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PINKI SRIS RANA

## Dirty, Dangerous, Difficult ... and Dehydrating

■ Pinki Sris Rana in Dhanusa

South of Janakpur near the Indian border is the village of Phulgama. Out of its population of 4,500, nearly every household here has at least one son who is a migrant worker abroad.

Some 40% of Nepali men between the ages of 20-35 are migrant workers abroad, mainly in India, the Gulf states or Malaysia. In the last nine months alone, 741,297 people travelled overseas: mostly to the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Malaysia and Kuwait. This does not include those who left on student visas, and there are no records of how many went to India.

Most end up working in '3D jobs' — dirty, dangerous and difficult. There is also a fourth D: dehydrating work.

Risky outdoor as manual workers, excessive heat of the desert in the Gulf or humidity of the tropical jungles of Malaysia, poor diet, dehydration and unhealthy lifestyles all contribute to a higher risk of kidney failure among Nepali migrant workers. Dhanusha district has one of the highest proportions of workers migrating for work to India and abroad.

Nephrologists call kidney disease 'the silent killer' because patients do not show symptoms until it is too late, and migrant workers are especially susceptible to Chronic Kidney Disease (CKD) or End-Stage Renal Disease (ESRD).

Increasing demand for cheap labour and minimum pre-departure health awareness training makes migration more risky than it should be. From a survey of hospitals and dialysis centres in Dhanusha and Kathmandu, the risk of kidney failure appears higher among male migrant workers than in Nepali men of the same age group.

"This disease is idiopathic, meaning it is not caused by one specific factor," explains Rishi Kafle of the National Kidney Center Nepal. "But after screening migrant workers going to the Gulf and developing End-Stage Renal Disease in 3-4 years, we can say that migration increases the likelihood of kidney failure."

Kafle adds: "Because of the need to maximise earnings, working in extreme heat for long hours dehydrates them. And many opt for Coca-Cola and meat instead of healthier water and vegetables."

While the risk of kidney failure is higher in returnee migrant

workers in Nepal, the disease is on the rise globally due to lifestyle changes, diabetes or undiagnosed hypertension.

Currently, there are 28,266 kidney patients enrolled in the Department of Health Services for free treatment under the government's Bipanna Nagarik Kosh, of which 17,044 are male and 11,222 female. Just in the past year, 9,176 more patients were added to the fund. Most hospitalised kidney patients are from age 15-65.

In a healthy person, toxins and waste in the blood are filtered by the kidneys. But patients with kidney failure need to circulate their blood regularly through a haemodialysis machine. The whole process takes about 3-4 hours and causes blood vessels in the arms to swell over time.

Nearly 2 million Nepalis suffer from chronic kidney disease (CKD), which is about 8% of the population. The rise in diabetes and hypertension is contributing to an increase in the disease. Everyone from migrant workers to many of Nepal's top politicians suffer from kidney

failure. Prime Minister Oli himself has had two kidney transplants.

Even with dialysis twice a week, some patients develop nausea, swelling and other problems when they eat or drink. The extra dialysis sessions cost money, and the livelihood allowance given to patients is never enough or timely.

Not every migrant working in hot climates returns with kidney disease, but a recent yet-to-be-published study led by nephrologist Sailendra Sharma states that one-fourth of all kidney patients in Nepal are migrant returnees. It points to recurrent heat stress as a primary risk factor.

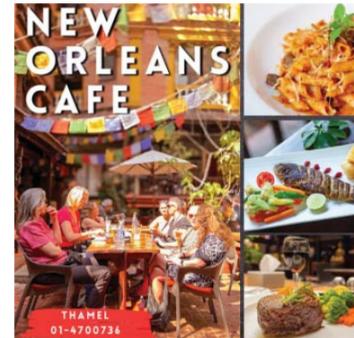
The Madhesh Institution of Health Sciences in Janakpur has 103 regular patients who come for dialysis. Of them, 30 are returnee migrants not just from Dhanusha, but also Sarlahi, Siraha, Mahottari and Sindhuli.

"Not by the nature of the disease, but the way kidney disease is growing, I would call it an epidemic," adds Kafle. 🇳🇵

**Dying to work overseas**

**MORE PAGE 10-11**

**The road out of Nepal**  
GUEST EDITORIAL  
PAGE 2



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# The road out of Nepal

One of the government's first priorities after federalism was to bring development to the grassroots. The political leadership concluded that the way to do that was to build a road network.

Road connectivity would encourage Nepalis to stay in their villages, connect



**GUEST EDITORIAL**  
Chetan Adhikari

farmers to market, and stimulate local economies. so they thought. As the roads snaked north into the mountains, Nepalis moved south to the plains along them.

Nepal's new roads have become conduits for better opportunities in the cities, the Tarai and abroad. Since 2016, every road that has reached villages in the hinterland has helped empty them. Billions of rupees were spent on roads to improve the lives of people who do not live there anymore.

According to the 2021 census, 34 of Nepal's 77 districts have witnessed a sharp



WIKIMEDIA

decline in population. More worryingly, there is depopulation in 329 out of Nepal's 753 municipalities, which is 43% of the country's geography.

It seems there is an inverse relationship between roads and migration. This is evident in districts like Ramechhap and Khotang, with the highest population decline as road connectivity spread.

Despite its proximity to Kathmandu, the first motorised vehicle only arrived in Ramechhap in 1998. The district was cut off from the road network until a little over three decades ago, and its population was 188,064 during the 1991 census.

By the time unpaved roads were built-district wide in 2001, the population had increased by 1.2%. But in the 20 years since, as paved roads and a bridge across the Sunkosi connected rural Ramechhap to Kathmandu and the Tarai, people began to leave in droves, and the district witnessed a -0.47% decline in population by 2011.

The 2015 earthquake caused extensive damage in Ramechhap, and additional roads

were built to facilitate reconstruction. Most rebuilt houses now lie empty.

By 2021, major road networks connected all the municipalities in the district, and Ramechhap had a population growth rate of -1.67%. Ramechhap currently has more than 4,000km of roads.

But while the roads reached Ramechhap, the village did not have enough jobs or indigenous products that they could trade in the newly accessible market.

"The road network brought the market to the community, but took our people in exchange," says Dilli Raj Adhikari of the Manthali municipality.

In remote districts like Humla, which are not connected to the highway grid, connectivity within the district has meant that people have begun to move to Simkot.

The population growth rate in relatively underdeveloped districts like Kalikot, Jumla, Mugu, and Dolpa is relatively high. On the other hand, Dailekh and Salyan which have more roads, have seen a decline in population as people move to cities.

The government conceived of the 1,700km Mid-Hill Highway in 2007 to keep people in the mountains. One of the objectives of this 'national pride project' was to connect 5 million people across the mountains to better facilities. However, the government and politicians did not care how this new road would affect migration. As it stands, the population of all 26 districts connected to

this highway has declined steadily for the past two decades. The fast track, which was promised to be the 'highway of prosperity' has instead become a highway of relocation.

The 1952 census found that 65% of Nepalis lived in the mountains and hills, while 35.2% were in the

Tarai. By 2021, 53.6% were living in the Tarai, while only 40.3% remained in the hills.

It is not enough for road infrastructure to reach the remotest corners of the country if there are no livelihood opportunities.

Development is not just about roads and bridges unless it enables people to fulfill their basic needs and connects them to better health, education, and employment opportunities.

Otherwise, people will continue to leave for cities which are struggling to manage increased pressure on their limited resources, lowering overall quality of life for all.

*Chetan Adhikari is a demographic analyst who is pursuing MPhil-PhD on population studies from Tribhuvan University.*

## ONLINE PACKAGES



**CRAFTING HERITAGE**

Arati Subba and Samridhi Gurung's Riti Studio with its all-women team handcrafts beeswax candles, incense sticks, and ceramics and strives to preserve Nepal's craft traditions. Watch video on our YouTube channel and subscribe for multimedia content. Read the profile on page 12.



**BACK TO SCHOOL**

In Nepal, education wasn't always accessible for girls. But now, inspiring grandmothers are breaking barriers and enrolling in school. Meet these women as they achieve their lifelong dreams of getting an education, and see how their journey is paving the way for a brighter future in Nepal. Watch the video on our YouTube channel.

### EVEREST FLIGHTS

Those helicopters are noxious pests flying around in confined spaces like swarms of mosquitos, or more accurately based on their noise and intrusion, like flying chain saws ('Nepal chops chopper flights to Everest', Arjun Dhakal, Guest Editorial, #1243). All day long, up and down the valley. Ban them.

**Roger Ray**

■ There needs to be a moratorium withdrawing all such tourist flights while a thorough review is conducted. There is no easy realistic long-term formula but all aspects need to be weighed, including possibly a bidding system for limited permits on limited days is one avenue of discussion.

**Tony Jones**

■ One of the fantastic features of Khumbu when I was en route to EBC was that it was all quiet.

**Ben-Erik Ness**

■ Where does the money earned by travel agencies and tour operators go?

**Shohum Joshi**

### EARTHQUAKES

Excellent and frightening article citing scientific journals and experts ('6.8, 7.8, 8.3, 8.9..', Sonia Awale, #1243). I fear that in North India we are as unprepared as Nepal for the next big earthquake and the melting of the glaciers.

**Naresh Khanna**

■ This calls for the Nepali population to be more alert and prepared for earthquake.

**Bharat Koirala**

This should not be ignored. Nepal will have more earthquakes.

**Alan Roadnight**

### NEPAL TIGER NUMBERS

There are not too many tigers, but there definitely are too many privileged men who've overstayed their time in power for sure ('Does Nepal have too many tigers?', Sudiksha Tuladhar, #1243).

**Utsav Shakya**

■ Not tigers, but we know for sure we have too many politicians.

**Anil Chitrakar**

## Times.com

### WHAT'S TRENDING

#### Nepal Bhasa Google Translate

by Vishad Raj Onta  
Google Translate added Nepalbhasa to its list of supported languages in June last year. This will impact the study and preservation of Newa culture, and also paves a path forward to Nepal's 123 other languages and dialects. Detailed report on nepalitimetimes.com

**f** Most reached and shared on Facebook

#### Eyes wide open in Mustang

by Kunda Dixit  
A visit to Kishor Kayastha's 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. Read Kunda Dixit's review of the ongoing exhibition.

**x** Most popular on X

#### Chopper flights to Everest

by Arjun Dhakal  
The chopper ban in Everest brings about the key question of balancing tourism with natural and cultural heritage. While CAAN has an authority over the sky, Sagarmatha National Park and local government have the final say. More on our website.

**66** Most commented



#### 6.8, 7.8, 8.3, 8.9..

by Sonia Awale  
The 7.1M jolt in Xigatse last week swayed buildings in Kathmandu 400km away, and coincided with the approaching 91<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the 1934 Great Earthquake, and is a reminder to be better prepared. A recent assessment found earthquake preparedness in Nepal very weak. Read the report and join the discussion online.

**🔥** Most visited online page

### QUOTES

**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
"We tripled the tiger population, but if proper steps for management and cooperation are not taken, we can lose them all as easily," warns Ghana Gurung of WWF regarding PM's statement on Nepal being too successful in tiger conservation.

**Hem Sagar Baral @WorshipNature**  
Dr @ghanagr, the leader of @WWFNepal shares his opinion about tiger conservation in Nepal and the significance of it for maintaining a healthy ecosystem. And of course- the very experienced Danny Tamang (=Dhan Bahadur) and Sushila have some good advice too. Take it!

**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
Dev Narayan Mandal, who is behind the Mithila Wildlife Trust, believes firmly in the coexistence of wild animals alongside humans. Mandal has made a name for himself in Madhes Province for nature conservation, and is now moving on to cultural preservation.

**pigreen1 @pigreen1**  
Mithila painting deserves conservation

## 1,000 WORDS



BHABIN KARKI / RSS

**MONUMENTAL GARLIC:** An intersection on the Midhill Highway at Laliguras Municipality on the border between Sankhuasabha and Terathum is marked by a cement replica of garlic, the region's primary cash crop. The trend of erecting statues of local produce on highway traffic islands is spreading across eastern Nepal. Read about how new roads are conduits for outmigration from rural areas (Guest Editorial, left).

## Times

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## 20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

### Oily Business

*Petroleum and politics do not mix. If they do, it is volatile. Twenty years ago this week, we reported how then Supplies Minister Ishwar Pokhrel of the UML hiked petroleum prices and got party's affiliated students to protest it. Excerpts of the story published in issue #230 14 - 20 January 2005.*

Politicians are known for populist grandstanding, that is what they are made for. So it's not surprising the UML comrades want to have it both ways: Supplies Minister Ishwar Pokhrel hikes petrol prices with a fishy one-week delay and his party's student wing is out on the streets vandalising public property in protest. Even by the reckless standards of Nepali politics, the UML's two-faced opportunism is stunning. Then Pokhrel makes the shocking admission to us (p 8) that dealers are allowed to hoard. All this doesn't make the fuel price hike less inevitable. The 30 percent increase in global oil



prices in the past year has put Nepal Oil Corporation Rs 5.12 billion in the red. The corporation's losses are threatening to bankrupt the state as well.

The basic rule of business is you can't sell a product for less than what you bought it for unless you are: a) stupid, b) a welfare state or c) Nepal Oil Corporation. To be able to afford subsidies, a government needs to be honest, efficient and have a revenue source. Our government is none of the three.

There is another reason for raising prices: smuggling of cheap subsidised fuel across the open border to India. This is a well-oiled business in which folks on both sides get a cut. Forty percent of the kerosene Nepal imports is either used to adulterate diesel or is smuggled into India. The Nepali state is subsidising Bihari consumers.

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

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# Keeping brain and tongue in sync

An author's struggles with English language pronunciation

The pronunciation of English words can be quite difficult for those of us who attended government schools where phonetics were not part of the curriculum. English pronunciation has no rules anyway, and way too many exceptions.



**ANGREZI**  
Anbika Giri

While we may understand the meanings and proper contexts of words, we often struggle with their correct pronunciation. However, this is not my primary concern. Admittedly, my pronunciation can also be odd, incorrect, and even amusing at times, but I have something else that is serious to discuss.

I often feel a sense of discomfort in my mouth when I come across words that contain many letters. There seems to be a disconnect between what my mind intends to say and what actually comes out. My thoughts may be clear, but when I try to speak, the sound that comes out is different from what I intended.

At times, my nerves get the better of me, making it difficult to even say the word at all. I understand that these situations are normal but they still can affect my self-esteem. It makes my learning process tough. The only relief for me is that I have acknowledged the issue.

The first time I truly recognised my struggle with the word 'acknowledgement' was while reading a book to my daughter. I noticed the author's acknowledgment section and thought it would be a great opportunity to show her how many people contribute to getting a book published.



However, when I attempted to read it aloud, I found myself unable to do so. I tried to mentally dissect the word and speak it, but nothing worked.

Despite preparing myself repeatedly, the moment I tried to say it, my tongue felt paralysed. That day, my daughter stepped in to help me pronounce it, but it took nearly a year before I could say it without feeling anxious. Generally, I rely on those around me or an online dictionary for assistance. I break the word down, write it in Nepali, and practice it multiple times, which helps me pronounce it correctly.

Yet, the very next day, when I need to use it again, my nerves kick in, and I find myself questioning whether I should just choose a different word. I stay committed

to improving, and while I do make mistakes, I continue to learn. But sometimes, I feel like giving up and search for an easier word instead. Yet, when I'm speaking, that challenging word often resurfaces in my mind and slips out. Others may not notice, but I certainly do, and it disrupts the flow of my conversation, leading to more mistakes.

I know, over the time, I have improved a lot. However, there are thousands of such words and they come my way in different circumstances. I worked in the subscription department of a magazine for a short time. There I learned the meaning of 'subscription' but it took many years for me to pronounce it correctly.

After leaving the job, I

encountered with the word when I switched myself from TV to YouTube in 2014.

Every this and that YouTuber was asking their audience to subscribe their channel. I used to utter the word every time the Nepali YouTuber said 'subscribe my channel' (without the 'to'). I would laugh thinking until and unless I can pronounce the word correctly, who would 'subscribe my channel' if I had one. I could not say "Grahak Bannus" for YouTube as I used to request while working for the magazine subscription.

I have been exploring a new approach lately. When I anticipate discussing a specific topic, I create a list of key words that I know I need to include. If there are words I find challenging to pronounce,

I take the time to practice them. Although this method has not produced immediate results, I remain committed to reducing my mistakes. How long will it take? I am not sure, but I continue to practice diligently.

Recently, I delivered a presentation at a conference in Sri Lanka on how the Constitution and laws have protected women's roles in Nepal's politics over the past decade. I had mentally prepared myself to avoid the term 'constitutionalised' but my ingrained habits took over.

As I spoke, that word slipped out, and I found myself struggling. However, surprisingly, I did not feel nervous. I maintained my flow and continued speaking. The word came up again, and while I felt uncomfortable, I did not let it derail me. I focused on sharing other points confidently and remained composed throughout.

A few weeks ago during a meeting, I found myself struggling with the word 'accompanied'. I had gone over it the night before, hoping it would come to me easily.

Unfortunately, it popped into my mind at the wrong moment. It was the first time I openly acknowledged that certain words can trip me up. Thankfully, my colleagues stepped in to help me finish my accompan... ied.

Since that day, I have been diligently practicing it, hoping that next time it will flow smoothly and not trip up my tongue. I will not deny that I felt a wave of nervousness and shyness, but I also managed to laugh at myself, which helped me relax and keep the conversation going.

Lately, I have been working on getting comfortable with the term 'statistician'. I know I will be using it a lot soon. I am just hoping that by the time I need to say that 'the data I am discussing has been analysed by a skilled statistician', my brain and tongue are in sync. 🇳🇵



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## Turkish Amenity Kit



Turkish Airlines has introduced 'UNESCO Türkiye Series' amenity kits for its business class passengers that are inspired by six UNESCO World Heritage sites in Türkiye: Nemrut, Göbeklitepe, Cappadocia, Ephesus, Ani, and Troy.

They carry Turkish marbling designs and traditional rug motifs. Each kit, designed sustainably by fragrance brand Ex Nihilo, consists of hand and body lotions and lip balms. "We are showcasing Türkiye's rich cultural heritage to the world," said Turkish Airlines COO M. Akif Konar.

## German Hilfe

The German government has pledged aid for health services to communities affected by the September 2024 flood in Sarlahi, Rautahat and Kavre with One Heart Worldwide to ensure access to basic health services, winter materials, and emergency supplies, especially to pregnant women. Rautahat, which is vulnerable to cold weather and fires, has a significant Muslim and Dalit population who will benefit from the funds.

## Soaltee Club app

Soaltee Hotels & Resorts launched a mobile app for its loyalty program. Through the app, Soaltee Heritage Club members can track and redeem points, manage bookings, and get personalized offers. The app is currently on Android and will soon be on iOS. Soaltee also introduced their new brand ambassador, actress Surakshya Pant.

## Mercure in Nepal

Mercure Kathmandu Sukedhara Heights has opened with the Mercure brand's first hotel in Nepal. With over 1,000 hotels in more than 60 countries, Mercure aims to blend contemporary design with local accents and encourage



guests to explore city centers. The hotel has an all-day restaurant DYNE, Sopra for Italian, and Zaiqa for Indian food. On the rooftop is Sukra Bar and a pool. It also has a fitness centre with a sauna, and spaces for events and gatherings.



## Dongfeng showroom

Chinese EV company Dongfeng Nammi opened a showroom in Nagpokhari. It also introduced a silver color for the '01' hatchback, and held a test drive camp 11-16 January during which bookings include discounts, a 7KW wall charger, and one night at Hotel Country Villa in Nagarkot.

## Redmi Note 14 Series

Xiaomi launched four smartphones as part of the Redmi Note 14 Series, ranging from Rs24,999 for the 128GB Redmi Note 14 to Rs54,999 for the 512GB Redmi Note 14 Pro+ 5G. The phones have fast charging, a three-camera setup and AI features such as Circle to Search.

## Unlimited Ncell at night

Starting 9 January, Ncell customers subscribing to 'Best' or 'Unlimited' Sadhain ON packs costing Rs399-1,499 can get unlimited internet access from 11pm-7am.



## HBL 32nd AGM

Himalayan Bank held its 32nd Annual General Meeting, moved its Thamel branch to Darbar Marg and started construction on a New Road branch. The Bank will operate a branch at the previous Thamel location too, following retrofitting. The bank posted a profit of Rs1,238.3 million and collected Rs297.72 billion in deposits.

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security systems and practices, recognising its commitment to safeguarding customer data and maintaining high digital security.

# Women conserve, men still conservative

Nepal's rural women protect community forests, but men still make the decisions



PHOTOS: UNNATI CHAUHARY

## ■ Unnati Chauhary in Kailali

**K**usum Devi Dagaura has chaired a community forest group in Kailali for three years. The forest has thrived on her watch, but she has never been involved in any of its decision-making.

The Mohanyal Community Forest Users Committee seven-member executive committee includes five women and two men. The men call the shots. "Sometimes they pretend to listen to us, but in the end, whatever the men say goes," says Dagaura.

As chair, she once suggested that timber from their forest be provided for free to the most underserved, including the Dalit and indigenous communities. But the men disagreed, and the poorest in the village had to pay to use the timber they helped protect.

Once Dagaura was assaulted in a dispute over forest conservation, and she asked the committee to bear the cost of treatment. The two male members refused.

Dagaura is from the Tharu community,

and a freed bonded labourer. She never went to school but learnt to read and write through in an adult education program.

Many community forests across Nepal are led by women. Rules require a woman to be either chair or secretary of committees, and half the members must also be female.

The Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal (FECOFUN) includes 22,415 community forests across the country, of which 1,072 are headed by women. Of Kailali's 700 locally protected forest committees, 150 are led by women.

Women have played a crucial role in forest conservation and in expanding Nepal's forest cover, which has grown to nearly 46% of the country's area from just 25% 30 years ago.

Tej Rani Chaudhary is a member of the Hariyali Community Forest Users Group, which has a male chair and five women among the total eight members in the working committee. The forest was registered 20 years ago by Chaudhary and a group of women.

"When we registered the forest, the men scoffed at us and questioned our ability to manage it," recalls Chaudhary. "It wasn't just unkind words, the men undermined our efforts by allowing their animals to graze in the forest and even smuggled out logs."

When the women resisted and brought the forest to a healthy state, the men took over control of the committee. Chaudhary says, "When the forest improved, we were forced to hand over leadership to the men."

Women forestry committee members add that the men constantly belittle them, discouraging them from voicing any opinion during the working committee meetings. But the women are resisting.

"Whenever we do not agree with the points being made during committee meetings, we simply get up and walk out as a group," says Chaudhary.

Women say that despite being in leadership positions, they are tasked with forest maintenance and conservation, while men have control over the budget, accounting, and resource distribution.

"They task the women with fire control, tree plantation, fencing, and conservation, without being paid anything," says Dagaura of Mohanyal Community Forest.

Karna Rawal, vice-president of the Kailali chapter of FECOFUN, says that men dominate the decision-making processes in 60% of community forests that are led by women.

"The non-acceptance of women in leadership is not just limited by male office-bearers, but also by other employees," he admits.

Women who lead community forests also face pressure from family members and society. Jhuma Chaudhary, who heads FECOFUN's Sudurpaschim Province chapter, is convinced that the role of women in Nepal's community forestry success story is being undermined by discrimination.

She says: "Women are actively participating in conservation, but have not yet been given control of resources that help manage our forests better. We must ensure that changes. Starting now." 🇳🇵






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# Inking an identity

The stories told by Tharu tattoo motifs, from nature and lineage to afterlife and dowry

■ Sanjib Chaudhary



**M**any indigenous peoples throughout the world have inked tattoos for aesthetic and therapeutic reasons which respect their culture and traditions.

That includes Tharu women in Nepal who have tattooed themselves with traditional motifs that tell stories about their ancestry and the natural world.

The Nat are a nomadic ethnic group that pitch tents near villages to do odd jobs. While the men hunt birds and small mammals, or fish, the women tattoo other women.

Ghurni Chaudhary, 70, from Saptari remembers getting one of her tattoos from a Nat woman in return for cooking for them. Elders told Ghurni that her in-laws would not accept food from her hand if she did not get tattooed.

“Although I don’t know the meaning of floral patterns on my





**BODY OF ART:** (clockwise from main photo) Garbhi Dasin Tharuni shows elephants and warriors tattooed on her arm.

Kashia Chaudhary with a sago palm and marigold on the back of her lower arms.

A woman from Kailali with peacock tattoos on her legs.

Ghurni Chaudhary's parents told her that her in-laws would only accept food from her if she got a tattoo.

Peacock and tiger tattoos on Chanabati Tharu's legs.

Kailali woman with tattoos on her legs.

Bhuti Devi shows her fish tattoo. The Tharu believe fish and earthworms were the first life on the planet.

arms, I got inked the pokhair tattoo with a small boat and oarsman," she adds.

The pokhair is a pond in the Tharu language and the tattoo consists of four corners of a pond – a floral pattern at each corner. The boat symbolises the crossing of the river of life to the other side.

Interestingly, the Tharu epic Gurbabak Jalmauti talks about Gurbaba, the creator of the earth, going to a safer place with his disciples on a boat during the apocalypse. Most Tharu women also get inked with floral patterns to get freedom from the endless cycle of life and death and a symbol of nirvana.

Ahilya Devi, 80, proudly shows a simple thopa-thopi tattoo on her left arm made with rosette motifs that are supposed to ward off the evil eye.

"It is one of the simplest tattoos – it's easy to make for the tattoo artist and looks great on the arm," she says. "I just have that one, and didn't want any more."

The Tharu are forest-dwellers and grow trees in their backyard. Which is why Tharu women from eastern Nepal have a tattoo of the garden of the god Salahesh with flowers and an Ashoka tree.

Kashia Chaudhary shows off her tattoos of sago palm and marigold flower, inked on the back of her lower arm. Another tattoo that covers the whole of the upper or lower arm represents an areca nut palm.

Many women in the village of Ramdhuni in Sunsari wear tattoos of the god Ram and his brother Laxman. Ramdhuni has an eternal flame which is believed to have kept burning from the days of the Ramayana. Lord Ram is supposed to have spent a night here before his exile.

Garbhi Dasin, an ascetic in her 70s, wears Ram Laxman tattoos on her calf and wheels of a chariot on her shin. Ashia Tharuni from the neighbouring village also wears a

Ram Laxman tattoo on her legs. Interestingly, the sacred tattoos find a place on women's legs, and that too on the rear side.

Other Tharu women simply got these tattoos as a sign of beauty, and inking is regarded as permanent jewellery. The block tattoos of peacocks on the legs add to the aesthetic.

"We got tattoos to look beautiful," says Bhuti Devi from Hasanpur village. "These tattoos will accompany us when we die. They will go together with us."

Bhuti Devi has a lot of tattoos. The most outstanding one perhaps is that of a peacock because Tharus believe they are descendants of Mauryas, the dynasty of Emperor Ashoka who spread Buddhism across the Subcontinent.

Tharus have an important relationship with fish, regarding them and earthworms as the first life on the planet. Fish tattoos are therefore popular.

Tharus have been credited for their role in nature conservation in their homeland where Chitwan and Bardia national parks are now situated. They used to be elephant handlers for royalty. The elephant tattoo with a mahout is common in tattoos worn by Tharu women.

One woman in Sunsari even has a tattoo called German ke larai (German war) which is a complex tattoo design that includes armies on foot with spears, on elephants, and on horses doing battle.

Tigers are another tattoo that adorn the chest or the upper arm of women, inked on top of other motifs, because they are regarded as goddesses.

On Nepali New Year, Tharus worship the goddess and other jungle gods, sacrificing goats and pigeons to appease them, so that they and their cattle are not attacked by wild animals and evil spirits. In western Nepal, Tharus get tattoos of horses, animals they revere.

Some of the tattoos that the artists inked for free were simple human patterns. If somebody got many tattoos made, the artists would also ink them for free, particularly on fingers or the arm. The most prominent tattoo on their hands can be the rays of the sun.

The tattoo artist usually stuck seven needles in candles, collected soot from oil lamps and started piercing the skin. Once done, they applied turmeric powder and mustard oil, as well as chanted a mantra to alleviate the pain.

Tharu elders banned child marriages and tattooing went into decline. Now, the younger generation of Tharus are less interested in getting traditional tattoos, and the Nat no longer wander around the villages offering the service. But a few remain in Kanchanpur and elsewhere.

There is now an increasing awareness and activism about these cultural practices, and a revival of interest.

"Traditional tattoos are a powerful symbol of our cultural identity," says Tharu activist Indu Tharu. "For us, this is not just body art but a connection to our ancestral roots, beliefs, and history, and a form of reclaiming unique cultural practices that have been marginalised and suppressed. Wearing a tattoo is a visible declaration of pride in who I am and where I come from."

KalaKulo, an art initiative, together with artist collective ArTree Nepal, organised Tika Chhedana Angana, a convention on Tharu tattooing in Bardia last year.

Many young tattoo artists are now learning the art to keep their culture alive. It was not only a celebration of the legacy of Tharu women who have carried a universe of images on their skin, but a beginning for new tattoo artists in the very land that shaped and nurtured this ancestral tradition. 🇳🇵

## Skin art for the journey into afterlife

As the art and craft of traditional tattoo fades, so does this rich heritage



PHOTOS: SUMAN NEPALI

■ Suman Nepali

Lha-Chyogu is the term for tattooing in the Newa community of Kathmandu Valley. It literally means 'writing on the skin'.

The tattoos are traditionally made using cactus needles and herbal ink, and although a more common adornment in women, men and children also got inked, not just for aesthetics but also for therapeutic reasons or to protect them from evil spirits.



Tattoos on the legs symbolise strength while one on the right arm stands for energy. The concept of reincarnation of the human soul is also linked with inking on the skin and reflects a deep belief system.

Elders also believe that when a person dies, they take nothing but their tattoos with them.

On their way to heaven or hell, it is the markings on the skin that is believed to be the travel 'pocket money' into the next realm. They pay their way through for an easier journey, wherever that may lead.

Then there is the widespread belief that tattoos drive away misfortune, possibly tied to frequent cholera epidemics, earthquakes and other diseases that took young lives.

Some of the more famous designs are those of the half-moons, Tikijhya lattice windows, animals and deities. Some even get tattoos of gods and goddesses they were named after.

For example, Laxmidevi would have a tattoo of the god of wealth whereas someone called Ram might have chosen to have his image on their body.

Chini Dangol, 74, of Lagan Tole in Kathmandu has a tattoo of Krishna playing flute on her right arm and a half-moon on her hand (pictured, above). She remembers paying 1 paisa for the moon, but five times more for tattoos of gods.

Her 79-year-old husband has a tattoo of Chakuncha, a sparrow, but it is barely visible now (pictured, left). He remembers getting it because everyone else was at the time in his neighbourhood.

## EVENTS

**Mustang photo exhibit**

Stop by MUSTANG: A Two Decade Odyssey, the ongoing exhibition of 30 panoramas by Kishor Kayastha.

Extended till 19 January, Nepal Art Council

**Art Under 30**

The Art Under 30 pop-up exhibition promises unique artwork by a lineup of talented Nepali artists.

17 January, 12pm-7pm, Moksh, Gyanmandala

**Kids Mela**

Take your kids out to play and do pottery, decorate cupcakes and participate in other fun activities. Also support local vendors and enjoy a variety of food and drinks.

18 January, 12pm onwards, The Yellow House, Sanepa

**Nepal Kabaddi League**

Witness thrilling raids, defense and leaps of victory at the Nepal Kabaddi League. Secure tickets now.

17-25 January, 5:30pm onwards, Tickets: Rs2,000++, NSC Covered Hall, Tripureswor

**BT Kancha**

Brace for an evening full of laughter as BT Kancha takes the audience on a hilarious journey into what it is like to be homesick.

18 January, 9pm Onwards, Tickets: Rs800++, Tito's Pub, Thamel

## DINING

**Fire and Ice**

One of the first pizzerias in Kathmandu, Fire and Ice offers genuine Napolitana pizza and dozens of other variants to choose from.

Thamel (01) 5350210

## MUSIC

**Small Room Rave**

Dance the evening away at the Small Room Rave featuring Sunny Jay and Buffy at Musicology. Entry is free.

22 January 8pm onwards, Cafe Musicology, Lalipur

**Purna Rai & Daju Bhai**

Watch Purna Rai and Daju Bhai haru up close and be part of a musical night. Call for more details.

22 January, Trisara, Lazimpat (01) 4510200

**EDEN Live Session**

Yugal Gurung and Brihat Pahari bring magic to EDEN with their live music.

18 January, 7pm onwards, Tickets: Rs700++, EDEN, Sanepa

**Soulful Wednesday**

Unwind with the finest live music from Pratih Prajwal at MeSoHot on the upcoming instalment of Soulful Wednesdays.

22 January, 7pm onwards, MeSoHot, Sanepa

**Newaz anniversary**

Celebrate with Newaz, the band that has defined Nepal's rock music culture, as they mark 35 years Nepali music.

18 January, 8pm onwards, Tickets: Rs1,000, LOD, Bhagwatishan

**Belgian Waffles**

The mouthwatering waffles from the Belgian Waffles Co. is enough to satisfy anyone with a sweet tooth.

Durbar Marg, 9843108194

**Evoke Café & Bistro**

From pita bread and baguettes to homemade fries with salad on the side, Evoke has got it all. Pick a favourite.

Jhamsikhel, 9851111051

## GETAWAY

**Chandragiri Hills**

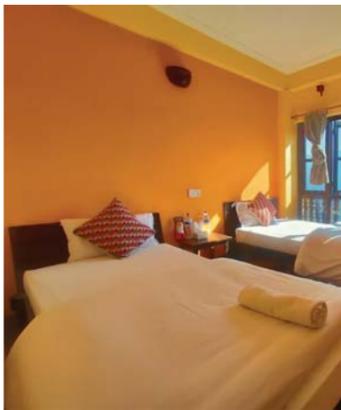
Enjoy a scenic ride on the Chandragiri Hills cable car that offers stunning views of the valley and Himalaya. Visit the temple, thrilling amusement park, and food court, and relax at the luxurious resort for an unforgettable experience.

Chandragiri (01) 5970796/9802326541

**Escape Stay**

With apartment-style rooms and a cosy atmosphere, Escape Stay is the go-to getaway for the weekend.

Chundevi Marg, 9808031497

**Bandipur Kaushi Inn**

The rustic Bandipur Kaushi Inn is a must stay in the idyllic village of Bandipur, replete with cultural diversity and traditional architecture.

Bandipur, 9803008170

**Jagatpur Lodge**

The Lodge's private tents with its luxury amenities are located in the heart of Chitwan's grassland.

Jagatpur, Chitwan (01) 4221711

**Grand Norling Hotel**

Enjoy a relaxing stay at Grand Norling, with its spacious bedrooms, spa facilities, and pool.

Mulpani, Kathmandu (01) 4910193

**Gangnam Galbi Barbeque**

Try Korean barbecue roasted at high heat on charcoal at Gangnam Galbi Barbeque, perfect for the cold weather.

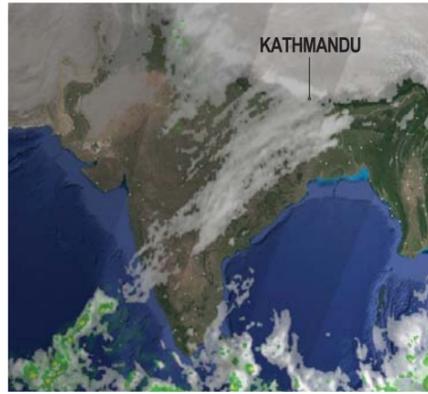
Thirbam Sadak, Bhatbhateni (01) 4547137

**Cibo Bistro**

Enjoy Cibo's carefully curated menu of pastas, pizzas, salads, and desserts.

Pulchowk (01) 5541940

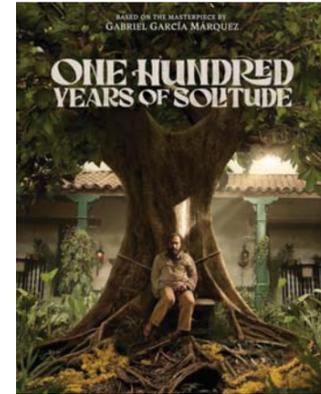
## WEEKEND WEATHER

**Winter Over?**

Successive westerly systems have fizzled out before they reached Kathmandu. This winter has been predominantly without rain or snow in central and eastern Nepal, and already by Tuesday next week we are looking at the mercury climbing up to an unseasonal 24°C in the Valley. We could still have another cold spell, but it looks like this is it for winter. The Tarai, meanwhile, is still fogbound (pictured left on Thursday morning).

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
21° 5°	21° 5°	23° 7°

## OUR PICK



Netflix's Colombian tv series One Hundred Years of Solitude, based on Gabriel García Márquez's 1967 novel of the same name, begins as Úrsula Iguarán and José Arcadio Buendía are forced to leave their hometown after their marriage and found the new town of Macondo. What follows is the story of seven generations of the Buendía family as they build and live their lives in a town that is unable to escape both the past of its residents as well as Colombia's socio-political changes. Stars Diego Vásquez, Marleyda Soto, Claudio Cataño, Viña Machado, and Loren Sofía.

## 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

# UFO over Pokhara

Nearly 60 years after a fiery fall of fragments from the sky, the mystery is no closer to being solved

■ Durga Rana Magar in Pokhara

It was 8:15 in the evening of 25 March 1968 when everyone in the village of Batulechaur near Pokhara heard a deafening sound as a bright flashing object hurtled down to a nearby field.

The land belonged to Kul Timilsina, and the next morning he retrieved a sheet of metal about 2m by 1m for his buffalo shed.

Before he died at age 83 three years ago, Timilsina had told photo archivist Sunil Ulak that the metal sheet had rounded corners. There are a few witnesses still alive who remember that night.

One of them is Timilsina's wife Gyanu, who was 22 at the time. She had been at home, and recalls the big bang and a flash.

"We saw the thing in the field in the morning," she told us. "It looked like a lid, a covering of some sort. We thought it would be useful and took it home."

Another witness is Kul Narayan Paudel was only eight. "We ran to to see a four-sided metal sheet. I don't know what happened to it."

Ram Bahadur Baniya, a teacher at the local school, says he had heard the sheet had been brought to the school, and later handed over to the Zonal Commissioner at the time, Nanda Prasad Malla.

There are two versions of what happened to Kul Timilsina's metal sheet. One is that an American Peace Corp Volunteer teaching at the nearby Bindyabasini School took it, and another is that it was handed over to the government.

Recently declassified Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and US State Department documents from the time mention the US Embassy in Kathmandu tracking down the object two years later and shipping it back to the US.

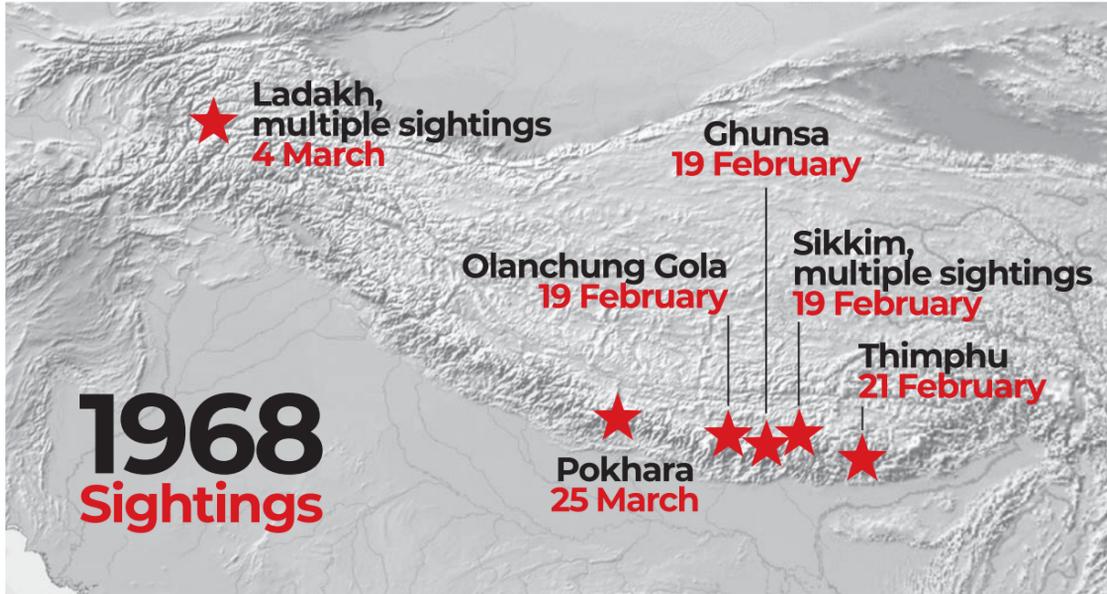
A telegram from the Department of State and Department of Defense tagged as 'MOON DUST / Space Fragments' dated 1 March 1972 stated:

1. Restored space fragment will be on board Embassy support flight 115 arriving at Kathmandu on or about March 10. Fragment is packed in shipping crate (cargo no. 72-33365) marked in care of DAO.
2. State and Defense representatives examined fragments prior to shipment finding restoration acceptable.

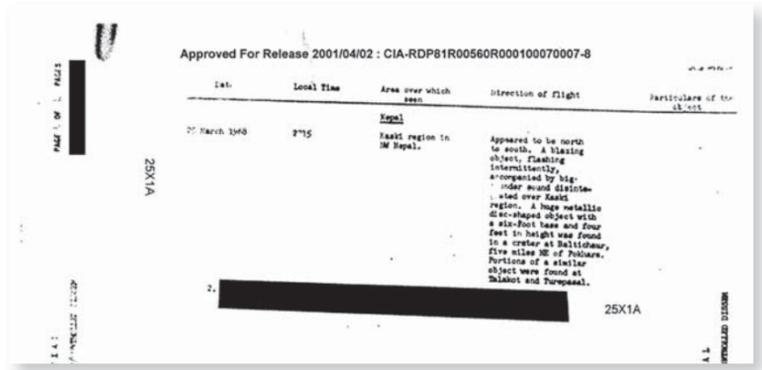
The documents show that the US government, military and intelligence agencies investigated thoroughly, and have continued to revisit it ever since, as recently as five years ago.

What is even more intriguing is that the object that fell in Pokhara was not the only unidentified space object that fell to earth that year.

There were similar sightings



SKYFALL: The field in Batulechaur near Pokhara belonging to Kul Timilsina where fragments of a flying object fell in 1968, and a recently declassified US diplomatic cable.



of objects falling from the sky in Ladakh, Sikkim and Bhutan between 19 February and 25 March 1968.

These mysteries were the subject of a CIA investigation in 1968 titled 'Sighting of Unidentified Flying Objects in Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan', and the report is part of the recent online declassification of 800,000 top-secret documents from the period.

Although unidentified flying objects (UFOs) have a connotation now of being alien craft, it could be pieces of satellite, missile, rocket or even aircraft.

The CIA report documents six sightings in 1968 and quotes local sources as describing all of them having similar characteristics: bright blue or red streaks in the sky accompanied by loud sounds like lightning and thunder, and objects falling to the ground.

Aside from the metal sheet found in Pokhara, other debris were recovered nearby as well. The object seems to have disintegrated before it hit the ground.

The CIA report records the first sighting on 19 February 1968 in various parts of Sikkim and Olangchung Gola and Ghunsa in

eastern Nepal. The light was said to be 'long and thin' and giving out 'green and red light'.

Two days later on 21 February, a soundless blue object was seen traveling fast across the sky above Thimphu in Bhutan. Then on 4 March, there were multiple daytime sightings or white streaks in the sky at Chang La Pass, Fukche and Koyul in Ladakh. There were more sightings in Ladakh on the very day fragments fell near Pokhara on 25 March 1968.

After the Pokhara sighting, rumours of aliens landing spread in Kathmandu, or that it was a Russian or Chinese spy plane. Some even thought it was a sign from heaven that the end of the world was near.

This was at the height of the Cold War. The Russians and Americans were testing their thermonuclear devices as well as intercontinental ballistic missile delivery systems.

The Washington-Beijing rapprochement had not yet happened, and China was making quick progress testing atomic bombs. Within two years after its first atomic test, China in 1966 exploded its first hydrogen bomb at the Lop Nur site in Xinjiang,

3,000km north of Nepal.

After six decades, what is still intriguing is that all the sightings within a few months of each other in 1968 were along the Himalayan arc bordering Tibet: from Bhutan, Sikkim, Nepal, to Ladakh (map).

US military intelligence seems to have concluded that this was not a coincidence, and there were frequent research trips to the site in Pokhara by American officials in the months after the incident. The Royal Nepal Army helped in a thorough search of the region north of Pokhara

A confidential memo dated 25 June 1968 by Jerry C Trippy to a 'Mr Farley' mentions that the US Air Force's Foreign Technology Division had decided that the debris could be important because it may be related to a Chinese missile test or a Soviet 'Vehicle Venik' rocket.

On 28 August 1968, the US Embassy in Kathmandu cabled Washington saying that the object could be of Soviet origin, possibly from when the rocket carrying the 'Kosmos 208' satellite re-entering the atmosphere. But why were the fragments falling to earth weeks apart, and in the same region?

No one knows where Kul

Timilsina's metal sheet is now. It was definitely packed in a crate and taken to the US. Archivist Sunil Ulak heard from the Timilsina family that CIA officials had returned to Pokhara five years ago.

Could the Pokhara fragments as well as the sightings in Ladakh and Bhutan actually be alien craft falling to earth? Even 57 years later, we do not know if they were Chinese or Russian craft. Or could it be parts of an American plane which was dropping supplies for Khampa guerrillas?

"If it was American, it would explain why they were so thorough in collecting the fragments in Pokhara," says archivist Ulak. But that still does not explain the multiple sightings in 1968.

Indeed, US military aircraft were at the time flying frequent

night-time missions from air force bases in India to supply weapons to Khampa guerrilla camps in Nepal in Mustang. The Chinese could have shot down one such aircraft. The other sightings could have been contrails of US spy planes, or Chinese anti-aircraft missiles.

There were quite a few developments regarding UFOs in 2024. In a US congressional hearing in July, former intelligence officer David Grusch claimed that the government had long been involved in a program to investigate and retrieve non-human craft crashes, and then try to reverse engineer them. However, Grusch did not show any evidence.

The UAP Disclosure Act of 2024 was signed into law by Joe Biden in December 2023. It plans to oversee the public disclosure of UFO information. However, there is a clause in it that prevents disclosure if it would cause threats to military defense, intelligence operations or foreign relations. 🇺🇸

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More declassified material online.

# new

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# Dying to work overseas

Nepal's health system is paying to treat workers whose kidneys failed while toiling in hot, rich countries

■ Pinki Sris Rana in Dhanusha

Jagdish Sah left for Malaysia ten years ago. He had taken a loan for his sister's marriage and he had to pay it back. As the eldest son, he was also expected to get married next, but he faced multiple rejections.

"Women have expectations too. They want to get married to well-to-do families. They didn't want to get married to a family that lived in a mud house like ours," says Sah, now 35.

Foreign employment was a one-stop solution to his problems. Or so he thought.

Sah was 24 when he left for a tailoring job at a garment factory in Malaysia. He often worked overtime, sometimes up to 12 hours a day in the hopes of earning extra ringgits. Even so, his highest monthly income would only be Rs35,000.

Workers got a 30-minute break for lunch, and there were limited toilet breaks. So, Sah just worked straight out.

Back in Nepal for a break in

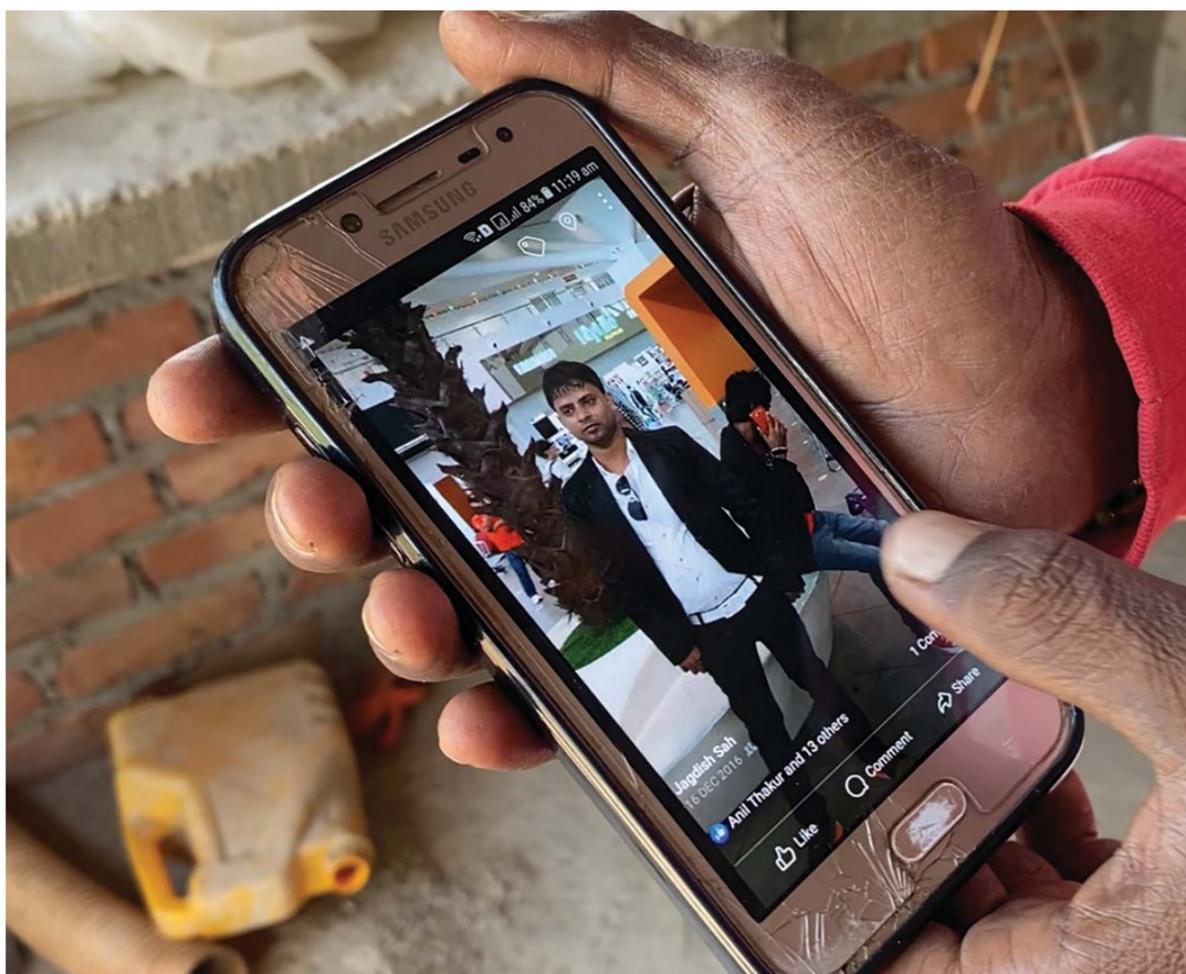
2017, Sah had blurred vision and fainted. He thought it was high blood pressure, but a few months later at age 28, he was diagnosed with double kidney failure.

"Whatever he saved in Malaysia went for his treatment in Kathmandu. We even sold a plot of our land," recalled Sah's mother, Mantoriya Devi.

Sah drives his motorcycle twice a week from his village to the Madhesh Institute of Health Sciences in Janakpur for free dialysis. His family says it is as if the Jagdish who went to Malaysia and the one who came back are two different people.

"This disease has already doomed my life. Why ruin someone else's?" says Sah of his lack of marriage prospects. "It is because of dialysis that I have survived so far."

His parents are too old and occupied with their chores to accompany him. Since Jagdish cannot work, his father, Ram Dev sells popcorn by the sidewalk from a wheeled cart.



Mithu Kumar went to Saudi Arabia to work as an electrical supervisor two years ago. He was 25. Recently when he started vomiting, he was taken to a local hospital. He was diagnosed with chronic kidney disease and was sent back to Nepal.

As Kumar lays down for his dialysis treatment at Save Lives Hospital in Janakpur, he says, "My only wish is that I am healthy enough to work again."

Umesh Kumar Yadav also worked in Saudi Arabia as a guard. He returned with chronic kidney disease, but he says he is the only one to contract the ailment among all the returnees from his village.

"Only the ill-fated people have this disease," says Yadav. "Otherwise, it would have been the same for every other person from the village who is abroad working."

Ambar Bahadur Sarki, 46, travels from Sindhuli for three hours every Monday and Thursday to Janakpur for his free dialysis at the Madhesh Institute of Health Sciences.

Sarki worked in a palm oil plantation in Malaysia, where heat stress often exceeded the wet-bulb threshold for heat and humidity. "It was extremely hot at all times," he remembers. He first got hypertension, which made both his kidneys fail.



PHOTOS: ALINA ACHARYA

## Women on the move

The blanket ban on migration to the Gulf is putting women at higher risk of exploitation and abuse

■ Alina Acharya in Bhairawa

With her husband unemployed, it was difficult to manage the household expenses. Debt was piling up, and Sonika Sanjel saw foreign employment as her only way out.

"I was always fighting with my husband because we didn't have enough to get by so I found a middleman," says Sanjel.

The broker said she had to go to India overland and then fly to Kuwait from Delhi.

Having travelled far from home, first to Kathmandu and then to Raxaul in Birganj, she was ready to go to an even more unfamiliar place if it meant it would free her from financial trap.

Sanjel reached the border town of Belahiya in November, where volunteers deployed to control human trafficking became suspicious and questioned her. She told them she was going to Kuwait but could not produce the necessary documents. They were telling her she was being trafficked, when the recruiter disappeared. She is now at the Shanti

Rehabilitation Home in Bhairawa.

Nitesh Kumar Chaudhary heads the organisation monitoring human trafficking at the border, and says that the number of Nepali women being trafficked has increased significantly. "We have been stopping those we suspect," he adds, "but some may have slipped through."

Organisations working on migration and women's issues in the area including the Peace Rehabilitation Center, Aafanta Nepal, Sana Haat and Shubha Avar Gram provided counselling to nearly 33,000 women at the Belhiya



border crossing in the past year. Of them, nearly 800 women were trying to go to a third country to bypass a ban on women migrant workers.

Nepali women used to be trafficked to India to work in the sex industry, but the recruiters have now shifted to luring them to third countries. However, those going overland via India are also sometimes stranded in Mumbai and Delhi and sold to brothels.

So far, 15 human trafficking and smuggling cases have been filed at the district police office in the last five years. Deputy Superintendent

of Police Suraj Karki also confirms that the number of women traveling to third countries overland through India has increased.

"There is an increasing trend of women travelling India on foot and then flying off to other countries from there," says Sita Pantha of the group SAMI. "Those who take this route are at a much higher risk."

Just on one day two months ago, 13 women were stopped at Belahiya checkpoint. Other checkpoints on this side of the border in Biratnagar, Birganj, Nepalganj, and Mahendranagar have also seen human trafficking cases.



PHOTOS: PINKI SRIS RANA

Ram Udgar Mandal from Dhanusha started working in Saudi Arabia in his late twenties. He spent the next 17 years in the desert working as a driver. Now in his late forties, he was diagnosed with End-Stage Renal Disease (ESRD) four years ago.

But this is an intergenerational cycle. Mandal's son has now also gone to Malaysia to supplement the family income. He fears his son will meet the same fate as him. "We do not have a choice, do we?" he says.



**HARD LABOUR:** (clockwise from main picture) Jagdish Sah shows a picture from his time in Malaysia. He is now gaunt and frail in this picture taken during his biweekly dialysis at Madhesh Institute of Health Sciences in Janakpur recently.

Sah at a garment factory in Malaysia where he worked, often dehydrated, and not taking toilet breaks to earn more.



Lalit Balampaki, 28, from Dhanusha was diagnosed with ESRD a year earlier in Dubai. He stays in Kathmandu along with his older brother's family on a rented floor.

Balampaki worked in extreme heat conditions in a smelting factory in Dubai. He had to work

night shifts twice or thrice a week. Sleep deprivation and extended periods without food were part of his daily routine. The pay was good, but his savings have all gone now towards hospital fees.

"More than the money, I earned the disease," says Balampaki.

Suraj Thapa Magar, 30, was the sole breadwinner of his family. He installed aluminum windows and doors in Kuwait

"It was the hottest in summer and coldest in winter," says Magar, who worked for 10 hours a day even in 50°C. He also often neglected hydration, and one night he vomited blood. At 26, he was diagnosed with ESRD and has been in Nepal ever since.

Thapa has no other choice than to rely on the Rs5,000 allowance, but even that is not timely and not enough. He has to take loans to travel for his dialysis. The government hospitals are supposed to provide some medicines for free, but they are often out of stock. Thapa has looked for jobs, but kidney disease is a stigma and no one wants to hire him.

In 2016, Nepal started providing free hemodialysis treatment for the poorest patients. Two years later, a monthly livelihood allowance of Rs5,000 was to be distributed to patients suffering from chronic diseases like dual-kidney failure and cancer.

Free dialysis is provided in

107 hospitals across the country, but that is only in theory. Many facilities do not have nephrologists because the government does not provide salaries. The machines also often are not working because they need constant maintenance.

Among the 11 hospitals that provide free dialysis in Madhes Province, three are in Janakpur. Nepali Times visited the enlisted hospitals but there were no nephrologists to supervise the treatment, and they were run by general physicians or senior nurses.

"The government does not provide adequate salaries for the nephrologists," says Kafle. "That is why nephrologists are mainly affiliated with the private hospitals."

Bagmati Province has 44 hospitals with free dialysis, which is why many dual-kidney failure patients have opted to live in Kathmandu. The hospitals service over 8,000 kidney patients.

Since most of them are migrant workers, the end result is that Nepal's poorly-resourced health system ends up bearing the cost of treating kidneys that failed while working as labourers in hot, rich countries. 🇳🇵

Following some high-profile cases of violence against Nepali female workers in the Gulf, the Nepal government on the recommendation of the International Relations Committee of Parliament banned women from travelling to the region in 2016. But women continue to migrate in the absence of other livelihood options at home, often resorting to illegal routes and at much higher costs.

Gyanu Poudel of the Namuna Integrated Development Council that works in human trafficking and social awareness in Bhairawa says that the risk has increased since the government closed the legal route to migration.

"The government banned women workers from going to the Gulf because of abuse and exploitation but it did not give them an alternative either," points out Poudel. "This ban should be reconsidered to ensure that women go through the legal route safely."

Following the ban, middlemen are now using tourist visas to get women workers to the Gulf. Recruiters also pay immigration officials at Kathmandu airport to look the other way.

Sunita Pahari of Lalitpur reached the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on a tourist visa in August 2023. But unable to land a good job, she jumped from a building three months later. Nearly 300 female migrant workers have died abroad in the past 14 years.

The report by the Ministry of Labour also considers suicide as a major cause of death among Nepali workers in the Gulf and Malaysia. According to the report, 1,187 Nepali migrant workers have died by suicide in

the same period. Of these, 10-15% are women.

Tikaram Dhakal at the Foreign Employment Board says that women who take a backdoor to the Gulf are undocumented and essentially illegal in these destination countries. Nepali embassies there do not have any information on them, which means they have no recourse in case of abuse or exploitation of any form, they are deprived of services and compensation of any kind.

Brokers who take women to India via land and fly them to third countries are known to lure unemployed people in the villages, tempting them with free visa and ticket. Sunita Ram of Jhapa received a similar offer. The broker also told her that she would earn Rs55,000 a month in Kuwait.

Ram made a passport soon after, and before long was at the Sunali border about to cross into India when she was stopped. She wasn't arrested because the broker wasn't with her and instead taken to the Peace Rehabilitation Center, from where she was handed over to her relatives.

Panchamaya Tamang from Sindhupalchok was also lured by a broker with an offer of a free visa and ticket. But when she was trying to cross the border, she was found without necessary documents, and without a middleman. She was sent back home.

Women going for foreign employment via India are between 20-35 years, most of them from ethnic and marginalised communities.

Gyanu Poudel of the Namuna Integrated Development Council cautions aspiring women migrants against tempting offers while also noting, "It seems that the brokers are targeting uneducated women from remote villages." 🇳🇵

For More Information

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RITI STUDIO

# Reviving Nepal's craft

Women united by their roots and vision return to Nepal to set up a sustainable lifestyle business



SANGYA LAMSAL

## ■ Sangya Lamsal

What began as a joint effort to research Nepal's natural resources has now become a global representation of indigenous craftsmanship, and empowering women.

Arati Subba and Samridhi Gurung (pictured) were raised in the UK, had years of experience in the fashion industry, and found themselves in Nepal during the Covid-19 pandemic.

"I always wanted to explore what Nepal naturally offers," says Gurung. "After a lot of research, we discovered that beeswax is a biowaste that lasts three times longer than soy or paraffin wax."

She researched the local market for lifestyle products, and found only paraffin candles for sale. So, they thought, why not create beeswax candles?

Together, they set up Riti Studio and have now diversified from candles to grow into a business in sustainable lifestyle products.

Based in Nepal and Hong Kong, Riti's all-women team now also handcrafts candles, incense sticks, and ceramics. It strives to preserve Nepal's craft traditions.

"Do you know how to hand-roll incense sticks by yourself?" Gurung asks. "My grandmother still does it, but neither my mother nor I know how to do that. So, this is an effort to preserve our generational craft, and take it further."

The entrepreneur duo define their approach as 'slow luxury of artisanal quality' and collaborate

with local artisans. Each ceramic piece, for example, is hand-crafted, reflecting the skill and dedication of those involved.

"Every piece is unique in itself," says Subba. "The design is the same, but the actual printwork, texture, it is all different."

Sustainability remains a key priority, but financial viability is also important. In the early days, the two scoured nearly every honey shop they could find.

Most honey sellers in Nepal also have their own farms where they

source raw materials. Their search extended beyond honey, as they also sought local suppliers for ceramics and packaging.

After finding the right materials, they sampled to ensure quality. Only then did they move to production and marketing, for which Nepali language was a must.

"It was really hard to communicate and try to sound smart in Nepali while meeting with the suppliers at first," she recalls. The language barrier meant some suppliers did not take her seriously in a largely male-dominated society.

Things changed when the men started noticing their professionalism. "Now, the men are much more appreciative of who we are, and we are taken more seriously," adds Gurung.

The name Riti comes from the idea of having one's own little ritual, focusing on self-care and self-love and the Nepali term रीति रिवाज, meaning rituals.

When asked if they had any advice for other entrepreneurs just starting out, Gurung says, "You have to put your head down and get to work. Stop listening to the noise outside and stay focused."

Subba pipes in: "Find what interests you, and make something beautiful out of it." 🇳🇵

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