATHER

**Cooler, wetter**

The monsoon has arrived in Kathmandu and is progressing steadily westward. This has brought down the maximum temperature by 10 degrees to 26°C. The Tarai is also getting a welcome respite. The 'Asare' monsoon is characterised by steady rain, more intense at night and without thunderstorm activity. Mornings will usually be bright with clouds building up by afternoon. This satellite precipitation image on Thursday shows a huge monsoonal trough entering eastern Nepal, indicating heavy rain over the weekend in most parts of the country.

## OUR PICK



The American series 3 Body Problem, based on author Liu Cixin's science fiction novel series Remembrance of Earth's Past, follows astrophysicist Ye Wenjie in 1960s China as she is sent to a secret military base and tasked to make first contact with extraterrestrial beings. Her decision to help an alien settle on Earth has repercussions for a group of present-day scientists, who must join hands with a detective to confront a planetary threat. Stars Jovan Adepo, John Bradley, Rosalind Chao, Liam Cunningham, Eiza González, and more.

## MISS MOTI-VATION

KRIPA JOSHI

It's not that I'm so smart.  
It's just that I stay with problems longer.

— Albert Einstein



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

# The rise and fall of Nims Purja

Because he identified himself so strongly as a Nepali, the mountaineer's scandal has hurt Nepal

■ Pradnya Pradhan

When Nirmal (Nims) Purja neared the summit of K2 during the first ever winter ascent of the world's second tallest peak in Pakistan, he waited for the rest of his all-Nepali team to catch up.

Then, with arms around each other's shoulders, they sang Nepal's national anthem, muffled through their oxygen masks and recorded it on a selfie stick as they walked together to the top with Nepal's double triangle fluttering in the wind.

In the 2021 Netflix documentary hit 14 Peaks: Nothing Is Impossible, Nims starred as himself. He provided hundreds of millions of viewers worldwide a glimpse of the Nepali character: of grit, endurance, sacrifice, and a deep love for his mother and motherland.

Despite British nationality, Nims identified himself closely as a Nepali. And as a scandal erupted last month over allegations of his sexual misconduct in high places, it was Nepal's international image that was also dented.

Nims Purja is an ex-British Gurkha Special forces commando who saw action in Afghanistan, and shot to global fame in 2019 after climbing all 14 of the world's eight thousanders in six months and six days.

Now 40, Nims set up the mountaineering company Elite Exped with a VIP clientele that



Nims Purja

includes the likes of Qatar's princess Sheikha Asma Al Thani. Nims was about setting the history straight by giving Nepali high altitude guides and porters their due in assisting Western mountaineers attain glory.

Nims Purja had literally and figuratively

reached the peak of his climbing career when it all came crashing down. On 31 May, The New York Times published an exposé titled For Female Climbers, Dangers Go Beyond Avalanches and Storms, in which Finnish mountaineer Lotta Hints and American physician April Leonardo accused Nims of sexual harassment.

Nims responded with a 24-hour Instagram story stating he 'unequivocally denies any wrongdoing', and accused the Times of leaving out his full statement and critical eyewitness accounts.

The article did include testimonies by Nims' guides who gave an alibi to the mountaineer, but it was countered by screenshots of text messages with timestamps provided by Hints and Leonardo.

Hints was a prospective employee for Elite Exped and Leonardo was his client on K2. Leonardo told the Times, 'I'm on this crazy climb. He's my guide. I don't want to do anything to put myself in jeopardy.' Both women detail Nims taking advantage of his position during precarious climbs.

Many in the mountaineering community have condemned Nims and expressed support for the women. Some say the allegations are just the tip of the iceberg in a male-dominated field where toxic masculinity is often mistaken for athleticism, and celebrityhood provides immunity against misconduct.

"Hats off to the women who have come forward with their stories, and I hope they will encourage others to speak up too," German mountaineer Billi Bierling who is director of the Himalayan Database told Nepali Times. "Let's join hands to make sure that the beautiful environment of the mountains will become a safe place for women again."

Nims has had other scrapes. He is accused of not paying proper compensation to three people killed in an oxygen cylinder explosion at a storage facility in Kathmandu in 2022. This year, he was hauled over for illegally flying a helicopter to Camp 2 on Everest. There have also been allegations, which Nims has refuted, that he uses his Nepali passport to avoid paying climbing royalties required for a British citizen.

Last month, he created a flutter after claiming that someone was trying to sabotage his expedition by slicing the fixed rope on the summit ridge of Everest. The allegation was refuted, and the government issued a stern press statement saying Nims would be investigated for 'disseminating misinformation with the intention of getting popularity'.

Since The New York Times story came out, Nims Purja has lost most of his sponsors and there are questions about the future of his outfitting company.

## More scandals

Nims Purja's case has raised questions about other fit and famous Nepalis like cricketer Sandeep Lamichhane and actor Paul Shah, both of whom have been accused of raping underage women. The Times article coincided with the Patan High Court acquitting Lamichhane, 23, of rape due to 'lack of evidence' a month ahead of the T20 World Cup.

The Cricket Association of Nepal (CAN) then promptly lifted its ban on Lamichhane but he tried and failed twice to get a US visa. He could not play in the earlier games of the tournament, but made it to the matches in the West Indies this week.

Nepali diaspora fans who flew to St Vincent and the Grenadines gleefully welcomed Lamichhane because most regard him as a key player in Team Nepal. The International Cricket Council (ICC) singled out Lamichhane ahead of the 2018 Cricket World Cup Qualifiers as a player to look out for, and he became the captain of the national team at only 21.

He was taken into judiciary custody in



Paul Shah

October 2022 for the alleged rape of a minor. He called the accusations defamatory. In January 2023, the Patan High Court let him out on bail on condition he would not leave the country. A month later, the Supreme Court lifted the ban and allowed Lamichhane



Sandeep Lamichhane

to participate in the UAE Tri-Nation Series.

Meanwhile the identity of the girl was leaked, subjecting her and the family to online harassment and threats from fans. Many accused the girl of extortion while others were convinced it was consensual.

In December 2023, the Kathmandu District court found Lamichhane guilty of rape, but not the rape of a minor. It felt that Gaushala-26 (code name) lied about her age. The court dismissed school reports showing she was 17, and took her birth certificate stating she was 18 at the time as authentic.

In May 2024, Lamichhane's lawyers appealed at the Patan High Court which overturned the earlier verdict, clearing the way for him to play in the current World Cup.

Lamichhane now stands cleared of all charges. His participation in the team, and Nepal's better than expected performance at the games (page 6-7) has overshadowed the debate about his hasty acquittal.

Many cheerleaders on social media platforms support Lamichhane and trolled those who say this is a clear case of justice taking a backseat in favour of national glory.

Another celebrity to be charged for molestation of a minor and who served time only to be mysteriously acquitted is actor Paul Shah. Much like Lamichhane's supporters, Shah's fans trolled his accuser. Shah is now back shooting one film after another while co-stars sing praises of him. 🇳🇵

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# Saving the waters of life

Nepal's lakes and ponds need urgent protection to ensure water supply and preserve ecosystems



**LAKE DISTRICT:** Rupa and Begnas lakes in Kaski do not just enhance tourism and fisheries, but also recharge groundwater.

KUNDA DIXIT

■ Mohan Mainali

The monsoon is progressing on schedule in Nepal from east to west, and there is water everywhere. It falls from sky rivers on the mountains and plains, the rivers are full, the groundwater is being replenished, and dried-up springs are flowing again.

The monsoon is four months of too much water, but in the other eight months Nepal suffers from a lack of water. We take water for granted, but adapting to climate change means storing monsoon precipitation to last all year round.

Water can be stored by household rainwater harvesting, building dams, or it can be stored underground by recharging the aquifers. The indigenous knowledge of Nepalis to replenish groundwater with ponds and lakes is being lost, and with it the capacity to adapt to weather extremes induced by climate breakdown.

In eastern Nepal, if the sacred Mai Pokhari in Ilam loses its water, the district will be almost inhabitable. If Morang's Rajarani and Rajkumari ponds dry up, its rich aquatic flora will be gone.

The lakes of Rupandehi and Kapilvastu are repositories of wild rice and rare plant species, and a rich wetland habitat for birds. Ghodaghodi Lake in Kailali is a biodiversity hotspot.

Pokhara's big lakes were formed about 800 years ago when a gigantic debris flow from the Annapurnas blocked tributaries of the Seti, but today the lakes are shrinking due to sedimentation and human encroachment.

It is not just in rural Nepal that wetlands, lakes and ponds offer invaluable ecosystem services, Kathmandu Valley's hydraulic civilisation built water channels to feed stone spouts that are functioning to this day and are marvels of engineering.

The ponds that dotted Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur also served to recharge the aquifers so community wells did not go dry and were filled with naturally filtered water.

Nepal's lakes, ponds and rivers have traditionally been regarded as holy because the ancients understood their importance to human survival. They have inspired poets and singers because of their beauty, but also because we used to understand their importance as storage systems.

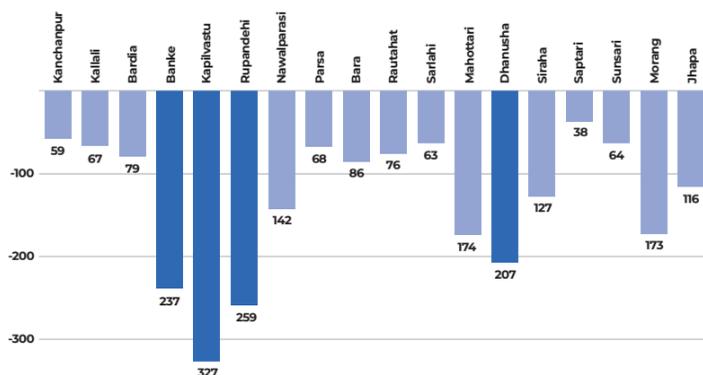
But modern Nepal is losing this traditional knowledge. Ponds have been allowed to dry up so cities can spread over them, lakes have shrunk, wetlands have been filled up. Rivers are polluted with waste.

This year's World Environment Day on 5 June had the theme 'Our Land, Our Future'. But land has no value without water. To restore land, prevent desertification and make it resilient against drought, we need to ensure adequate water for plant and animal life to thrive, and for farm and household use.

Nearly 20 years ago, the people of Tansen dug a big pond up on Srinagar hill above the town. It was designed to prevent runoff in the monsoon

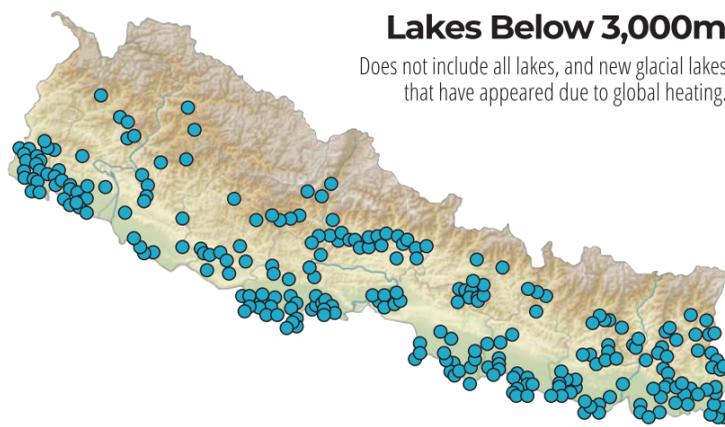
## Depleted Ponds

Number of ponds that have disappeared in the Tarai since the last count 10 years ago.



## Lakes Below 3,000m

Does not include all lakes, and new glacial lakes that have appeared due to global heating.



SOURCE: NATIONAL LAKE CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE



Kamal Pokhari in Palpa in 2016.

MOHAN MAINALI



A water buffalo wallow pond in Kavre in 2001. Many such ponds have disappeared in the past decades.

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Lagankhel in the 1960s taken from the Ashoka Stupa.

the people were throwing rubbish into the existing Kamal Pokhari until it was completely covered. Then townspeople started building houses on top of it.

The irony of the Palpa experience is that even while the town was building a new pond, it was destroying an old one. Such destruction of essential waterbodies is happening all over Nepal.

Human civilisations have collapsed because they ran out of water due to poor planning and preparedness. It can happen again unless we restore our ponds, lakes and rivers. Reviving traditional knowledge about water will also conserve the water we do not see: underground water.

But we in Nepal are doing exactly the opposite. We are cutting off our lifeline in the name of infrastructure and modern living. 🇳🇵

that used to flood the downstream settlements, and also to replenish the groundwater table so that the springs would flow all year round. The people of Palpa had

revived local knowledge about water conservation to ensure that the growing district headquarter had adequate supply. However, down the hill from the new pond

## How many lakes and ponds?

Of the 626 big and small lakes in Nepal below 3,000m, 21 have been degraded, and 300 are in a critical state. Only 96 are in good condition and even these are threatened by encroachment and pollution.

There is no information about the state of 209 lakes. Hundreds of new lakes have popped up above 3,000m due to global heating.

Using data from Nepal's topographical maps from 1992 to 2001, Ukesh Raj Bhujyu counted 5,358 natural ponds and lakes all over the country (map, overleaf). Since natural ponds are rarely perfect squares or rectangles, manmade ones were not counted. Bhujyu used to work for the National Lake Conservation and Development Committee which made an inventory of 3,131 lakes in 67 districts up to 3,000m elevation.

But the most recent survey 10 years ago showed that this number has shrunk

dramatically to only 626, mainly because of encroachment and most of them in the Tarai (chart), where 53% of Nepal's population lives. Many more lakes and ponds have probably disappeared in the past decade.

Topographical maps used to show that Kapilvastu district had the third largest number of lakes in Nepal. Most lakes are now gone, and there are only 327 of them.

These lakes and ponds are not just important for Nepal and India for groundwater recharge. They have global significance, being vital stopovers for migratory birds that travel every year back and forth from Siberia to Africa, and from Central Asia to Southeast Asia.

Of these, Rara, Kosi Tappu, Mai Pokhari, Phoksundo, Bishajari, Ghodaghodi, Gokyo and other lakes are the most important for birdlife. Mai Pokhari, Bishajari and Pokhara's lakes are being threatened by encroachment and pollution.

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