

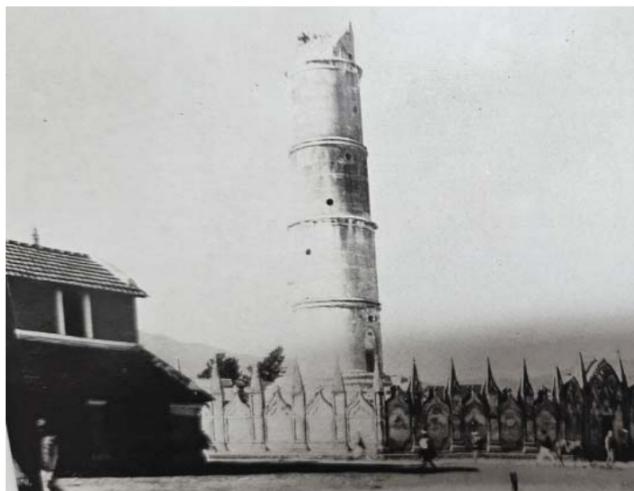


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ISSUER RATING BY ICRA [NEPAL]

► Nepal's safest bank. Five times in a row. ◀



KATHMANDU, 15 JANUARY 1934: Ruins of the Ghanta Ghar and Dharara towers, and the gate of Singha Darbar after the Great Earthquake 91 years ago that killed 10,000 people in Kathmandu Valley. Tents at Tundikhel housed survivors as aftershocks rocked the country for days.

6.8, 7.8, 8.3, 8.9 ...



KEDAR MANI DIXIT ARCHIVES

■ Sonia Awale

The new year 2025 started literally with a bang. The 7.1M jolt in Xigatse on Tuesday swayed buildings in Kathmandu 400km away, and coincided with the approaching 91st anniversary of the 1934 earthquake.

The National Earthquake Safety Day on 15 January marks the 1934 8.3M disaster that killed 10,000 people in Kathmandu, leaving many collapsed buildings. Thousands took shelter in tents in Tundikhel amidst aftershocks.

This year is also the 10th anniversary of the 2015 7.8M Gorkha Earthquake that killed 9,000 people. These are all warnings about the 'seismic gap' in western Nepal which has not seen a major quake for more than 500 years.

That one is overdue, and the country is woefully unprepared for it. Despite the distance, Kathmandu and other urban centres will be hit.

"It will be catastrophic and yet there is no preparedness among the public or policymakers despite increased awareness," warns Surya Narayan Shrestha of the National

Society for Earthquake Technology (NSET Nepal) which has been retrofitting public buildings.

"The warning of the 2015 earthquake was not heeded, it has not meant safer houses or enforcing building codes," Shrestha adds.

There have been a series of smaller earthquakes in Jajarkot and Doti in the past year, and it is an indication of the lack of preparedness that even moderate quakes like those killed so many.

The National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Authority (NDRRMA) in its Emergency Preparedness and Response Assessment quantified earthquake preparedness levels in 23 cities. The country nearly failed with just 39.8%, while Doti in western Nepal scored the lowest at 11%.

"This means the criteria for emergency preparedness and response system are weak," stated the 2022 assessment. It underlined a severe lack of search and rescue equipment for different hazards, dysfunctional emergency operations center network, and poorly constructed houses and public buildings.

Western Nepal has seen a swarm of smaller quakes in the past year, and this could either be releasing some of the tectonic tension, or a warning of a big one to come.

The National Earthquake Monitoring and Research Center recorded 10 earthquakes between 4.1-5.2M from 17 December to 3 January, most of them in western Nepal. "We need thousands of these minor tremors or hundreds of moderate 6M earthquakes a year to be able to release the stress that has accumulated beneath western Nepal," explains Anil Pokhrel, who used to head the NDRRMA.

Today, Nepal's seismic risk is magnified by climate breakdown. Rising temperature is melting glaciers, and turning them into lakes dammed by fragile moraines. A megaquake in the Himalaya increases the risk of multiple Glacial Lake Outburst Floods (GLOFs) downstream.

A few hours before two small glacial lakes burst destroying the village of Thame in August last year, a 4.5M earthquake had struck nearby on the Tibetan Plateau.

The Journal of Basic and Applied Geomorphology in February 2023 published a study highlighting how earthquakes exacerbate climate-driven cascade processes of the glacial lakes failure in the Himalaya.

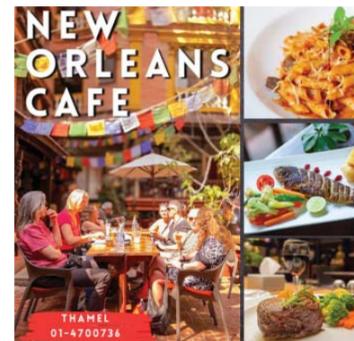
Of the 47 high-risk lakes on glaciers that threaten Nepal, 25 are in China and feed tributaries of the Arun and Bhote Kosi that flow into Nepal. Pokhrel says he initially feared that the Xigatse earthquake on Tuesday would cause glacial lakes in Tibet to burst.

He adds, "It is important to be prepared for cascading, complex disasters that combine the climate crisis with earthquakes, permafrost melting, GLOFs, landslides."

Pokhrel was in Thame in August, and says, "The two lakes that burst were the size of Olympic swimming

pools and yet managed to wipe out half the village. We have lakes 600 times bigger which are now at a higher risk of bursting in an earthquake due to climate breakdown." 🇳🇵

Nepal chops chopper flights to Everest
GUEST EDITORIAL
PAGE 2



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Nepal chops chopper flights to Everest

The Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN) likes to pick fights and has been at odds with Sagarmatha National Park after it, the Namche local government, and Lukla businesses banned commercial helicopter flights to Everest from 1 January.



GUEST EDITORIAL
Arjun Dhakal

The restriction has a lot to do with local political and business rivalries, and was hastily announced before the tourism and mountaineering industry could find alternatives. But there is no denying that the constant throb of choppers over the wilderness was starting to put visitors off.



From the new year, only rescue and emergency flights are allowed above Lukla. Flying large, noisy aircraft to Everest Base Camp and Kala Pathar just for sightseeing was getting out of hand. It does not just ruin the tranquility of the region below the world's highest mountain, but disturbs wildlife and deprives local communities who depend on portering.

CAAN challenged the national park's decision in a strongly-worded statement, citing its exclusive authority over aviation-related issues. It egged helicopter operators to keep flying.

A 2007 study by Alaska-based environmental consulting firm ABR Inc for the US Army found that polar bears fled up to 64km away when a helicopter flew 100m above ground level, abandoning cubs and returning to search for their young only after three days had passed.

There are no studies yet on the sky and endangered musk deer, snow leopards, red pandas, and bears, which inhabit the Sagarmatha National Park. The Khumbu is also the migratory route of bar-headed geese and other birds which have adapted their lungs to fly over the Himalaya.

It is therefore well within the purview of

national park authorities to control activities that contribute to biodiversity loss. The unrestricted flights have also reportedly contributed to wildlife poaching, especially for the musk deer prized for their pouches.

There is no military or park oversight of helicopters landing or overflying the region. Air traffic control also does not exist, and pilots are required to keep a visual lookout for other choppers.

Vibrations from helicopter rotors can also trigger avalanches on mountain slopes already unstable due to permafrost loss, warming and climate breakdown.

To be sure, Nepali helicopter pilots are world renowned for their daring rescues at high altitudes. But operators have become just as infamous for fake rescue operations in which they collude with guides and hospitals in the city to scam insurance companies.

There is debate about exactly how beneficial sightseeing 'heli-tourism' is to Nepal's mountain communities whose livelihood depends upon visitors to the Everest region. Trekkers can now cut short their stay and get choppers to ferry loads, impacting local businesses.

A survey showed that if an Airbus H123 helicopter flown by a Nepali pilot over Khumbu charges Rs145,000 per hour, only 19.5% of that

amount goes to the national economy, the rest pocketed by select travel agencies, helicopter operators and the manufacturers.

Trekking-based adventure tourism has more and multi-faceted benefits than heli-tourism in the Himalaya because it pumps money directly into the local economy.

All this is not to say that helicopter flights must be completely stopped. There should have been negotiations between those for and against helicopters, and a compromise could have been easily found to allow commercial chopper operators at least up to Syangboche.

Also, rescue flights are of vital importance to residents of mountain communities as well as mountaineers and trekkers. This comes to the key question of how to balance tourism income with the concern for the protection of natural and cultural heritage.

CAAN has an authority over the sky, but Sagarmatha National Park and local people have the final say over the protected natural habitat.

Arjun Dhakal is the Managing Director of Social Economic, Environmental Institute (SEEP) and is an expert on natural resource and climate change policy issues.

ONLINE PACKAGES



CYCLE OF LIFE

Over 1,200 women in Patan have learned to use bicycles in the last few years as part of an initiative by a local women's social media group called **बुद्धि बाली** (Women for Women) which became active during the second Covid-19 lockdown in 2021. Watch the video on our YouTube channel.



TAKING THE HIGH LINE

Highlining is an extreme adventure sport relatively new to Nepal. Perfect for adrenaline junkies, it is akin to slacklining, which is essentially walking on a tightrope between two anchor points. Watch the video of Roadies winner Saman Shrestha slacklining on our YouTube channel and subscribe for multimedia content.

RAILWAY

Will they ever build a railway in Nepal? I see a lack of commitment, clarity and effort to get things done ('Nepal train project struggles to stay on track', Urmila Gamwa Tharu, #1242). I wish I could travel from east to west on a train.

Bidur Acharya

■ The railway discussion has been going on for thirty-odd years. In any case, it is a brilliant plan. Maybe someday there could be a connection between Pokhara and Kathmandu.

Felix Rüttsche

■ As with so many projects in Nepal, the stalling of the railway project is probably because of a problem with backhanders.

Roy Francis

■ We have been talking about railways connecting us to the north and south for a long time. It is now time to finalise the projects and start working on them. This is a nicely balanced article to help readers understand the realities ('India-China rail race', Shristi Karki, #1242).

Bharat Koirala

■ These cross-border railway projects will happen, even if we must wait for a new generation of leadership.

Tony Jones

ADOPTEEES

Across the world, reconnecting with their roots has always been a difficult and emotionally-charged experience for children with little recollection of their past. What makes such cases particularly difficult in Nepal are social indifference and lack of accountability in the bureaucracy ('Searching for a homeland away from home', Hari Prasad Sacré and Chandra Kala Clemente-Martinez, #1242). Many such dead-end stories indicate that we are heading towards becoming a society with decreasing human empathy. Kudos to Nepali Times for sharing this story.

Pradéep Poudél

UNTHINKABLE DISASTERS

Not only thinking the unthinkable, this editorial speaks the unspeakable (Editorial, 'Thinking the unthinkable', Kunda Dixit, #1241). Amazing how oblivious we are to the disasters that we are creating and for which there is abundant evidence and that we are fully aware of.

Naresh Khanna

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



Homeland away from home

by Hari Prasad Sacré and Chandra Kala Clemente-Martinez
Nepali children who were adopted abroad are now adults and are coming back to Nepal in search of their roots, only to encounter a society that no longer recognises them, legally or socially. Visit nepalitimes.com for the full story.

Most reached and shared on Facebook



Elephant-friendly festivals

by Sanjeeta Sharma Pokharel
Most elephants used for safari tourism in Nepal have been kept in captivity for extended periods, rendering them unsuitable for rewilding. It would be more beneficial to prioritise activities that resonate with their natural behaviours. More on our website.

Most popular on X

Train project trid to stay on track

by Urmila Gamwa Tharu
Controversy about land acquisition and compensation as well as environmental impact has stalled the progress of Nepal's East-West Railway Project. Read the field report and join the discussion online.

Most commented

Seams sustainable

by Sangya Lamsal
Women entrepreneurs in Nepal are using sustainable fabrics with low social and environmental impact like nettle, bamboo, and hemp to make a fashion statement.

Most visited online page

QUOTES



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Most elephants used for safari tourism have been kept in captivity for extended periods, rendering them unsuitable for rewilding. It would be more beneficial to prioritise activities that resonate with the natural behaviours of elephants.



Ron Burns @rurns

An excellent, informed and important article..



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

In cricket, a team up in the league tables can be down in next tournament. Similarly, in society it may be wise for individuals that are 'up' to be pro-change rather than be the status quo. This is the only democratic way ahead, writes Chaitanya Mishra.



pigreen1 @pigreen1

Excellent use of cricket to make some valuable observations about society at large

1,000 WORDS



PM SECRETARIAT / RSS

JOB INTERVIEW: Prime Minister K P Oli and former President Bidya Devi Bhandari discuss recent political developments at the latter's residence in Budhanilkantha this week. The UML of which Oli is the Chair recently expelled leader Bhim Rawal and suspended Binda Pandey and Ushakiran Timsina while Bhandari is said to be seeking an active return to politics.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Power Surge

Twenty years ago, we wrote about how a malfunction in a turbine in a power plant led to power cuts across the country. The installed power then was only 610MW and the peak demand 560MW, which caused a shortfall of a mere 53W that led to loadshedding.

Today, Nepal's installed capacity is 3,157MW, peak demand is near 2,000MW, and electrification across the country is near 100%.

We now have surplus power, and wasting a lot of it by spilling. It got much worse before it got better: at one point in 2015-16 Nepal's endured power cuts up to 20 hours a day.

Excerpts of the report published on issue #2297 - 13 January 2005:

This week's two-hour power cuts caused by the malfunction in one of the three Kali Gandaki turbines proves just how precarious the electricity supply situation in Nepal has become. An internal assessment of the Nepal Electricity



Authority (NEA) forecasts power cuts from later this year up to 2008. The reason: surging demand and delays in new power plants like Middle Marsyangdi.

This week's power cuts are temporary and will be lifted once the turbine is fixed but all signs point to long and chronic load shedding in the coming years. This week, NEA has distributed power cuts so no one area suffers more than two hours a week.

"We cut power first along the border towns because we can switch them to the Indian grid," says NEA's load dispatch centre chief Shyam Sundar Shrestha.

But by this time next year power cuts will be nationwide and routine because shortfalls in the supply will be an unprecedented 53 megawatts. At the rate demand is rising, peak load will touch 560 megawatts this year, while the installed capacity is merely 610 megawatts.

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



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MRP: 67,990 **SAVE 13,598**
MOP: 54,392

Does Nepal really have too many tigers?

The answer is no. We must learn to manage wildlife better.

■ Sudiksha Tuladhar

When a dozen tiger range countries met in St Petersburg for a summit in 2010, they committed to doubling the population of their big cats in 12 years.

Nepal became the first country to not just achieve the target but nearly triple the figure, from 121 in 2010, to 355 in 2022. But some people in Nepal, including Prime Minister K P Oli, now think Nepal has been too successful and the number of wild tigers should be reduced.

This was the same prime minister who last year had urged people to help in the conservation of tigers, calling it “the pride of Nepal”. But last month, in his own pithy language, Oli said tigers had become as numerous as dogs, and they could not be allowed to breed at the cost of human lives.

“The tiger population should be proportionate to our forest area, why not gift the extra tigers to other countries as economic diplomacy?” Oli added at a debriefing on COP29 last month.

Human-wildlife conflict has indeed claimed lives, since tigers are venturing outside crowded parks to find prey. So, the prime minister’s proposal to promote wildlife diplomacy may not be such a bad idea since it would raise Nepal’s international profile and highlight the country’s conservation success story.

“Tigers can be sent to other countries through diplomacy, but the receiving countries must have the right capacity and environment,” says Ghana Gurung of World Wildlife Fund (WWF Nepal), adding that tigers to be sent must also be chosen carefully.

“The Prime Minister gave an emotionally charged statement, which probably came after he spoke to affected groups,” Gurung added.



WWF

“We tripled the tiger population, but if proper steps for management and cooperation are not taken, we can lose them all as easily.”

However, member countries of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) would have to follow strict protocols and paperwork to transport the tigers. Previously, Nepal has sent rhinos to China in two batches through the completion of complicated procedures.

Naturalist Sushila Mahatara at Bardia National Park does not agree that Nepal has too many tigers. She tells us: “Tiger numbers are not excessive according to the areas allocated for them. If there are too

many tigers, they fight and kill each other to keep their numbers in control.”

Bardia National Park has 125 adult tigers, and Chitwan National Park has 128. There were about 12 fatalities from tiger attacks in the past year, and some of the maneaters are darted and caged. However, many of them soon die in the confined space.

Dhan Bahadur Tamang, a tiger conservationist with over 50 years of experience explains exactly why tigers venture out when they do: “Those that enter human settlements are usually young tigers which have been separated from their mothers. Some are injured tigers who cannot attack traditional prey.”

The other reasons include encroachment as a result of human settlement and infrastructure projects in close proximity or within the protected areas with no wildlife-friendly components such as overpasses. The water shortage made worse by the climate crisis has added to the challenge.

Although an average of 3,000 people in Nepal are killed every year by venomous snakes, tiger kills get far more media attention. This has led to tigers being seen as a threat rather than an important apex species in an ecosystem.

The other threat to tigers is from commercialisation. Last year, then Minister for Forests and Environment Birendra Mahato of Janata Samajwadi Party (JSP)

proposed auctioning tigers to trophy hunters because Nepal had “too many tigers”. He calculated that the country could earn \$25 million through tiger hunting licenses which would underwrite the cost of maintaining national parks.

His statement created widespread outrage as well as mockery from conservationists and environmentalists, just as Prime Minister Oli’s statement last month did.

Tigers are also a major source of revenue for national parks, and a highlight for tourists. “The tigers being in the jungle means that there is the presence of a balanced environment,” says Mahatara at Bardia. “Any loss of biodiversity in the parks could lead to a decline in the influx of tourists.”

Eco-tourism and tiger safaris are a big source of income also for homestays and the local communities in Chitwan and Bardia.

Says Ghana Gurung at WWF: “Tourists visit national parks in anticipation of viewing tigers. At present the number is 355 and if tourists don’t spot a single tiger during their safari, then how will they see one if the numbers are reduced?”

Better management of wildlife is the key, and involves a mix of approaches including the idea of tiger diplomacy. But because many human-wildlife conflict cases take place when locals go to the forest to collect firewood or fodder, they should be aware of safety precautions.

“We have worked continuously through skill development and behaviour change campaigns to help the locals live and maintain a livelihood in the buffer zone and protected areas,” adds Gurung. “This has been one of our major goals, to uplift the living standards of the locals so that they can coexist with wildlife in the area.”

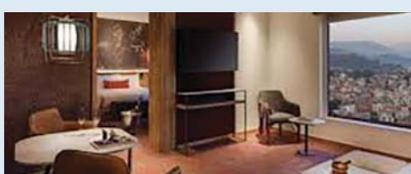


NMB BANK
एनएमबि बैंक

Samsung AI Laundry



Samsung has launched two models of a 12-kg washing machine that uses AI to learn the user’s laundry habits and minimise water and energy consumption. The dial-controlled model is priced at Rs114,990, and the LED-controlled version at Rs120,990. The machines can also be controlled via app.



Hyatt Place rebrands

The Hyatt Place has rebranded to Hyatt Centric Soalteamode. The hotel has a renovated lobby, 153 rooms, dining options, bars and lounges, a rooftop pool, and flexible event spaces with catering. Under Hyatt Hotels Corporation, Hyatt Centric is a brand of full-service ‘lifestyle’ hotels in prime locations in destination cities.

Training for farmers

Khukri Rum producer Nepal Distilleries held training programs for sugarcane farmers in Biratnagar and Sarlahi recently. The company aims to enhance the capacity of



the farmers by presenting techniques to improve the production and climate-resilience of their crop, hoping to increase income generation, food security and community in the long run.

18,000 trees

To mark its 18th anniversary, Global IME bank is planting 18,000 trees across Nepal in collaboration with local



organisations. CEO Surendra Raj Regmi planted saplings at the bank’s Anamnagar office to commence the initiative.

Ncell ISO Certified

Ncell has received the ISO 27001 and ISO 27701 certifications for complying with best practices for information security and protection of customer privacy. Ncell has implemented measures against cyber threats and unauthorised access, and put in place robust frameworks to protect personal data and minimise risks of breaches.



Tata Magic BS6

Official Tata Motors distributor Sipradi launched its Magic BS6 10-seater 30 horsepower van. It is said to be a high mileage, low-maintenance vehicle designed for urban and school transportation. Counting the previous BS2, 3, and 4 models, over 4,000 Tata Magic vans are on Nepal’s roads.

MLBL Donation

Mahalaxmi Bikas Bank has donated computers and printers to the Autism Learning Centre in Jhapa to support the education of the 24 children who study there.



Proton E.Mas7

Malaysian car brand Proton is launching the E.Mas7 series in Nepal. The model combines the electric motor, inverter, transmission and regenerative braking in one unit. It also has a ‘short blade’ battery that can charge from 30-80% in 20 minutes. The base model promises 345km range, and is estimated to be priced at Rs6 million.

Wood, Furniture, Decor

The Nepal Wood, Furniture, and Home Decor International Expo is happening at Bhrikuti Mandap 17-19 January with more than 100 domestic and international businesses taking part. There will be seminars, interactive workshops, and live demonstrations to introduce new technologies to the Nepal furniture market.

NIC Library

NIC Asia Bank has helped construct and launch a library at Birendra Adarsh Secondary School in Rapti Municipality in Chitwan. The Bank has a budget of Rs20 million for constructing libraries in various community schools across the country, help 11,000 students access to textbooks and other educational resources.

Nepal Bhasa on Google Translate

Saving an endangered indigenous language by using latest AI and LLM tools

■ Vishad Raj Onta

A young non-resident Newa person in Dallas emails a New York Times article to his grandfather in Nepal who cannot read English.

Grandad copies the English text, pastes it into Google Translate to read it in Newari.

This translation feature, available to the world's major languages, can now also be used by the indigenous people of Kathmandu Valley to translate their mother tongue into English and vice versa.

This involved three-and-a-half years of effort and will impact everyday life in the study and preservation of Newa culture. It also shows a path forward to Nepal's 123 other languages and dialects.

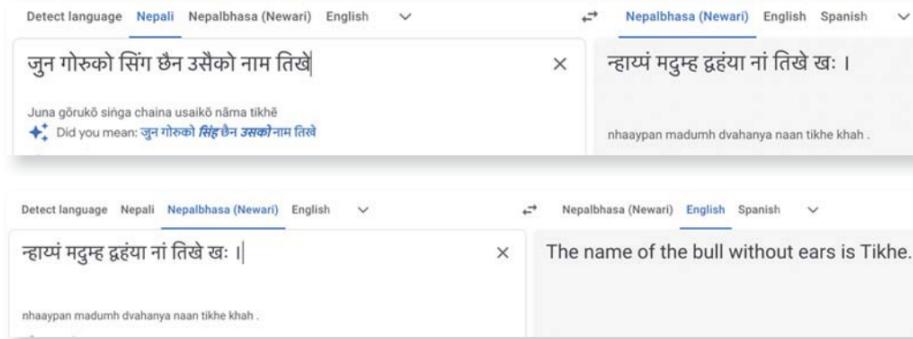
The World Newah Organisation (WNO) in 2011 invited Newa people from around the world to a convention in London. Software engineer and historian Sanyukta Shrestha was involved, and now leads WNO.

The top priority for discussion was how to conserve the language which was classified as 'definitely endangered' by UNESCO, with only 850,000 speakers left.

"The Newa people are diverse: there are different sects, religions. The language and the calendar are what is common," explains Shrestha. "The strategy was to unite the community behind an existing technology."

Ujjwal Rajbhandari, an engineer at Google who does not even speak the language, got involved. "I thought why not take advantage of a great tool that already exists," Rajbhandari, who is co-founder at Qubrid AI in Austin, Texas, told us on the phone.

Work started December 2020, but the prognosis was bleak. Engineers said that the project may take up to 10 years. Translate runs on a 'transformer', a machine learning neural network designed to take sequences as input, uses math to understand the



context, and outputs a probable output. It uses an 'attention' mechanism, which looks at the input text and tries to work out the relationships of each word to each other word.

The more data you feed this statistical monster, the better it gets. But that was the first problem. There was a dire lack of digital material, either in Newari, bilingual Newari-Nepali or Newari-English dictionaries.

"Tens of thousands of digital pages of content were needed, so in 2021 we met with the editors of Newa magazines and asked to scan and digitise their material," Shrestha recalls. "We hunted down writers, publishers, songwriters, invitation cards - anything that was written in Nepalbhasa."

Google gave WNO a sheet of 1,200 sentences from random contexts, to be translated. WNO formed a committee to complete this task, and by April 2021, Translate could at least identify the language.

Nepalbhasa can be written in 13 different scripts, the two most popular are the Ranjana and Devanagari. The team chose the latter because there is a lot more material in Nepalbhasa in Devanagari, and many more people who can type in it. "Devanagari is what has allowed any of this work at all,"

points out Shrestha. "Translation was the much harder problem to solve, converting output to another face is much easier."

Now the model needed a large volume of input from the community. "Every AI model is dependent on the volume of data, even that which is introduced later. User corrections are fed back, which makes the model more robust," says Rajbhandari.

This happened to be at peak pandemic-time. People knew how to video-chat and had time on their hands. WNO members met for one or two hours in the evening, on a Zoom call that they also broadcast on Facebook. People worked together translating. Which was very effective, because they could get instant input or feedback from others on the call. "It was cool to see was how this brought together elders who knew the language deeply, and the youngsters who have the tech skills," says Rajbhandari.

By February 2024 there were 500,000 contributions, and Google deemed that this volume of data was sufficient for the model to 'level up'. Translate added Nepalbhasa to its list of supported languages in June last year. The language had now been intergrated into a tool that can be used for free from anywhere with an internet connection. Accuracy was

unusually high, over 90%.

It opens up a whole different world on the internet, for those who only know Nepalbhasa, since any website integrated with Google can be used automatically and instantly converted to that language.

The translations are already being used in East Europe to translate legal documents, Newa songwriters, like Ujan Shakya, use it to convert English lyrics. And when Rajbhandari speaks to WNO over video, his English is instantly translated into Newari subtitles.

"Older people are happy that language will now not die. Younger ones can use it to self-learn the language, now they can't blame elders for not teaching them," says Shrestha.

Yet another use is the integration with large language models, like Chat GPT. LLMs encounter Nepalbhasa in their training data, so they can already generate rudimentary responses.

Says Shrestha, "You can ask questions about a Newa book in English, and the LLM gives you a coherent answer and even cite the page number." This makes the use of Newa books for research possible and a lot faster.

Leading this mammoth task led Shrestha to a better appreciation for his mother tongue. "I saw the richness of Newari. There are onomatopoeia and proverbs that only elders use, and it is these and the dialects that need to be saved," he says.

The next step is a text-to-speech, speech-to-text interface, which would open up its use by those who speak and understand Nepalbhasa but may not read, write or type it. Tourists to Nepal would also benefit.

Rajbhandari wants to work on similar projects for other endangered languages of Nepal, and the team has shown that it does not need government to do such work.

Says Rajbhandari: "We have learned many things that would make integration of future languages more efficient so we can solve problems in other projects." 🇳🇵




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Eyes wide open in Mustang

Kishor Kayastha presents an exposition of 20 years of wall-size prints

■ Kunda Dixit

As a struggling photographer in Bhaktapur 30 years ago, Kishor Kayastha could not even afford furniture. Buying a new lens was out of the question.

Later, as one of Nepal's top fashion and travel photographers, Kayastha toured the world, doing shoots in exotic places for famous brands. Money was not as much a limiting factor anymore.

Then came the accident. The shoot team was caught in a blizzard in Mustang in 2019, when Kayastha and the horse he was riding tumbled down a steep slope in whiteout conditions.

"My life flashed before me," he recalls, "I was filled with regret for all the work I had not yet done. I suddenly realised all the money in the world cannot buy you life."

Miraculously, Kayastha survived and the near-death experience was an epiphany that changed the trajectory of his life. Since then, his photographs have a more dreamlike tone, the visuals not just documenting an observed reality, but transcending it.

Which is why a visit to Kishor Kayastha's ongoing exhibition of 30 ultra-wide panoramas at Nepal Art Council, *MUSTANG: A Two-Decade Odyssey*, feels like a pilgrimage to Mustang. It is the next best thing to being there oneself.

The high resolution prints are vast, some of them 6m wide, and do justice to Mustang's big sky and the wrinkled, ochre terrain of this arid trans-Himalayan district.

Kayastha has been going to Mustang at least four times a year for the past two decades, and the exhibition spans the time in which much has changed with the arrival

of the highway, outmigration and climate breakdown. But a lot remains the same.

"I first went in 2004 mainly because I could not go to Tibet," Kayastha relates. "And I found that there is a Tibet in Nepal, too. Mustang has always been a refuge, a beyul, to escape the materialistic world of Kathmandu."

Kayastha, now 47, was born into photography. His parents owned a studio in Bhaktapur, and as a boy he helped his mother in the darkroom, dipping black and white prints into developers and fixers under a dim red light.

Today, everyone with a mobile device is taking pictures, but Kayastha believes photography is more relevant than ever: "Selfies have become selfish. Just like they said that the invention of the camera would make paintings obsolete, photography is not going away either."





Anyone who has travelled north of Kagbeni, especially in the old days before Sumo jeeps replaced mule trains, will appreciate the tranquility of this windswept plateau where time stood still.

"The horizon is so wide, the sky so immense, the land so unending that Mustang makes you feel small in the scheme of things. It brings you down to size, both physically and spiritually," Kayastha says.

The extra-wide prints were so big, even the Nepal Art Council's walls could not accommodate all of them, so Kayastha had to scale some of the photographs down. The sheer size of the images evoke in visitors the finiteness of human existence in time and space.

Kayastha speaks to us as he unrolls a stitched panorama of Kagbeni he took in 2004. That image and another one taken from the same spot in 2024 serve as bookends

at the exhibition, revealing through repeat photography the passage of time. Kagbeni's monastery complex is now much bigger, there are new concrete buildings, and scars from the great flood last year that tore through town.

Yet, beyond and above the Kali Gandaki's fossil-strewn banks, the russet brown folds in the rock strata remind us that in geological timescale, human beings have been here for less than a millisecond of a camera's shutter speed.

Kishor Kayastha's exhibition forces us to think that Mustang's fierce afternoon winds will keep sculpting its dyed organ pipe cliffs long after we are not here to see them. 🇳🇵

MUSTANG: A Two Decade Odyssey
by Kishor Kayastha
Nepal Art Council
Till 14 January, 11AM-4PM



EVENTS

**Unity Day at Chandragiri**

Be part of the garland ceremony on National Unity Day at the top station in Chandragiri Hills. Offers include 25% off cable car tickets for students and elderly aged 60–79, free rides for guests dressed as Prithvi Narayan Shah and those born on Prithvi Jayanti, and more. Call to inquire about additional offers. 11 January, Chandragiri, 9802069900

Khichara Mahotsav

Don't miss out on celebrations of the Tharu New Year 2648, filled with a line-up of performances by artists including Sabin Rai and The Pharaoh, Purna Rai and DajuBhai, as well as Rockheads Nepal. Also happening: Tharu food stalls and cultural performances. 13-20 January, Gaucharan, Chitwan

**Street Defence Tournament**

The Street Defence Tournament—which will celebrate the art of self-defence in honour of Bruce Lee, will be the first martial arts showdown of its kind in Nepal. 11-12 January, 11am onwards, Tickets: Rs.1,000, Table Tennis Covered Hall, Lainchaur

Wood Expo 2025

See the latest advancements in wood furniture and interior design sectors, and connect with industry leaders in the region at the Nepal Wood International Expo 2025. 17-19 January, 10am onwards, Bhrikutimandap

**Open Mic Night**

Enjoy music, storytelling, and stand-up comedy at Open Mic Night, every Friday at Eco Home Restro & Bar. 10 January, 6pm onwards, Eco Home Restro & Bar, Kathmandu

DINING

**Haopin Hotpot**

Warm yourself this winter with Haopin's flavourful hotpot, best served with a side of good company. Narayanchaur, 9808064999 / Sanepa, 9708293123

MUSIC

Culture in Sync

Get a glimpse into the musical journey of maestro Hari Maharjan, who is known globally for his unique fusion style. 17 January, 7pm onwards, Tickets: Rs800++, LOD, Thamel

**Kuma Sagar & co.**

Brace yourselves for a magical performance by Kuma Sagar and his band, happening live for the first time in Hetauda this Friday. 10 January, 4pm onwards, Tickets: Rs500, Bhutanadevi School Ground, Hetauda

Sabin Rai & The Pharaoh

Sabin Rai & The Pharaoh are set to play an electrifying gig at Beach Mania in Sindhupalchok. Stay tuned. 17 January, Sukute, Sindhupalchok

**Small Room Rave**

Get out your dancing shoes and join the Small Room Rave featuring Aaron and Leo at Musicology. Entry is free. 15 January, 8pm onwards, Cafe Musicology, Lalitpur

**Soulful Wednesdays**

Unwind with the finest live music at MeSoHot, where performances from Raaz & Siwani await the audience next week. 15 January, 7pm onwards, MeSoHot, Sanepa

**Reggae Sundowner**

Groove to some reggae while enjoying the brand new signature cocktail menu at Sam's One Tree, curated by Pauline's. 11 January, 2-6pm, Sam's One Tree Cafe, International Club, Sanepa (01) 5437918

Casa Mexicana

At Casa Mexicana, get a taste of Mexico with an assortment of authentic tacos, quesadillas, tres leches cakes and more. Bakhundol, 9803624067

GETAWAY

**Bodhi Suites**

Head to Bodhi Suites for a winter retreat and unwind at the spa, sauna, or jacuzzi. Lakeside, Pokhara, 97761457657

Mystic Mountain

Situated amid the forest of Nagarkot, Mystic Mountain offers world-class comfort. Nagarkot (01) 5913205

**Sapana Village Lodge**

At Sapana Village Lodge, marvel at the beauty of the lush national park and witness elephants lumbering through the forests in the heart of Sauraha. Chitwan, 9855080308

**Mirabel Resort**

Perfect for families, Mirabel offers comfort, continental cuisines and breathtaking views of Kathmandu Valley. Dhulikhel (01) 490975

Karma Hotel

Located in the heart of the vibrant Thamel, Karma Hotel—with its brightly decorated room and artwork—is inspired by an amalgamation of Tibetan and Nepali culture. Thamel (01) 4517897

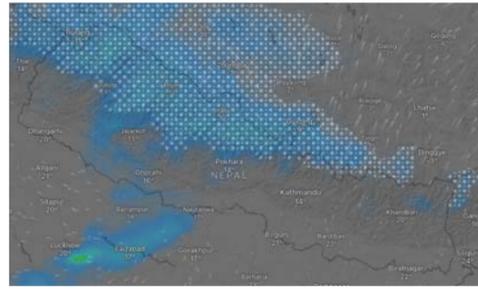
Baker's Den

Is a loved one's birthday coming up? Order from a selection of cakes at Baker's Den. Also get freshly baked doughnuts, muffins, or bread. Naxal (01) 4416560

**The Yellow House**

Try Festive Features at Yellow House: a three course meal with Carrot & Ginger Soup, Linguine and Strawberry Tart, alongside a glass of their red or white House Wine. Till 31 January, Price: Rs1,700, Sanepa (01) 5453869

WEEKEND WEATHER

**Clouds, No Rain**

Another westerly front swept across Nepal this week, dumping all its moisture in the west and centre. Kathmandu Valley and the east are still waiting for the winter monsoon. This pattern will be repeated over the weekend with snow and rain in western and central Nepal, with a slim chance of a light shower in Kathmandu. Forecast image from Windy for Sunday at noon (left).

OUR PICK



The Last Dance is a 10-part documentary of Michael Jordan's career, told from the point of view of the basketball icon regarded the Greatest Of All Time of the sport. The series gets its name from the last of the Chicago Bulls' six NBA championships with Jordan, when there was much speculation about whether the team could stick together for one last title run. Individual episodes flashback to other aspects of Jordan's career, including his teammates, coaches, rivalries, brand deals, the '92 Olympic 'Dream Team', and his broad impact on 90's sports and culture. Jordan presents himself as an athlete focused on his sport and on winning, and shows the many ways he found to motivate himself towards singular skill and success.

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

Rice fields to concrete terraces

Bi-national art project on what has been lost of the Kathmandu Valley civilisation

Four Nepali and four Dutch artists featured in a project (pictured, right) to draw attention to what has been lost as Kathmandu Valley is transformed from an integrated rural-urban society to a metropolis of 4 million people.

The transition has happened just in the last 30 years with the growth accelerating after the start of the 10-year conflict in 1996. What was once an emerald valley has turned into a concrete jungle.

The NEDNEP3 2024/2026 art project of the eight artists will unfold in two phases-- with a recent show that ended on 5 January in the Netherlands, and during the Kathmandu Triennale in February 2026. The exhibition in the Netherlands was in the northern Dutch city of Haarlem at De Vishal, a popular hub of contemporary art.

The project is curated by Dutch artists Erna Anema and Renate Schwarz, who have been frequent visitors to Nepal and they have selected the works of four Nepali artists (Sujan Dangol, Kripa Tuladhar, Sunita Maharjan and Sagar Chhetri) along with artists Maartje Smits and Liesbet Bussche and themselves from The Netherlands.

Anema and Schwarz spent five weeks with Dil Bahadur Prajapati in Thimi, making their ceramic sculptures for this project and meeting Nepali artists.

Sujan Dangol was in the Netherlands for the grand opening of the exhibition at De Vishal in Haarlem and to conduct workshops there and at the renowned Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam.

Erna Anema's oil on canvas and clay installation is titled *Moraines to Clay*. She says, "I want to take you on a journey from the pressed clay circles of the Kathmandu Valley supported by sculptures representing the moraines to the towering ice giants of the Himalayas."

Liesbet Bussche's *Building Rings* are grinded and sanded out of clay blocks, a light building material often used in quick expanding areas of the city. The installation of the carved rings is combined with brick dust and explores urban materiality from a maker's perspective. Liesbet's first project with clay was realised with



Pukar Risal in 2008 in the streets of Kathmandu during NEDNEP 1.

Kripa Tuladhar's *Remembrance of Shadows* is made of traditional lokta paper and thread and evokes the Asan neighbourhood, which becomes a canvas of its people, marked by those who have passed through it. "Layers of movement from the footsteps of our ancestors, crumbling bricks and windows, and the future pushing its way against the old reshaping it," she adds, "cutting out these traces in paper, layering them, like the city's layers of history, memories of the city are encapsulated in fleeting shadows."

Renate Schwarz has sculptures titled *Jars of Then and Now* (pictured, left) with clay and plastic taps that draw attention to water. The abundance of it was in the lake that was once Kathmandu Valley, torrential rain, the glacial streams in the mountains. Water irrigated the Valley's soil, making it fertile. Says Schwarz: "The transformation of the Kathmandu Valley has struck me ever since my first visit in 1984. What a mega tsunami of change has come over this valley ... with my

sculptures I express the delicate balance between water, clay and craftsmanship."

Nepali photographer Sagar Chhetri's *Brutality of Geometry* explores the definition of land and how earth, soil, vegetation all become monetised commodities. The photographs depict the greed that drives the ecocide of hillsides by real estate 'plotting' on the Valley's rim. Chhetri explains: "As an artist, I wish to respond to and investigate this geometry of brutality on the land in depth."

Sujan Dangol's piece, *Mandala*, is a mixed media tribute to the original fertility of Kathmandu Valley with a collection of 54 types of grain, beans, and spices that used to grow here. He also collected bamboo, copper, glass, plastic, and steel utensils to represent the shift from an agricultural era to an industrial one. "The place which we call home, the Earth, is not only ours. Coexistence with animals, birds, plants, insects, water, and soil is essential for our well-being."

Sunita Maharjan's *Curtain of Change* is stencil print on handmade cotton and depicts her hometown of Kirtipur, where the ancestral lands of her forebears are now occupied by Tribhuvan University. "The continuous influx of students has altered the fabric of Kirtipur figuratively and literally," Maharjan says. "In *Curtain of Change* I document and comment on the evolving identity of my hometown, where urbanisation, industrialisation, and educational migration intersect, leaving both visible and invisible marks."

In *Wild Bees* in the Netherlands Maartje Smits uses letterpress prints on paper to show the sudden disappearance of honeybees in Europe, and how the artist decided to become a beekeeper, hoping it would help.

But honeybees are competing for survival with wild bee species. "Just as with the Kathmandu Valley, the Dutch landscape has been hollowed out and built up. Food and nesting places for flying pollinators are scarce, trying to save one species can mean the demise of another," she says. 🇳🇵

NEDNEP3 2024/2026

From *Burning Rice Fields to Urban Growth* Kathmandu Triennale in Nepal (February 2026)

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**घाम-पानी छेक्छ,
१० वर्ष टिक्छ**

चर्को घामबाट बचाउँछ

मुसलघारे वर्षाबाट जोगाउँछ

१० वर्ष वारेन्टी

The tale of four Nepalis in



"Here, all you have is hard work. You can eat only if you work hard."



**DIASPORA
DIARIES 56**

This is the 56th edition of **Diaspora Diaries**, a regular column about migration in **Nepali Times**.

Heera Tirwa

I was just 13 when I married an India-born Nepali from Achham. An arranged marriage, I first saw my husband only at the wedding ceremony. I moved to India from Achham when I was so young that I associate my childhood with Mumbai instead of Nepal.

My father, also a watchman in Maharashtra, did not visit us when my children were born despite living just a 10-hour

drive away. I had to accept the fact that my mother who was in Nepal would not visit me, but my father's absence hurt.

I wrote a letter reminding him that his responsibility as a father does not end simply because he married me off. Navigating new responsibilities at such a tender age far away from home, I needed his attention. My father then visited us and lifted my spirits.

Years have passed, filled with both happy and sad moments. Access to education, health, jobs and road networks is better here. But the cost of living is high and making ends meet is difficult, especially in single-income households. That is why I also work full time at a company that makes nuts and bolts. We are so invested in our children's education and future that we overlook all the hurdles in life.

In the old days, someone's departure from the village to Mumbai would draw a crowd, with people asking them to deliver letters and gifts to their loved ones. This flow of people between our villages and Mumbai ensured we were up to date with news including of childbirths, marriages and deaths on either side, despite the absence of phones and internet.

I still cannot believe it took me 13 years to make my first trip back to Achham from Mumbai. It was a reunion filled with tears and embraces, especially with my mother, much like my departure years ago.



Chandra Singh

I grew up in Doti. My mother passed away when I was around four years old, so my five siblings and I pretty much raised ourselves. Even at that age, I took care of my younger siblings.

I do not know exactly when I came to India from Doti, it must have been over 40 years ago. But I vividly remember weeping non-stop till I reached Dhangadi en route to Mumbai with my new family. The next time I visited

Free-visa-free-ticket policy in limbo

Fix it if it is not working.

2025 marks ten years since the free-visa-free-ticket policy was introduced that caps worker-paid fees at Rs10,000 if employers do not cover it. But there is not much to celebrate since workers continue to pay excessive recruitment fees.



LABOUR MOBILITY
Upasana Khadka

Many reports have covered the implementation failure of this policy: workers pay, they receive receipts stating Rs10,000 even when they have paid significantly higher, and recruiters pay taxes on just this amount as the rest is, pick your label: black money, bribe, commission. The legally stipulated amount sometimes might not even cover the 'cut' often offered to those in power as part of the 'setting' to facilitate migration. This is all an open secret.

The recruiters association, NAFEA, demands that the legally allowed service fees of Rs10,000 under the free-visa-free-ticket scheme be revised to a month's wage. In the current climate, this is a reasonable demand. The Philippines has a cap of one month, while India has set the limit of INR20,000, or 45 days' worth of wages. In the case of outgoing workers from Nepal to Korea under the Employment Permit Scheme (EPS), the fees are over \$1,000 -- but all workers are charged the same, there is a transparent breakdown of costs that apply equally to all, and workers are able to recoup this cost within a month.

All these features of transparency and predictability are missing for workers headed to the Gulf and Malaysia where the free-visa-free-ticket policy applies, but is rarely implemented. Workers are arbitrarily charged as per the recruiter's or individual broker's demand. There is no certainty when they can recoup costs, usually it takes many months. In this context, the debate around Rs10,000 versus 1 month in service fees is moot, since workers are paying significantly higher.

The free-visa-free-ticket scheme also does not allow for other policy alternatives. Even though workers are paying heavily by borrowing informally, policies to lower costs such as via no-collateral interest rate loan schemes are not prioritised. If a worker is paying the recruiter a reasonable fee as a month's salary with transparent and favorable job terms, they would still be treating it as a shady under-the-table deal.

The Nepal government can do a lot more to clamp down on fraudulent recruiters, empower migrant workers with correct information and have proper monitoring systems to bring costs down, because there is no limit to how much workers are being charged currently.

But we have to consider the transnational drivers of recruitment costs in the international labor market and the limitations of a unilateral policy like the free-visa-free-ticket scheme.

The free-visa-free-ticket policy is based on the employer-pays model. The name itself is a giveaway: the employer pays. But in



the current reality, the employer does not always pay. In some cases, the employer may cover the costs, but HR representatives and other intermediaries might still engage in shady dealings.

Of course, this is not meant to give recruiters a pass. Through unhealthy competition to secure contracts, recruiters have allowed employers or their representatives

to avoid paying for various or all aspects of the recruitment fees or costs. Even when recruiters do receive payment from the employer, they often charge workers as well, profiting from both sides simply because they can. Individual informal brokers, too, continue to prey on workers.

But in this mess, why do some workers still migrate at zero cost then? Surely the free-visa-free-ticket policy is working in some instances? Not really. It has more to do with policies and actors outside our borders.

For example, many recent recruitment drives offering zero-cost placements have originated in Malaysia. This is not a result of the free-visa-free-ticket policy, but rather a consequence of some Malaysia-based companies

becoming stricter with their recruitment practices and due diligence after facing export bans from countries like the US.

In fact, workers ethically deployed in many recruitment drives for Malaysia have benefited more than what the free-visa, free-ticket policy typically requires. Not only did they avoid paying fees, but their domestic transportation and

lodging costs were also covered.

When Malaysia closed its doors to foreign workers indefinitely last year, ethical recruitment from Nepal has been adversely impacted. Aakarshan International that sent 2,716 workers last fiscal year has not deployed a single worker since June 2024 when Malaysia closed doors.

Another company, International Manpower Recruitment that used to send over 5,000 workers ethically in 2023 has seen its numbers drop this year to less than 100. While overreliance on a single destination country has its risks, responsible recruiters face additional challenges in diversifying, as the number of ethical drives is limited in the international market.

The good news is that ethical recruitment is still possible, and is being done when there is the will from all actors involved. There is scope for due diligence laws in global supply chains that hold parent companies liable for activities of subcontractors and suppliers, regardless of where they operate. These include the EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive, UK Modern Slavery Act and Australian Modern Slavery Act.

There is potential for better information sharing and matchmaking between responsible actors, allowing a responsible employer overseas to easily identify a trustworthy recruiter in our region, and vice versa. Thousands of workers, including from marginalised communities have migrated without being debt-trapped.

The worrying news is that a lot more work is needed to make

Mumbai



Doti was years later, accompanied by my three children.

My father-in-law worked as a watchman in Mumbai. My husband, who is no more, was born here and also worked as a watchman. Many Nepalis like my father-in-law who had permanent jobs moved their families to India.

Housework including taking care of my grandchildren

and elderly mother-in-law keeps me busy, but I continue to work as a part-time household help for an Indian family. I mop and wash dishes which provides me some spare cash to supplement my sons' earnings.

Back in our village in Nepal, one can rely on agriculture and livestock to sustain ourselves. There are social networks to lean on during difficult times. One can borrow or even beg. You won't go hungry. Someone or the other will check on you. Here in the city, all you have is your hard work to rely on. You can eat only if you work hard.



Kamala Tirwa

I was a bright student growing up in Mahendranagar. I had completed Grade 9, and also taught adult literacy classes to women in my village, so they knew how to sign or to read letters. I also spread awareness against HIV stigmatisation.

These engagements exposed me to a world beyond my four walls, expanding my knowledge as I interacted with diverse people, underwent training from organisations, and taught classes. It was also fulfilling as women showed up for the classes after finishing their household chores and participated intently.

To complete SLC was a big deal in our village, especially for a girl, and I was so close. But my parents decided to marry me off to an India-born Nepali at 16. I knew of him as he sometimes visited from Mumbai during his vacations and played football with the village boys.

My son, who is now in his

twenties, is still a baby in my eyes. I was significantly younger than him when I got married. Yet, I was expected to know how to manage a household and fulfill my responsibilities as a wife, daughter-in-law and mother. We also did not have access to tv or internet back then. Children these days are so knowledgeable. We were living in the dark age and did as we were told.

Even after all these years, a part of me regrets not completing my education despite being a good student. What was the point of being studious in my circumstances? I remind people to study hard because education is such a privilege. I am invested in my sons' education.

The elder one is now doing a bachelors in AI and data science. Just as my in-laws returned to Nepal after we settled down in Mumbai, we too are considering returning to Nepal after our children are settled.



Suresh Singh

I cannot believe it has been 34 years since I came to Mumbai. For most of us Nepalis, जन्मभूमि (land of birth) and कामभूमि (land of work) are two separate geographies. Like my father, I worked as a watchman. My grandfather, too, worked in Mumbai in a mill.

I am now the Security Head, the highest position at my company. The city provides opportunities for those willing to seize them. In my case, I should have used the time outside my 8-hour shifts to complete my education or take skills-based training so I could be competitive in the labor market. The realisation that education is important came late to many of us.

My wife was back in Achham, while I worked in Mumbai. She passed away when my son was just one-and-a-half years old. It was difficult to comprehend the news, and I rushed back. I forced authorities to let me on the flight from Tikapur. I was going to leave

anyhow, even if it meant having to stand on top of the plane.

Grief can make you act in strange ways. In my white clothes, shell-shocked and filled with raw emotions, I must have been quite the sight. They eventually provided me with a seat.

My mother raised my son until he reached five, after which I brought him to Mumbai. As a single parent, I don't think I was able to provide him the kind of guidance that is needed during children's formative years.

Work obligations to provide for him often took precedence. Thankfully, he grew up just fine.

He recently left his secure banking career to start his venture in digital advertising.

He does not have any memory of his mother. We don't have a single photo of her. 🇳🇵

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

responsible recruitment a less risky and sustainable business. The more rigid recruiters are about sticking to responsible practices, the more choked they are to obtain new business.

The appetite for ethical recruitment needs to be whetted in the international labour market, and this requires all stakeholders to step up. The role of employers in driving good practices is evident in how many recruiters operate in a hybrid model in Nepal depending on whether the employer hires under the employer pays model and conducts monitoring or not.

The Nepal government needs to use its leverage via bilateral agreements and discussions, multilateral platforms like the Abu Dhabi Dialogue and Colombo Process. Host country governments also need to take ownership of the role of employers in influencing worker-paid costs and ensure the employers are covering the costs associated with worker recruitment even if workers are paying recruiters outside their territory.

Efforts to attract responsible employers to Nepal need to be prioritised alongside strengthening our own labor mobility industry.

Surely, 10 years of consistent failure warrants a shake up? An honest evaluation of the policy is essential for all of us who champion migrant welfare.

This requires understanding the broader context in which the scheme operates (or fails to) beyond the evident lapses in the Nepal government's enforcement and monitoring and the recruiters' and individual agents' unperturbed preying on workers:

1. Employers do not always cover recruitment costs or conduct proper due diligence and monitoring of recruiters.
2. Host country governments are not doing enough to regulate companies hiring overseas workers even when their laws prohibit workers from getting charged.
3. Migrant-sending countries like Nepal, the Philippines, and India have varying regulations regarding recruitment costs.
4. Nepali youth are desperate for overseas jobs, often borrowing at prohibitively high informal interest rates.
5. Even attractive, low-cost job offers with high returns that do not meet the free-visa-free-ticket requirement by the letter are often handled as 'under the table' deals.
6. Responsible recruiters are struggling to secure job orders that align with the employer-pays model.
7. Recruitment costs are not the only determinant of migration outcomes and should be considered in the context of other terms of employment including both pecuniary and non-pecuniary benefits.

Only when all these aspects are considered can a fair evaluation of the implementation failures of the unilateral, populist free-visa-free-ticket policy be possible. 🇳🇵

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

For More Information

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