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HANDS OFF: A cement mould tiger at the entrance to Bardia National Park appears to symbolise the fragile balance Nepal has to maintain between ecology and economy.

KUNDA DIXIT

STATE vs NATURE

Nepal's Supreme Court has summoned the President Chure Terai Madhesh Conservation Development Board and the National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC) in a public interest litigation case against the amendment of the 1973 National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act.

The Constitutional Bench comprising Chief Justice Bishowambhar Prasad Shrestha, as Justices Prakash Man Singh Raut, Sapana Pradhan Malla, Prakash Kumar Dhungana and Kumar Regmi ordered representatives of the two institutions to appear in court for a hearing on the writ petition.

In July, President Ramchandra Paudel authenticated a Bill passed hurriedly and secretly by the new NC-UML coalition in both Houses to amend provisions in the 1973 Act to allow investment in infrastructure and projects inside protected areas.

Senior advocates Prakash Mani Sharma, Dilraj Khanal and Padam Bahadur Shrestha filed a writ in the Supreme Court demanding that the amendments be declared null

and void because the amendments added in Section 5A of the Act were against Nepal's own conservation commitments, and obligations under international biodiversity pacts of which Nepal is a signatory.

The petitioners argue that the amendments were introduced through an investment bill by the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Supplies instead of the Ministry of Forests and Environment, and would throw off the careful balance between environmental protection and development in Nepal.

There is a danger Nepal's internationally-recognised successes in doubling forest cover in 25 years to 46% of area mainly because of community forestry, tripling the tiger population, and biodiversity protection will be rolled back, they say. The amendment is reportedly being pushed by politicians and their powerful business cronies with support from some international consultants (story on page 10-11).

The writ petition also argues

that the fragmentation of the authority and integrity of protected areas will directly contribute to irreversible ecological damage, harming local livelihoods and heighten inequity.

The petitioners claim that the amendment poses not only an unfair restriction on the right of Nepali citizens to live in a clean and healthy environment, but directly interferes with human-nature coexistence.

As it is, forest protection is the only climate target pledged by Nepal's leaders at international conferences that the country has actually met. As another investigation on page 10-11 shows that illegal logging and timber smuggling is rampant mainly in three Tarai districts bordering India where forest cover is said to have declined by half in past decades.

In particular, section 5A of the Act, which has provisions related to prohibited activities within national parks and reserves, now includes an added clause which will essentially allow the government to designate 'non-sensitive' areas within these protected zones, enabling private sector investment in resorts, cable cars and other infrastructure.

Some international credit agencies and investors argue

that Nepal's economy and local communities must benefit from the country's conservation successes, and the best way is to allow carefully calibrated investment in national parks, conservation areas, and community forests.

That may work in countries where politicians are accountable and the rule of law prevails, but with Nepal's current level of corruption and governance failure, handing over nature to big business is a recipe for disaster.

Examples abound of recent cut-and-paste environmental impact assessment (EIA) reports presented by the government for the proposed international airport in Nijgad and hydropower projects in ecologically and culturally fragile Himalayan valleys.

Nepal was relatively successful in addressing the humans vs nature challenge by balancing the needs of local people with national parks.

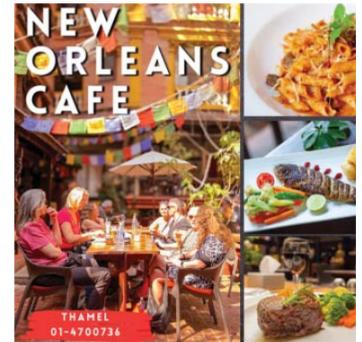
Now we have entered a new era of state vs nature. 🇳🇵

Not out of the woods yet

PAGE 10

Shrinking Tarai forests

PAGE 11



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Taking a leap forward, Nepal's own Natureknit Cashmere is venturing into the global market by participating in Maison&Objet Paris 2024.

NATUREKNIT

Safer migration for women

Just before Dasain this time last year, two young Nepali women were about to leave for Dubai. They were offered jobs to perform at cultural programs, but did not have proper travel documents.

One of them was a friend of Archana Darji, a journalist with our sister publication himalkhabar.com. As she writes in her blog, it was clear they were being trafficked by a gang of recruiters who had paid off Kathmandu airport immigration.

The girls had to support their families, and were determined to go despite knowing the risks. One of them soon returned because she fell sick, and could not bring herself to tell Darji what the work was in Dubai.

One year later, she has once more paid a recruiter for a job in Dubai, and is about to fly off again.

Most of the focus on overseas remittances gives credit to male migrant workers sending money home. The question around migrant women is often why they go despite knowing about exploitation and abuse.



AMIT MACHAMASI / NT ARCHIVE

That is the wrong question. We know why. Instead, we should be asking what can be done immediately to ensure safe migration for Nepali women — both in Nepal and in destination countries.

In 2017, following high profile cases of abuse of women domestic migrant workers in West Asia, the government imposed a blanket ban on female migration. This misguided decision drove recruitment underground, forcing women to take unauthorised channels, increasing the risk of trafficking en route.

Many were stranded in Mumbai or Delhi, and being outside the safety net of Nepali embassies and consulates made their rescue and repatriation difficult.

A new eight-year study by Brunel University London calls for Nepali women migrants to be given skills-training and language orientation so they can migrate without being trafficked, exploited or abused.

'The ban overlooks evidence of positive outcomes for Nepali domestic workers and leads to several unintended and damaging consequences,' the study says, adding there should be 'concrete reintegration plans for returnee domestic workers at the local level of governance to assure their social, political and economic empowerment'.

The report's author Ayushman Bhagat, lecturer of Political Geography at Brunel, interviewed women including recent

returnees in Jhapa. He found them distrustful and angry with the government for making it more difficult for them to migrate.

"Instead of solving structural issues of class, caste, education, these women are having to bear the burden of historical marginalisation," Bhagat told Nepali Times. "All they want is for their children to not have to lead the same life they did, and migration is the quickest way to their empowerment."

Many women migrating for domestic work are at greater risk of being cheated by recruiters in Nepal, trafficked en route, and abused in destination countries. Even when they do return bearing the scars of abuse, they leave again out of sheer desperation.

Officially, one in every ten Nepali migrant workers is a woman but many more who are undocumented or migrate to India are not counted. Their contribution to the economy and family income is rarely acknowledged.

This is hardly surprising, given the marginalisation Nepali women face at home, and the double discrimination women of excluded caste and ethnicities experience in society.

Over the years, the government has flip flopped on women migration, introducing shamefully restrictive and ad hoc gender-insensitive rules. One such regulation (later revoked after outrage, pictured) even required women under 40 to obtain permission letters from male family members and the local government for travel.

Part of the problem is the media's doom and gloom portrayal of migration that magnifies the negative.

True, there are harrowing cases of abuse and exploitation, and workers are cheated every step of the way, often by their own relatives and recruiters. But Bhagat says there are many other positive outcomes for women workers.

"We must highlight how the women are contributing to society, not everyone is being exploited and frankly to think otherwise is a very privileged mindset," adds Bhagat.

Nepal's graduation to middle income country is almost entirely supported by remittances reducing the poverty rate. Many returnees have improved family living standards, and created jobs for other Nepalis.

Restrictions and bans never work. Bhagat has some common sense steps to making migration safer for women:

- Invite all women workers to register with Nepali missions regardless of their status with no repercussion.
- Strengthen the capacity of Nepali missions abroad to help workers in need at dedicated service centres.
- Form government-to-government legally binding arrangements for safe migration.
- Thoroughly vet new labour markets and regulate recruitment at the local levels.

Sonia Awale

Nepal is a remittance economy, but it is mostly male migrants who get credit. What about the women?

ONLINE PACKAGES



TALE OF TWO FLOWERS

Locally known as Yenyā, Indra Jatra is dedicated to the god of rain Indra. The festival is marked with much enthusiasm and devotion by Hindus and Buddhists alike in Kathmandu Valley, and is celebrated for eight days with singing, dancing and feasting. Watch this walkabout with heritage conservationist Anil Chitrakar in his retelling of Indra Jatra through two of the flowers found in Kathmandu Valley and their significance to the festival. Indra Jatra special on page 6-7.



LOGGING OUT

Using satellite imagery, our reporter does an on-ground investigation into illegal logging in three Tarai hotspots on the Indian border. Expensive hardwood timber and proximity to India means smugglers are chopping down trees deep inside national forests. Watch video on Nepali Times' YouTube channel complementing reports on page 1, 10-11 about a new law allowing development inside protected areas.

PERMAFROST

I see a lot in the British media on how climate change is affecting the Alps but it is no less astounding in the Himalaya ('The not-so-permanent frost', Wilfried Haerberli and Alton C Byers, #1228). And of course systems in Nepal are not so resilient, even if the people are.

Ed Douglas

- Melting permafrost was the primary reason behind the Melamchi disaster in 2021.

Dipak Gyawali

- The situation of the melting permafrost in Tibet and the Arctic tundra has been of concern for some time now, and it is inevitable that Nepal is also being affected now. The repercussions of this will be enormous.

Lesley Abhita

- Climate change that's already occurred may not be reversible and humans don't have the resolve to prevent further climate change. Many of the world's political problems stem from climate change, especially the migration of refugees to northern countries and anti-migrant sentiment in those countries.

Robert Gass

IT SECTOR

The potential of Nepali entrepreneurship and intelligence, particularly in the IT sector, is truly impressive ('It's IT', Vishad Raj Onta, #1228). It's an exciting avenue for growth. The challenge lies in navigating this evolution thoughtfully, ensuring that both technological innovation and social development go hand-in-hand, promoting sustainable and inclusive growth without leaving anyone behind. Striking this balance will be essential for Nepal's future prosperity.

Sunil Sakya

DR BIDYA PANT

Thank you very much for the incredibly inspiring story last week of the selfless Dr Bidya Prasad Pant, who is indeed a Nepali ophthalmologist with a clear world vision ('Nepali surgeon with a vision for the world', Kunda Dixit, #1228).

Buddha Basnyat

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



Buddha Air retires ATR 42

Buddha Air has decommissioned the first ATR 42-320 it acquired, after 16 years mainly serving Nepal's domestic air routes. The plane with call sign 9N-AIN with 47 seat capacity was one of three aircraft of the type bought by Buddha Air in 2008. Coverage online.

f Most reached and shared on Facebook



Quality of equality for women

Editorial by Shristi Karki

However progressive the laws, true equality cannot be achieved until women are socio-culturally empowered to make their own decisions. Patriarchy has contributed to gender inequality, but internalised misogyny lurks deep within society. Read more on our website.

X Most popular on X

Not-so-permanent frost

by Alton C Byers and Wilfried Haerberli

Noted Himalayan researchers Alton C Byers and Wilfried Haerberli draw attention to the little known phenomenon of permafrost that seems to be the main trigger in recent climate-induced disasters in the Himalaya including Thame. Join the discussion online and watch the explainer video at nepalintimes.com

66 Most commented

Surgeon with a vision for the world

by Kunda Dixit

Bidya Prasad Pant has performed over 200,000 ocular surgeries in the last 40 years. For his work, the Nepali surgeon is being recognised by the Danish Ophthalmological Society on 27 September. Go online to read more about his life and work.

7 Most visited online page

QUOTES



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Since 2014, Bidya Prasad Pant has been doing free eye surgeries in developing countries. He and his team have performed 300,000 operations just in Burma. His is an extraordinary journey of determination, perseverance -- and vision.



Hem Sagar Baral @WorshipNature

Dr Bidya outperforms many other eye surgeons of Nepal, so very proud of Dr Bidya for his continuous service in this field, rising from what he was and to this level. Congratulations and respect



Hikmat Thapa @HikmatThapa

Congratulations Doctor Shab



RAJKUMAR PARAJULI / RSS

1,000 WORDS

MY WAY OR HIGHWAY: A statue of B P Koirala being erected at the starting point of the Japanese-built B P Highway in Dhulikhel on the leader's 111th birth anniversary on 8 September.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Lines on the map

In 2004, India released a reformatted political map that included disputed territories of Kalapani which Nepal also claims to be within its boundary. It unleashed a public uproar in the country and a crossparty consensus in Parliament passed a new map of Nepal including Kalapani from Parliament.

Kalapani has been a contentious topic ever since the British India days, and Kathmandu seems disinterested about this remote tip of the country. Twenty years ago this week, our reporter Sharad KC found out for himself when he was stopped and questioned by Indian authorities at a border checkpoint along the east bank of the Mahakali well within Nepali territory.

Excerpt of the report published in issue #213 10 - 16 September 2004:

"Where are you going?" they asked angrily in Hindi... "Didn't you see the flag? Why did you cross the checkpoint? Why are you really here? How many Maoists are there on that side?"



What kind of weapons do they have?"

A uniformed official then accused us of being Maoists and tried to scare us by telling his runner to have blindfolds and red hot iron rods ready at their camp.

Just then another senior-looking fellow in civies from the Indo-Tibetan Border Police approached and asked us who we were and why we were there. We told him. He pointed to a barren mountain to the east and explained that was the border. He finally let us go, but not before one of his assistants had exposed the film in our camera.

Later after comparing maps and talking to officials in Darchula, it was clear that now the Indians don't just regard the east bank of the Mahakali as their territory. They don't even regard the smaller tributary that comes down from Lipu Lekh as the border, and nor even the small stream that feeds into it. What is the de facto 'line of control' where we were stopped is now 600m southeast of the stream on a bluff overlooking the river, which is supposed to be right inside Nepal.

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



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Medicine on the move

The Asia-Pacific Travel Health Conference in Kathmandu to discuss disease dynamics in an interconnected world

■ Shristi Karki

The 14th Asia-Pacific Travel Health Conference is set to take place in Kathmandu from 18-21 September, bringing together 200 delegates from 27 countries to explore advances in travel medicine which have relevance for Nepal's own tourism industry.

The biannual conference is the first in four years after its 13th iteration in New Zealand in 2020 was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Previous conferences have been held in Bangkok, and Kathmandu in 2016.

Lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic will be prominent in the agenda of the conference in which experts from the International Society of Travel Medicine will also be taking part. Nearly 60 of the 200 participants are from Nepal.

"The practice of travel medicine can be an important sentinel for diseases," says Buddha Basnyat, MD, Chair of the Oxford University Clinical Research Unit-Nepal, who is part of the Nepali delegation.

The three-day event will kick off with a day-long Pre-Conference Seminar on Adventure and Wilderness Travel, as well as separate sessions on mental health strategies and military medicine before the main events next week.

"Travel medicine is relevant to Nepal because it has always been a desirable tourism destination," says Prativa Pandey, MD of CIWEC Hospital and Travel Medicine Center, a partner to the Asia-Pacific Travel Health Society.

She adds: "Outbreaks of diseases like dengue, road and aviation safety issues, and economic hardships



HIMALAYAN RESCUE ASSOCIATION NEPAL

have had an impact on the number of travellers coming to Nepal."

Each day of the conference will include three plenary panels, followed by parallel symposia and interactive workshops. The conference will highlight groups including the elderly, pregnant, and immuno-compromised travellers.

An 'ABC' workshop will provide participants with the basics of setting up a clinic and explain pre-travel consultations. Other sessions include discussion about vaccines, new immunisation technologies, and the Japanese Qdenga vaccine against dengue that has not yet been licensed for use in Nepal.

Travel medicine is not just

important for tourists coming to Nepal, but also for residents since non-endemic infections like Mpox and other diseases can be brought here by visiting carriers.

"We were diagnosing dengue and typhus fever in travellers to Kathmandu who came via Rajasthan or Bangkok in the 1990s, long before these diseases became well-established in the local population," explains Buddha Basnyat, who is delivering a lecture on the Typhoid Conjugate vaccine and its roll-out in Nepal.

The conference will also discuss airlift and medevacs, a workshop on the role of the military in disaster and outbreak relief operations

— both especially relevant to trekking and mountaineering in Nepal. Climate breakdown has increased the need for better preparedness and rescue.

Sustainable travel in the age of 'no-jet set' will also be discussed, as 4% of greenhouse emissions are from air travel. Workshops will also look into other infectious diseases and the use of AI and ChatGPT in travel medicine.

Travel medicine is mainly about medical care to visitors to Nepal, but can also include pre-travel and post-travel medicine for Nepalis.

Says CIWEC's Prativa Pandey: "Heartbreaking as it is, migrant workers and students

are leaving in droves, and many migrants are coming back with kidney failure, about which there is very little data or research, so there is an urgent need to address those areas as well in Nepal."

Prominent participants include the 'father of travel medicine' Robert Steffen from Switzerland, Tomas Jelinek of the Berlin Centre for Travel and Tropical Medicine, editor of the Journal of Travel Medicine Annelies Wilder Smith, David Shlim who was Medical Director of CIWEC in Kathmandu 1983-1998, and Sir David Warrell, a world expert on snake bite, rabies and infectious disease. 🇳🇵

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Nepal-Germany

Nepal and Germany concluded their negotiations on development cooperation in Berlin on 4-5 September under which Germany committed to €51 million to cover three focal areas: Renewable Energy and Energy Transmission, Health and Social Protection, and Sustainable Economic Development.

WWF-Forest Ministry

WWF Nepal has signed a tripartite Project Implementation Agreement with the Ministry of Forests and Environment (MoFE) and Ministry of Forest and Environment Bagmati Province for 'Managing



Watersheds for Enhanced Resilience of Communities to Climate Change in Nepal'. The agreement will facilitate \$9 million in funding through the Least Developed Countries Fund (LDCF) managed by the Global Environment Facility (GEF).

Ncell-Police

Police reports can now be filed through a new Ncell App which has also 'zero-rated' the Nepal Police website so it can be accessed without data charges. Ncell is working to update its app to digitise services and assist the government's Digital Nepal goals under its सन्धे ON campaign.



Cimex BYD Charity

BYD and its official Nepal dealer Cimex has launched the Cimex BYD Charity Foundation. Every BYD vehicle sold will contribute Rs10,000 to a charity which Cimex opened with a Rs10 million donation. The foundation will focus on sustainable development projects in education and healthcare.

Kathmandu Spikers

Women's Volleyball franchise Kathmandu Spikers unveiled a black, white, and gold logo as the new team in the Everest Women's Volleyball League. The team is owned by Sharad Kr Tibrewala and can be found on social media at @KathmanduSpikers.



Turkish in Sydney

Turkish Airlines is starting its Sydney flights four times a week via Kuala Lumpur with Airbus A350-900 starting 4 December later this year. The special launch prices for Sydney to Istanbul flights are AUD 1,489, and \$999 for Istanbul to Sydney flights.

Buddha retires ATR 42

Buddha Air has decommissioned its first ATR 42-320 after 16 years serving Nepal's domestic routes. The plane was manufactured in 1995 and flew for Air Caledonia till 2007 before being acquired by Buddha Air. The plane was greeted with fire engine water arches at a farewell ceremony at Buddha Air's hangar at Kathmandu airport on Tuesday.

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Dolma Climate Fund

Dolma Impact Fund, an international private equity fund aiming to empower Nepali entrepreneurs, celebrated its 10th anniversary and announced the Dolma Climate Fund, which will focus on investing in hydropower, solar, and the green transition.

WiFi on Cathay

Customers travelling in First or Business class onboard Cathay Pacific aircraft can now enjoy complimentary Wi-Fi service on flights and will be further extending it to Cathay Diamond members travelling in all cabins from November.



100+ Punch delivered

Official Tata dealer in Nepal Siprodi has delivered more than 100 of its Punch.ev that it unveiled at the NADA auto show. The Tata Punch EV starts at Rs33,99,000, and is also being launched in Biratnagar and Birtamod.

“The most amazing thing about Nepal are its people”

Daniela-Mariana Sezonov Țane was fascinated with the teachings of the Hindu epics, and studied Hindi at the University of Bucharest before joining the Romanian foreign service.

In between, she served with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Nepal in 2007, the year after the ceasefire. Țane is now Romania's ambassador to Nepal, Bangladesh and India and is in Kathmandu this week to launch her book, *Twilight Chronicles* of which two chapters are about her time in Nepal. She spoke to *Nepali Times* about her impressions.



Nepali Times: How did you land up in Nepal with the ICRC?

Ambassador Țane: My work with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) lasted some eight years and took me to several countries affected by conflicts or in post-conflict time. The mission in Nepal was the third one, after one year in the Tigray region of Ethiopia and 10 months in refugee camps in Eastern Tanzania. In Nepal, initially I was assigned to work on the missing people file. In June 2007 there were still some 1,200 people unaccounted for. I did some field work for families of the missing affected by conflict, recipients of a small assistance program which was meant to help them out of dire poverty.

The last months of my mission were spent mostly in Tarai, preparing the ground with the Nepali Red Cross for the first elections in 2008 after the king's abdication. If you remember, there was a lot of tension at that time

because the Madhesi people felt underrepresented. We were making contingency plans in case there were violent clashes.

My most memorable moment is presented in this book, in the chapter Solukhumbu. Together with my Nepali colleague, Roshan, we went to search in a very remote area for the family of a minor girl who had been separated from her loved ones a few years before. She was rescued and kept by a humanitarian group in a shelter for unaccompanied minors supported by ICRC. She expressed the wish to go back home, so we needed to see if the family was still there. After three days of trekking, we found them in a remote ward, living in a

very poor house.

In the meantime, more siblings had been added to an already very poor family. But the reaction of the parents, when they saw the photo of their missing daughter, now a teenager, was a very emotional moment, as well as the insistence of one of her schoolmates to give us a letter for her, next day early morning, before we would start our long journey back.

What I loved the most in my mission in this amazing country were the people. A real bond with my Nepali colleagues at the office was created, and I keep in touch with some of them even today.

After that you became ambassador, how did the book come about?

I started writing my Indian diaries, while posted in India as third secretary and cultural attaché at the Romanian Embassy in New Delhi, beginning of 2000. My friends wanted to know more than the emails sent sporadically. It also came out of the need I felt to make India easier to grasp by my fellow citizens. After being the guide of many delegations, I realised there is a need to better explain the countless puzzling, contradictory expressions and manifestations of India. I noted in my diary the people and the moments which marked me the most.

The entries about Nepal and Sri Lanka came naturally after that somehow. Writing made me explore

the various cultural, religious and social aspects of those countries where, by staying longer than a tourist, I became adopted and felt like a local. I hope the readers will like the chapter dedicated to Nepal, a country that will always remain in my heart as one of the most beautiful places I have visited, with warm people and an amazing culture.

How is being ambassador to Nepal in peacetime different from when you were here with ICRC?

Working as a humanitarian comes with a lot of field work and direct contact with people at grassroots level. Time spent in the office alternates with time in the field. There is no diplomatic glamour, just hard work, sometimes in dire or extreme conditions, to which one needs to constantly adapt. As an ambassador, the perspective is totally different.

It means to run both an embassy, as a manager, cultivate the contacts in all areas and at all levels with the countries where you are accredited, and work towards the deepening of ties and economic cooperation. It implies a lot of protocol aspects, and the only common ground with the humanitarian work lies in the 100% requested dedication, leaving almost no time for one self.

Romania is now in the Schengen group, how will it affect Nepalis going to work there?

Belonging to Schengen means we have to apply strictly by the book the Schengen regulations for granting all types of visas. There is no exception from the need of



physical presence at the interview and of presenting all the required documents demanded for every visa type.

Nepalis will continue to go to Romania for work, provided they have a valid work permit, and they pass the interview. Nepali workers are highly appreciated in Romania, they are currently more than 20,000 there working in many sectors like hotels, restaurants, pubs and clubs, agriculture, supermarkets, construction. They are appreciated for their seriousness, hard work, good behaviour and pleasant personality.

How much interest do Romanian trekkers and mountaineers have for Nepal?

With the increase of living standards and of wages, the past decade witnessed a growing number of Romanians coming to trek in the Himalaya. I do not have any exact figures, but during the second wave of the pandemic in June-July 2021 we managed to evacuate some 60 Romanian and Moldovan trekkers and tourists with the help of our Honorary Consul General, Narayan Bajaj.



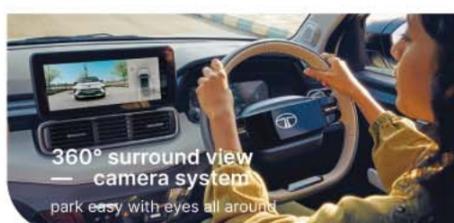

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MASK



Nepali aerospace engineer pens a children's book that touches on migration, mental health, racism and identity

■ Sonia Awale

Halucha is a carpenter living a happy life with his big family in Kathmandu's Maru Hiti in the 1960s handcrafting chairs, tables and temple woodwork.

He observes festivals of his Newa community including Yenya, Indra Jatra, enjoys his favourite choila baji and yomari with friends, and occasionally momocha.

But then a big new furniture factory is set up nearby, which takes away the jobs of those with the ancestral occupation of carpentry. Halucha loses his customers.

One thing leads to another and by the 1970s, Halucha travels to England for work after borrowing money at a high interest rate.

London is rainy and dreary, he struggles with the language and at his job. He has no friends, people look at him differently and treat him poorly. He feels lonely and homesick. The isolation affects his mental health and before long, he loses his job and is homeless.

Author Ojesh Singh weaves a layered tale that delves into the universal themes of migration, diaspora, mental health, racism, heritage and identity in simple, engaging storytelling style with vibrant illustrations by Sahanshil Dangol in the new Nepali children's book, London Lakhey.

"Children are smarter than we give them credit for, they have genuine reactions and responses, and the earlier they are exposed to difficult emotions, the sooner they will learn to express them openly

and grow up better able to deal with them," says Dangol on some of the heavier themes underlying London Lakhey.

Indeed, as children's literature, the book does not shy away from difficult topics. This was a very conscious choice, says Singh, who himself went to England in 1999 and is now an aerospace engineer running two restaurants specialising in Newa cuisine in London.

"The story is inspired by some of my own experience when I moved to England and that of people close to me, the not-so-easy beginning, the loneliness," adds Singh, who is in Kathmandu to launch the book.

"The first thing we Nepalis seek abroad is a plate of warm dal bhat and not getting that can be so hard, then there are our festivals, dance and music that we miss so much."

Singh had it relatively easy as his father was already in the UK. But even then, he had to support himself and for the first five years he studied by day, while working at a restaurant at night.

Finally, he bought his own restaurant, and another one a few years later. He calls them "Nepali-Indian" restaurants but actually specialise in Newa food, the first of few in the London area.

"I do a lot of work virtually so the restaurant for me is like a living room and it is as if I am cooking for my friends and family, it keeps me feeling alive," says Singh, whose clan home is in Basantapur. He is actively involved in the Pasa Pucha Guthi in London as one



of the founding member since its inception in 2000.

The Newa-English community in London organises cultural events including performing the Lakhey mask dance during Mha Puja, also the Newari New Year. This real-life tradition in London serves as an inspiration for the book.

"The new generation of Nepali diaspora should know the struggles of their parents, what they went through, some were asylum seekers, others came for better opportunities," says Singh, stating how this was one of the ideas behind the book, especially as he is

himself a father now.

A mutual contact brought animator and illustrator Sahanshil Dangol onboard for the book, and the two would go on to work closely for the nearly two years it took for the volume to develop.

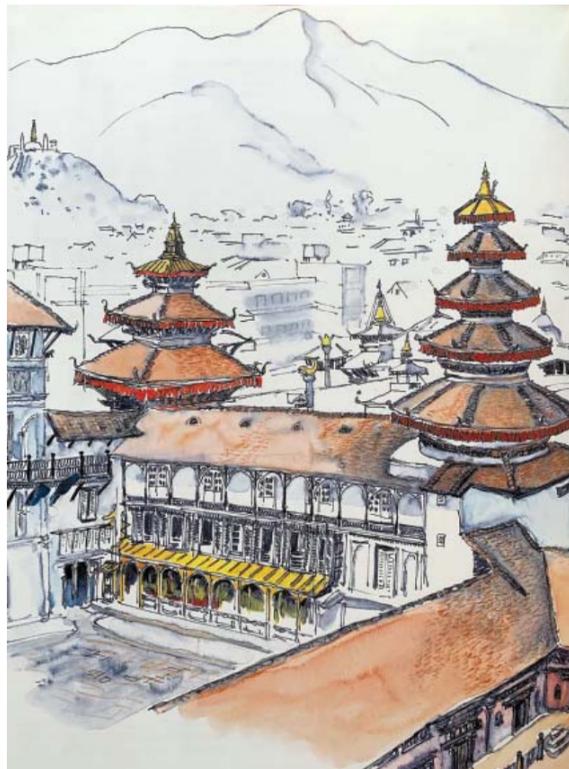
Dangol works for London-based studios and was previously involved in making commercials and music videos for up-and-coming Nepali artists like Yugal Gurung and Ankit Shrestha.

But what really got him passionate about the book project was the Lakhey element. During his undergrad, Dangol was working

on a film to document his cousin's mask dances in Pokhara but had to shelve it.

He has since come across the Nepali Creative Gang, an online collective of artists, writers, game developers, animators and others which helps young talent with guidance and feedback as well as protection for their work.

Dangol went on to develop a 4-minute-long stop motion film called Death and Exposure but he always had the Lakhey project at the back of his mind. "It felt like a second chance to work on something close to my heart,"



DESMOND DOIG

The legend behind the myth of

■ Desmond Doig

Indra Jatra, or Yenya, commemorates the descent of a god from heaven dressed in peasant's clothes and bent on a very human pursuit: stealing flowers.

The deity concerned was no ordinary god. He was Indra, the Lord of Heaven. When he descended on Kathmandu wrapped in a concealing cloud, no one recognised him. So much so, that when he was discovered gathering parijat night jasmine flowers, people caught and bound him hand and foot like a common thief.

For reasons best known to himself, Indra refused to reveal his identity and none suspected it even though his

celestial elephant began searching the streets of Kathmandu for him. In heaven, Indra's mother, who had required the parijat flowers for the observance of a festival, grew so anxious at her son's disappearance that she also descended on Kathmandu and lost no time in letting it be known who she and her son were.

Great was the people's rejoicing and, presumably, their embarrassment. King and commoner alike celebrated their amazing good fortune with feasts and processions, song and dance. And when their divine guests were about to depart they asked a boon of Indra's mother.

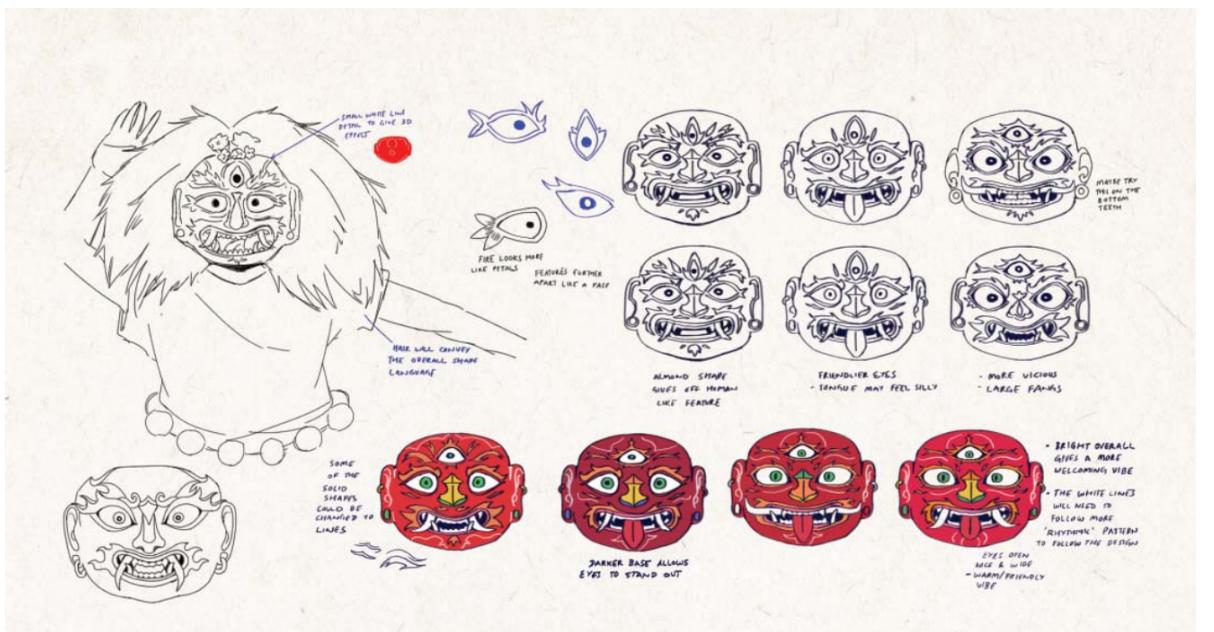
Would she take with her to heaven the souls of all those who had died that year? This she readily granted, besides bestowing a gift of her own -- a gentle morning mist that would blanket the Kathmandu Valley during the autumn and winter months to ripen the harvest. Farmers are still apt to call it the gift of milk.

As for the souls of the dead, she advised

that they form a chain behind her holding on to each other, with the first taking a firm grip on her sari. Away they went like the tail of a great kite. They hadn't travelled far, when something as unfortunate as spiritual vertigo or fatigue caused the chain to break and all the souls fell into a lake atop a mountain south of Kathmandu, where bereaved families went to worship and honour them.

Today, Kathmandu celebrates Indra Jatra which, fused together with the festival of the living goddess Kumari, and the epic of the Nepali King Yalambar who was slain by Krishna at the battle of the Mahabharata, is Nepal's most colourful celebration. Everyone, from the king, the royal family, ministers, government servants, the general public—even foreign diplomats, are involved.

For this is the time of the year when the king receives the blessings of the Kumari who places tika on his forehead. Superstition, well supported by strange circumstance or coincidence, enhances the belief that the Kumari, in fact, bestows upon the king the



ILLUSTRATIONS: LONDON LAKHEY / SAHANSHIL DANGOL

he told Nepali Times in a video interview from London.

It also helped that the characters spoke to him. Having moved to London at 11 following his father who was in the army, Dangol never felt like he quite fit in, neither in London, nor in Kathmandu.

“Growing up, I didn’t have Nepali friends, and in any case, I didn’t feel like I completely belonged anywhere, and while I didn’t go through everything that Halucha went through in the story, I could still resonate with the character and sympathise with him, it is a relatable story with so

many of our friends and families migrating today.”

Dangol based the physical attributes of Halucha and other characters on people around him. The last few pages of the book are dedicated to the process of illustration including doodles and sketched studies of Lakhey and his masks (above, right).

The Lakhey mask depicted in the book is a variation of the real thing which is supposed to give devotees divine powers when they wear them. In fact, communities in Kathmandu did not want their actual mask to be represented in

the book for fear of offending the deities.

Lakhey is a demon in the carnival of God but is worshipped as a deity protecting townspeople of the Newa civilisation. He is depicted as having a ferocious face, protruding fangs, and a mane of red or black hair.

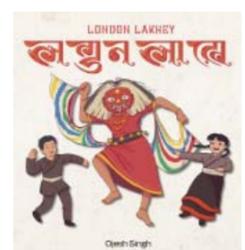
During festivals including Indra Jatra which falls on 17 September this year (below), he comes out on the streets and dances in a trance whirling and jumping to the thump of drums.

On the surface, London Lakhey is a children’s book but since its

release, it has found as many adolescent and adult readers who have requested most copies, says Dangol.

“I want our children to remember their roots and not be ashamed of it. They can so easily feel embarrassed because they are eating dal bhat for lunch and not burgers and pizza,” says Singh.

“We have to own up to our roots but we don’t have to stick to one singular identity either, it can be a mix of Newa and British like in my own persona. This is important for stability and a peace of mind.”



London Lakhey
Ojesh Singh
Rato Ghar Foundation 2024
Hardcover Rs500 (special price)

of Indra Jatra



KUNDA DIXIT

right to rule for another year. When, on occasion, she has placed tika on the wrong forehead, dire consequences have resulted. (Yenya this year falls on 17 September, and presidents have replaced the king after Nepal abolished the monarchy in 2008.)

This too is the time when all the valley’s

Bhairab masks are displayed, particularly the great silver mask that Yalambar wore to battle, and the even larger, bejewelled golden mask of the white Bhairab in the old palace.

All over the valley, in city, town and village are strange erections of wood, like wayside crucifixions, to which are tied masked dummies representing the captive Indra. Numerous images of other gods are brought out to watch the festival, for nobody, not even the hosts of heaven, would like to miss so wondrous an event.

Hung from a tall pole in the old palace square of Kathmandu is a colourful banner representing the flag presented to Indra by Vishnu. As long as it is there it means that the lord of heaven is in Kathmandu, bestowing upon the city and the country, his blessings and protection.

The pole itself is invested with significance. Some days before the festival begins, a government appointed priest and a select group of men from Kathmandu make for a pine forest not far from Bhaktapur.

There, following ancient ritual and on-the-spot portents, they select a tree, offer prayer and blood sacrifice and after felling it, drag it in procession to the potters’ village of Thimi.

Men of Thimi bear it to Kathmandu’s Tundikhel from where it is finally taken to the old palace square. There follows a blessing by the royal priest, who comes accompanied by soldiers in the olden uniforms of King Prithvi Narayan’s Gorkha army carrying muskets and swords, and marching to a military band out of history. As the pole is raised into position, cannons boom and music plays.

When the festival is done, the great pole is taken in procession to the river Bagmati where it is immersed, cut into pieces to feed the perpetual flame that burns at yet another Bhairab shrine on the river bank. So much for the living, for whom the Indra and Kumari jstras are carnivals of numerous attractions: dances representing the demons Lakhe and Dagini, enactments of the mortal incarnations of Vishnu, folk dramas,

processions of masked ‘deities,’ a dancing elephant made of bamboo, painted cloth and human legs, and the massive trundle of the Kumari’s rath, followed by lesser chariots of the living Ganesh and Bhairab, virgin boys selected in much the same way as the Kumari.

For those who like a more scholarly reason for festivals such as this, it is thought that the warrior king, whose Aryan forces overpowered India, inevitably turned his attention to the Himalaya. Perhaps the warlike hill people nagged his flanks. Leading an army against them, he was captured and held prisoner until he promised some boon of settlement. The great Nepali king Yalambar ruled Nepal at the time. No one less than a god, and the Lord of Heaven at that, could have fought and come to terms with him: an interesting thought as festival chariots roll through Kathmandu.

Nepali Times serialised chapters from Desmond Doig’s book, *In the Kingdom of the Gods*, from which this piece is extracted.

EVENTS



Taste the Culture

Taste the Culture is a Nepali food and culture festival to be held next weekend. It will feature performances from the bands Sabin Rai and the Pharaoh, Purna Rai and Dajuvai, and Kutumba.

21 September, 11am-10pm, Ticket: Rs500-Rs1,000, Hyatt Ground, Chabahil

Himalayan Art Festival

The seventh iteration of Himalayan Art Festival this year features artwork from 150 Nepali artists, with art that highlights Nepal's rich cultural heritage.

9-14 September, 11am-7pm, Nepal Art Council, Baber Mahal, 9841211295



Lain Bangdel

Don't miss out this ongoing exhibition that explores the life and devotion to art of Nepal's foremost artist, novelist, and art historian: Lain Singh Bangdel.

Until 22 September, 11am-7pm (Fridays to Sundays), 11am-6pm (Tuesdays to Thursdays), Takpa Gallery, Lazimpat, 9851326472

Pottery Workshop

Get your hands dirty learning a new skill and create your own traditional pottery with family and friends.

Everyday, 9am to 6pm, The Pottery Training Centre, Bhaktapur



Kancho Dhago

Inspired by real events, this drama set in far west Nepal and directed by Aashant Sharma delves deep into human behaviour, relationships, and emotions.

Until 14 September, 5:15pm, 1pm (also on Saturday), Kausi Theatre, Teku, 9860360109

DINING



Holiday Inn Express

Explore diverse Asian dishes while enjoying the breathtaking rooftop panoramic views. Reserve your tables to treat your taste buds this weekend.

Naxal, 9802356232

MUSIC

HipHop Mandal

Meet the members of the group Outlawz, which Tupac Shakur was part of, at this hip hop festival. Don't miss the chance to watch the group perform live.

13 September, 2pm-9pm, Ticket: Rs1,000-Rs2,500, Bhrikuti Mandap



Classical Musical

Be part of a soulful musical evening featuring renowned classical artists and immerse in the timeless beauty of classical music.

15 September, 5pm onwards, Goma Petrol Pump, Baluwatar



Nainsook album

Nepali hardcore band Nainsook is set to launch its second album Let's Make It Happen (LMIH). Book tickets from Ticket Sansar's website to attend the album launch.

14 September, 2pm onwards, Ticket: Rs300-Rs500, Purple Haze Rock Bar, Thamel



Symphonic Samrajya

This Friday evening, go with friends to this live acoustic sound experience, with the band Ko Kaa will be the opening act.

13 September, 8pm onwards, Tito's Pub, Thamel

Fahrenheit Flow

Fahrenheit's 'Hip Hop Flow' event this Friday will include Physco's first performance for a Nepali Audience. Swopnil Maharaj, Wild Martin, and Vazra will also join.

13 September, 6pm onwards, Club Fahrenheit, Thamel



Coco Waffle Café

Craving something sugary? Order freshly made waffles from the wide menu at Coco Waffle Café.

Bansbari, 9813048938

Kakori

Discover the flavours of Punjab and North India at Soaltee's Indian specialty restaurant. Choose from varieties of kebabs, biryanis and mouth-watering desserts.

Soaltee Crown Plaza, Tahachal (01) 4273999

GETAWAYS



Barahi Jungle Lodge

The first eco-jungle lodge in Chitwan is not just a lodge but an experience in itself. Don't miss out on their 30% monsoon discount, valid until this weekend.

Meghauli, Chitwan, 9851331247

Buddha Maya Garden

Wake up to the sounds of birds in the mornings and relax in the beautiful garden of Buddha Maya Garden Hotel. A major bonus is that the Maya Devi Temple is within walking distance.

Lumbini, 9801033114



Shinta Mani Mustang

With elegantly designed interiors using local materials, hand-picked art and rich textiles, Shinta Mani creates an ambience of opulence and comfort for guests.

Marpha, Mustang, 9802336386

Royal Singi Hotel

The distinctive and symbolic art elements of Tibetan culture, made by local artisans adds to the serenity and charm of the Potala suite at Royal Singi hotel.

Kamaladi (01) 4524191



Hattiban Resort

Hattiban Resort is one of the closest places for residents of the Valley to relax for the weekend. Grab breakfast from the hotel's buffet and lounge by the sunny courtyard overlooking the mountains.

Hattiban, 9801309842

Villa Everest

With some of the best handmade Korean noodles, Bibimbap, Korean BBQ and Kimchi Jigae, Villa Everest is the ideal place for lovers of Korean food.

Thamel (01) 4513471

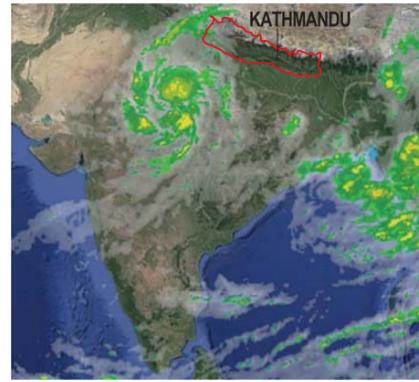


The Village Cafe

Experience the fresh, delicious, home-made food from The Village Cafe. Try their selroti, juicy momo and khuwa yomari. Call the cafe for deliveries, or order online.

Jhamsikhel, 9801989535

WEEKEND WEATHER



Push and Pull

There is an epic push-and-pull going on between a retreating monsoon and a reviving autumn jet stream over Nepal. This clash will be played out as low pressure troughs that have travelled into northern India are pushed eastwards into Nepal by resurgent westerlies. Meanwhile, another low pressure circulation is coming out of the Bay of Bengal. This means over the next five days most of Nepal will get intermittent showers from both systems, with the heaviest precipitation in central and western Nepal.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
27° 19°	26° 19°	26° 19°

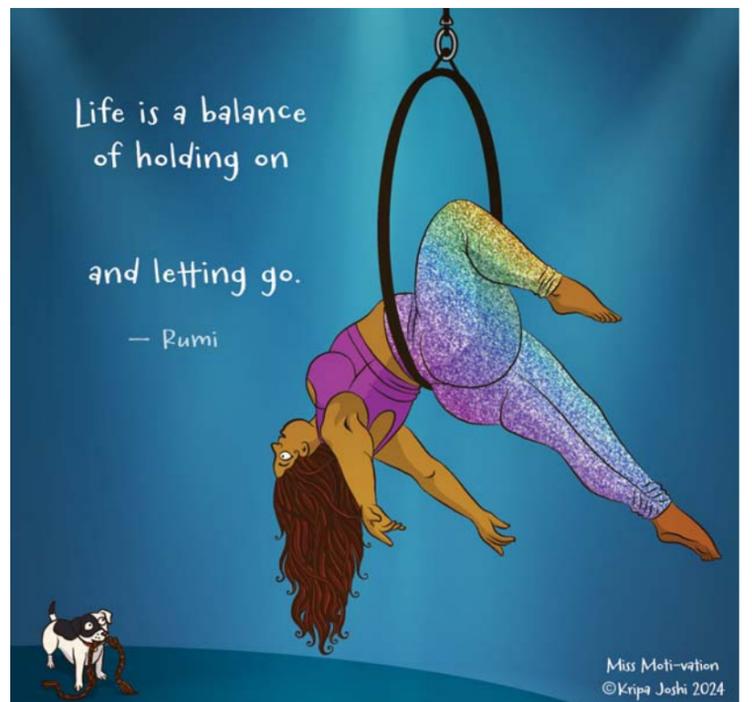
OUR PICK



Shambhala, a Nepali film selected for the main competition at the Berlin film festival this year, has been garnering attention, especially after lead actress Thinley Lhamo won the Boccalino d'Oro Prize for Best Acting Performance at the 77th Locarno International Film Festival. Directed by Min Bahadur Bham, the film follows Pema, who is married to Tashi and two of his brothers. After their marriage, Tashi leaves for Lhasa, and Pema finds out she is pregnant. When the legitimacy of her child is questioned, Pema sets off to find Tashi, which becomes an ultimate journey of self-discovery and liberation. Stars Thinley Lhamo, Tenzin Dalha, Sonam Topden and Karma Shakya. The film is currently showing in theatres.

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

Min Bahadur Bham's cinematic quest

"As a male director, I wanted to explore my feminine side to understand it more deeply."

■ Abishek Budhathoki

There was controlled chaos at the Chhaya Centre on 8 September before the premiere of *Shambhala*, which has made history as the first South Asian film to be selected for the 2023 Berlinale in-competition lineup in three decades.

Director Min Bahadur Bham ran around, dreadlocks flailing, to test the DCP in the projection room and welcome an all-star lineup of guests. Even so, he found time to sit down with us for an interview in a quiet corner in the lobby.

Despite visible signs of stress, Bham's passion for his craft shines through. The premiere was the culmination of years of work, but as Bham tells it, the true essence of filmmaking is the journey itself.

Min Bahadur Bham, 40, was born in isolated Mugu. As a boy he already knew he wanted to be a film director after his photographer and journalist father bought a cinema hall in his hometown.

While watching Bollywood movies there, his friends all wanted to be actors and would imitate the mannerisms of their favourite stars. But Bham craved something more.

"Even back then, I wondered who tells the actors what to do. There must be someone guiding and coordinating their performance," he says. "I didn't know at the time that it was done by a director, but I instinctively felt that was the person I wanted to be."

This early fascination set Bham on a journey that would take him far, far away from Mugu. In Grade 8 he was already saving money for film school, and by Grade 10 he had run away from home. He started in theatre in Kathmandu, learning acting, lighting, set design, and costume.

This theatre background proved to be formative and influenced his later approach to cinema. "If I had to choose, I'd still give more points to theatre," he tells us. "It's a pure art form, it has a poetic and an artistic sense to it, requiring discipline and hard work, unlike the finances and glamour of cinema."

Beyond filmmaking, Bham developed a deep interest in spirituality. "Creating art is a form of meditation," Bham says, his eyes shimmering with intensity. "Film-making, like meditation, requires



PHOTOS: SHAMBHALA / FACEBOOK



pouring all of yourself into it."

His debut feature, *Kalo Pothi* (The Black Hen) premiered at the Venice Film Festival in 2015, earning critical acclaim for its nuanced portrayal of two boys caught in the crossfire of Nepal's Maoist insurgency. The film's success, however, left Bham ambivalent.

"I felt burdened by the success," he confides. "Looking back, I'm critical about its lack of cinematic language: it felt more like a film essay."

Kalo Pothi was a personal story

of Bham's own memories when his friends in school were joining the Maoists, and he heard of the disappearances. A recurring theme in both *Kalo Pothi* and *Shambhala* is childhood.

"All the characters in my films are reflections of myself," Bham confesses. "Of course, they're manipulated for the sake of the narrative, but their essence is drawn from my own childhood when I was very fragile and introverted."

As a boy, instead of playing with

children his age, Bham preferred hanging out with older people, listening to their stories: "I missed out on a normal childhood, but had a wonderful one nonetheless."

These early experiences, the memories and nostalgia, became invaluable storytelling tools for cinema, and his PhD in anthropology was an asset as well. "As a filmmaker, it's essential to grasp the nuances of human behaviour, culture, and politics," he explains.

Before *Kalo Pothi*, Bham wanted to study political science to get a deeper, holistic understanding of what was happening in Nepali society at the time.

But it is with *Shambhala* that Bham truly comes into his own as a director. "*Kalo Pothi* was my love letter to my society, and *Shambhala* is a love letter to my existence," he says.

Shambhala benefits from Bham's own spiritual journey. He started meditating at age 12, becoming a more serious practitioner by 15. "Through meditation, I began having vivid recurring dreams of a past life as a lama in a monastery in Dolpo," he says.

He travelled to Dolpo, where the terrain and people matched the dreamscape of the places from

his meditation. "It was a surreal moment," he says. "That's when I realised I had to make *Shambhala*, to explore the subconscious and discover what I didn't know."

When the film was selected for the Berlinale, Bham admits he was not very excited, perhaps because he was confident it was going to go places. In Berlin he did not attend any parties, cancelling all interviews and official meetings.

"I wanted to be at peace and simply observe. I didn't want to get caught up in the networking or the festivities," he recalls.

Though polyandry is a central element of *Shambhala*, Bham says it only serves as a backdrop to an inner quest into the meaning of existence, femininity and reincarnation.

"Dolpo offers such incredible landscape that you can point the camera at anything and it will

be stunning," he says. "But it was not a love story, so I used the mountains as characters themselves."

The film's protagonist is Pema (played by Thinley Lhamo for which she won the Boccacino d'Oro Prize for Best Acting Performance at Locarno last month) whose power and freedom challenge patriarchal norms.

"Pema's character is a reflection of inner strength and independence, transcending gender," Bham explains. "As a male director, I also wanted to explore my feminine side to understand it more deeply."

He adds that, in *Shambhala* the male characters reflect aspects of himself, while Pema represents his feminine side: "Developing the characters, I made sure the male side did not overshadow the feminine side in me."

Bham is researching ideas for his next film which might, for a change, be set in Kathmandu or Angkor Wat to discover his artistic sensibility, irrespective of locale.

More than a geographical journey, Min Bahadur Bham is on an artistic voyage deep into his inner being to find the meaning of existence itself. 🇳🇵

Shambhala is set to release on 13 September in cinemas with Nepali and English subtitles.

Experience Luxury
SILK Finish



Not out of the woods yet

Amendments to the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1973 threaten to undo Nepal's nature protection wins

■ **Santa Gaha Magar**

In July, less than a month after it was first introduced in Parliament, President Ramchandra Paudel authenticated a bill to amend some laws to spur investment. Among its provisions is the amendment of the 1973 National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act.

Section 5A of the Act, which prohibits activities within national parks and reserves, now includes an amended clause: 'The Government of Nepal may designate highly-sensitive areas within protected areas including National Parks, Reserves or Conservation Areas through a notice in the Nepal Gazette if it deems it necessary.'

This could mean that the government is now trying to disingenuously classify areas within protected wildlife habitats also as 'non-sensitive' to allow private sector investment in resorts, cable cars and other infrastructure.

The 1973 Act lays out definitions of National Park, Strict Nature Reserve, Wildlife Reserve, and Hunting Reserve, and stipulates that those areas are set aside for conservation and management of the natural environment in areas of ecological importance. By designating some parts of these reserves as 'sensitive', activists say, the government is trying to defuse criticism of investment by the private sector.

The 1973 Act has been critical in Nepal's conservation success story, ensuring that nearly a quarter of the country's area is protected, the tripling of Nepal's tiger population and protection of its habitat, and the doubling of forest cover to 46% in the past 25 years.

"Conservation areas are created for biodiversity-sensitive regions, and as such only a minimal part of such areas can be categorised as not being highly sensitive," argues Rajesh Kumar Rai, professor at Tribhuvan University's Institute of Forestry.

The amendment also states: 'Apart from the areas specified under section 5A, the Government of Nepal can approve



specified projects of national priority, projects approved by the Investment Board or national pride projects in any intermediate zone within national parks, wildlife reserves, conservation areas while maintaining the co-existence of nature and human beings.'

This conservationists say, would mean disturbance of protected wilderness areas, and open them up to 'development' by all three levels of government which are not known for transparency and rule of law. In fact, there is such an unhealthy alliance between politicians and their business cronies that it is becoming difficult to tell them apart.

Projects under consideration that directly impact protected areas include the Kori cable car proposal in Sikles of Kaski, the 80km Pokhara-Jomsom gondola cable car, new resorts inside Rara (pictured below), Chitwan and Bardia National Parks.

Experts assert that the Act goes against Nepal's Constitution, the 1992 United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, the 1972

World Heritage Convention and the 1971 Convention on Wetlands.

"This Act will destroy wildlife habitats, undermining gains in Nepal's biodiversity protection," adds Rai, explaining that ensuing habitat fragmentation will lead to wildlife relocating beyond protected areas, thereby increasing human-wildlife conflict.

Even though laws and governance related to conservation areas and wildlife protection fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Forests and Environment, it is significant that the bill was tabled by the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Supplies as soon as the new NC-UML coalition assumed power in June.

And while it typically takes years for Parliament to pass any law, this bill was rushed through both the lower and upper Houses within 26 days, and verified by the President's office on the same day that it was passed by the National Assembly. All this makes conservationists smell a rat.

This is not the first time that corporate

groups have eyed development inside nature conservation areas, and they have lobbied repeatedly for ordinances, procedures and regulations.

This amendment comes at a time when major corruption scandals have rocked the highest echelons of government. In fact, the coalition reshuffle in June after which the NC-UML government came to power has been attributed to the two parties protecting their top leaders from investigations by the previous RSP home minister into scandals.

But even the previous coalition led by Maoist chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal had amended the National Parks Act in April by issuing the Ordinance Amending Some Nepal Acts Related to Investment Facilitation 2024. Before that, the government published the Construction of Physical Infrastructure Inside Protected Areas Act in January, which allows hydropower and other infrastructure within protected areas.

In 2018, businesses bypassed laws to prepare for infrastructure construction including ropeways, hotels, resorts and campsites in conservation areas and buffer zones after the Ministry of Forests published a draft outlining procedures to operate and regulate tourist services within protected areas.

Conservationists and analysts have called for the immediate repeal of this Act that puts commercial interests over the protection of Nepal's wildlife and biodiversity. They say the law is unjust and hypocritical because it punishes villagers for foraging fodder inside protected areas, while giving politically-connected businesses the freedom to build whatever they want inside wilderness areas and make vast profits from them.

"Businesses must not be allowed to operate anywhere in our protected areas, not just biodiversity-sensitive regions," says Rai. "In the event that such commercial activities are allowed, priority must be given to the indigenous communities and locals who have been historically displaced in the process of creating these conservation areas." 📌



The Tarai's shrinking forests

Nepal's forest cover has doubled in 25 years, but illegal logging is thinning the southern jungles

■ Ramu Sapkota in Parsa

The Gadimai Partnership Forest extends 4,150 hectares in Parsa district bordering a nature reserve adjacent to Chitwan National Park.

Half of Gadimai Forest is made up of hardwood species like sal, sisau and khayar that have high commercial value. Illegal logging by timber smugglers on the Indian border is now thinning the jungle.

An on site investigation earlier this year confirmed what was seen on Google Earth Pro satellite images. We saw more than 30 tree stumps deep inside the forest with scars in the undergrowth showing where the logs had been dragged away from the once-healthy stands.

Comparing satellite images of the forest in 2008 and 2021 show a significant loss of forest area as well as reduction in canopy cover in the last 13 years (pictured, right).

"Our staff have not been able to adequately monitor the forest because of the presence of smugglers in the Sonbarsha and Koilabhar Bindabasini

regions," says Gadimai Forest Management Committee chair Shahrum Gaddi. "We have seen a rise in illegal logging since the pandemic."

The annual report of Parsa's

Division Forest Office cites smuggling of timber to India from Gadimai and two other community forests in the district.

Community forestry is considered Nepal's biggest conservation success story and is internationally acclaimed. It was the main reason Nepal's forest cover which at present is 46% doubled in 25 years. Communities have managed forests relatively better in the mountains, but in the Tarai it has been less successful because of the abundance of expensive hardwood timber and proximity to India.

Forest cover could be further undermined by an amendment of the 1973 National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act in Parliament this week (see adjoining story, left).

Global Land Analysis and Google Earth Pro images show deforestation of the 13,512 hectares



DEFORESTATION FROM SPACE: Parsa's Gadimai Partnership Forest in 2008 and in 2021 on Google Earth Pro. The vegetation colour is different because the images were taken in different seasons. The location of the forest is marked in red in the map below.

of Sagarnath Forest Development Project in Mahottari, Sarlahi and Rautahat districts.

The project began in 1978 and involved planting fast-growing saplings of sal, sisau, and eucalyptus to increase timber production, but much of the sal and khayar stands have been logged from within these forests.

Sarlahi resident Rajnikanth Jha, who is a central member of the Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal (FECOFUN) blames collusion between Sagarnath Forest Development Project staff, government agencies, politicians and the "forest mafia".

In March 2024, Brahmapur Community Forestry User Committee president Manoj Tamang was arrested on charges of smuggling sal logs. The Division Forest Office (DFO) also charged Tek Bahadur Basnet, Aashish Tamang and Heralu Pemba Tamang of the committee.

Another community forest in Lalbandi of Mahottari, which was once just 2km from Jha's house has now receded 6km away due to encroachment and illegal logging. He says that Nepal's forest cover may have doubled, but the eastern Tarai has lost half the area of national forests.

"From the highway the forest may look thick and lush, but if we go deeper into the forests most of the trees have been stripped bare," says Jha.

Forest researcher Nagendra Prasad Yadav estimated eight years ago that the Tarai jungles were being destroyed at the rate of 0.96%, equal to 1,756 hectares per year. Given the evidence on the ground, that rate is sure to have increased.

In Parsa alone, one estimate said illegal timber worth over Rs5 million was smuggled out every month. The DFO does nab smugglers from time to time, and cases were filed against 66 loggers, but it is the tip of the iceberg and those caught are mainly the hired workers.

The Madhes Province Forest Directorate says 931 illegal logging cases were filed in the courts last year, and 523 were arrested – mostly in Bara, Parsa and Rautahat districts which have more forest cover than other eastern Tarai districts.

Global Forest Watch estimates Nepal lost 4,570 hectares of 'biologically important' dense forest between 2002

and 2023 due to encroachment and smuggling.

"There is inadequate protection and not enough rangers and police to guard the national, community, and partnership forests," says Parsa-based journalist Ram Mandal. The reason is lack of budget and often collusion between local politicians and their criminal cronies.

In Gadimai Forest, Shahrum Gaddi says he receives frequent death threats after timber smugglers are caught, and elected local government officials pressure him to release them.

"The police do nothing while logging and smuggling is happening right under their noses, they only show up after we have been assaulted by smugglers and after all

the timber has been taken across the border," adds Gaddi, who says he has written to the CIAA, Hello Sarkar, DFOs, as well as the Ministry of Forests. There has been no response from any of them.

In 2021, timber traffickers injured four forest staff and looted their weapons during a clash in Bara's Pipara, and were arrested soon after. Former FECOFUN president Bharati Pathak says smugglers set off fires in forests, steal logs and poach wildlife, by pretending to put out wildfires.

"There is an established but under-the-radar network involved in illegal activities that must have smuggled millions of cubic feet of timber from the forests by now," says Pathak.

This network takes the logs to sawmills near the Indian border under the cover of night, then transports the wood planks across to Bihar. Trafficking gangs also use bicycles, tyre carts, tractors, vans, and trucks full of sand to smuggle timber, even modifying the vehicles to fit the logs in many cases. Sometimes, the logs are also floated down river into India.

Says Rajnikanth Jha of FECOFUN: "Infrastructure, expansion of settlements and timber smuggling are destroying our trees. If this continues there will be no forest left outside national parks in the Tarai." 🇳🇵

This article was written in collaboration with The Environmental Reporting Collective.



Nepal's Forest Cover



Madhes Province Illegal Logging Hotspot Districts





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Daughter of Chomolungma

The latest Netflix documentary on how a Nepali climber and single mother overcame domestic violence

■ Pinki Sris Rana

For the Sherpa people who live below Mt Everest, Chomolungma is 'mother goddess'. As a young girl, Lhakpa Sherpa used to gaze up at the mountain with awe and reverence.

Pasang Lhamu Sherpa was the first Nepali woman to reach the summit in 1993, but she died on the way down. Lhakpa remembers the funeral in Kathmandu, and says she sensed Pasang Lhamu's soul enter her at the cremation.

Since then, Lhakpa has climbed Mt Everest a record 10 times, the most by any woman anywhere. She sought Chomolungma's blessings and forgiveness before and after every climb.

"I respect the mountain like my mom," she says in the Netflix documentary *Mountain Queen: Summits of Lhakpa Sherpa*.

The new documentary is as much about Lhakpa's skill and stamina as a climber, as about her courage to stand up to an abusive husband and the strength to raise three children as a single mother working at a Whole Foods Market in the US state of Connecticut.

Directed by Lucy Walker who excels in documenting real life characters, the 104 minute film provides viewers with an intimate glimpse of Lhakpa's home, conversations with her daughters, and some spectacular footage of her climbing Everest. Walker removes layer upon layer of Lhakpa's life to introduce us to the real person that she is.



EXTRA STRENGTH: Lhakpa Sherpa approaching the South Col on her tenth ascent of Chomolungma. A still from Netflix's 2024 documentary *Mountain Queen*.

Lhakpa was headstrong, and her mother used to call her "too tough, too tall and very, very bossy". And that is exactly how she comes across in the film. But behind the toughness and cheerful smile, Lhakpa is soft-hearted and in search of love and healing all her life.

Lhakpa was a social misfit, but found her true calling in mountaineering. She started out as a porter carrying up to 100kg on her back -- double her body weight. She had to pretend to be a boy since women did not get jobs with expeditions. She was promoted to

be a kitchen boy, cooking for the climbers in base camps.

She needed money to climb but nobody at the time was sponsoring a woman. A chance meeting with King Birendra and Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala got her the sponsorship she needed in 2000 to lead an all-women Nepali Everest expedition. She reached the top for the first time, the only climber from her group to do so.

Her goal was achieved, and that should have been it. But Lhakpa was hopelessly hooked on climbing. She met the Romanian-

American mountaineer George Dijmarescu, who encouraged her not to just be a porter, but join him in climbing Everest from the Tibet side.

For the next several years the two were the ultimate power couple in Himalayan mountaineering. She emigrated to the United States and had daughters Sunny and Shiny.

Dijmarescu started showing his true self, and Lhakpa was trapped in an abusive marriage in a foreign land. The fairytale had ended.

She was featured in a New

York Times report, training for her 10th ascent of Mt Everest carrying boxes of vegetables and fruits at Whole Foods Market.

In *Mountain Queen*, Walker directs a highly personalised profile of Nepal's almost-forgotten mountaineering legend, digging up her troubles and triumphs with sensitivity and care.

Walker does more than tell the story of perseverance and resilience that go hand-in-hand with climbing. She also tells the story of a matriarch who has to be strong for her family.

After her 10th Everest ascent, sponsors lined up to fund an expedition to even more challenging K2, which Lhakpa climbed last year.

Pasang Lhamu's soul burns brightly in Lhakpa Sherpa, and she sums up her own journey: "I'll give my life to the mountains, keep climbing until the day I die." 🇳🇵



Mountain Queen: Summits of Lhakpa Sherpa
Directed by Lucy Walker
Netflix, 2024
104 minutes

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