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## WATER ENERGY FOOD

■ Pinki Sris Rana in Tanahu

As Nepal embarks on plans to build more large reservoirs on its Himalayan rivers, it faces the tough task of balancing the country's growing energy needs with environmental and social impacts.

Nepal's immense hydroelectricity potential is often referred to as 'white oil', and politicians have dreamed for decades of making the country prosperous by selling electricity. But actually it is all about water — storing the monsoon excess for year-round use for irrigation, power generation, industries and household use.

However, only a fraction of Nepal's hydropower potential has been harnessed, and nearly all electricity is from run-of-river projects which generate full power during the monsoon, but struggle during dry periods due to low river levels. Reservoir dams, which store water, could mitigate this seasonal imbalance and also regulate rivers for dry season irrigation.

The Kulekhani reservoir, built in 1982, remains Nepal's only significant storage project. A second reservoir in Tanahu is expected to be completed by 2026. Other proposed large-scale projects, such as Budi Gandaki and West Seti face delays, and the massive Karnali and Saptakosi dams will need decades to plan and build.

While storage dams could stabilise power generation and boost the economy, they are costly due to construction expenses, land acquisition, and submergence of fertile farms reducing food production. Multipurpose projects that offer benefits beyond electricity, like irrigation and tourism, could defray some of the cost.

Dams like Tanahu and Budi Gandaki will submerge settlements. In a village above a tributary of the Seti River, 43-year-old Yam Kumari Thapa, points to her rice and maize



NEXUS: Construction site of the 140m high concrete dam on the Seti River that will impound a reservoir 18km long in Tanahu when complete in 2026.

PINKI SRIS RANA

fields that will soon be submerged.

Til Bahadur Thapa tends to terrace fields that his ancestors have farmed for generations but will also be inundated by the rising water of the Tanahu reservoir. He tells us: "We are not asking for land in the city, just a nearby farm where we can grow food. A country cannot develop by driving people like us off the land."

The reservoirs will also impact on the riverine ecosystem and biodiversity. The lifespans of high dams will be reduced by sedimentation, and there is increased risk of glacial lake outbursts like the one in Sikkim last year.

But perhaps the most knotty problem will be geopolitics. Nepal's main rivers all

start on the Tibetan Plateau in China and flow through Nepal and become tributaries of the Ganga. As a lower riparian, India is increasingly assertive about what planners in Kathmandu want to do with Nepal's rivers — especially storage projects.

Shared river systems necessitate cooperation, yet past and current projects have seen friction and restrictions, especially regarding electricity exports to India and water management.

Nepal's approach to expanding its hydropower infrastructure in the coming decades will test its ability to manage the interplay of economic growth, energy demands, environmental preservation, and regional diplomacy. 🇳🇵

### ■ RIVERS BE DAMMED ■ DISPLACING PEOPLE TO STORE WATER

Nepal struggles to balance energy and water needs with dams that damage livelihoods and ecosystems.

FULL STORY PAGE 10-11



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## के गर्ने, यस्तै हो

The new NC-UML government that was sworn in this week is a rare instance where Nepal's two largest parties that have taken turns overthrowing each other for four decades, are finally in government together.

Ever since the restoration of democracy in 1990, the NC and UML were bitter rivals and demonstrated their one-upmanship while in the opposition by punishing the Nepali people with national shutdowns at the slightest pretext.

Called 'hartal' or 'banda', these were acts of enforced compliance that banned street movement, closed schools, and all economic activity. A few vehicles that defied the shutdown would be torched early in the morning at busy intersections for maximum publicity to terrorise the public. The tactic worked brilliantly.

After the end of the conflict in 2006 the Maoists also weaponised the banda, and tried to improve on it with multiple-day hartal. That did not go down too well because desperate people spontaneously spilled out into the streets on urgent errands after the first day.

In that sense, this NC-UML coalition can be called historic. Or it could be history repeating itself as Oli and Deuba, out of sheer habit, start stabbing each other in the back.

Back in the day, banda were central to the Nepali identity, it even became a tourist attraction since trekking expeditions began from Kathmandu airport itself. But can anyone remember the last successful hartal? It sort of went out of fashion, and we miss those good old days.

Let's see if the jilted Comrade Lotus Flower does not get nostalgic and start calling for national shutdowns against Deuba and Oli for pulling the rug from under him.

We must admit that banda organisers in the past had class, pizzazz, style and gumption. Civil servants, students, workers all rejoiced when a shutdown was announced because it meant an unscheduled holiday. For some reason, street vigilantes banned four-wheelers, but pedal rickshaws were allowed. (Four legs bad, three legs good.)

This was in the prehistoric era before PUBG, TikTok, and Youtube, so youngsters could take full advantage of the empty streets to play football, cricket and water polo, in one curious case involving a healthy-sized pothole in Pulchok.

Taxis were toasted, tyre pyres burned in the streets and the city was overcome with the

smell of burning rubber. We tracked down a party faithful who used to be a banda enforcer, now older and wiser, who misses the fun and excitement.

"I was in charge of sourcing tyres," he recalled. "Truck tyres were the best, but sometimes we had to do with skinny motorcycle ones. But for a real long-lasting bonfire, tractor tyres were much sought after. Sometimes we burnt tyres still attached to cars."

This comrade got so hooked to tyres that he gave up his Unified Marxist-Leninist ideals and transferred his skills to selling tyres in Melbourne, pursuing his lifelong passion for rubber and tread.

One reason banda were so successful was that with all the holidays for festivals and new years, that another day or two off did not feel at all strange. Somewhere deep in our dharmic souls, fatalistic Nepalis even believed that we deserved shutdowns.

Today the only banda we have are state-sponsored ones during the state visit of a Qatari Prince, or another stopover by Prime Minister Modi or President Xi, when the streets are all cleared and everyone can enjoy a well-deserved break away from work.

Records show that the last banda was called by the Biplav faction of breakaway Maoists some

years ago, and enforced by the strategic placement of a couple of ominous looking pressure cookers on traffic junctions. But people had stopped paying heed, and it was a big flop.

Even though the relaxation of an unexpected day off is hard to pass up today, 21<sup>st</sup> century Nepalis know that each day wasted is another day's delay in getting a visa to leave the country.

There may be a rationale for reviving the banda culture: to reduce Nepal's carbon footprint and allow the country to meet its SDG target by 2030. The country's petroleum import bill would come down, narrowing our trade deficit. There would be enormous health benefits from better air quality, so we can all breathe again. A banda would therefore be better than subsidising EVs. For a re-run of the banda lifestyle, we will have to wait and see if this NC-UML coalition implodes, or if impatient Maoist comrades take to streets again to call for one of their one-week shutdowns. And if there is a re-emergence, we are sure Nepalis will go along saying "के गर्ने" or "यस्तै हो".

Vishad Raj Onta

### A semi-serious flashback to Nepal's fatalistic culture of national shutdowns.

#### STOP PRESS



KANAK MANI DIXIT

## Ambica Shrestha, 92

Heritage champion, exponent of women's empowerment, philanthropist and founder of Dwarika's Hotel, Ambica Shrestha, passed away in hospital on Thursday after a brief illness. She was 92.

Of her many accomplishments, the Dwarika's Hotel which was named after her late husband Dwarika Das Shrestha stood as a monument to cultural and architectural preservation.

The unique multiple award-winning hotel in Kathmandu used carved wooden windows, columns, eaves and other priceless objects rescued from ancient buildings that were being torn down over the past decades to make way for modern structures. Many of the carved wooden architectural elements in Dwarika's Hotel are therefore museum pieces. The hotel served as a living memorial to Kathmandu Valley civilisation, and underlined the importance of heritage conservation among Nepalis. The construction of the hotel also revived Nepal's ancient wood carving and construction techniques in building and maintaining the property.

Besides the hotel, Ambica Shrestha was the founder of Nepal Heritage Society, a strong proponent of gender empowerment and women in business, and led the Federation of Business and Professional Women of Nepal (BPWN).

She was the Honorary Consul General of Spain in Nepal, and was conferred the The Order of Isabella medal by the Spanish government in February this year. She also served as Chair since its inception in 1998 of Himalmedia, the company that publishes Nepali Times.

She and her husband founded Kathmandu Travels and Tours, and entered the tourism business in the 1970s during the coronation of King Birendra, and built Dwarika's Hotel, expanding it in installments over the years. Today, the company also runs a resort in Dhulikhel.

Ambica Shrestha's family was from Sikkim and she moved to Kathmandu after getting married to Dwarika Das Shrestha in 1955, and had three children. She is survived by two daughters, grand- and great-grandchildren.

Ambica Shrestha used to say: "There is no shortcut to success, it is a long struggle to preserve our past for the future. And it helps if you ensure that no one in society is left behind."

## ONLINE PACKAGES



DAMNED IF WE DO, DAMNED IF WE DON'T

Nearly all of Nepal's electricity is generated from run-of-river schemes. Dams to store water in large reservoirs would balance year-round power and water supply, but Nepal's only existing reservoir project is Kulekhani. Plans for other bigger dams are stalled. Read the story on Page 1, 10-11, and watch the video on Nepali Times' YouTube channel.



ANALOGUE PHOTOGRAPHY

Before photos went digital, there were film reels, darkrooms and prints, technology that had not changed since photography was first invented 150 years ago. But analogue photography is staging a comeback worldwide, and there are aficionados in Nepal also trying to keep the technique alive. Watch video on our YouTube channel and subscribe for more multimedia content.

### SIMALTAL TRAGEDY

As we grapple with the weight of the terrible loss of life in the two buses swept away by landslide, it is a stark reminder of the inadequacies of our road infrastructure that contribute to such devastating tragedies. Lives are forever changed due to circumstances that could have been prevented with better planning and safety measures. Our thoughts are with the victims and their families during this unimaginable time. Let us honour their memories by advocating for safer roads and infrastructure to prevent future tragedies.

Sunil Sakya

■ Even as Nepal receives billions in foreign aid year after year, there are losses from floods, landslides, road accidents, and plane crashes. It is an unfortunate and bitter truth that Nepal is corrupt to the bone.

Margret Aerts

### DEMOGRAPHIC WINDOW

Good elaboration and practical advice in your interview with Young Hong ('Future-proofing Nepal's population strategy', #1220). Another alarming future concern is the anomaly in male-female ratio, particularly in Madhes Province. I do hope authorities take note and make serious efforts to reverse this.

Bishow Parajuli

■ Meanwhile, despite the youth bulge overseas jobs help household incomes and arguably help keep the lid on unemployment and its typical consequences ('Nepal's demographic window is closing', Sonia Awale, #1220).

Tony Jones

### CORRECTIONS

In the page 5 story last week titled 'Nepal's demographic window is closing', Nepal's fertility rate was incorrectly stated due to an editing error. It should be 2.1, near the replacement level.

■ In the page 6-7 story titled 'Ladakh's Nepal links', a typographical error put an incorrect distance between Mustang and Ladakh. It should be 1,500km.

## Times.com

### WHAT'S TRENDING

#### More things change, more they remain the same

Editorial

K P Oli was sworn in as Nepal's prime minister for the fourth time this week after a new UML-Nepali Congress alliance ousted Pushpa Kamal Dahal and his Maoist Centre-led coalition. Nepal's politics has been dominated by the whims of the same three ageing politicians and their parties since 2006. Follow Nepali Times online for latest developments.



Most reached and shared on Facebook

#### Future-proofing Nepal's population strategy

by Nepali Times

UNFPA Country Representative Won Young Hong speaks to Nepali Times about Nepal's population dynamics, breaking down major demographic trends for the country in the next 30 years. Visit nepalitime.com for the interview.



Most popular on X



#### Ladakh's Nepal links

by Dirgha Raj Upadhyay

Nepali metalsmiths were brought to Ladakh 400 years ago to make gilded copper statues. The craft has since been passed down over generations to the descendants of Nepali craftsmen who live and work there. Nepalis have also died fighting in this region strategic to India. Full story on our website.



Most commented

#### What's cooking besides politics?

by Sonia Awale

Nearly 95% of Nepalis now have electricity, and it will be 100% this year, all of it from hydropower, and mostly used for lighting. Only 0.5% of the power is used by households for cooking. Over-reliance on hydroelectricity at the cost of solar power is also high-risk and high-cost. Join the discussion online.



Most visited online page

## QUOTES



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Nepal's politics has been dominated by the whims of the same three ageing politicians and their parties since 2006. While they have been engaged in political theatre and trading barbs, 80 people have died in Nepal in floods and landslides this monsoon.



ART @AmulyaSir

no hope... in fact more dread they'll screw up worse with even less effective opposition and restraint as they have done in the past



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

"Bhutan's government cultivates an enlightened international image by propounding the theory of gross national happiness, but the blatantly abusive treatment of these prisoners tells a different story."



pigreen1 @pigreen1

This is true. The regime also discriminates against its Nepali speaking citizens

## 1,000 WORDS



GOPEN RAI

**ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN:** K P Oli, 72, was sworn in as Nepal's Prime Minister for the fourth time on Monday at the President's office in Shital Niwas. Bishnu Paudel of UML is the Finance Minister while Ramesh Lekhak of Nepali Congress got the Home Ministry. Arzu Rana Deuba is the Foreign Minister.



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# Textbook case of bad textbooks

## Grade 9 Social Studies textbooks present a toxic interpretation of the open Nepal-India border

As the well-known adage goes: you can choose your friends but not your neighbours. There is no alternative to learning to live together.

Relations between neighbours in a housing estate or nation states is (or should be) dependent on long term bilateral interest, not instantaneous calculations.



**BORDERLINES**  
Chandrakishore

Nowhere is relations between nations more of an everyday issue than around the borders between countries. And the need to manage and nurture relations between countries should be the message in school textbooks.

After all, the foundations of knowledge and values are laid in school through textbooks. In most countries the content in them is determined by the state. In fact a textbook is an official document reflecting a country's position on various facets of a cross border state, like citizenship.

I have recently been leafing through the Social Studies textbooks for Grades 9 and 10 published by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology's Curriculum Development Board at Sano Thimi.

I was astonished at a sentence in the Grade 9 chapter on 'Nation and Nationalism' in a section titled Border Security (translated from Nepali): 'An open border opens up the possibility of increased human trafficking and drug smuggling. In fact, an open border can poison relations between people and even lead to war.'

Similarly, a section titled 'Nepal's Friends and Agencies' talks about Nepal being a landlocked country situated



between India and China, without indicating that these two neighbours of Nepal are global economic heavyweights.

Whatever the text book may say about the dangers of an open border, all national frontiers should be as open as the one between India and Nepal. Nepal has had a similar open border with Tibet for centuries.

Officially, a country's relation with its neighbour is marked by when diplomatic relations were established. But there is no such date with which we can pinpoint how long Nepal's relations with India and Tibet (now an autonomous region of China) has existed.

Nepal's textbooks fail to impart on students the importance of the country's relations with these two vast and powerful neighbours. Instead of establishing a narrative that an open border is the ultimate symbol of strong and close ties between countries, Nepali textbooks portray a negative

perspective.

By contrast, Nepal's trans-Himalayan border with China is limited and controlled. Citizens of both countries need passports and visas to cross over, although there is still some bypassing of official checkpoints.

The Nepal-India border on the other hand is open because of mutual agreement, friendship, good neighbourliness, religious and cultural diversity, social cohesion, family relations, and common geographical features on both sides.

These economic, cultural, political and historical aspects of the open border should have been incorporated into Nepal's text books. On the other hand, the books should also have explained the reason why the Nepal-China border has not been open since the annexation of Tibet 65 years ago.

The content of the Social Studies text book reflects state neglect. A border is not the result of the wishes of a country on one

side, it is the common meeting point of nations.

The situation is worsened because Nepal's examination system requires students to memorise and regurgitate content of textbooks, instead of teaching them to come to their own conclusions.

A text book's content therefore does not just impact the point of view of students, but also teachers. More than disinformation on social media, it is the half-truths and false notions in text books that are more dangerous.

In fact, textbooks read like the declaration of the political party in power. This is a result of the curriculum drafters not being inclusive and representative of Nepal's diversity.

This can bring about a tectonic shift in the thought process of young Nepalis, evoke a sense of animosity towards neighbours and 'others'. In a country where political polarisation, ideological divide is already wide, such assertiveness by the dominant community can be sensitive.

Textbooks cannot be propaganda, they cannot be a vehicle to establish a political narrative. They should heal and unite.

Students need to learn and understand Nepal's fragile geopolitical circumstance, and not be exhorted to rock the boat. There is a common socio-cultural milieu that is transboundary because of our shared history and politics.

Nepal's youth need to have a moderate and balanced view of the history, geography and cultural links of the borderlands so they can contribute to cooperation and coexistence.

Chandrakishore is a Birganj-based media commentator and writes this monthly column Borderlines for Nepali Times. @Kishore\_chandra



■ Sonia Awale

Ghana S Gurung had to walk 11 days from the tiny village of Dhee in Mustang to Pokhara to give his high school exam in 1983. He wanted fervently to be a medical doctor, and took biology in college in the hope of selection for a medical seat under the Mustang king's quota.

While in Amrit Science College in Kathmandu, he was offered a scholarship to study Parks, Recreation and Tourism in New Zealand. He did not even know the meaning of the English word 'recreation', and failed a mandatory English test.

Ever resourceful, Gurung convinced Edmund Hillary, New Zealand's ambassador to Nepal at the time, that he would take English lessons when he got to

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### Turkish to Torino

Turkish Airlines has added another destination to its network with flights between Istanbul and Turin from 10 July. Turin is now the carrier's ninth destination in Italy and 349<sup>th</sup> in the world. The route was inaugurated

at Turin Airport with the attendance of the Piedmont community and Turkish Airlines executives. In the lap of the Alps, Turin is Italy's first capital and has cultural attractions including the Royal Palace, the iconic Mole Antonelliana, and the famous Egyptian Museum. The city is also celebrated for its refined cuisine and vibrant arts scene.

### Samsung Z Fold6, Flip6

Samsung has opened pre-orders of the Galaxy Z Fold6 and Z Flip6 smartphones in Nepal. These models use Galaxy AI to enable new utilities such as translating and auto format meeting notes, and creating images through sketches. The Flip6 starts at Rs154,999 and Fold6 starts at Rs234,999, and can be financed for 0% interest.

### Biz Sadhain ON

Ncell launched its Biz Sadhain ON data packs with features like data carryover and unlimited plans to make communication smoother for Nepali businesses, with five types of monthly plans ranging from Rs499 to Rs1,949 that are bundles of data, talk time, texts, and streaming and investing apps. This is an extension of Ncell's Sadhain ON campaign to make mobile data cheaper in Nepal.

### Budget unspent

The government used 80.45% of the Rs1.75 trillion budget for this fiscal year, 16.32% of which was in just the last month, once more exposing chronic corruption. Capital expenditure in productive sectors is particularly low. Meanwhile, the government earned Rs1.074 trillion in taxes, Rs44 billion of which was only on the last day of the fiscal year. This is just 75.56% of the government target, but a 12.3% increase from the last fiscal year.

### Hyundai Raffle

Laxmi Intercontinental announced the winners of its 'Hyundai Festive Delight 2080' in which customers got discounts of upto Rs600,000, and a year of free insurance and road tax. Additional discounts were available through scratch cards. Sunsari's Indra Prasad Guragain won the grand prize, a Hyundai Exter, through lucky draw.

### Power struggle

The Independent Power Producers' Association Nepal (IPPAN) has urged the resolution of a dispute between NEA and industries about unpaid dedicated feeders. NEA recently cut off power to industries, causing some to threaten a shutdown which would further affect domestic consumption and increase 'spill' this monsoon. Industrialists say they are ready to settle the dues once the NEA provides proof of unpaid arrears.

### NMB EV Loans

NMB Bank is offering loans for electric vehicles with a fixed interest rate of 8.99% p.a. for 7 years. The bank is ensuring that the loan will have flexible repayment options and quick approval processes to promote the use of EVs in Nepal.

### MG4EV at Kora-la

MG Motors drove the MG4 EV to the Kora-la Pass in Upper Mustang at 4,660m, showcasing the car's performance on steep uphill and off-road. The journey, completed by MG customer Dhiren Man Shrestha, tested the MG4's features such as suspension, battery capacity and regenerative braking. The company also sells other electric and petrol models in Nepal.

### Hilton Kathmandu

The Hilton Kathmandu in Naxal is now officially open. Senior Vice President and Country Head of Hilton-India was present at the opening. The hotel offers EV charging, an outdoor pool, a business centre and extensive dining, among other amenities. Rooms start at \$163 a night.

### Mithila Art at the UN

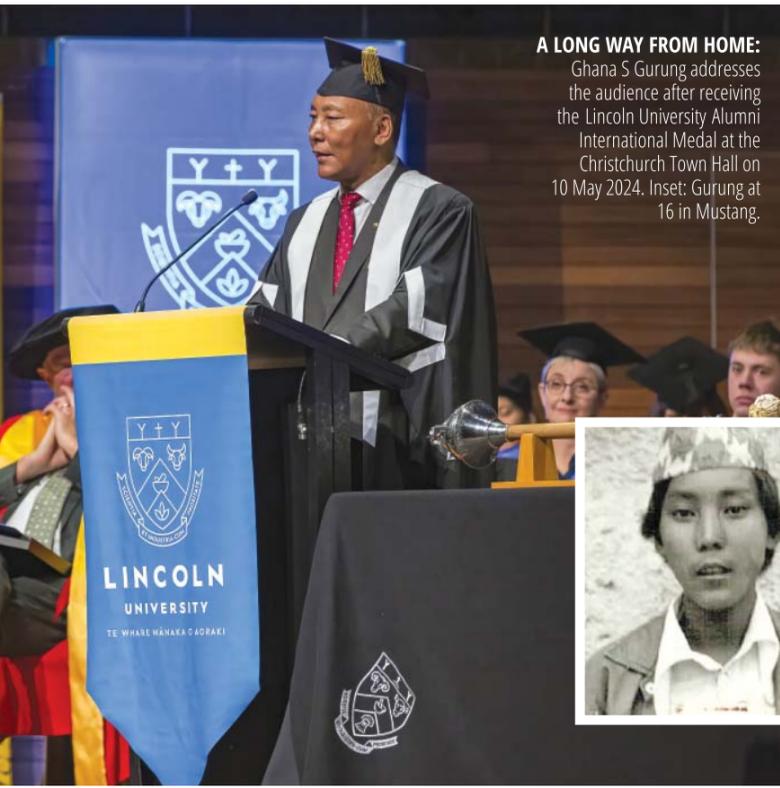
The United Nations headquarters in New York City inaugurated the 'Art for SDGs: the Mithila Heritage' exhibition this week. Mithila Center USA, Nepal's Mission to the UN, and the Nepali Consulate in New York collaborated to launch the exhibition with 17 pieces of art originally on Nepal's postage stamps in 2021.

### Sunsilk Awards

Sunsilk hosted the 'Creator Honors' Award, recognising Lifestyle, Beauty and Fashion influencers. The ceremony, held on 8 July at the Penthouse Lounge in Darbar Marg, saw Sweeti Dangol win in the 'Rising Star' category, Simran Shrestha in 'Sunsilk Born to Shine,' and Siddharth Tamang in 'Best Use of Trend' categories.

# Conversation with Mr Conservation

Nepal's self-made champion for protection of nature now says protect people first



**A LONG WAY FROM HOME:** Ghana S Gurung addresses the audience after receiving the Lincoln University Alumni International Medal at the Christchurch Town Hall on 10 May 2024. Inset: Gurung at 16 in Mustang.

LINCOLN UNIVERSITY

Victoria University of Wellington. He graduated from Lincoln University in Christchurch, and went on to do his PhD in natural science from the University of Zürich, Switzerland.

"I was born for conservation," says Gurung, who is now WWF Nepal Country Director. He was recently honoured with the Lincoln University Alumni International Medal by his New Zealand alma mater. "As a child

I studied Buddhism, which is all about doing good for people and nature. It taught me about sentient beings, about interconnectedness, interdependence between all living and non-living things."

As a boy in Dhee, Gurung herded sheep and yaks and recalls that snow leopards were the main threat to the family livestock. "Snow leopards were then my biggest enemy," he says, "now they are my best friends."

Gurung has been hailed as a pioneer of snow leopard conservation in Nepal and globally. In 2022, he was named one of 12 most important conservation heroes in the world by World Atlas.

Today, snow leopard numbers are on the rise across the Nepal Himalaya, although the elusive endangered cats are threatened by the impact of climate breakdown. In fact, Gurung's home village of Dhee has been nearly abandoned because of migration and springs in the area have gone dry due to chronic winter drought.

Growing up in Dhee, Gurung says he had a strong urge to excel in studies to dispel the entrenched notion that people from the mountains were not very smart. One of his biggest inspirations was his school teacher Man Bahadur Biswokarma of Marpha, who urged him to aim high and get a PhD some day. "I think I have made Man Bahadur Sir proud," he says.

At WWF, Gurung was closely involved in the creation and handover of the Kangchenjunga Conservation Area, a 2,030 sq km zone in eastern Nepal patterned after similar nature reserves in Annapurna and Manaslu.

The Maoist conflict was at its peak, yet Gurung managed to do the groundwork with local officials and mother's groups for the Kangchenjunga Conservation Area under the leadership of the government. Many of Nepal's top conservationists arrived in Ghunsa for the official handover in October 2006, including his mentors Harka Gurung, Chandra Gurung, Mingma

Norbu Sherpa and Tirtha Man Maskey.

After the ceremony, Ghana was supposed to join them for the helicopter ride back to Kathmandu but had to stay behind in Taplejung to prepare a press statement. Soon after takeoff in pouring rain, the Mi8 helicopter hit a mountain at 4,000m, killing all 24 people on board. Ghana was involved in the search and rescue, and was determined with others to turn the tragedy into a long term effort to nurture a new generation of conservation leaders. Since then, the Mingma Norbu Sherpa Memorial Scholarships have been sending two Nepalis to Lincoln University in New Zealand every year, and WWF Nepal provides five memorial scholarships every year.

At WWF Nepal, Gurung is a proponent of an integrated approach to development that involves local communities in conservation, not the fortress model of fencing off wilderness areas championed in the West.

He says: "In Nepal, unless you protect people, they will not protect wildlife. All these years I thought we were working for nature. Now I realise we were working for people. Human beings are a part of the living world, and it has to be a symbiotic relationship."

Indeed, indigenous communities have been crucial to Nepal's successes in conservation including tripling the tiger population in 12 years, doubling forest cover in 30 years, and recording 752 days of zero poaching of rhinos. However, more tigers mean more encounters

with humans as they enter human settlements in search of food and water. "We are trying to convince people in the buffer zone about precautions they have to take near the park," says Gurung, who has gotten WWF to help local people manage homestays for ecotourism.

While Nepal's success in tripling its tiger population has increased attacks on people, the media magnifies tiger attacks even though many more people in Nepal are killed every year by snakebites.

The increase in forest cover coupled with outmigration of local people has also meant that the undergrowth in buffer zones is now loaded with deadwood that is fuel for forest fires. Additionally, climate change-induced droughts have caused grasslands to be tinder dry.

Gurung says the answer to Nepal's new conservation challenges lies in protecting water sources in the catchment area, watersheds, wetlands, groundwater, and controlling the river pollution.

"Being climate-smart automatically means water resilience," says Gurung, noting how natural springs across Nepal are going dry while in the Tarai, over-extraction of groundwater has led to ponds inside national parks drying up. Prolonged heat waves are making the water crisis worse.

Unplanned infrastructure is also adding to the challenge, Gurung says, and one of WWF's focus areas is in ensuring that protected areas are not disturbed by highways, transmission lines, and irrigation canals bifurcating them.

The climate crisis has caused Gurung's community to abandon Dhee and Samjong villages in Upper Mustang. He says, "We have spent enough time talking about how bad climate breakdown is. It is time to start doing something about it ourselves with nature-based solutions to protect our water sources." 🇳🇵



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# Leaky roofs on the Roof of the World

Climate breakdown brings rain to once-arid region of Nepal, altering traditional architecture

■ Anita Bhetwal in Mustang

Mustang district is in the cold and arid trans-Himalayan region of Nepal, and used to get very little rain. But with climate breakdown, precipitation patterns have changed, bringing frequent winter drought and summer floods.

This is forcing families here to abandon traditional flat-roofed, mud-walled house designs for modern reinforced concrete and brick structures that can better withstand heavy rainfall.

Most flat roofs of Mustang homes used to be stacked with precious firewood, and the size of the pile indicated the family's affluence. A large stack suggested wealth, and even better marriage prospects.

Roofs lined with juniper branches are still an integral part of Mustang's architecture and identity, and is a tourist attraction in a part of Nepal that is geologically and culturally close to Tibet.

The firewood fits together like tetris, capping the clay roofs of houses with sloping rammed earth walls, traditionally plastered with white, black and orange clay.

The late artist Robert Powell documented Mustang's architecture with detailed paintings in his book, *Earth Door Sky Door* (pictured) which explained that the firewood on the roof, besides signifying status, also protected the clay roofs and walls from melting snow.



PHOTOS: KUNDA DIXIT

The front yards and porches of these houses are laid in stone, as are the main paths that run through towns like Marpha. Altogether there is a cohesive, congruent feeling to the architecture.

But the roofs on the Roof of the World are changing. Unusually heavy rains caused by the climate crisis means the roofs now leak and the mud walls dissolve in downpours. Traditional buildings are being torn down to be replaced

with cement houses.

Mustang is now connected to the rest of Nepal by a new highway, and this means families use LPG cylinders to cook and do not need firewood anymore.

Kamala Linchin runs a hotel built in the local style in Marpha, but is replacing it with a multi-storey cement structure.

"Even after repairs, there are a lot of problems with this house," she explains, "The firewood rots,

the roof leaks, and the walls break down. It is costly to maintain and I am losing business."

Linchin has noticed the change in weather patterns: it snows very little, if at all, in winter, and there are summer storms that unleash flash floods and torrential rain.

She adds, "It used to snow so much in Mustang that you couldn't leave your house for months. We stored firewood for cooking and heating. But it doesn't matter how

much firewood you store now, it rots quickly, and water starts dripping from the roof."

Two years ago, her neighbour Ripes Linchin was also forced to build a concrete house with a sloping tile roof. He tells us: "The firewood on the roof may look photogenic for tourists but it leaks, and your sons want a more comfortable house. What to do?"

In nearby Gharpajhong, village chair Mohan Singh Lalchan has

## Mustang farmer shows what

Migrant returnee from Japan combines thriving apple farm with eco-tourism to create jobs

■ Kunda Dixit in Mustang

Before the road got here to Nepal's prime apple growing region, the bumper fruit harvest would rot in the orchards in autumn. Farmers tried to feed apples to livestock, but the cattle were sick of eating it.

There were few jobs, a war was going on, and most young men migrated out of this spectacularly scenic but isolated region along the Kali Gandaki River between Annapurna and Dhaulagiri.

Saroj Tulachan was one of them. He left his small homestead near Tukuche and walked five days to Pokhara, took a bus to Kathmandu and through contacts got a job as a chef in Japan.

"I was just like a coolie there, working in the kitchen, but I learnt a lot about farming techniques in my spare time, and kept dreaming of the day I would return to Nepal with savings in my pocket," says Tulachan. But it took him 16 long years to come back.

But much more important than savings, he came back with a dream. In the beginning,



PHOTOS: KUNDA DIXIT

like most returnees, he struggled to adjust and find a meaningful job to pay for high living expenses. Then the Covid pandemic hit, and Tulachan fell ill.

"I said to myself, why am I staying in the city when my home in the mountains is safe and a heaven on earth?" Tulachan recalls, his

face wrinkled in a wide smile.

Tulachan's dream was always to return to his native Mustang. Covid just made him bring the plan forward. What he has achieved since coming back is a remarkable example of passion, simple technical innovation and marketing skills transforming rural Nepal in



APPLE OF HIS EYE: Saroj Tulachan explains the difference between traditional and modern apple farming. He combined his apple farm with an eco-tourism resort in the lap of Mt Nilgiri,

just a few years.

Improving on the knowledge about apple farming that he learnt from his father, Tulachan uses a high-density tall spindle farming method to grow apples vertically like vines rather than trees. The system improves productivity through early yield, better fruit quality, and reduced costs for care. Each plant produces more than a much bigger tree of the local Marpha variety, and the fruits fetch a higher price in markets in Pokhara and Kathmandu.

In the past year, business has been so

# of the World



data that show a shift in the style of houses. Sixty of the 600 houses in the village now have tin or concrete roofs and the trend is catching on.

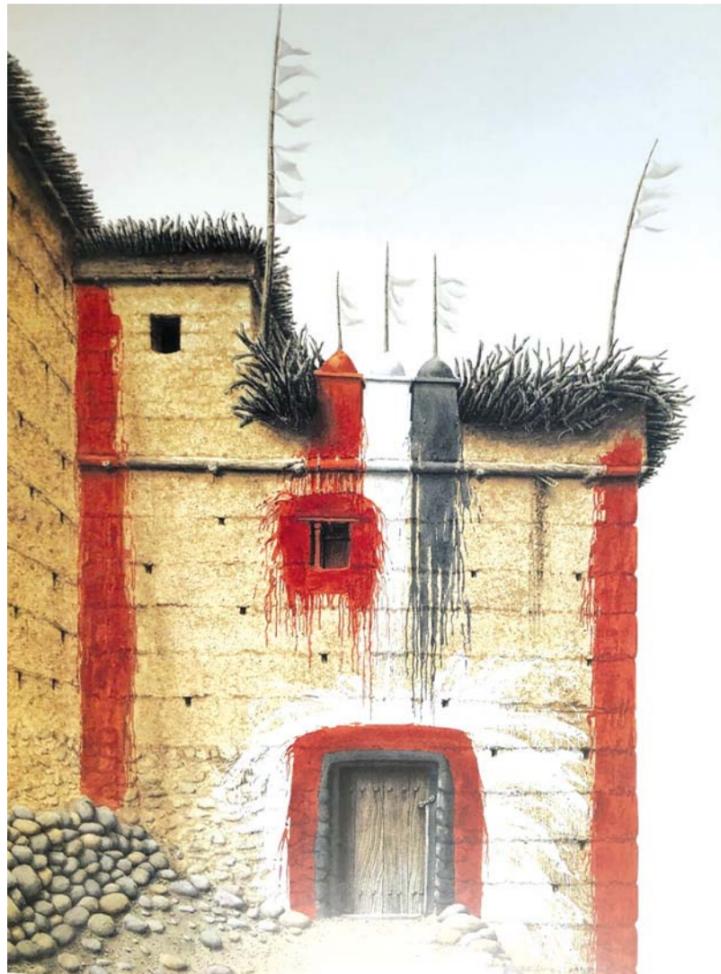
Gas cylinders are available even in the remotest villages in Mustang, so people do not need to stack firewood on their roofs anymore.

This is not necessarily a bad thing: government-subsidised gas means less pressure on high altitude forests where trees take a lot longer to grow. Kitchens are

also less smoky now, so children are less exposed to respiratory ailments.

Just about every family in Mustang has someone working in Japan, South Korea or the US, and the money they send means households can buy cooking gas, and build modern houses.

The main reason for the shift, though, is climate breakdown, Lalchan says, adding: "It used to snow so much that flights at



ROBERT POWELL

**LO COUNTRY:** The centre of Lo Manthang with the main Thubchen Gompa monastery and an adjacent building with firewood stacked on the roof.

Juniper firewood on a roof of a house in Lo Manthang.

The late artist Robert Powell's book *Earth Door Sky Door* had paintings of Mustang's architectural heritage. One of the water colours (left) shows a traditional Mustang house with sloping rammed earth walls and firewood on the flat roof.

Tourists have to pay a \$500 fee for a 15-day permit to visit Upper Mustang where visitor numbers are controlled to protect local culture. Mustang has been voted among the 52 must-go places by the *New York Times* for the second year in a row in 2024, and what attracts tourists is the region's unique culture and architecture. The firewood roof tradition is an important part of the tourism economy even as globalisation homogenises the world.

Juddha Gurung is an expert in natural resources and tourism, and he thinks the way to go is to make local communities more aware of their heritage so they protect it. "The number of new-fashioned houses is still quite small. This is a result of economic and social change in the locality, so the local government must get active about this," says Gurung.

Head of Gharphajhong village Mohan Lalchan is worried that modernity and climate change will erode Mustang's identity, affecting tourism. "We are examining how we can support local families to keep the traditional look of their homes," he told us.

Architects say a compromise between modern architecture and tradition is possible. A firewood-stacked roof need not be demolished to prevent leaks. In fact, some homes have poured concrete on their roofs while keeping the traditional façade of the stone and clay plaster houses.

With another monsoon now bringing fresh showers, Mustang looks like it is in a race against time to save what is left. 🇳🇵

Jomsom airport would be cancelled for weeks, but it's been a while since that happened. Now the only snow we see is on top of Mt Nilgiri."

Rainfall data from Nepal's Department of Hydrology and Meteorology also shows heavier precipitation in summer. In 2010, there was 286mm of rain in Jomsom. By 2018, total precipitation was 301mm. In 2020 403mm of rain fell, with a whopping 666mm in 2021.

In the last 14 years, average annual rainfall has doubled, sometimes triggering destructive flash floods like the ones in Lubra and Kagbeni. Data also shows an increase in temperature. In 2011, the average annual temperature

here was 17.68°C, and last year it was 18°C. Other meteorological stations in Mustang show similar increases.

Environmental researcher Hemu Kafle warns that even a 0.1% change in average annual temperature or rainfall can cause drastic changes in weather. In Manang and Mustang districts, vegetables can now be grown and apple orchards have recorded higher yields.

Sociologist Krishna Bhattachan notes that the most affected by these changes are Mustang's indigenous people. He says, "For many of Mustang's natives, cement will never be an alternative to wood, culturally and economically. The government needs to help find an ideal solution."

## It is possible despite government



traditional apple trees and his high-density spindle orchard (left). He has Nilgiri, added a cold store and expanded his orchard (above and right).



successful that Tulachan has expanded from the orchard he inherited from his father to buy and lease more property along the Kali Gandki floodplain. He is also helping neighbouring farms in Tukucho, Marpha and Jomsom to adopt the new technique.

"It does not make sense only for me to do well, the whole community needs to benefit," says Tulachan. "What is most important is self-fulfillment and happiness, I can't take my money with me when I die."

And Tulachan is happiest among his apple trees. He is up at the crack of dawn and

with his garden shears is off for a morning of pruning, training and grafting apple plants. He has built his own irrigation system channeling water from a nearby stream.

Learning from his Japan stay, he has also established a ryokan-style inn called Mustang Eco Hill Resort by the Pokhara-Jomsom

highway with a restaurant serving organic produce from his farm, and a gift shop.

A new addition to Tulachan's eco-tourism and apple orchard venture is a cold storage which evens out the autumn glut after the apple harvest when prices are low, so the fruits fetch a higher price in April-May.

"If you want to get rich quick, this is not your line of business," warns Tulachan, walking between neat rows of tall spindle apple stems to check on his drip irrigation system. "You have to be patient, and plan ten years into the future."

His Japanese high density apple variety takes only three years to ripen, compared to 15 years for local trees. Presently, the farm harvests 18 tons of apple every season, and with the new plants in his expanded farm, Tulachan expects 40 tons. The farm makes Rs3.5 million in profit every year, which goes for upkeep, servicing loans and upgrading his inn.

Traders now come all the way from Kathmandu to book Tulachan's apples. His apple varieties sell for Rs400 per kg at Bhatbhateni department stores, more than three times more than the traditional Marpha variety.

A flag of Nepal flutters proudly in the afternoon wind on the roof of the Mustang Eco Hill Resort, and Tulachan says Nepalis who stop at his farm marvel that there is a place like this in Nepal. He has set an example that it is possible to run a profitable business and create jobs despite the government.

He says: "There is no point blaming the government, we can do a lot by ourselves. If they just scaled up what I have done here to the national level by investing in tourism, agriculture and hydropower, Nepal can also be prosperous." 🇳🇵

## EVENTS

**KORA 24 Cycling Festival**

Mark your calendars for the upcoming annual cycle festival sponsored by Turkish Airlines. Team up with your close ones and gear up for this cycling challenge this Saturday. Register at [Korachallenge.com](http://Korachallenge.com).  
20 July, 7am onwards, Patan Darbar Square

**Play द सिस्टम**

This play takes a satirical approach to gender discrimination in the workplace. Showings have been extended for a week.  
Until 23 July, 5:15pm (except Tuesdays) / 1pm also (on Saturdays), Kausi Theatre, Teku, 9861315317

**Art Exhibition**

The solo exhibition Echoes from the Land of Memories by Nabina Sunuwar features woodcut printmaking and blends nostalgia with the reality of changing landscapes.  
Until 28 July, 11am-6pm (Tuesday to Thursday), 11am-7pm (Friday to Sunday), Takpa Gallery, Lazimpat

**Fluid Play**

Don't miss out on this solo exhibition by Kushal Pokharel, which explores the creative journey of an artist.  
Until 23 July, 10am-7pm, Gallery Mcube, Chakapat

**Yugko Sancho**

An adaptation of Roald Dahl's classic Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, this play changes Willy Wonka to Ms Moon and the chocolate factory to a textile factory.  
Until 3 August, 5:30pm (except Tuesdays) / 1pm also (on Saturdays), Ticket: Rs300- Rs1000, Shilpee Theatre, Battisputali

## DINING

**Erma Restaurant**

Erma Restaurant offers an upscale fine dining experience with carefully curated continental dishes. With a farm to table approach and an assortment of wines, Erma turns every meal into an experience.  
Hotel Shambala, Chakrapath, 9803867240

## MUSIC

**Trishala Unplugged**

Indulge in Trishala Gurung's soulful melodies and release the week-long stress. After the performance, there is an after-party featuring DJ Black and DJ Rupesh.  
19 July, 9pm onwards, Ticket: Rs499, Mirage by Escobar, Gairidhara

**Sabin Rai & The Pharaoh**

Renowned band Sabin Rai and The Pharaoh are joining Lavie Garden's fourth anniversary. Book tickets through the Khalti app.  
26 July, 4pm onwards, Tickets: Rs999, Lavie Garden, Boudha

**Musical Gala 2024**

This gala day is a charity event aimed at supporting HIV/AIDS initiatives. Enjoy live music from the band Rockheads Nepal alongside your dining experience.  
26 July, 12pm onwards, Ticket: Rs200-Rs399, Himalayan Whitehouse International College, Putalisadak

**Open House Carnival**

Experience a unique fusion of rock and contemporary Nepali music with delicious food and fun carnival games at IIMS Open House Carnival. VEK and Sushant Ra Raga also join.  
19 July, 11pm onwards, Annapurna Hotel, Durbar Marg, 9820104279

**Prazada**

Enjoy Prazada's selection of chilled draught beers in the lush garden with aromatic food and special pizzas accompanied by relaxing music on Fridays, and a Pop-up market on Saturdays.  
Baluwatar (01) 4410473

**Haadi Biryani**

Haadi is the place to go to fulfil cravings for Biryani. Their slow-cooked biryanis are seasoned with a secret spice blend and the clay pots that they come in enhances the experience.  
Dilli Bazaar (01) 4438444

## GETAWAYS

**Begnas Lake Resort & Villas**

Located in one of the most agriculturally flourishing areas of Pokhara, guests have the opportunity to explore and try locally grown coffee, grains, oranges and more.  
Begnas Lake, Pokhara, 9856061080

**Bodhi Suites**

Situated in the City of Lakes, Pokhara, Bodhi Suites and Boutique Hotel is modern, classy and offers a wide variety of luxury amenities. The rooms are spacious, and ideal to unwind after a long day of exploring Lakeside.  
Lakeside (61) 457657 / 58

**Traditional Comfort**

Traditional Comfort blends together the distinct architecture of traditional Newari designs and the comfort of modern amenities. Relax overlooking the scenic beauties of the Kathmandu Valley.  
Kamalpokhari (01) 4510009

**Kathmandu Guest House**

Kathmandu Guest House is a favourite of frequent trekkers to Nepal. The converted Rana mansion has offered comfortable accommodation, airy rooms, beautiful gardens and great prices since 1967.  
Thamel (01) 4700632

**Summit River Lodge**

The Summit River Lodge is an expansive 16-lodge property that boasts an infinity pool, semi-tropical vegetation and authentic Nepali cuisine made from local organic produce. The rustic lodge incorporates traditional wood designs with minimalistic accents.  
Kurintar, Dhading, 9801151166

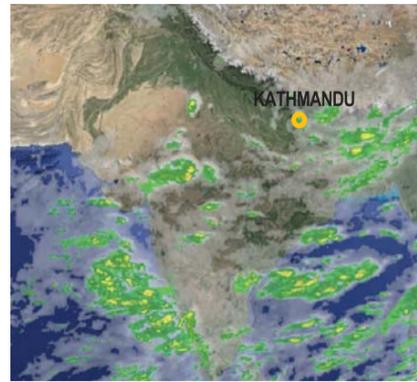
**Mr. Gimhap**

Korean Gimhap is a dish made from steamed rice filled with veggies or meat and wrapped in seaweed. It is a combination of sweet, salty and umami flavours and Mr. Gimhap has the best.  
Jhamsikhel, 9818281368

**The BLVD**

The in-house restaurant at Hotel Royal Singi serves healthy and gluten-free meals that are packed with flavours. The restaurant also has a variety of dessert options.  
Lal Durbar, Kamaladi (01) 4424190 / 4424191

## WEEKEND WEATHER

**Tug-o-war**

The summer monsoon in Nepal is always a tug-o-war between moisture-rich winds from the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. Sometimes, the Arabian Sea arm of the monsoon is stronger, and pushes back the Bay winds. At other times, the two systems collide and unleash destructive cloudbursts. This week, the expected rains did not arrive, but a monsoon pulse is massing up, and will bring more rain over the weekend in Kathmandu.



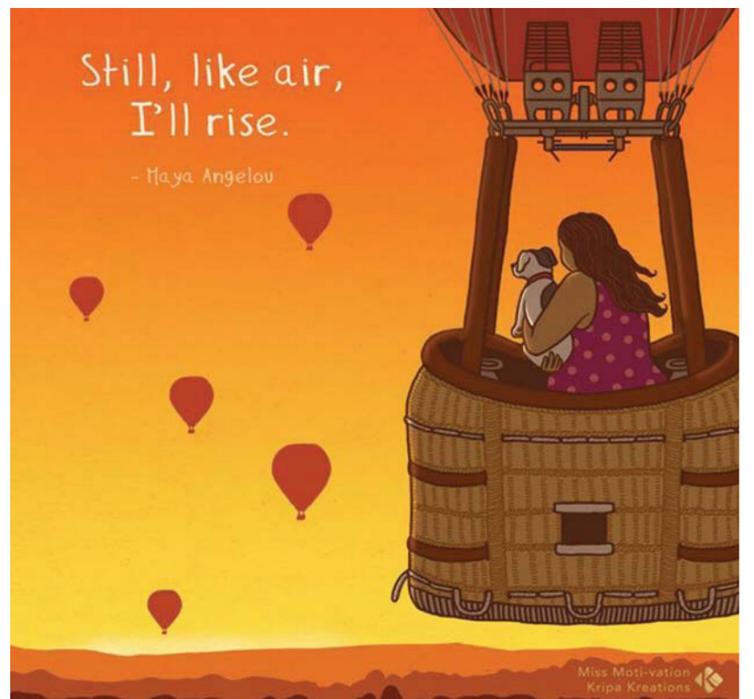
## OUR PICK



The critically-acclaimed 2024 British romantic drama series One Day tells the story of Emma Morley and Dexter Mayhew, who meet for the first time in 1988 on the night they graduate from the University of Edinburgh. Over the next 20 years, the limited series follows the ups and downs in the two's relationship at different points in their lives and careers. Based on the 2009 novel by David Nicholls as well as the 2011 film adaptation, it stars Ambika Mod and Leo Woodall in the lead roles.

## MISS MOTI-VATION

KRIPA JOSHI



## गर्मी मौसममा संक्रामक रोगबाट बचाउ र बचाऔं

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



नेपाल सरकार  
विज्ञापन बोर्ड

# Those were the days

Decades-old archival images by photojournalist Bikas Rauniar of ministers in the new government



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ALL PHOTOS: BIKAS RAUNIAR

**K**P Oli is Nepal's Prime Minister for the fourth time. Regardless of the fact that we are just recycling the same old, tried, tested and failed leaders, Oli has now secured himself a position among Nepal's serial prime ministers.

He has promised to vacate the chair for coalition partner Sher Bahadur Deuba, who will be PM for the sixth time in 18 months. Deuba has only one more tenure to go to prove his astrologer right. His consort Arzu Deuba was sworn in as foreign minister in the new cabinet this week.

Surya Bahadur Thapa of the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) and Girija Prasad Koirala of NC were prime ministers five times each. Lokendra Bahadur Chand also of RPP has also been PM four times.

Oli first became prime minister in 2015, although he was a powerful member of the UML ever since the 1990s. His second term was two and a half years later in 2018 after Nepal's first federal elections. The third

time he was a minority PM and was in the office for two months before Deuba upstaged him in 2021.

Now, the two leaders who backstabbed each other multiple times are partners in government again. There could be no better proof of the truth in the adage that there are no real enemies or friends in politics.

Besides Arzu Deuba, the NC has also brought back Prakash Man Singh (son of democracy warrior Ganesh Man Singh) as deputy PM and Minister for Urban Development -- despite the fact that both lost seats in the last election in 2022.

Bishnu Paudel of the UML has returned as the Finance Minister for the third time with his work cut out to revive a stagnant economy. His appointment is also under a cloud because his son has been implicated in the Baluwater land scam.

Notably, there are only two women ministers in the cabinet. Besides Arzu Deuba, Bidya Bhattarai replaces Sumana

Shrestha of RSP as the Minister of Education.

In these archival images by photojournalist Bikas Rauniar, we trace the political journey of some of these prominent figures, and in their faces we see the passage of time. But we are also reminded that the more things change, the more they remain the same.

We see Oli on a street demonstration with Madhav Kumar Nepal (now his nemesis) and other leaders in 1998 protesting inflation and state violence. Two years later, he is at a commemoration of the North Korean National Day in Kathmandu. We also catch a glimpse of Oli with a young Bidya Devi Bhandari, who later became the first female president.

We also see Arzu Deuba as an activist attending a public hearing on the Arun III project in 1992, and another photo of her won a heritage walk in Madhyapur Thimi. A 1994 photo captures Prakash Man Singh with his father Ganesh Man Singh at a function. 🇳🇵

1 Arzu Rana Deuba (2nd from left) with Anil Chitrakar, water expert Ajaya Dixit, journalist Rajendra Dahal, hydropower expert Bikash Pandey and Rishi Shah. (Behind) Barbara Adams, Huta Ram Baidya and others during the first public hearing of the Arun III project at Kathmandu Hotel in 1992. Arzu Rana was then working for IUCN.

2 Arzu Rana walking with Karna Shakya and others in Thimi during a heritage observation walk in 1995.

3 K P Oli, Madhav Kumar Nepal and others during a demonstration against the NC government outside Singha Darbar in 1998.

4 K P Oli, Madhav Kumar Nepal, Bharat Mohan Adhikari and other UML leaders at a parliamentary party meeting at Singha Darbar in 1996.

5 Home Minister K P Oli, Bidya Devi Bhandari, Mirza Dilshad Beg at Kathmandu airport to see off Haj pilgrims in 1995.

6 K P Oli with Krishna P Bhattarai of the NC, Beni B Karki, Narayan Man Bijukche, Chitra Bahadur KC and a North Korean diplomat at a solidarity meeting for Korean unification in Tripureswar in 2000.

7 Prakash Man Singh with his father Ganesh Man Singh, Krishna P Bhattarai, Yog P Upadhyaya during a Nepali Congress rally at Khula Manch in 1994.

## WORLDLINK

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# RIVERS BE DAMMED

Nepal struggles to balance energy and water needs with dams that damage livelihoods and ecosystems

■ Pinki Sris Rana in Tanahu

For decades, Nepal's leaders have promised prosperity by harnessing 'white oil', the vast hydroelectricity potential of Himalayan rivers.

So far, less than one-tenth of the 48,000MW of feasible hydropower has been exploited — nearly all from run-of-river schemes that do not store water, but use the energy of steep rapids.

This results in an annual monsoon power glut, and power scarcity in the dry season as rivers run low. Dams to store water in large reservoirs would solve that problem and balance year-round electricity generation and water supply.

Nepal's only existing reservoir project is Kulekhani, a rock-filled dam built back in 1982 that impounded a 7km long lake called Indrasarovar near Kathmandu. The only second reservoir in Nepal is the 150m tall concrete dam here in Tanahu that stores water for 17 days and is scheduled for completion in 2026.

Plans for other dams are stalled: Budi Gandaki (1,200MW) with a 280m high dam, West Seti (750MW), Sun Kosi II (1,110MW) and the mammoth Mahakali (Pancheshwar) Dam on the western border with India. Even bigger projects have been proposed, like the gigantic Karnali Dam at Chisapani (10,800MW) and the Kosi High Dam at Barachhetra in Sunsari.

"Except Kulekhani,



40 YEARS AGO: Built in 1982, Kulekhani (above) is the only reservoir project in Nepal today.

all hydropower projects in Nepal are run-of-river which produce enough electricity during the peak monsoon season, but in winter there is no rain and during that time, we buy electricity at a costlier rate than we sell to India," says former Water Resources Minister Dipak Gyawali.

Gyawali reasons that storage hydropower will even out the seasonal imbalance of both the water and the electricity, and boost Nepal's domestic economy.

However, storage projects are more expensive because of construction, land acquisition and impact on food supply. But there is a way to reduce cost by ensuring that regulated water has multi-purpose benefits downstream for agriculture and for fisheries, water

supply, or tourism, with electricity a byproduct.

Hydropower developer Kumar Pandey agrees: "The widening of a reservoir project's purpose broadens investment prospects from different sectors and helps minimise the energy cost."

However, Nepal will have to balance the economy's growing demand for year-round clean energy with those dams damaging local livelihoods, riverine ecosystems, lowering food production and exposing expensive infrastructure to climate and seismic risk.

Industrialised countries are dismantling some of their dams to let their rivers flow free again. But Nepal is only now embarking on a dam-building spree for energy and

regulated water.

"Nepal's need for electricity is still to be fulfilled, so dismantling dams is pretty far-fetched," says Gyawali. "Rather than 'no dams', we should be pushing for 'no bad dams'."

There are currently 167 licensed hydropower projects in Nepal whose installed capacity will reach 3,000MW this year. When 278 new projects that are under construction come on stream, electricity generation will exceed 10,000MW by 2030.

Dams in Nepal tend to have shorter lifespans because Himalayan rivers have some of the highest sediment loads in the world. Making dams seismic resistant adds to their cost. On top

of this, there are now added dangers of glacial lake outburst floods, extreme rainfall and landslide dammed river ruptures.

Nepal's rivers frequently suffer these disasters, the latest in 2021 in Melamchi and eastern Nepal last year that damaged hydropower infrastructure. But an example of catastrophic destruction was the October 2023 flood on Sikkim's Teesta that destroyed the \$1.2 billion Chungthang dam and other projects.

"Climate change has drastically changed rainfall patterns, and we are yet to understand the impact on the hydropower projects," says Kumar Pandey. "There can be many different factors that put dams at risk, but exaggerating the risks even

## Displacing people to store water

Nepal's first reservoir project on the Kulekhani Khola was built in 1982 on a spring-fed stream near Kathmandu. The inundation displaced 3,500 people who were not adequately compensated.

"Back then, people were naive and Kulekhani residents gave up their land without much discussion," says Ram Kumar Shrestha, 59, whose family was among those who had to move. They are currently living on the outskirts of Markhu.

His father, Jhamak Lal Shrestha was the village head during the absolute monarchy days. Residents of Kulekhani under consideration to be given land in Thori near the Indian border in Chitwan, but many were not happy.

"It was too hot and there was danger from wild animals," recalls the senior Shrestha, now 79. Some invested the compensation money on land elsewhere and did well, but others spent it on everyday expenses and were soon destitute.

The compensation and resettlement plan for the Kulekhani displaced was 'deeply flawed' as per a report by researcher Jagdish Chandra Pokharel.

And Nepal's record for resettlement of people for



Tanahu project will inundate Battimaya Biswakarma's house and of her families in Wangtangetar.

infrastructure and national parks has not improved since then.

Kulekhani's history is being repeated in Tanahu. By the banks of the Seti River in the village of Badarkuna, cows and water buffaloes graze without a herder in sight amidst cement pillars with painted numbers.

These are farms that belong to the people of Paltyang village, who cultivated fields by the river but lived up the mountain till as recently as three years ago.

"Our ancestors lived in Paltyang because there was malaria down here in Badarkuna," explains Til Bahadur Thapa, 64, who along with wife Sansari worked the fields by the river and climbed back up to Paltyang just to sleep.

The cement pillars on Thapa's field mark the area that will be inundated by the Tanahu dam. After they were put up, the Thapas stopped farming here.

Yam Kumari Thapa, 43, grew more than enough rice and maize

in her fields near Fedi Khola, a tributary of Seti— that will soon be submerged. She sold the surplus in the market. Now, she is fighting for compensation for her land.

A little above Badarkuna is a Dalit settlement that will also soon be underwater. The land is undocumented, and this means compensation from the project will be complicated for the 12 families here.

"We know that electricity is important and we are not against development," says Battimaya Biswakarma of the Dalit settlement of Wangtangetar. "All we are asking for is a place to live like we were living here."

The Tanahu project has affected 560 households but 41 households are fighting for land compensation.

How the Tanahu project compensates them will have precedent for other even bigger reservoir projects being planned, like Budi Gandaki which will displace 3,560 households and Sun Kosi II which will affect 15,000 people.

"Hydropower is built on rivers and water is a socially required resource which is why the development of dams brings out a lot of local social and environmental issues," explains

hydropower developer Kumar Pandey.

Run-of-river projects are at high risk from floods, but relatively benign because unlike reservoirs, they do not displace too many people and submerge fertile farmlands.

Some experts say Nepal should not be investing in colossal projects like the \$1.3 billion Upper Arun in northeastern Nepal directly under mountains that will be vulnerable to glacial lake outburst floods, and instead prioritise smaller schemes and spread the risk.

"Smaller run-of-river projects require much less area while mega storage projects submerge huge tracts of farmland and displace people, making the financial and social cost heavier," says Jagdish Chandra Pokharel, author of the Kulekhani report and former chair of the National Planning Commission.

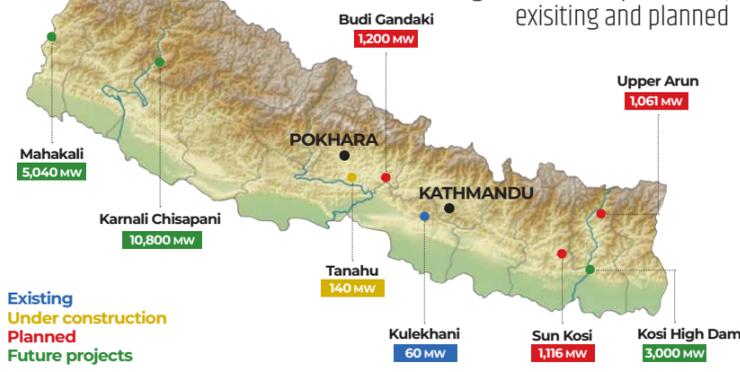
However, the need for a year-round balance of electricity and water supply is forcing Nepal's planners to look at the larger picture and opt for big reservoir projects.

Til Bahadur Thapa looks below at his fields on the banks of Seti River that his ancestors have farmed for generations but will now be submerged by the Tanahu reservoir. He says simply, "A country cannot develop by driving people like us off the land." 📍



## DAMNED IF WE DO, DAMNED IF WE DON'T

Storage dams on Nepal's rivers, existing and planned



The 3D rendition of Tanahu project dam to be completed in 2026.

TANAHU HYDROPOWER LIMITED



PHOTOS: PINKI SRIS RANA

Nepal's rivers are older than the Himalaya, and many of them start in China, cutting mighty gorges through the mountains, and flow down to join the Ganga in India before emptying into the delta in Bangladesh.

Rivers do not respect country boundaries, but hydropower projects are built within national jurisdictions. Nepal has had to navigate intricate geopolitics with its lower riparian neighbour India, and it has not always gone smoothly.

Past projects like the Kosi and Gandaki that India built on the border 50 years ago are seen by many experts as being unfair to Nepal. More recently, New Delhi has refused to buy surplus electricity from hydropower projects in Nepal in which the Chinese are involved.

Reservoirs in the Himalaya are going to be even more geopolitically sensitive because the climate crisis will make water a strategic commodity for India's densely populated and increasingly prosperous Ganga plains.

"Rivers are continuous with upstream-downstream linkages. Anything done on rivers in Nepal will have an impact downstream, which is why rivers should be studied in totality, and infrastructure designed keeping that in mind," says water expert and author Ajaya Dixit.

Storage dams in Nepal will regulate water on rivers flowing downstream, and if Nepal builds them with international loans India will benefit for free, while Nepal's fertile and populated valleys are submerged. But for strategic reasons, India may want to have a say in Nepal's plans to dam its rivers.

An estimated 70% of dry season flow and 40% of annual discharge on the Ganga comes

down from its tributaries in Nepal. It therefore makes sense for India and Nepal to plan for the future by regulating flow.

The other consideration is ecological. Dams are even more disruptive on riverine ecosystems than run-of-river schemes, and destroy the habitat of Himalayan rivers which are havens for biodiversity. Some endangered fish, amphibian and bird species are found nowhere else on the planet.

A 2018 Asian Development Bank report, Impact of Dams on Fish and Rivers in Nepal, found that hydropower projects did not use any tool to measure the possible impact on aquatic biodiversity.

"Dams act as barriers for migratory movement of fish, in many cases, threatening species' survival," the report stated.

In northeastern Nepal, a local community in Lumba Sumba is lobbying internationally to crowdfund a campaign against a hydropower project on ancestral land in the Chhujung River valley that they say will also disturb the habitat of endangered snow leopards.

How well Nepal's planners can balance geopolitics, rising energy demand and economic growth with ecosystem protection and respect for human rights will be tested in the coming years, as the country embarks on a dam-building spree.



Nearly all of Nepal's electricity is generated from run-of-river schemes. Dams to store water in large reservoirs would balance year-round power and water supply, but Nepal's only existing reservoir project is Kulekhani. Plans for other bigger dams are stalled. Watch the video on Nepali Times' YouTube channel.

before a project is started is fear-mongering."

Near Damauli, halfway between Kathmandu and Pokhara, the designers of the Tanahu dam say they have taken into account the Seti River's origins in the glaciers of the Annapurna and its frequent

floods.

"We factor in the worst-case scenario and measure the probable maximum flood that could happen and tailor the structure to withstand the probable flood," says acting project head Shyamji Bhandari at the project site near Damauli.

Tanahu's design includes flushing gates to minimise monsoon sedimentation to ensure longevity of the dam. Bhandari adds, "And if these measures aren't enough and a calamity does strike, we also have an emergency siren system to warn downstream areas."

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