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SANIMA HYDRO AND ENGINEERING

PILING IOUs: The 216MW Upper Trishuli-1 hydropower in Rasuwa is among the largest FDI projects at present with a price tag of \$647.3 million.

trillion from a target of Rs1.422 trillion. So far this fiscal year, only a quarter of the target has been collected.

Corruption, tax evasion and capital flight also take their toll. Two monitoring teams were formed to look into tax evasion in October. The government also reduced the customs duty on gold and silver to reduce smuggling and increase revenue from legal imports.

"Around 40% of imports were through informal channels even when we were able to reach our target revenue through customs," says former Secretary Kewal Bhandari. "Smuggling has obviously become more rampant now."

Meanwhile, demand for consumer goods and real estate transactions remain sluggish, further impacting revenue. Construction and manufacturing are in a recession. The construction sector recorded negative 11.2% slump during the third quarter of the last fiscal year. Wholesale and retail trade decreased by 2.7%.

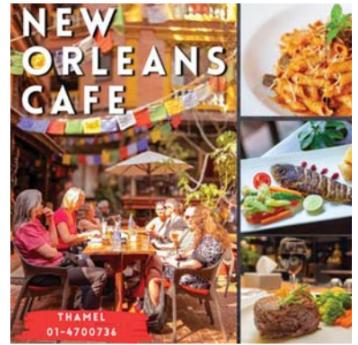
The prime minister must have been briefed on these figures, which is why he sounded the alarm at his rally last month that was supposed to be a political show of strength. His government has no option but to carry out major structural reforms in laws, the tax system, and clean up the administration to ensure financial stability and push growth.

The Economic Reform Commission under Finance Secretary Rameshore Khanal is supposed to offer fix-its. But this is not the first time such a Commission has been formed. Earlier recommendations were never implemented.

Last year's High-Level Tax Reform Advisory Committee led by former Finance Secretary Bidyadhar Mallik projected a revenue increase of up to Rs3 trillion annually through tax reforms. Nepal Rastra Bank Governor Maha Prasad Adhikari is proposing a campaign to build 10,000 low-cost housing units in Kathmandu under public-private partnership to kickstart the construction sector.

Economist Keshav Acharya believes Nepal's economy can be steered in a better direction with existing resources through state restructuring and prudent use of government expenditure.

He warns, "We will find ourselves in an even bigger soup if we do not carry out a major shake-up to increase revenue, slash expenditure and reduce further loans."



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Near-debt experience

■ Ramesh Kumar

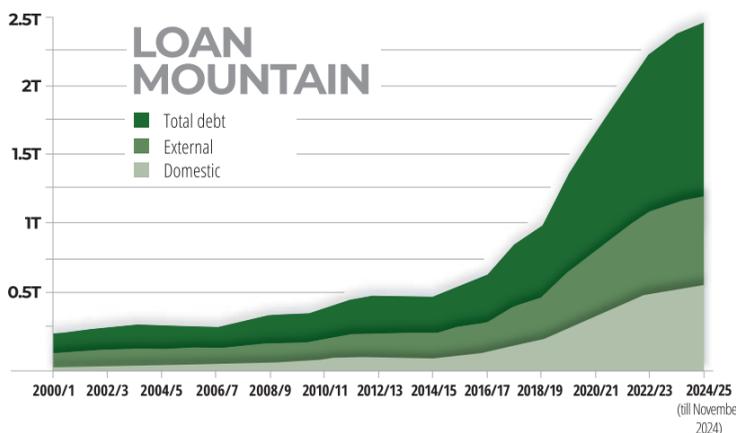
During the governing UML rally at Darbar Marg last month, Prime Minister K P Oli listed a host of economic woes that had rendered the country "inoperable".

His main concern was rising national debt. He said the country could not afford to take on any more loans.

"The treasury is empty while our debt is sky high, revenue and manufacturing are down and smuggling is rampant," Oli told the rally that created massive traffic jams during rush hour on Friday. "We collected 24% less revenue last year than the one before it."

But just two weeks later, the prime minister was in Beijing to sign a BRI Framework Cooperation Agreement. His coalition partner Nepali Congress (NC) had insisted that the deal should not have loan components. The Chinese did not agree, and the BRI agreement for 10 projects under an 'aid assistance financing' (read: loans) was signed.

Nepal's public debt to GDP ratio stands at 44%. And even though the figure for China is 83% and Japan 250%, those countries have robust exports and vast reserves. A more telling statistic is that Nepal's debt has increased 5-fold to Rs2.5 trillion in the last decade (see graph).



"Indiscriminate borrowing has made us skittish about seeking more loans to finance development," says economist Keshav Acharya. "But we are not in a position to reject loans for infrastructure."

Nepal's national debt servicing now exceeds its capital expenditure for development. This year's budget allocated Rs352 billion for capital expenditure, while Rs367 billion was for loan repayment. Loan repayment will increase, which means less money for development.

Nepal had to raise 29% of its annual budget from borrowing because of continuing decline in revenue. Just this year, institutions including the World Bank and the ADB extended long-term low-interest loans worth Rs548 billion

in budgetary support.

The government has also been propping up the treasury with internal loans because it is at a deficit of Rs86 billion. Another Rs84 billion in internal loans have piled up since July.

"We cannot afford to borrow uncontrollably like this, and instead take loans to invest in projects that increase economic output, create jobs, and provide returns," adds Acharya.

Falling revenue collection has been exacerbated by a sluggish economy. Ironically, a decreasing import bill also means less revenue from taxes. Last fiscal year, revenue collection fell to Rs1.03

Asia's 'Eastminster Model' GUEST EDITORIAL PAGE 2

WINTER LUXURY

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Asia's 'Eastminster Model'

Most people in America and around the world are waiting with bated breaths for 2025, and what a second Trump term will mean. The year 2024 is ending with a botched martial law declaration by Yoon Suk Yeol in South Korea, parliament's failed attempt to impeach him, and more street protests and vigils.

At a time when people in most Asian countries practice varying degrees of openness, signs signal further democratic reversals in the coming year.

From authoritarian North Korea and China, elected autocracies like Singapore, to formerly democratic countries that are backsliding like the Philippines and Indonesia, the Asia-Pacific region has been witnessing democratic decay for decades.

However, with a new headline rightwing government in Washington next year, analysts in the region fear further erosion of press freedom, democracy and rule of law. America will no longer have the moral high ground in preaching human rights, democratic values and civic freedoms to the rest of the world.

This will likely be accompanied by Trump's America ditching traditional allies like South Korea, Japan or Taiwan, or asking them to pay for the US defence umbrella as he tried to do the first time round.

Trump's muddle-headedness on bilateral trade and security alliances are likely to leave both allies and adversaries scratching their heads. One outcome could be China filling the vacuum left by America's strategic retreat. Even Kim Jong-Un is relieved that his old pal is back in the Oval Office, and will not be giving him a hard time about sending 10,000 troops to fight in the Russian Army against Ukraine.

Most Asians look admiringly at China and Singapore, which have achieved phenomenal economic progress despite limiting political and media freedoms. They are strongly attracted by 'Asian values' that emphasise the collective good rather than individual pursuit of happiness, and feel that Westminster-style parliamentary democracy is not really suited to Asian political culture.

This philosophy has adherents in middle-income states like Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia, as well as the poorer parts of the continent like India, where there is a hankering for strongman rule.

They argue that political pluralism leads to societal divisiveness, undermines a cohesive national ethos, and distracts leaders from focusing their attention to lift living standards of citizens. What is the point of being allowed to vote freely for a political

party if there is no freedom from hunger, is their reasoning.

Many in Asia's badly governed countries are convinced by this argument. The countries with the lowest per capita income in South Asia practice western-style parliamentary democracy, but even there the system has been hijacked by populist leaders.

Some have called this the 'Eastminster' model. In the world's largest democracy, India, the compulsion to play economic catchup with China is so great that rulers in New Delhi have borrowed Beijing's authoritarian playbook: abandon the doctrine of separation of powers, steadily but steadfastly constrict freedom of expression, manipulate the electoral mechanism, and

weaponise social media networks to stoke populist rhetoric against ethnic minorities, migrants, or magnify external threats.

This has worked brilliantly to elect autocrats: in many formerly democratic countries authoritarian leaders have been elected multiple times because of their stranglehold on the levers of power. They have used free

NT ARCHIVE

election to get to power and then dismantled the very institutions of democracy that got them elected in the first place.

Elected despots have co-opted the judiciary to deploy strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP) to target political rivals,

journalists and civil society — framing them on trumped up charges of tax evasion, money laundering or even sedition.

All this has been made possible by the tyranny of the algorithm which has aided and abetted populism on social media platforms, polarising and radicalising voters at election time. Disinformation and deepfakes on X spread the toxic sludge, silencing rational voices, muting critics, stoking bigotry and xenophobia.

Asia's autocrats have keenly watched the US presidential elections, and they have been taking notes. If the United States and India, with all their constitutional safeguards, can drift into authoritarianism, what hope is there for Asia?

One thing to keep in mind is that countries like Nepal and Sri Lanka or Philippines and Indonesia have tried strongman rule before, and it was a disaster. And there are examples of formerly authoritarian Asian states that have prospered after restoring democratic checks and balances. Seemingly self-fulfilling predictions of the demise of democracy in countries of the Asia-Pacific, therefore, may be exaggerated and premature.

Moontae Jeong in Bangkok



Predictions of the demise of democracy in countries of the Asia-Pacific may be exaggerated.

ONLINE PACKAGES



STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Sumitra Karki wanted to be a nurse while growing up. Instead, she became a farmer-entrepreneur setting up a collective farming group in her village in Galkot and inspiring other women to pursue professional farming. Watch video about how the collective has become a powerful model for female independence and income.



DAIRY FARMERS

Meet the Bhusal family, who migrated from Nawalparasi to Rupandehi and started a dairy business with the goal of making their area self-sufficient in dairy. Watch the video on Nepali Times' YouTube channel. Also read about dairy farmers in Chitwan who are overcoming subsistence and increasing household income on page 4-5.

'ART LOVER'

May this important piece receive the attention it deserves and lead to meaningful action against Gopal 'Kalapremi' Shrestha ('Art Lover' accused of sexual abuse', Subeksha Poudel, #1238). To everyone who shared their stories, thank you for speaking up, and I hope you feel supported and find comfort in your community of friends, family, and strangers.

Pragya Rimal

■ Gopal 'Kalapremi' Shrestha has been featured in numerous art exhibitions and has showcased his work in prominent galleries. However, it would be dishonest and unethical for anyone to express shock at the allegations against him. His repeated misuse of power was an open secret within the art community. Solidarity with all the survivors who have come forward to share their stories.

Ankit Khadgi

■ It is shameful how as a society we teach complicity to children to the point where blatant violence can be curtailed by "love".

Riddhi Gautam

■ Is he a teacher or a monster?

Nirmala Dhakal

POKHARA UFO

Maybe what was found was fragments of a plane, considering it was during the Cold War ('UFO over Pokhara', Durga Rana Magar, nepalitimes.com).

Mohammad Karim

■ UFO just means they can't identify what the object is. It's unidentified, but that doesn't mean it was from space.

Margaret Kerr

BRI DEAL

Nepal needs vision and a master-plan for its development ('China syndrome', Shristi Karki #1238). Partnering with China is not ill-advised. The risk of course is that that will irritate India. In such an event, India would also play realpolitik to woo Nepal.

Tony Jones

TYPHOID VACCINE

This is amazing, exciting news, and example of the innovation narrative coming from Asia, Africa and Latin America ('Nepal's success in typhoid vaccine trial', Sonia Awale, #1238).

Naresh Khanna

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING

Those who stay

by Lauren Fox
When record rain fell in central Nepal killing at least 250 people in September, communities along the Annapurna Circuit in Manang also experienced unseasonal storms that disrupted climbing routes and agriculture. Visit nepalitimes.com for the full story.

f Most reached and shared on Facebook

China syndrome

by Shristi Karki
After much backroom haggling in Beijing, a compromise formula was found for Nepal to finally sign the BRI during PM Oli's China visit last week. But the last minute deal-making is an example of how not to conduct bilateral negotiations. Follow us for the latest developments.

X Most popular on X



'Art' lover accused of sexual abuse

by Subeksha Poudel
Former students detail a history of sexual abuse and harassment by artist and teacher Gopal Das Shrestha 'Kalapremi'. Some are pressing legal charges against him, hoping that others do not have to endure what they did. Join the discussion online.

66 Most commented

UFO over Pokhara

by Durga Rana Magar
Declassified CIA documents show the US government, military and intelligence agencies investigated after fragments from a flying object fell from the sky in a village near Pokhara nearly 60 years ago. Decades later, the mystery is no closer to being solved. Read more on our website.

7 Most visited online page

QUOTES

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Former students detail a history of sexual abuse and harassment by artist and teacher Gopal Das Shrestha 'Kalapremi'. Some are pressing legal charges against him, hoping that others do not have to endure what they did. Subeksha Poudel (@subeksha) reports:



Bishow Parajuli @BishowParajuli

This is another scandal & shameless that Govt DDC is on the way to destroy dairy farming. Agri ministers had promised to resolve due payments but it is still pending is a national concern as it kill dairy industry, which has been doing well. All concerns need addressing.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Activists have criticised the government for hounding Rabi Lamichhane with inhumane treatment that borders on physical torture. But his custody also highlights the stark difference between how influential prisoners are treated compared to ordinary inmates.



Krishna Joshi @krishna_joshi01

So would Rabi fall under the influential category or ordinary based on how the govt is treating him?

1,000 WORDS



FREQUENT FLIER:

Rabi Lamichhane being flown on Wednesday from Kathmandu to Pokhara.

RSP

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Path to Republic

We have been able to predict the outcomes of some of our most contentious political transitions over the years. Twenty years ago this week, we warned of the monarchy reverting to authoritarianism because that would push even the biggest proponents of constitutional monarchy towards republicanism.

That was exactly what happened. King Gyanendra staged a coup d'état on 1 February 2005. Nepal abolished monarchy on 28 May 2008 after 240 years of royal rule.

Excerpts of the editorial published on issue #225 10 - 16 December 2004:

A slew of statements in the past month hinting at a Poush One-type royal putsch is too deliberate to be a coincidence. First we had the government spokesman stirring a hornet's nest on 11 November by wondering publicly about the possibility of reverting to authoritarianism.



Then there was a sense of disquieting déjà vu as we heard demands to set up a 'royal advisory council'. Pliant party disgruntleds seem to be forging an alliance, and a younger generation of royals was newly vocal. On Thursday, a regional Raj Parishad meeting was inaugurated by King Gyanendra himself.

However much the political parties brought it on themselves with their shenanigans, and even though there are few indications that they have mended their wayward ways, we strongly advise against any temptation to reverse history. This will push even those who still believe

our common future lies in constitutional monarchy and pluralistic democracy towards republicanism. Whoever is counselling this move is pushing the monarchy itself into a trap and the country into irreversible polarisation.

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

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TK 726	SUN/MON/TUE/THU/SAT	IST	01:25	11:00	KTM



TURKISH AIRLINES

How to make farming viable a

■ Pinki Sris Rana in Chitwan

As soon as she milks her cow, 52-year-old Punam BK is off, pedaling her bicycle furiously along the highway with a blue milk can in the front basket.

By the time she arrives at the Jaya Shiva Ganesh Dairy Producers Cooperative in Gopalganj village, others are already there, their bicycles parked on the roadside. The farmers are all holding on to their blue milk cans, and are chatting away.

"We keep what is needed for the family, and sell whatever remains here at the cooperative," says BK, as the volume, fat and non-fat solid content of her milk is measured.

It is then poured into a bigger vat to be mixed with milk from other farmers. BK collects her receipt with the value of her milk, and prepares to head home. The farmers are reimbursed on a quarterly basis.

"Everyone around here has at least a cow or buffalo to provide milk for the family, the cowdung is used for fertiliser, and we can bring whatever is left over to the cooperative," says BK who, like the others, brings her milk by bicycle twice a day (pictured, right).

All this may seem like nothing special: just an ordinary farmer selling her milk. But it has to be seen in the context of dairy farmers overcoming subsistence and increasing income. Nearly 200,000 dairy farmers from over 1,200 cooperatives have not been paid by the government-run DDC for their milk for a year or more.

The DDC has fixed a quota for buying milk from cooperatives that limits production even during the peak winter months. Farmers in



PHOTOS: PINKI SRIS RANA

NMB BANK
एनएमबी बैंक

Turkish Golf Cup

The Turkish Airlines World Golf Cup Finals was held at Antalya Gloria Golf Resort between 2-6 December. Over 9,000 golf enthusiasts attended, including members from the carrier's corporate and loyalty program. The participants had already competed against each other in more than 110 preliminary tournaments in over 70



countries. Lt Col Dinesh Baniya from Nepal had qualified for the finals, having won a preliminary in Gokarna in May 2023. In Antalya, American Walker Toomes became champion, scoring 140 points. Turkish Airlines has been holding this tournament annually since 2013. "This tournament transcends just a sporting event, it fosters friendship and cooperation, uniting cultures and people," said Turkish Chief Commercial Officer Ahmet Olmuştur.

Nabil Appt

Nabil Bank has introduced an appointment banking system, allowing customers to schedule visits and minimise wait times for cash counter transactions. The service is currently available at the bank's Tindhara head office. Appointments can be booked through their website or their Nbank app.

Meanwhile, the Nabil Bank School of Social Entrepreneurship launched their fourth cohort in collaboration with TU School of Management. Participants will undergo 18 days of training over six months.

Tata Magic

Sipradi Trading has launched the Tata Magic Direct, a four-row ten seater minivan. The Tata Magic first entered the Nepal market in 2008, with DX and DXS models. These vehicles have 95% of the market share in their category, with over 4,000 units operating across Nepal, mostly for urban and school transport.

StanChart CEO

Standard Chartered Bank Nepal has appointed Gorakh Shumsher Rana as its new Chief Executive Officer (CEO), marking the first time the bank has a Nepali head. The bank also held its 38th Annual General Meeting on 10 December at the Army Officer's Club. The bank has had a successful financial year 23/24, recording a Profit After Tax of Rs3.3 billion, a Return on Equity of 19%, and a Total Dividend of 25.5%.

Lumbini Museum

The US Embassy in Nepal, through the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation, has awarded a \$244,966 grant to the Buddha Foundation to conserve, document, and preserve the Lumbini Museum Project and its invaluable collection of ancient artifacts and the establishment of a state-of-the-art conservation lab.

Barahi Cake Mixing

Hotel Barahi Kathmandu held a cake-mixing lunch event this week, where guests mixed dried fruits, nuts and spices to create a cake-base.



SEC turns 30

Swisscontact marked the 30th anniversary of its Senior Expert Contact (SEC) program in Nepal by bringing together tourism leaders at the Hotel Yak & Yeti. Since 1994, the SEC program has supported 550 SMEs and created over 4700 jobs, mainly in the tourism sector.

Hyundai December

Hyundai is running December Delight until 15 December, during which customers can get discounts of up to Rs600,000, exchange bonuses of upto Rs500,000, a year of free comprehensive insurance, and three years of free servicing. In India, Hyundai is working with the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Delhi, Mumbai and Madras to set up a collaborative research system to advance the study and development of batteries for electric vehicles, especially for the Indian market.

Elsewhere, the Hyundai SANTA FE was named Car of the Year at the 2025 Carwow Awards. The SUV with petrol and diesel options, also won the Family Values award. The Hyundai IONIQ 5 N won Tech Trailblazer, and Hyundai was named Brand of the Year.

TikTok Safety

TikTok has launched its Safety Ambassadors program in Nepal, partnering with creators and celebrities to raise awareness about in-app safety features, minor safety, and options to get help for victims.

NMB Gender Award

NMB Bank received a special mention in the Gender-inclusive Workplace category at the UN Women Asia-Pacific WEP awards. The bank has implemented several measures such as all-woman branches, and female scholarships and leadership programs.

Rescued from Gadimai

Humane Society International India and People for Animals alongside India's border police have rescued nearly 400 buffaloes and goats to be sacrificed at the Gadimai Festival this week. The animals will now be sheltered in Vantara, a wildlife and rehabilitation centre in Jamnagar in India. The groups also released 328 rescued pigeons back into the wild.

Laxmi Sunrise branch

Laxmi Sunrise Bank has moved its New Road branch to Chyasaal in Patan. The relocated office is equipped to offer a full range of retail banking services.



Ncell x SAATHI x Zonta

Ncell, SAATHI and the Zonta club launched Orange in the Schools, a campaign raising awareness about gender-based violence that ran until 10 December across 12 government and private schools.

again

International support for agro-businesses lifts farmers from subsistence, providing cash income



Chitwan are so fed up, they have staged demonstrations and even poured milk on the East-West Highway in protest.

Punam BK's milk ends up in Bhawani Dairy, a milk processing plant in Chitwan that buys milk from various cooperatives in the district. It was established six years ago by three entrepreneur cousins Devrath Baral, Drishya Baral and Subash Paudel and is now being supported by the Commercial

Agriculture for Smallholders and Agribusiness (CASA) project.

This UK-aid funded project implemented by Swisscontact in Nepal has been supporting agro-businesses in 23 countries in Asia and Africa.

CASA in Nepal focuses on improving the capacity of private dairy and vegetable farmers to find markets and build a sustainable supply chain for their produce. It helps dairies

like the one in Chitwan with branding and marketing, as well to track business through a Dairy Management System (DMS) digital database.

Bhawani Dairy also got support to conduct orientation for cooperative farmers to learn about new ways to boost productivity with breeding, cowshed management and hygiene maintenance. Many commercial farmers in Chitwan, some with

up to 60 cows and buffaloes, have benefited.

BK says she only has six cows, so not everything she hears at the orientation about increasing cowshed area is applicable. "We are just happy our milk is not wasted, and we can earn some cash from the surplus," she says.

Bhawani Dairy's clientele is based entirely in Chitwan and in towns along the East-West Highway. But building on its success here, the company is looking to expand nationwide and target the Kathmandu market. Being a perishable product, the dairy business is challenging. Businesses also need investment and technical support to diversify into value-added milk products like cheese, yoghurt, ice cream or powdered milk.

"For now, the best thing we as a dairy business can do for farmers is to buy their milk at a decent price and pay them on time," says Drishya Baral of Bhawani Dairy.

Another agro-industry supported by CASA since 2018 is Himalayan Supervores, a venture that sources farm produce to supply vegetables and other foods to restaurants and hotels in the city, and even export Halal-certified produce to Gulf countries.

CASA helped by bringing in experts to help with the cold chain management system process so that the vegetable produce remain fresh for the national and international market. Himalayan Supervores is already exporting to the UAE and Qatar, and is targeting other Gulf countries next.

"The guidance provided by the international expert was invaluable, we could not have bought that knowledge even with money," says Nelson Man Shrestha of Himalayan Supervores. "It was not about fancy hardware, but how to minimise wastage, increase productivity, save time and money."

Though Himalayan Supervores collects vegetables from vegetable cooperatives, it indirectly works with a network of thousands of cooperative farmers. Its catchment area therefore is enormous, and it has enhanced their knowledge about organic farming methods, bio-pesticides, and the right way to handle and package vegetables.

CASA's most recent tie-up is with Pokhara-based Poshilo Foods, which specialises in increasing the shelf-life of local nutritional food items. During the Covid lockdown, Prithwi Kallyan Parajuli saw an opportunity to supply nutritional foods that stayed longer, and set up Poshilo.

It took traditional satu flour made from dry-roasted pulse, added more nutrients, and packaged it. Four flavours of satu with nutrient values differentiated for various age groups now line the shelves of supermarket chains like KK Mart and Saleways. Poshilo is now exploring the export market in India. In the five years of helping Nepali agro-businesses, CASA has already teamed up with 35 companies. Parajuli heaps fulsome praise on the catalytic support and guidance he got early on, not just for product design, branding and marketing.

He has participated in government-led programs before, but says those are one-off and focus only on technical solutions and do not pay much attention to the important back-end work with management and sales.

Says Devrath Baral of Bhawani Dairy in Chitwan: "We would probably have gotten to where we are now, but it would have taken years longer without CASA. And now we can share our experience with other agro-businesses in Nepal." 🇳🇵




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How the media shapes Ban

■ Mahfuz Anam

The bilateral relationship between India and Bangladesh must be based on a win-win policy, rooted in mutual respect, non-hegemony, and the pursuit of shared prosperity and deeper understanding.

For India, there have always been only two neighbours: China and Pakistan. The rest of its smaller South Asian countries are geographic entities to be praised, cajoled, reprimanded and even punished as the situation calls for.

Sheikh Hasina's last tenure in power (2009-2024) appears to have been a 'praise' period. However, after the student-led people's uprising toppled her regime in August, a powerful section of the Indian media has shifted into the 'reprimand' mode, with some even suggesting 'punishment'. Much of the social media discourse seems to support this.

Oppression of minorities anywhere in the world, including in my own country, must be condemned and speedily resolved. It should never recur. Communal conflict has been an age-old phenomenon in South Asia following the British colonial policy of divide and rule.

After the regime change in Bangladesh, the Indian media's coverage of events can, in my view, be categorised as follows:

The events that toppled Sheikh Hasina was the work of Pakistan's ISI, the Islamists in Bangladesh, or pro-Chinese elements all aimed to replace the 'India-friendly' government with an 'unfriendly' one. There is no mention of the role of common people or of the students, of the killing of ordinary people. What is the source of all these assertions?



THE DAILY STAR

The new government in Dhaka is bent on persecuting Hindus and even committing 'genocide'. Many of these stories were debunked by fact-checkers, including the BBC. But that did not stop or even slow down the tirade of stories demonising Bangladesh.

The US involvement was also referred to and linked with the events in Pakistan in toppling Imran Khan. So, the US toppled Sheikh Hasina.

Even three months later, there has been no substantial coverage of the atrocities inflicted on students and civilians. The Sheikh Hasina government even resorted to firing



on demonstrators using helicopters. In a prompt action, the interim government fast-tracked the issuance of visas for journalists. However, Indian journalists who visited Bangladesh focused solely on the attacks on Hindus, ignoring

the broader human rights abuses by the Hasina government.

The Indian media's coverage of the July-August uprising in Bangladesh was also striking in its one-sidedness. It largely ignored the massive student-led people's

SUBCONTINE

'Neighbourhood first' or neigh

■ Yogendra Yadav

What exactly is India's 'national interest' in our neighbourhood? Is it in our long-term interest to flex our muscles, browbeat our neighbours and create a zone of India's dominance in our backyard? Even if this were desirable, is this feasible?

Or, is this foreign policy counter-productive, leaving us in an unenviable position where we are neither feared nor loved?

A recent visit to Nepal prompted me to ask this question. Normally, foreign policy is the domain of experts and diplomats, as it should be. Besides, the unwritten code of Indian public life dictates that differences over external relations are not aired in public.

This may have created an unhealthy situation where lack of public scrutiny of foreign-policy decisions may not serve public interests. At least in some cases, diplomacy is too serious a business to be left to diplomats.

We are in a particularly tight spot vis-a-vis our neighbours. K P Oli, with a track record of India baiting, is back as the prime minister of Nepal. Recently, he bypassed the established convention of Nepalese PMs visiting India first and announced his first official visit to China.

Muhammad Yunus in Bangladesh is no India baiter, but it is hard to disentangle the

anti-Hasina revolt that brought him to power from the anti-India sentiment that has gained ground in recent years. The new government's latest demand for the extradition of Sheikh Hasina is bound to put the Modi government in a spot.

In The Maldives, the main plank of Mohamed Muizzu's successful election campaign was his promise to oust Indian forces from the island.

The new president of Sri Lanka Anura Dissanayake and his left-wing coalition National People's Power secured a two-thirds majority in last month's elections. He did not campaign on an anti-India platform but his party's dislike for Indian intervention is no secret and goes back to civil-war days.

Bhutan has not seen any regime change, but the King has leaned a wee bit towards China, away from India.

Even if we keep China and Pakistan aside, where we do not expect very friendly regimes, the current set of regimes in the rest of the neighbouring countries is about as hostile as it can get. And we are unable to deal with these regimes by muscle flexing. Maldives, Sri Lanka, Nepal and even Bhutan have all learnt the art of using China for counter-balancing.

To be fair, the Modi government cannot be solely blamed for the entire mess. There is an element of coincidence in many of these not-so-friendly regimes coming together at the same time. Many of



THE INDIAN EXPRESS

the policies that led to the present situation started much before the Modi government.

Some of these have become the DNA of Indian diplomacy in South Asia. And there is no denying that playing the anti-India card is a rewarding game for many leaders.

Even so, if we live in a neighbourhood where every single neighbour is unhappy with us, it may not be a bad idea to ask: Did we do something wrong? And

if we own the biggest house, we might take the onus of resuming a decent relationship, even if we did not break it. That's not woolly dovishness. It's prudence.

Nepal is the one country in this region we cannot possibly have a cultural or historical basis to quarrel with. But complaints about the Indian government's 'big brother' attitude cut across its political spectrum.

These are not just some vague

allegations about the distant past. Nepali opinion makers and leaders have not forgotten India's vacillation during Nepal's democratic transition — first declaring the Maoist rebels as 'terrorists', then supporting them and insisting that they be part of the transition and finally sending an ex-prince as emissary when Nepal was getting rid of its monarchy.

Much of the current unease is about developments since 2014,

Bangladesh-India ties

movement, which saw millions take to the streets of cities across the country. Their focus remained exclusively on the sporadic violence against Hindus during the power vacuum in the first week of the transition.

The firing on unarmed demonstrators, resulting in at least 700 deaths by 5 August, was barely covered. This was one of the most barbaric crackdowns in the recent history of South Asia, yet the Indian media gave it little attention.

In six reports in which I was interviewed on Indian media, there was almost no mention of the scale of the uprising or the civilian deaths, only vandalism of symbols like Bangabandhu's statue or the burning of government properties.

Even three months later, there has been no substantial coverage of the atrocities inflicted on students and civilians. The Indian media's coverage appears to be driven by the isolated attacks against Hindus of Bangladesh, rather than the people of Bangladesh. India should not see the recent events through the lens of Sheikh Hasina but through the lens of democracy.

In a recent video broadcast by the Indian news portal ThePrint, Meenakshi Lekhi, a BJP leader and lawyer, said, 'The chief adviser... is seeking to rename the nation

[Bangladesh] to be [the] Islamic republic of East Pakistan.'

Where did she get that from? Her column was filled with distortions and misinformation. When recounting Sheikh Hasina's rule, she omitted critical facts like the rigging of the 2014, 2018 and 2024 general elections due to voters' outrage with her regime.

At The Daily Star, we studied 56 news items appearing in the Indian media between 9 July-20 November. Except for a handful, most could be categorised as 'views reports' and not 'news reports'. They had headlines like: 'To avoid election Yunus is using the excuse of reforms', 'Politics of revenge - 13 including ministers on trial', 'Will democracy at all return to Bangladesh?', 'China, ISI behind escalation of student-led protests in Bangladesh', 'ISI conspiracy to topple Sk. Hasina and established anti-India govt', among others.

Some TV news even called it an 'Islamist takeover'. There were hardly any attempts to take a serious look at the events in Bangladesh.

If we analyse the sourcing of the news, the presentation, the headlines, and the language used in reporting, it becomes clear that it was directed at creating an impression that Hindus were not safe in Bangladesh to generate deep hatred in the Indian population. The mindset of the Indian

media and also that of a section of political leadership is dominated by a fundamental disrespect for our intellectual ability, and Islamophobia.

Indian media coverage clearly implies that we, as a people, are incapable of determining our future. It is the Pakistanis, Chinese or the Americans (not to name the Indians, which they do not of course mention) that must tell us what to do.

This mindset is insulting to a nation that has fought against Pakistani cultural, economic and military oppression, and that has defeated it in an armed struggle with Indian help.

It is insulting to a people who have dismantled dictatorships and who have now toppled what appeared to be an invincible regime of Sheikh Hasina. This mindset shows the disdain of the Indian media towards Bangladeshis. One political leader even compared us with termites.

The Indian media and leadership must dig deep into the cultural and religious heritage of Muslim Bengal, and try to embrace us as we are, rather than define us as they would like us to be. We must accept what the Indian people decide is the India they want. Just as India must accept what the people of Bangladesh decide we are.

That is the only way a durable Bangladesh-India relationship can be built. The lesson for India is that regime-based relationships must be replaced by people-based relationships.

For that to happen, we must understand each other better, with sincerity and respect. 🇮🇳

Mahfuz Anam is the editor and publisher of The Daily Star. Reprinted with permission.

MENTAL DRIFT

Neighbourliness first?

after PM Modi received a historic and truly public welcome in Nepal following his victory. Every Nepali believes that the Modi government put severe conditions on what it wanted in Nepal's new Constitution.

And that the 'blockade' of 2015 was a punishment to Nepal for not heeding the Indian government's diktats. The Indian government denies that it imposed any blockade, the official version is that it was a band organised by the Madhesi movement within Nepal.

But there are few takers for this in Kathmandu. Neutral observers agree that the jamming of the Indo-Nepal land border could not have happened without covert support from India. For a land-locked country, the memory of the blockade is a wound to its psyche. Whatever the exact details, the onus of healing is on us.

After the promulgation of the new constitution as well, the Indian Embassy is seen as a major player in Nepal's domestic politics. It has its favourite parties, the Nepali Congress now has an official relationship with the BJP in India — and its favourite leaders.

It has its favourite Indian businessmen to promote in Nepal. Of late, the RSS is believed to be backing its counterpart in Nepal, the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh. Indian intervention has had the salutary

effect of forcing the hill elites to listen to the voice of the hitherto marginalised Madhesi communities. Other than that, it is unclear as to which larger interest the Indian intervention serves.

It is not clear if the Indian leadership is directly invested in shaping some of these interventions. An astute observer of Nepali politics explained the shift thus: "Earlier, the Nepali leaders were speaking directly to Indian leaders. Now, we have reached a point where Nepali leaders are made to engage with Indian intelligence operatives and wheeler-dealers."

I heard of many political nobodies in India who wield unbelievable clout in Nepal. Kathmandu is full of stories about conspiracies hatched by Indian agencies like RAW. Most of these are hard to believe. But this widespread perception is a reality in itself. More often than not, it is the worst of both worlds: We cannot claim a moral high ground, nor have we achieved much success in these operations.

'Neighbourhood first' is the charming label of the Modi government's South Asia policy. The official description does not help you understand what exactly comes 'first'. The government's priorities make you wonder if it is about putting first the concerns of our neighbours or about asserting our global power

claims first in our neighbourhood.

Would it not be better if we follow a policy of 'neighbourliness first'? Such a policy would involve respect for sovereignty of each country, non-interference in its internal affairs, not allowing one's space to be used for activity hostile to another and peaceful settlement of any dispute.

To these general principles, former Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral had added another in the case of neighbours like Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Maldives: India should not ask for reciprocity but accommodate what it can in good faith and trust.

One can imagine how foreign-policy hawks would balk at this 'naive' suggestion. But we must ask: what exactly have our too-clever-by-half policies in our neighbourhood achieved for India's national interest? Whose interest is national interest anyway? 🇮🇳



The writer is member, Swaraj India and national convenor of Bharat Jodo Abhiyaan. This comment was published in the Indian Express. Views are personal.

Adani in Sri Lanka

■ Sasanka Perera

This year, Sri Lanka entered a power purchase deal with Adani Green Energy Ltd to purchase electricity from the company over 20 years. The Adani Green Energy project received cabinet clearance from the previous government to produce 484MW of wind power in two facilities the company would build in Mannar and Pooneryn and invest more than US\$442 million in its projected life span of 20 years.

Adani Green Energy would be paid \$0.0826 per kWh. The deal was relentlessly pushed and ultimately signed by the previous Sri Lankan government. The mandatory tender process was not followed, indicating inbuilt corruption and vested interests at the time.

The project is now under litigation in the Supreme Court over environmental concerns

company Hindenburg accusing the company's top leader Gautam Adani of getting away with the 'largest con in corporate history'.

Another investigation by the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project documented malpractices by Adani. The Guardian and Financial Times also reported on the Adani family's surreptitious investments in the company's shares.

It is against this background that the flamboyant and utterly inexperienced former Sri Lankan Minister of Energy attempted to convert the agreement with Adani Green Energy Limited in August 2023 into a formal government-to-government deal.

In reality, no such formal state to state level agreement existed between India and Sri Lanka. The new Sri Lankan government needs to carefully and comprehensively revisit the power deal.

The project also needs to be evaluated in light of the global evidence against the Adani Group. In October, the Kenyan High Court suspended a \$736 million agreement between the state-owned Kenya Electrical Transmission Company and Adani Energy Solutions to build power infrastructure.

In 2023, accusations were made in India's Gujarat State against Adani Power Mundra Limited that it had charged an excess of INR 39,000,000,000 over a period of five

years under two power purchase agreements. An opposition politician in the state noted the case was a "textbook case of corruption, money laundering, loot of public money and above all, the classic case of cronyism that the Prime Minister and his government represent."

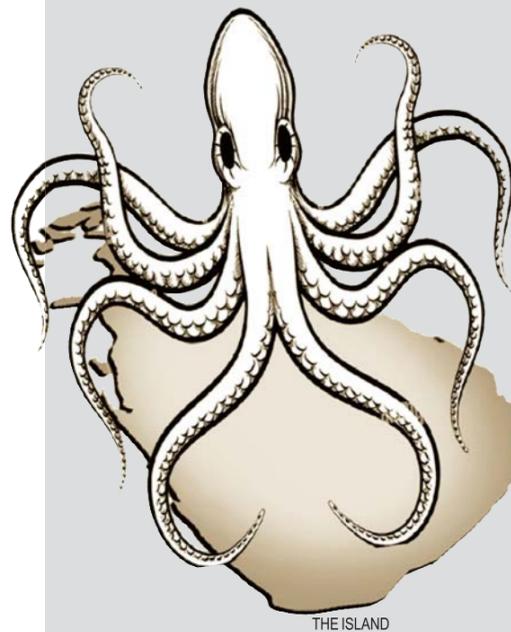
As a presidential candidate, President Anura Kumara Dissanayake assured that if he won, the National People's Power would cancel the Adani energy project because it posed a threat to Sri Lanka's energy sovereignty.

The controls placed by Adani Power on its power supply to Bangladesh is a classic example of its energy sovereignty utterly compromised at a very crucial time in the country's history.

In real terms, Adani Power has slashed its supplies to Bangladesh by about 60% due to unpaid bills exceeding \$800 million. Sri Lanka could find itself in a similar situation if it went ahead with the Adani project. In October President Dissanayake informed the Supreme Court that it would reconsider the approval by the previous regime to the Adani Group projects. The government must now expect considerable pressure from vested parties, in this case both the Adani Group and the Indian government.

We cannot be endlessly languishing in poverty because of the corruption of our own leaders and business magnates of the region. The Adani case is a good starting point to roll back mega corruption in the country. 🇮🇳

Sasanka Perera is the founding professor of the South Asia University's Department of Sociology. Reprinted with permission from The Island Online.



THE ISLAND

and the lack of transparency in awarding the deal to Adani.

The petitioners also argue that the agreed upon per unit cost is a significant loss to the country. The deal, its approval and the final granting process were mired in controversy even before litigation.

In 2022, the then Chairman of the Ceylon Electricity Board, M M C Ferdinando told the parliamentary panel, the Committee on Public Enterprises (COPE), that the deal was offered based on a request from Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to then Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

Ferdinando later retracted his statement and resigned. In May 2023, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ali Sabry observed flippantly in an interview with The Hindu that Adani projects in Sri Lanka were a 'government-to-government kind of a project'.

He noted that it was the Indian government that selected the Adani group for infrastructure development including the Sri Lankan wind power project.

Reading between the lines, Sabry's public observations indicated a clear backdoor and informal Indian state involvement in the project. Despite the notoriety that Adani companies had already acquired across the world, Sabry had the nerve to say that his government was "very very confident" that the Adani Group's companies had considerable capital.

Adani actually saw a \$140 billion drop in share values after the publication of a negative report by US research

EVENTS

**Spirits in Transition**

The exhibition *Spirits in Transition* features Tsherin Sherpa's latest explorations on the theme of spirit. (see page 9).
Until 29 December, 11am-7pm (Friday to Sunday), 11am-6pm (Tuesday to Thursday),
Takpa Gallery, Lazimpat

Christmas Market

Shop at and support local businesses this week at the annual Christmas market. Get local handicrafts, plants, cards, paintings, clothing, jewelry, thrifted clothes and more.
15 December, 2pm-7pm, Thasikhel

**NPL Season**

Has you caught the cricket fever yet? Support your favourite team this NPL season at the TU cricket ground.
Until 21 December, 9:15am onwards, Ticket: Rs300-Rs500, TU Cricket ground, Kirtipur

Anime Matsuri

Lovers of pop culture—get your cosplay costumes out and engage with like-minded fans at the Anime Matsuri cosplay event this weekend.
14 December, 11am onwards, Ticket: Rs200, Sensa The Urban Sanctuary, Kapan

**Fables of Punjab**

Celebrating the vibrant flavours of 1800s Punjab, this festival brings to life the gastronomic heritage of Multan, Lahore, Amritsar, and beyond.
Until 14 December (with Chef Abdul Haleem), 19-21 December (with Chef Rajeev Shrestha),
Nook, Aloft Kathmandu, Thamel, 9801976054

DINING

**Baker's Den**

Want a cake for Christmas? Order from Baker's Den. Or choose from a large variety of baked goods such as doughnuts, muffins, and bread.
Naxal (01) 4411886

MUSIC

Music Mela

Come together at this event to celebrate Nepal's musical richness with Kuma Sagar and the Khwopa band.
17 December, 2pm onwards, Ticket: Rs350-Rs800, KRB Driving Centre, Godawari

**Classical Music**

Rishab Rikhiram Sharma, the first sitarist of his generation to give a solo performance at Houston's NRG stadium, is live this weekend in Patan.
13 December, 6pm onwards, Ticket: Rs5,000-Rs20,000, Patan Durbar Square

Heal and Help

This charity concert brings contemporary artists together to raise funds for underserved cancer patients.
14 December, 12pm onwards, Ticket: Rs500, Bhrikutimandap

**The Elements**

Head out for a musical night with friends and sing along to The Elements band who will perform live this Friday.
13 December, 8pm onwards, Ticket: Rs1,000, Club Platinum, Darbar Marg

**Hetauda Vibes**

Join musicians Dong and Cobweb at their gig if you happen to be around Hetauda this weekend.
14 December, 4pm onwards, Ticket: Rs500, Bhutandevi Chaur, Hetauda

**Hotel Barahi**

Start your day with a sumptuous breakfast spread featuring a delightful fusion of local and international flavors, meticulously crafted to awaken your senses.
Thamel, 9851350515

Piano Piano South

Sip and savour the flavours of Italy at Piano Piano South, a cosy neighbourhood restaurant perfect to visit at any time of the day.
Sanepa, 9802302303

About Town

GETAWAYS

**Chandragiri Hills Resort**

Above the verdant pine forests, the picturesque cable car ride sets the tone for a truly unforgettable experience awaiting visitors at the resort.
Thankot (01) 5970796

Maruni Sanctuary Lodge

From the comfort of the cabins and cottages of Maruni Sanctuary Lodge, one can take a peek at the wandering wildlife and nature of the park.
Sauraha (01) 4700632

**Shinta Mani Mustang**

With elegantly designed interiors using local materials, hand-picked art and rich textiles, this luxury retreat creates an ambience of opulence and comfort.
Marpha, Mustang, 9802336386

**Dollu Villa**

Have a mini-staycation just a short drive away from the city, at Dollu Villa, which has three bedrooms, a living room, an in-house kitchen, a bonfire area, and a terrace surrounded by hills.
Pharping, 9812986686

Peacock Guest House

Housed in a World Heritage Site, this three-story Newari-style building provides splendid views of the Dattatreya Square and the Bhimsenthana temple.
Bhaktapur (01) 6611829

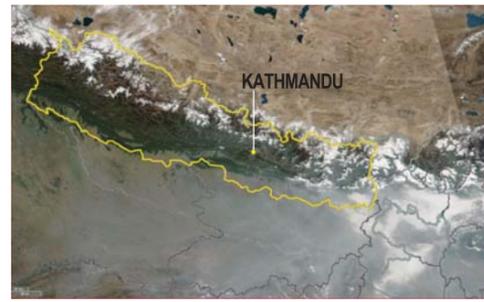
Kyubi's Kitchen

Head to Kyubi's for customisable bowls of noodles, platters filled to the brim with dumplings, spicy noodles, kimbap, corn dogs, da-pow and more.
Jhamsikhel, 9810298050

**Singapore BBQ**

Get a taste of Singaporean flavours right here in Kathmandu. The Singapore Style BBQ, Pork Rice, and the Roast Chicken or Duck are must-tries.
Nakhpot, 9818279222

WEEKEND WEATHER



FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY
20° 6°	19° 6°	19° 8°	20° 8°	19° 8°

Deep Winter

Weather models forecast a warmer and drier winter, but western and parts of the central Nepal Himalaya experienced the first snowfall of the season. The temperature range in Kathmandu is already approaching mid-winter in Kathmandu. The maximum will be below 20 with pale sunshine through smog, while the minimum will get down to 3°C on the outskirts. The westerly that brought precipitation dissipated by the time it got to Kathmandu, and that was the only front on the horizon.

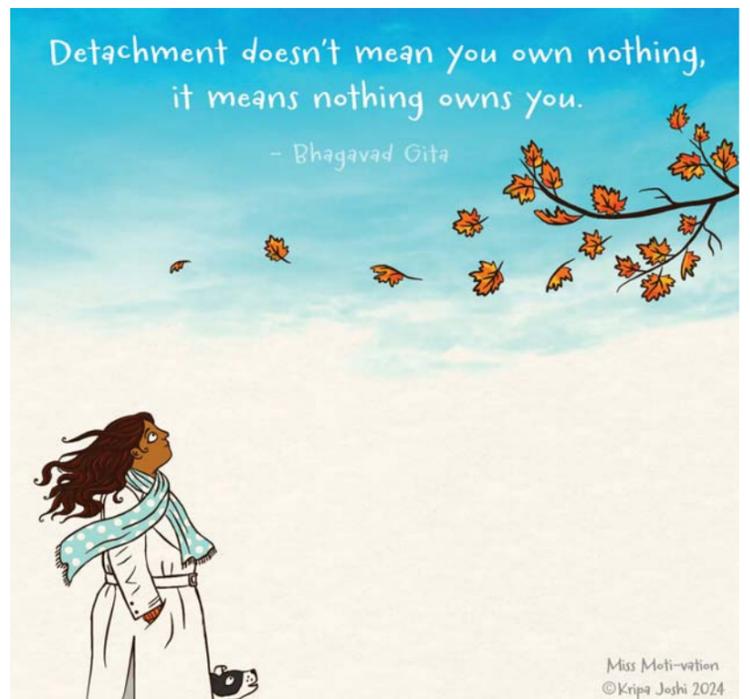
OUR PICK



The recent winner of the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival from India, *All We Imagine as Light*, explores the themes of longing, identity and resilience as it follows two Malayali nurses living together in Mumbai. Prabha, the righteous one, longs for her husband who is away while her free-spirited roommate Anu explores a forbidden relationship with a Muslim man. Stars Kani Kusuruti, Divya Prabha, Chhaya Kadam and Hridhu Haroon.

MISS MOTI-VATION

KRIPA JOSHI



सामाजिक सञ्जाल प्रयोगमा सचेतता अपनाऔं

- सामाजिक सञ्जालमा अपरिचित व्यक्तिको साथी बन्ने अनुरोधलाई विश्वस्त भएर मात्र प्रतिक्रिया जनाऔं ।
- अपरिचित व्यक्तिलाई जथाभावी साथी बन्न अनुरोध नपठाऔं ।
- सामाजिक सञ्जाल तथा अन्य विद्युतीय माध्यमबाट चिठ्ठा पुरस्कार जस्ता आर्थिक प्रलोभनका प्रस्तावको भरमा नपरौं ।
- आफूले प्रवाह गरेका सन्देश वा सूचनाबाट समाजमा पर्नसक्ने नकारात्मक प्रभावको ख्याल गरौं ।
- आफ्नो सन्देशले कुनै व्यक्ति वा अन्य कुनै समुदायको आत्मसम्मानमा चोट नपुऱ्याऔं ।



नेपाल सरकार
विज्ञापन बोर्ड

Tsherin Sherpa in body and spirit

Sherpa's latest exhibit explores Spirits undergoing a metamorphosis

■ Vishad Raj Onta

When Tsherin Sherpa was growing up, his grandmother told him tales about spirits that were attached to mountains and rivers.

That bond with the spiritual resides deep within Sherpa's psyche still, and informs his art to a large degree. After living and working painting thangkas professionally in the United States for 10 years, he realised that he wanted to use the skills he had developed after years in that rigid art form to paint in his own voice, and comment on personal, political, and social issues.

"I saw exhibitions adapting traditional art techniques, and thought I could do something similar with thangka," Sherpa told us in an interview at Takpa Gallery in Lazimpat, which is showing *Spirits in Transition*, his latest work. "I realized that I needed a secular form of art to communicate to a non-Buddhist, non-Nepali audience."

Sherpa returned to Nepal in 2018, and a lot had changed in the 20 years he had been away, and so had he. The changes in Nepal were both good and bad, but the artist decided to focus on the positive.

He was commissioned by the Visit Nepal 2020 Campaign to make 108 larger-than-life fiberglass sculptures of the yeti mascot to be displayed in public places.

But because of the pandemic, the Visit Nepal campaign was shelved. The yetis vanished, but not before stirring some controversy because some of them had religious motifs deemed to be irreverent.

This was an attempt to create a buzz around Nepal's tourism by having a mascot, just like Berlin's Buddy Bear, or the New York Cow Parade. But many Nepalis were not exactly ready for it.

These days, many of Sherpa's paintings and sculptures have the figures blowing pink bubble gum. Intrigued, we ask him about it.

"It's a small, modest object that can signify a lot," he explains. "In my art it tells about



CHHIRING DORJE GURUNG

the modern time, and also lends a certain playfulness to a rather serious art piece."

He adds, "Having said that, I love it when viewers relate to it in their own way. People see what they see: nobody's perception of the art is valid or invalid."

Although rooted in Nepali and Tibetan devotional art, Sherpa's work transcends cultures. It is as if the spirits travelled with the artist to the US, and returned after assimilating the new world.

"In our generation, the West had a grandeur about it. We had limited media and no internet, and thought West was best," he says. "What I found in the US was that many of my heroes, like George Lucas, were inspired by the East. I

realised that I had been ignoring my own identity."

Sherpa noticed that the new generation already regarded all cultures, heritage and identity as being valuable, and none of them were superior to any other.

"Look at any of my spirits," he says. "You can see their posture. There's a confidence, a self-pride in who they are."

For the artist, this exhibition also represents a transition as he explores what creative arena he wants to pursue next.

He says, "In Buddhism, when a person dies, there is a 49 day period called 'bardo' before the consciousness takes rebirth. This work is also a transition, like a layover on a long flight."



RICCARDO TOSETTO

All of the paintings at the *Spirits in Transition* exhibition have already been booked, by the same collector. Each painting takes Sherpa about a week. He starts with a small drawing of a figure, and undertakes a rigorous step-by-step process, influenced by his thangka background.

"Once I find a posture I like, I keep playing around," he says. "Painting the pattern on the spirit takes at least four layers. The first is almost translucent, and each layer adds vibrancy and makes the colours pop. This is the most time consuming part. I add the bubblegum last."

And what's with the fiery red hair? Sherpa remembers while learning the discipline of thangka, there were very strict, rigid rules. Every line had to be exactly how it should be. But with the bubble gum and red hair, he says he wants to explore an abstract, fluid aspect.

Sherpa is drawing from a technique he first did in Grade 3: dipping a thread in ink or watercolour, and dragging it across the page.

"It's what I paint last, because the red hair has to be done in one stroke. You can't make mistakes. There is no room for a correction." The artist uses 3D generated

models to decide on the postures, starting with a skeleton, and adding features to the shape. "I am very bad at drawing straight from imagination," he adds, laughing.

Despite modern elements in Sherpa's work, keen viewers can detect elements of thangka painting: rocks, water, curly clouds.

And all figures wear snake jewelry. In the context of a thangka painting, that represents conquering your anger. Tiger skins represent overcoming fear.

"After I came back to Nepal, I started combining my protector series with the spirit. The meaning is: whatever we are on the outside, we carry an appreciation for our identity on the inside," he says.

He just follows his instincts when painting and lets his imagination take over.

He says, "My style has emerged out of a collision of thangka, comics, and Bollywood. I read a lot of Marvel and DC when I was young, and hand-painted billboards of Bollywood movies at the movie theatre fascinated me." ■

Spirits in Transition

by Tsherin Sherpa
Takpa Gallery, Lazimpat

Until 29 December

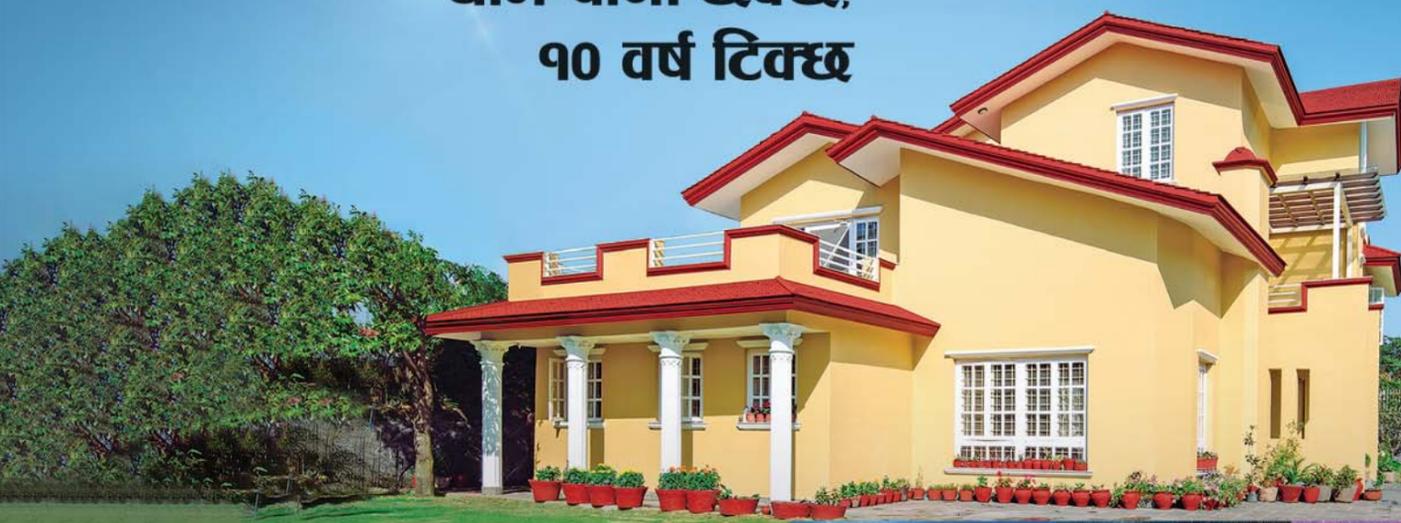
11am-7pm (Friday to Sunday)

11am-6pm (Tuesday to Thursday)

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१० वर्ष टिक्छ**







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मुसलचारे वर्षाबाट जोगाउँछ



१० वर्ष वारेन्टी



Migrating with the music of Nepal

Two migrant workers take along their flute and shehnai as they leave for work overseas



DIASPORA
DIARIES 54

This is the 54th edition of Diaspora Diaries, a regular column about migration in Nepali Times.

■ Kumar BK

I have enjoyed playing the flute since I was a young boy. I used to play it in the forest while tending to my cattle or collecting firewood near my village in Khotang. But I am a self-taught musician, I have never played professionally.

I know I am not as good as other professional flute players like those I often watch on YouTube. Reaching that skill level requires professional training. It took me a lot of practice to reach my present level. My learning was interrupted because of going overseas.

Growing up, my father was always abroad: first in Malaysia and then Qatar. I stayed with my maternal uncle, and childhood was a constant struggle. I had to help my grandparents with the family business, so I only got to attend school thrice a week. Even then, I



somehow passed Grade 12.

My father returned for good, and in 2014 it was my turn to go and work in Malaysia. I did not manage to save much because of household expenses. My brother has health problems, and a lot of my savings went for his treatment.

After three years in Malaysia, I went to Dubai in 2020. Because of a bad contract and Covid-19, things did not work out as I anticipated. During the lockdown I spent a few

months in my room without work or pay. Eventually I did get a good job, but after two years my contract was not renewed because of slow business.

I came home last year and am now headed to Qatar. Let's see how things go this time. When my father was away, he used to write home once every few months. We received news of his well-being with much relief. Times have changed now.

With my father sending money, we were able to afford household expenses. Before my father left, we lived in a bamboo shed with a small room, but now we have a house and land. He lifted us to a state where we no longer have to worry about affording food or a roof on our heads. Other hardships remain.

As a son of a migrant, there was always the expectation that he would bring us a mobile phone. It

is only later after working overseas that I realised it is not so easy. My overseas experience did not lead to much progress. We had many unanticipated expenses that took precedence: someone falling ill, someone falling down and needing hospital care. Random expenses left few savings.

I have now realised that it is difficult to make progress from migration alone if we do not have other ways to supplement our

Migration is development

A migrant worker from Nepal's Musahar community proves that good migration can be an equaliser of opportunities

His name is Jay. But we called him 'Artist'. Artist could draw from his imagination. He has had no formal training, and is from the Musahar community here in Mahottari district.



LABOUR MOBILITY
Upasana Khadka

"Ever since I was in Grade 5, I started dabbling with art and got better at it," he told us. "My friends used to request me to draw for them which encouraged me further."

He was part of an initiative aimed at making ethical recruitment accessible to the most marginalised communities who face significant barriers to migration.

Prior to departure in September 2024, he would stand in the middle of the orientation class, doodling unperturbed while two dozen pairs of eyes watched him. Perhaps he did not sense others watching him because his passion transported him to a different world. Or maybe he knew he was good at his craft, and the others were admiring his work.



Upon our request to fit the theme for the day he doodled an airport scene. But when left to his own devices, his natural inclination was to draw portraits of Hindu gods and goddesses (pictured, right). His wife told us he was the go-to person for people in his village when they wanted divine portraits on their walls, doors, vehicles and curtains.

Artist told us, "I have not made art on my wall yet because I don't have a good house. Once I build a good house with my overseas earnings, I will draw portraits of Shankar Bhagwan and Krishna on my wall."

With that, he left for Malaysia. And 15 months after his departure, we visited Artist's family in



Mahottari (pictured, left). His house is being renovated, and by the time he returns it will be ready for his portraits.

His mother beamed proudly, "I had told my son that as long as I lived, I would do everything to ensure his education was not interrupted. I made sure he passed his Grade 12 and learnt how to use a computer. Now he tells me not to do any work."

They have paid off almost all their piled up loans of Rs500,000. Listening to her made me wonder what other intervention would have helped a family like hers pay off their outstanding loans, renovate the house and invest in better education and nutrition within 15 months.

Other Musahar families say that equally vital benefits of fee-free migration in their case include being able to pay off outstanding loans, covering a niece's one-month hospitalisation bills, savings, meeting household expenses, purchasing medicines, and funding children's education. The way a large crowd had gathered to see workers off shows how migration is as much about the families as it is about them.

To be sure, migration is not a utopia, remittance is not a silver bullet. Factory work is not easy, and overtime hours are not always guaranteed. Living away from home has its downsides. Missed milestones such as childbirth can be painful. Not everyone passes job interviews for ethical migration drives, which are few to begin with. Not everyone stays for the duration of their contract.

Based on our conversations with the Musahar youth, had they not migrated they would likely be engaged in low-paying seasonal jobs in India, day labour in brick kilns, or working in others' agricultural fields,



WIND INSTRUMENTS: Kumar BK demonstrates his flute-playing skills in Kathmandu before he headed out to Qatar again (left). Deepak Darji (above) practices his shehnai while in Qatar so that he does not get rusty, and so he can perform at events for a living when he returns to Nepal.



overseas earnings. If households back home can cover basic expenses like food, overseas earnings can be channeled to more productive investment to uplift the family.

If remittance from one family member is the sole income source, then we migrate just to survive. Migrant workers like me have just one goal: to earn as much as possible in a limited timeframe. I am headed overseas again with the same thought.

Back in my village, I look for a quiet, shaded spot in a nearby forest to play my flute by myself while tending to livestock. I am often away now, but my neighbours in the village say that when they hear the sound of a flute from the forest, they know I am home.

I am taking my flute with me to Qatar. I will practice in my room in my free time. Playing it in my room will give me comfort.

■ Deepak Darji

I was very young when I lost my father. After that my mother also started falling ill.

Before that, our family was doing just fine financially. My childhood was not easy because of her poor health and my father's absence. School was not really a priority. I had to make sure my mother had the medicines keeping her alive.

I had household chores like cooking. My mother often reminded me to go to school, but how could I? The responsibilities were on my shoulders from a young age. At least now, she is getting a cash grant from the government that has eased things a bit.

Over the years, I have been doing odd jobs. Things are not easy and finding regular work is difficult in the village. As a musician, I am part of a पञ्चे बाजा troupe that plays at weddings and other rituals. If the event is far from where we live, we make about Rs4,000 and if close by, it can be up to Rs3,000.

The frequency of events varies. Some months we have four or five, while at other times it is less. Over a decade ago, I went to Dubai but did not get to work or earn as planned despite spending almost Rs200,000 in fees. I had to rely on fellow villagers in Dubai for help, but they told me this was not a sustainable way to live overseas.

They were right. I came home before the end of my contract, and was heavily in debt because I could not save enough to pay my recruitment loans. In fact, I had to borrow additional money to sustain myself while in Dubai.

After returning, I have migrated to various places in India including Shillong, Lucknow, Delhi and Mumbai to work in construction or hotels. I also did short term police duties during the election in Nepal, and the earnings helped while getting to serve the country.

I have tried to go overseas again but the first failed

experience left a deep scar in my psyche. It was difficult to trust people who said they would find me jobs. I also did not have the Rs300,000 fee they demanded for a job in the Gulf. For Malta they wanted up to Rs800,000.

I could not afford such high costs. Now, I have six children to take care of along with my wife and mother. I was finally able to go overseas because the job did not require any recruitment fees. After all, we migrate in the hope that something will work out.

Just about everyone is leaving from my village. The well-to-do ones go to Japan and Australia, and people like us to the Gulf. I am taking my shehnai oboe to Qatar to practice during breaks, or when I am bored.

Eventually, I will have to come home and resume performing at events, so I cannot afford to get rusty. I had previously taken it to India as well and fellow Nepalis would sometimes ask me to play after a hard day's work.

Our house in the village is known as the 'radio house' because the radio is always on. When my grandfather was alive, people would come over to listen to farming programs and radio dramas. He used to encourage fellow villagers to adopt the farming practices that the radio programs talked about. Even today, the radio plays throughout the day, and if it ever stops, people are startled by the silence and say: "कस्तो सुनसान भयो". 🇳🇵

Diaspora Diaries is a Nepali Times collaboration with Migration Lab providing a platform to share experiences of living, working, studying abroad.

or possibly be unemployed.

If they did beat the odds to migrate overseas via traditional models, the challenges are well known: everyone would have taken loans at exorbitant interest rates, which could take months or even years to repay. Any goals they had would have to be delayed. Even then, there would be risks of contract violations.

The ethical recruitment agency, International Manpower Recruitment, responsible for this drive had to retrieve passports of some of its candidates from fraudulent brokers who had been sitting on them for months.

Some workers told us they did not even have access to informal loans at high interest rates. Aside from zero upfront costs, it is transparency in responsible recruitment drives that is refreshing: workers get the job and benefits as per the contract. And while this may seem like a low bar, that is what workers really want but don't always get.

The way migration is being carried out now, it is a risky enterprise and almost like a lottery. Aspirants must navigate a second 'lottery' beyond the birthplace lottery, which drives many to seek opportunities unavailable in their place of origin: migration, with its uncertain, unpredictable and even arbitrary outcomes given malpractices and irresponsible actors.

We have interviewed cleaners and factory workers who went for identical jobs – some for free, while the majority paid between Rs150,000-350,000. To try to make sense of this randomness is a futile exercise. But any migration related intervention that can contribute in addressing the unknowns to make migration outcomes predictable would go a long way for workers and their families who are often entangled in the haphazard mess it often is.

On International Migrants Day 18 December, we should reflect

on how our public narrative around migration should separate fraudulent migration practices from the notion that migration itself is inherently a problem. Good migration can be powerful, and must be made accessible to the poorest, most marginalised.

Schemes to connect someone like Artist with the Japanese Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) or Korean Employment Permit System (EPS) programs that have higher barriers of access like language testing requirements, would make the rewards of migrating even higher than what he is making in Malaysia.

It will be like how Musahar youth are finding migration to Malaysia significantly more rewarding than their previous gigs in India. After all, gains of migration are relative, and merits attention from bilateral aid agencies of important host countries for Nepali like JICA and KOICA which invest in anti-poverty programs in Nepal. Migration is development.

Malaysia-based Artist, from Nepal's Musahar community, personifies the theme, 'talent is everywhere, opportunities are not' and that good migration can be an equaliser of opportunities.

Sometimes, all people need is a platform, a nudge, and an opportunity. Good labour migration can be one such option, alongside domestic priorities like social protection and job creation. Artist will soon return to his renovated house ready for him to draw portraits of gods and goddesses.

And soon, he will be able to start the painting business for signboards and vehicle art that he said he has always dreamed of but could not pursue due to a lack of capital. 🇳🇵

Upasana Khadka heads Migration Lab, a social enterprise aimed at making migration outcomes better for workers and their families. Labour Mobility is her fortnightly column in Nepali Times.

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