

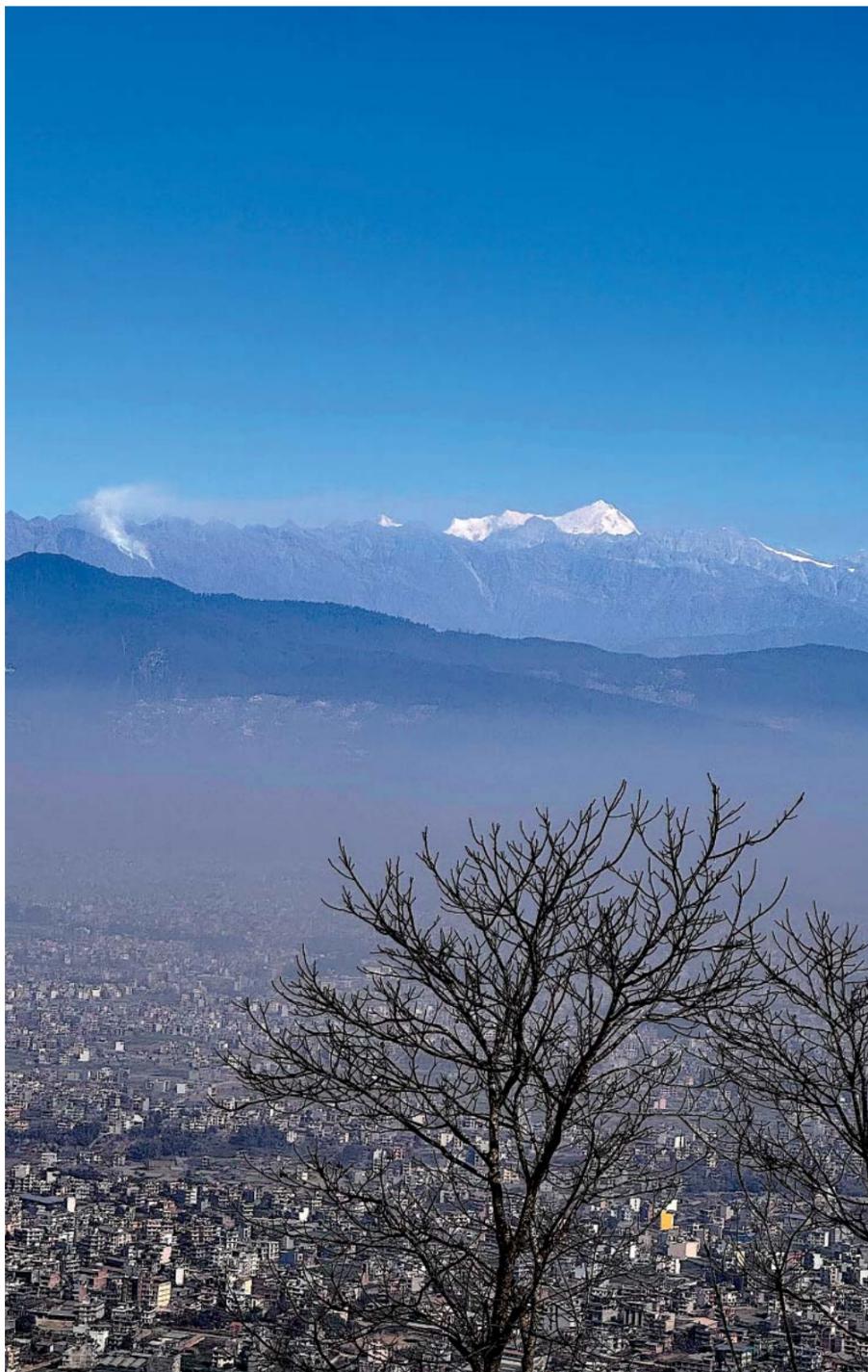


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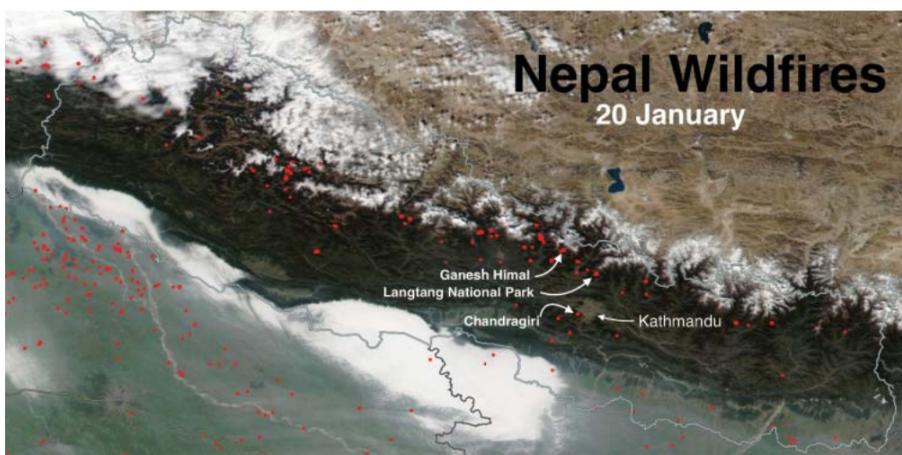
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KUNDA DIXIT



WILDFIRE EARLY-WARNING

Kathmandu Valley got half its annual average rainfall in 36 hours on 28 September last year, unleashing deadly floods. Since then, there has not been a drop of rain.

A prolonged winter drought in central and eastern Nepal, unusually hot conditions, and high winds sparked an early start to the wildfire season.

A NASA Fire Information Resource Management System (FIRMS) infra-red satellite image on 20 January shows at least 85 fires across the country, even in the west where it has snowed and rained in past weeks. The red spots of the three fires in this report can be clearly identified (left, below).

Usually, such fires are lit by grazers in early spring so new shoots sprout from the ashes when the rains come. But lack of soil moisture and high winds fanned the flames up slopes.

Nepal has doubled its forest cover in the past 30 years to 46% of its area. Depopulation of the mountain districts means less harvesting of deadwood and leaves for fodder, so forests have accumulated a lot of flammable dry undergrowth.

Several westerly systems have passed through Nepal since December, but they have dumped precipitation mostly in the western half of the country.

The National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Authority (NDRRMA) has been monitoring the early wildfires, but besides expressing concern about the lack of rain and counting the number of fires, there has not been much by way of preparedness.

Fire prevention needs a nationwide awareness campaign and enforcement, but it is difficult to monitor fires when they are 5,000m up the mountains, like this one at 5,000m in Langtang National Park seen from Kathmandu 45km away on Tuesday morning (pictured, left).

Multiple fires in Dhading sent a plume of smoke that blocked Ganesh Himal from view. Nepal just does not have the resources to fight rapidly spreading wind-driven fires in remote mountainous terrain.

Last spring saw a record number of wildfires across the country in April-May, many of them lasting days and blanketing the sky nationwide with smoke for weeks. The reason then was also an exceptionally dry winter.

When soot particles from wildfire smoke and air pollution are deposited on glaciers and snowfields in the mountains, they cause them to melt faster because of the reduction in their reflectivity.

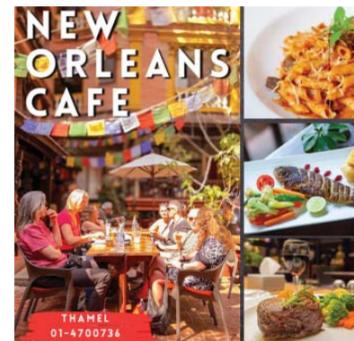
Research on Langtang's Yala Glacier has shown that up to 30% of the melting is due to the ice becoming dirtier, and absorbing more sunlight.

This winter, Nepalis and visitors to Nepal have been greeted by iconic mountains like Machapuchre, Annapurna and Gauri Shankar devoid of snow cover, and looking like black rock pyramids (page 2).

Long-term weather forecasts predict a warmer than usual winter with little chance of precipitation in the coming weeks. This can only mean more wildfires in the mountains. 🇳🇵

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Trump's Second Coming

It has been four days since Donald Trump officially re-entered the White House, and he has already signed executive orders and pardoned dozens of his storm troopers. The best thing you can say is that at least he keeps his promises.

America's election is not just about the United States. The rest of the world does not vote for American presidents, but what they do and do not do has far-reaching consequences for the planet. Quitting the climate deal in the middle of the Los Angeles wildfire calamity, and dropping out of the World Health Organisation (WHO) as the world prepares for the next pandemic is not even in America's own self-interest.



LIN JIAN / X



S JAISHANKAR / X

The presence at the swearing in of tech billionaires, who were seated in front of Trump's own cabinet picks, rammed home the point that America is now a 'siligarchy' (Silicon Valley Oligarchy). Meta's announcement that it will stop fact-checking on Facebook and Instagram will impact Nepali society and politics.

Trump spoke with Chinese president Xi Jinping before his inauguration, and it seems to have been a meeting of minds between the two authoritarians: the TikTok ban was immediately halted. For all the bluster and brinkmanship, Trump's threats against China appear to be just bargaining.

Trump invited President Xi for his inauguration, who sent his deputy Han Zheng (with Elon Musk on Sunday, above left). India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar was also present (above right with Marco Rubio, Trump's new Secretary of State).

For Nepal, the impact of Trump's second term will be governed by how US relations with India and China develop in the next five years. Having said that, the US Embassy in Kathmandu has always held importance beyond Nepal to serve as a Tibet listening-post. If the Trump-Xi bonhomie grows, it will affect US support for the Tibet freedom movement, and the Dalai Lama succession question (page 4-5).

Meanwhile, Trump is expected to continue Joe Biden's strategy of holding a slightly reluctant India in its Indo-Pacific embrace to counter China's growing economic and military influence in the region.

Trump has not followed through on his threats of tariffs on Chinese imports from "day one". This suggests a less hostile and more pragmatic approach towards Beijing. But that did not mean he held back criticism of China in his speech: notably when he blamed China for being a big polluter and

pulling out of the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, and not paying more to WHO.

It is true that China has become the world's largest greenhouse gas emitter, although in per capita terms it is still much below the US. China also leads in global renewable energy efforts, it is the biggest manufacturer and exporter of EVs, and has made photovoltaics, lithium batteries and wind turbines affordable to the world.

One can dismiss territorial claims on Panama, Greenland and the 'Gulf of America' as deranged, but his "drill, baby, drill" and "frack away, Pennsylvania" all promise to keep America as the world's top producer of fossil fuels.

America's election is not just about the United States, it affects the whole planet.

As a consequence, America itself will see more weather extremes. But it will be countries like Nepal at the frontlines of the climate emergency that will pay the heaviest price.

Last year was the warmest year on record as global temperatures exceeded 1.5°C above pre-industrial level for the first time – that target was set to be met by 2050 in Paris ten years ago. Nepal has experienced its warmest January yet this year, and the wildfire season has started early (page 1).

Another direct impact on Nepalis will be Trump's executive order to end birthright citizenship for children of undocumented immigrants. The crackdown at the Mexican border will affect hundreds of Nepalis taking the backdoor to reach America. Stricter immigration will also affect tens of thousands of Nepalis who are currently in the US or are planning to go study there.

Budget cuts will affect USAID outlays for reproductive health, human rights and social welfare, and US withdrawal from being the largest donor of WHO will mean less funding for Nepal.

But Washington will also lose its moral high ground in Nepal on issues like transitional justice, human rights, democracy and press freedom. Nepal was already feeling less pressure from the West on those issues, and it has been incrementally aligning itself with curbs on freedoms in resurgent neighbours, India and China.

It was already hypocritical for the US to espouse freedom and democracy in the rest of the world after its refusal to call Israel out on its war crimes in Gaza. Trump will take credit for the Gaza ceasefire, and will lean on Ukraine to accept peace terms with Russia.

By the looks of it, Trump is just getting started.

Shristi Karki

ONLINE PACKAGES



DYING TO WORK OVERSEAS

Jagdish Sah, 35, is a migrant returnee who has been on haemodialysis for seven years. Gaunt and frail, he cannot work anymore, and his father has had to go back to selling popcorn by the sidewalk. In Malaysia, he worked in a garment factory, often overtime without regular toilet breaks and little water. One-fourth of all kidney patients in Nepal are migrant returnees. Watch video on our YouTube channel.



HOME DELIVERIES

Sarlahi district, and Madhes Province overall, still have a high number of women giving birth at home. But more women are using health facilities to be as healthy as possible for safe delivery. Watch the video on our YouTube channel and subscribe for multimedia content.

WILDFIRES

Eight years ago, two front-page headlines included the election of Donald Trump, and that Kathmandu's pollution was on track to rival Delhi's ('Wildfire season starts early in Nepal', Kunda Dixit, Page 1). The former has been repeated today, but I hope we can avoid the second one as we head into forest fire season.

Bhushan Tuladhar

There needs to be enough intervention in protected areas to discourage the growth of invasive vegetation. Too much of protection seldom has negative results. Dry vegetation, high temperature and strong wind are a wildfire hazard. Wildfire in the forests and grasslands also kills nesting birds from March onwards.

Rajendra N Suwal

INDIGENOUS TATTOOS

Tattoos are something one notices almost immediately when visiting any Tharu village in southern Nepal ('Inking an identity', Sanjib Chaudhary, #1244).

Bharat Koirala

MIGRANT KIDNEY DISEASE

This is alarming news ('Dirty, Dangerous, Difficult ... and Dehydrating', Pinki Sris Rana, #1244). There need to be urgent attention and measures to educate migrant workers about the risk of kidney disease before they are provided work permits.

Leela Mani Paudyal

TIGER NUMBERS

I think it's the PM's existence that's a threat to the Nepali public, not tigers ('Does Nepal have too many tigers', Sudiksha Tuladhar, #1243). What is his logic, and how low will this man go?

Priya Sunuwar Shrestha

Surely unmanaged exponential growth of tigers will soon create real problems. There will soon be a need to manage growth, and the food chain needed to support it.

Tony Jones

DIASPORA DIARIES

Diaspora Diaries is a series that you must keep going ('The tale of four Nepalis in Mumbai', #1243)

Pratap Chhetri

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING

Reviving Nepal's craft

by Sangya Lamsal
Arati Subba and Samridhi Gurung's journey began with a shared passion for researching Nepal's natural resources and evolved into their sustainable lifestyle business Riti Studio to represent indigenous craftsmanship. Read their profile on nepalitimes.com and watch the video.

Most reached and shared on Facebook



Inking an identity

by Sanjib Chaudhary
Many indigenous peoples ink tattoos that respect their culture. Women from the Tharu and Newa communities have tattoos with traditional motifs that tell stories about their ancestry, the natural world, and the afterlife. Read story online.

Most popular on X

Wildfire season starts early

Nepali Times
A prolonged winter drought in central and eastern Nepal has sparked an early start to the annual wildfire season, with multiple fires reported across the country, including around Kathmandu Valley. Read analysis on page 1 and see photos online.

Most commented

Dirty, Dangerous, Difficult ... Dehydrating

by Pinki Sris Rana
Excessive desert heat in the Gulf or the humidity of Malaysia's tropical jungles, poor diet, dehydration and unhealthy lifestyles contribute to higher risk of kidney failure among Nepali migrant workers. Join the online discussion and watch the video on our YouTube channel.

Most visited online page

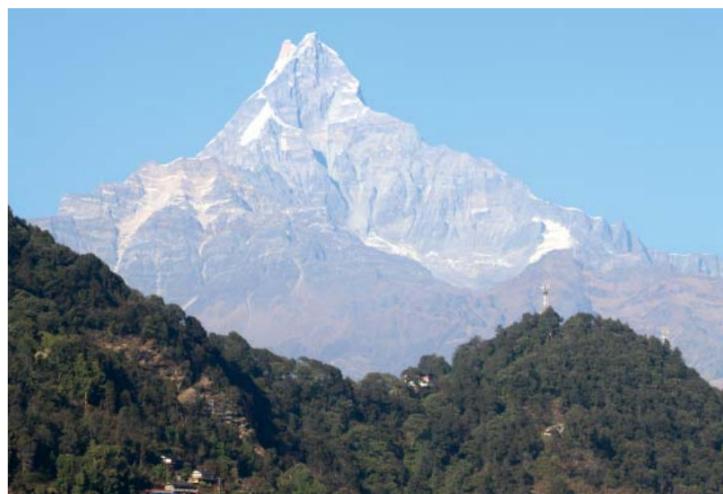
QUOTES

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
A prolonged winter drought in central and eastern Nepal has sparked off an early start to the annual wildfire season, with multiple fires reported across the country, including around Kathmandu Valley. All photos: @kundadixit

Kashish Das Shrestha कशिश दास श्रेष्ठ
@kashishds
Last spring saw a record number of wildfires across the country in April-May, many of them lasting days and blanketing the sky with smoke. The reason then was also an exceptionally dry winter.

Amish Mulmi @amish973
So it begins.

1,000 WORDS



HARI PRASAD BASTOLA / RSS

ROCKY MOUNTAIN HIGH:
Mt Machhapuchhre (6,993m) is devoid of snow as seen from Deurali of Kaski on Sunday. Even the snow that fell last week has already melted.

Nepal is experiencing its warmest January so far, and the prolonged winter drought has sparked off an early start to the annual wildfire season. (Story: Page 1).

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Earthquake Preparedness

The December 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami led to an increased awareness about earthquake preparedness among Kathmandu residents. Since then, Nepal has experienced one major and many moderate earthquakes and there is a looming seismic gap in western Nepal. This year we also marks the tenth anniversary of the 7.8M earthquake in 26 April 2015 that killed over 9,000 people.

Excerpts of the report published 20 years ago this week on issue #231 21 - 27 January 2004:

Some good comes out of even the most tragic events. Publicity of the havoc created by the Sumatra earthquake and the tsunami it unleashed in the Bay of Bengal last month has done more for earthquake awareness in Kathmandu than anything else in recent times.

That is why Mona Pradhan, 33, took her husband to Mangal Bajar this week to visit the Seventh Annual Earthquake Safety Exhibition. Mona was quizzing mason, Janak Maharjan, about the exact construction methods



he used to make a life size demonstration earthquake-resistant model of brick walls and reinforced concrete beams.

"We are building a house and we wanted to make sure it can withstand earthquakes," she told us.

Nepal Society for Earthquake Technology (NSET) which has been organising the annual exhibitions since 1998 to coincide with the great earthquake of 1934 which flattened Kathmandu Valley and killed more than 10,000 people. But this year, organisers say, there was unprecedented interest on new building techniques and disaster preparedness.

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



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ENGLAND

What (or who) after the Dalai Lama?

The Dalai Lama succession question has uncertain implications for Nepal

■ Sudiksha Tuladhar

In December, the Nepal government announced it would not allow a Beijing-appointed Tibetan spiritual leader, the Panchen Lama, to attend a Buddhist conference in Kathmandu. Immigration at the airport was put on high alert to ensure he did not try to sneak in.

Coming soon after Prime Minister K P Oli's visit to China, that decision underscored Nepal's precarious tight-rope act in addressing religio-political sensitivities in its relations with China. The Panchen Lama episode can be seen as a test for Nepal's handling of the succession of the Dalai Lama, who turns 90 in July.

"When the time comes to find a successor to the Dalai Lama, Nepal will face a larger policy dilemma," predicts Sudheer Sharma, author of two recent books on Nepal-China relations. "The government is still unclear what it will do if the successor is chosen from the Tibetan community in Nepal, or from China or India."

The Dalai Lama is the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism and a symbol of Tibetan identity; he is revered as the manifestation of Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. He was born in 1935 in northeastern Tibet and was formally recognised as the Dalai Lama in 1940.

He has been living in exile in Dharamsala for the past 65 years after fleeing Lhasa following the Chinese takeover. He has been allowed to make a low-profile visit to Lumbini only once in 1987, and never after that due to objections from China.

Nepal does not have a national strategy to handle the presence of religious leaders. If there are policies, they are ad-hoc or undeclared, depending on the government of the day in Kathmandu. The Nepal government, under Chinese



TEMPORAL REALM: The Dalai Lama presiding over a prayer vigil at the Tashilhunpo Monastery in Karnataka, India, for the victims of the 7 January 7.1 magnitude earthquake epicentred in Xigatse.

TENZIN CHOEJOR

pressure, even prevents public celebrations marking the Dalai Lama's birthday on 6 July.

"The Dalai Lama's attempts to visit Nepal again have been stopped since Nepal thinks he is not only a religious leader, but a political figure as well," says Sharma. "There is no discussion in Nepal's political circles regarding the succession of the Dalai Lama. The topic is regarded as a non-issue."

Over the years, the Dalai Lama has made various statements regarding his succession. At times, he has suggested that he will write a will to select a successor from within the Tibetan community. On other occasions, he has hinted that the next Dalai Lama could be chosen from a "free country", and

could even be a woman.

The Panchen Lama succession in 1995 could provide a hint about how the post-Dalai Lama era will play out. The Panchen Lama is the second most important spiritual leader in Tibetan Buddhism, and heads the Tashilhunpo Monastery in Xigatse, the epicentre of the 7 January earthquake, located 250km away from Lhasa.

The Panchen Lama traditionally has the role of finding the next Dalai Lama, but the previous Panchen Lama (Lobsang Trinley Lhundrup Choekyi Gyaltsen) has been missing since 1995, after the Chinese installed their own candidate (Gyaltsen Norbu). The present Panchen Lama's visits are carefully planned, and he has made

only one foreign visit so far, to Thailand.

"Nepal did not permit Panchen Lama's visit as he is Chinese Communist Party-appointed, thus making him a political figure," says Amish Mulmi, author of the book *All Roads Lead North*.

What China was trying to do through the Panchen Lama's visit for the Nanhai Conference in Kathmandu last month was to project its soft power, and perhaps prepare the ground for the Dalai Lama succession. But the ban raised the question of what Nepal will do if there is a visit by Hindutva figures from India at events in Nepal.

Religious leaders and figures from various faiths regularly visit

Nepal for devotional events, meetings and conferences. Their trips are often significant for promoting dialogue and cultural exchange, and cannot be banned under the Constitution.

"We did the Nanhai Conference, and in future religious leaders will definitely visit Nepal. The question arises whether or not to allow them to engage in political activities or not," says Mulmi. "Religion has always been political. So Nepal must not take easy decisions and must think it through."

Although Nepal and Tibet fought wars in the past two centuries, they share deep-rooted and ancient cultural, religious and trade ties. After the Chinese

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Turkish to Benghazi

Turkish Airlines relaunched its Istanbul-Benghazi flights with B737-78D aircraft on 14 January, offering three weekly frequencies. The carrier now offers flights to 64 destinations in Africa. "We are delighted to resume flights to Benghazi, where we share historical ties," said Turkish Airlines CEO Bilal Eksi.

BYD Exchange

Authorised BYD distributor Cimex is running a nationwide exchange fest from 22-26 January. Customers can get exchange and loyalty bonuses when trading in their current vehicle for a BYD ATTO, Dolphin or M6, and can also get free accessories and charger installation.

Skyworth Sapana

Ravi Aryal won a MG Comet EV as the bumper prize of the Smart Appliances Skyworth Sapana SaCar campaign. Customers across Nepal had participated in this program, winning weekly microwaves.

Sunsilk Vibes

Sunsilk's My Hair, My Vibes social media contest invited participants to share their creative hairstyles. Akriti Aryal, Manisha Lama, and Suhana Thakur were the three winners. Each collected a Rs100,000 cash prize and became brand ambassadors for Sunsilk.

Deepal S07L

MAW Vriddhi launched the Deepal S07L e-SUV, which has a range of 485km, a top speed of 180km/h, and a 0-100 time of 6.6s. The vehicle is available at Rs8.19 million



until 25 January, after which it will rise to Rs8.49 million. Bookings before the deadline also get free road tax, Autoplus insurance, and a 7kW charger. This model is an upgrade on the popular S07.



Nabil Blankets

With the winter cold setting in, Nabil Bank distributed blankets to people in Jajarkot and Rukum West affected by the November 2023 6.4 earthquake. The bank had also worked with the local governments to construct 96 shelters for impacted families in Nalgad and Chaurjahari.

Ad Agencies unite

Leading advertising and consultancy agencies CREO and Strategy Central have partnered to help local Nepali companies compete with multinational brands. CREO is a part of ad company Outreach Nepal, and Strategy Central is the strategy consulting unit of the ADCOMM Group based in Bangladesh.

New Hyundai Creta

Two variants of the new Hyundai Creta EV will arrive in Nepal by the end of February. The models have ranges of 390km and 473km, ample ground clearance, regenerative braking, and 11kW AC home charging which delivers a full charge in four hours.

KOICA Volunteers

Four volunteers from the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) have arrived in Kathmandu, and will assist in special-needs education, tourism, and health projects in Kailali and Baglung. A total of 489 KOICA volunteers have come to Nepal since the program began in 1990.

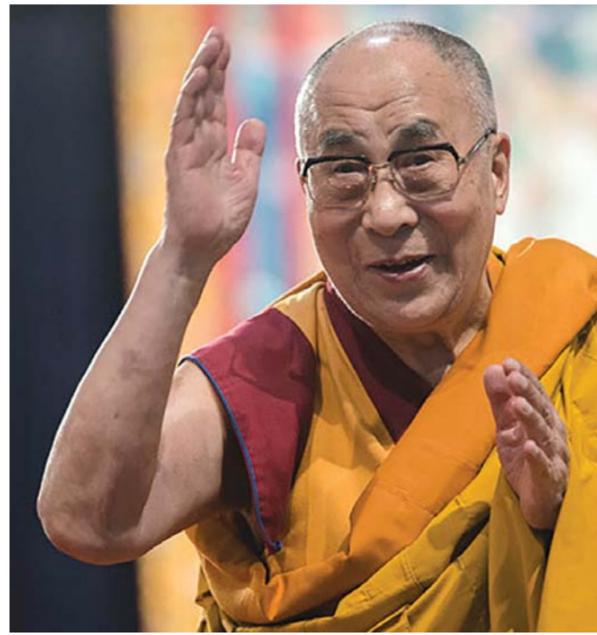
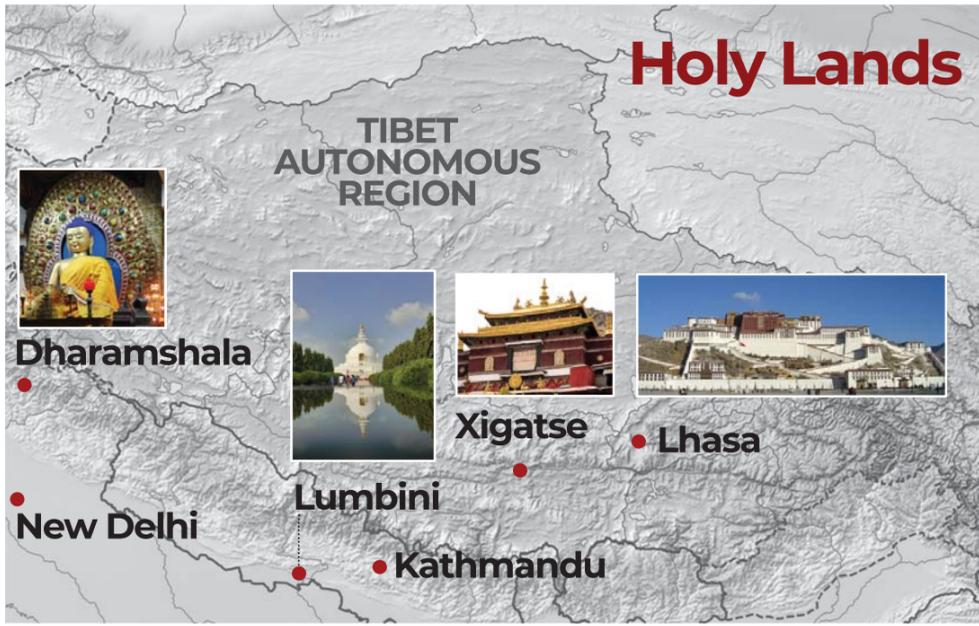
PATA in New Delhi

Representatives from the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) Nepal visited New Delhi in preparation for the Nepal-India-China Expo (NICE) to be held 24-26 February in Pokhara. The visit was aimed at strengthening partnership with PATA India and other tourism bodies.



Barahi TOFTiger

Hotel Barahi in Kathmandu has received Travel Operators For Tigers (TOFTiger) certification for its sustainability plans, including measures to save water and energy as well as waste management. Its contribution to employment generation and promotion of local craftsmanship was also noted. The South Asia Travel Awards 2024 also recognised Barahi as the region's Best New Hotel.



CHINA NEWS SERVICE

THEIR HOLINESSES: The Dalai Lama, who will be 90 in July (left), and China-installed Panchen Lama (above). Traditionally, it is the Panchen Lama who has a role in finding a new Dalai Lama.

TENZIN CHOEJOR

annexation of Tibet 70 years ago, Kathmandu gradually started dealing directly with Beijing.

Today, Nepal is the only country with a consulate in Lhasa, a city from where the only direct international flight is to Kathmandu.

Over the years, these ties have evolved, with shifts in trade dynamics and people-to-people interactions reflecting broader regional and global changes. Despite this, the historical bond between Nepal and Tibet remains a significant aspect of present-day bilateral relations with China, and this is why the selection of the next Dalai Lama has resonance here.

“It is clear that China has been trying to adopt Tibetan Buddhism as a soft power. It is trying to co-opt Tibetan Buddhism on the lines of China’s ambitions and narratives,” explains Mulmi.

The Dalai Lama’s considerable following in Nepal, India, Europe and the United States is an irritant for Beijing. Recent Sino-American tensions have therefore given the spiritual ownership of Tibetan Buddhism a geopolitical dimension, and in this the Dalai Lama succession will become an important factor.

Relations between Washington and Beijing during the second Trump term will have a bearing on this (Editorial, page 2).

As a buffer state between India and China, Nepal has historically tried to maintain equidistance between the two powers.

But China has rarely stuck its neck out for Nepal. Despite repeated requests for military help during its war with the British East India Company in 1814-16, the emperor in Beijing refused.

Explains Sudheer Sharma:

“China did not want to get involved with the British. They thought of their own national interests then, and they are thinking of their own national interests now with India.”

During the Khampa Uprising in the 1960s, Kathmandu was also squeezed between American support for the guerrillas and China’s objections to Nepal being used as a base. But with the Nixon-Mao rapprochement in 1972, the Americans stopped helping the Khampas. Nepal then yielded to pressure from Mao Zedong to mount a military campaign to drive them out.

Nepal was left to manage and host Tibetan refugees, and balance that with China’s security concerns. Explains Amish Mulmi: “Nepal has pretty much done everything China has asked to do, including deporting Tibetans.

China doesn’t need to be insecure, but Nepal needs to maintain a careful balance.”

Today, despite Donald Trump’s chest-thumping and threats of a tariff war against Beijing, he and Chinese President Xi Jinping are on the same page regarding democracy and freedoms. Which may mean Washington could once more leave the Tibetans in a lurch, and this could have a direct bearing on the Dalai Lama succession sequence.

The United States’ shifting foreign policy has often been criticised for leaving allies and partners to fend for themselves. Trump may revive his pressure on Japan, Korea and Taiwan to pay for the US defence umbrella.

Nepal’s stance on the Tibetan community relies on marking boundaries and offering protection. During Chinese President Xi Jinping’s visit to Nepal, China

proposed that Nepal sign an extradition treaty which Nepal politely refused.

“Nepal has tactfully not let the Chinese side extend a longer hand on the Tibetan issue,” says Sharma. “Possibly, we are learning our lessons from history.”

The question of who will choose the successor to the Dalai Lama will be decided by geopolitics, and China’s increased stature as a global economic power.

Beijing could insist on sticking to tradition to let its candidate for the Panchen Lama make the final decision. This would allow it to move the seat of the Dalai Lama from Dharamshala back to Lhasa.

The present Dalai Lama could also appoint his own candidate, but that person will not be allowed into Tibet by China. In that case, we may have a situation where there are two Dalai Lamas. 🇨🇳




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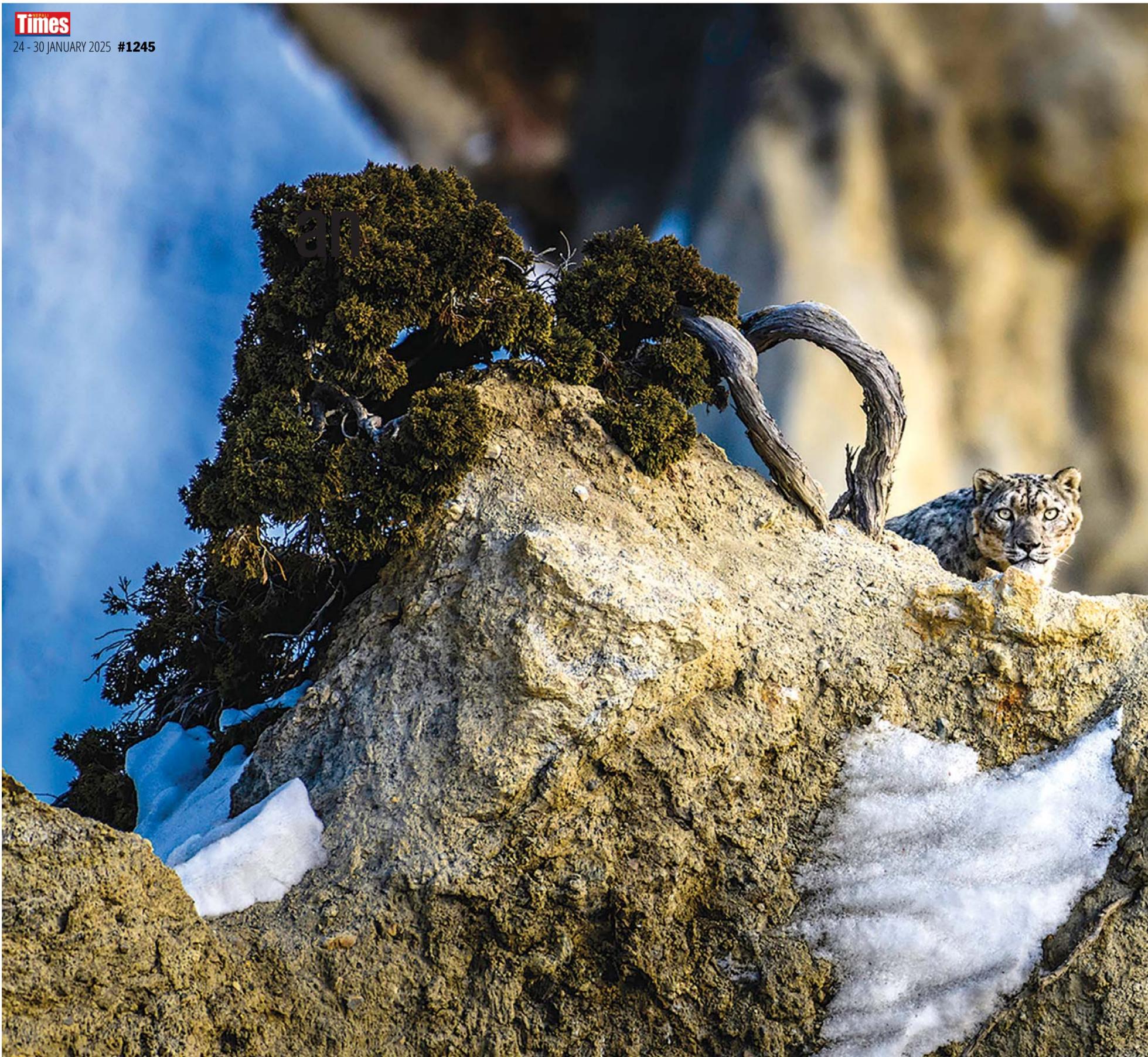
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Ghosts of the Himalaya

After saving its tigers and rhinos, Nepal now invests in snow leopard conservation

■ **Sonia Awale**

They are rare, they are elusive and they are so well camouflaged, they are difficult to see, even when they are right there. That is why snow leopards are called the ‘Ghosts of the Himalaya’. And because they are also regarded as being sacred, they are called ‘God’s Pets’.

Nepal has tripled its tiger population in 12 years since 2010. There have been successive years with zero rhino poaching and the numbers have bounded back. But few know about the country’s success story with snow leopard conservation.

Preliminary data from an on-

going census shows that Nepal ranks fourth among the 12 snow leopard range countries in central and South Asia. This is despite the country having just 2% of the total area where snow leopards can be found.

Nepal also leads in snow leopard research. Less than 3% of the snow leopard range has been studied through camera traps and genetic studies, but it is Nepal that has done the most. Over 100 Years of Snow Leopard Research by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in 2021 showed that 74% of the snow leopard habitat in northern Nepal has been the subject of research into the species.

“We are leading globally when it comes to snow leopard

conservation and study, starting from 1993 in Kanchenjunga using GPS to study their habitat,” says Ghana S Gurung of WWF Nepal. “We also found via camera traps they went as high as 5,800m and as low as 2,600m.”

There are an estimated 300-500 snow leopards across high mountain Nepal with Dolpo, Manang and Kanchenjunga the main hotspots for the endangered species. Unlike with tigers and rhinos which are poached by wildlife traffickers, snow leopard killings are mostly retaliatory for killing livestock.

Snow leopards attack yaks, sheep and goats of herding communities in the mountains. One of the most effective methods to protect the species from traps and poisoning is to help local communities build mesh wire corrals. The San Francisco-based Snow Leopard Conservancy through the Nepal group Mountain Spirit has designed and tested portable corrals that can move with herders.

“They move all year around so that the livestock have enough pasture to graze on, which is why it was important that our improved corrals could be dismantled and moved around,” explains Shailendra Thakali of the Snow

LEOPARD CENSUS

Estimated snow leopard populations in Nepal



World snow leopard population:
4,000-6,500

■ 50% of China’s snow leopard habitat is now protected

■ Half of Mongolia’s snow leopard habitat remains unexplored

Despite possessing only 2% of the snow leopard range across central and South Asia, Nepal has the fourth highest nu



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Best number of the elusive mammals in the world.



PURNA MAN SHRESTHA

GOD'S PETS: High altitude wildlife photographer and conservationist Tashi R Ghale captured this shot (left) of a snow leopard watching him from a crag in Manang.

Improved corrals in Manang and Mustang made of mesh wire to protect livestock from snow leopard attacks (above). The corrals are portable allowing herders to move them as they take livestock for grazing in high Himalayan pastures.

Leopard Conservancy.

The team consulted herders in Manang and Mustang while developing the corrals based on traditional design, with a stone base but wire mesh on the sides and the roof as well as strong wire gates for secure closure. They are also using fox lights to deter activities at night.

Tourism and agriculture in Manang and Mustang dropped during the pandemic, and the Conservancy also helped herder communities with alternative livelihoods.

"We trained them in basic hotel business such as lunch management skills but more importantly to restore abandoned pastures by planting jimbu which is highly valued for cooking in Kathmandu and Pokhara," says Brian Peniston, also with the Snow Leopard Conservancy. "The tourist figures have now doubled to 500,000 and this has directly benefited 1,000 households in three municipalities."

WWF Nepal has also collaborated with the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DPNWC) to train locals in Dolpo and Kangchenjunga to make their own mesh wire corrals with subsidies on raw materials.

WWF has partnered with Amchi traditional medicine practitioners to promote conservation of snow leopard in mountain communities where people trust faith healers. School eco-clubs also involve youth in conservation.

"We must trust communities

and promote local ownership when it comes to wildlife conservation, and if it were not for the communities there, snow leopards would be long gone," says Gurung of WWF Nepal. "It is important to revive the belief that snow leopards are sacred because they are god's pets, tie them up with the spiritual, cultural and traditional belief of the people."

Community-managed livestock insurance schemes have attained zero retaliatory killings in Kangchenjunga where WWF and the government has sent up an endowment worth Rs10 million to compensate herders for snow leopard kills. A similar scheme is being implemented in Dolpo which has double the density of snow leopards compared to Kangchenjunga.

But the compensation mechanism is cumbersome and often inefficient. Claimants need to provide photographic evidence with tags of the livestock still attached but snow leopards often go for the head and tags are lost. The evidence has to be submitted promptly, and this is difficult for herders in isolated villages.

Insurance agents are based in headquarters like Chame in Manang and are not willing to travel all the way up. Similarly, photographic evidence needs to be assessed by veterinarians who are also reluctant to go to remote areas that take up days.

"The compensation policy hasn't changed in the last 20 years," says Tashi R Ghale, high-altitude wildlife photographer and conservationist. "Here in Manang, herders would get Rs6,000 in compensation for a yak when the market rate was Rs20,000. The market rate is now Rs150,000 but they still get only Rs6,000. Even then, they have to wait for months."

Brian Peniston feels improving and tailoring compensation suitable to the landscape is of utmost priority, and the schemes need to be more accessible and effective as well as herder friendly. He adds, "Local governments should be

handed authority in these matters, and it should be equal parts trust and verify. It is over-verification at the moment."

Climate breakdown has added to the challenge of snow leopard conservation. Either blizzards or winter droughts mean fewer prey for the mountain cats, this in turn has also led to leopards preying on livestock. Usually, the wild prey to livestock ratio in a snow leopard diet is 70:30.

Blue sheep are the main prey species for snow leopards, but there is now competition with lowland spotted leopards which have moved up the mountains, while the Himalayan wolf has descended. The prey density may not have decreased, but predator species have more than doubled.

Other disrupters include overharvesting of yarsagumba and increased movement in this fragile landscape, with adverse impacts on all wildlife, not just snow leopards. Expansion of the road network to the remotest corners of the country is another concern, adding to the risk of human-wildlife conflict and poaching.

"There has been much research on snow leopard behaviour in the last 30 years but what we haven't done nearly enough is study human behaviour," says Peniston.

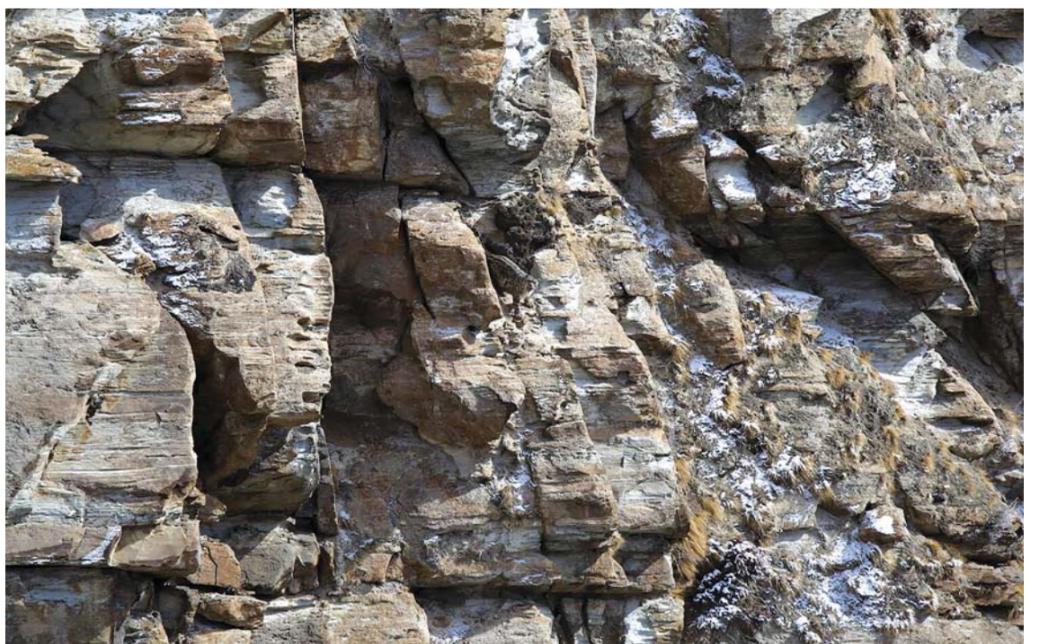
Despite the challenges, the rebound of snow leopard populations has increased the opportunity to snow leopard viewing eco-tourism, as is being practiced in Dolpo.

Says Tashi R Ghale, who won the Rolex Award 2021 for his conservation work in Humla: "Local communities here in Manang and Dolpo are doing what they can, but the Nepal Tourism Board needs to step in to promote snow leopard trekking and tourism. The co-benefits would motivate communities to protect the big cats." 🇳🇵

 nepalitimes.com

More photos online.

FIND ME: Elusive in nature, snow leopard sightings are rare and often detected only on camera traps. Spot the snow leopard in this picture taken by conservationist Tshiring Lhamu Lama in Dolpo, a hotspot for the big cats in Nepal.



TSHIRING LHAMU LAMA

EVENTS

**Jay Nepal Cup**

The International Inter-University T20 Jay Nepal Cup 2025 will have eight participating universities from Nepal, India, and Bangladesh. One tree will be planted for each run scored in the tournament.
Tickets: Rs100, TU Cricket Ground

Art exhibition

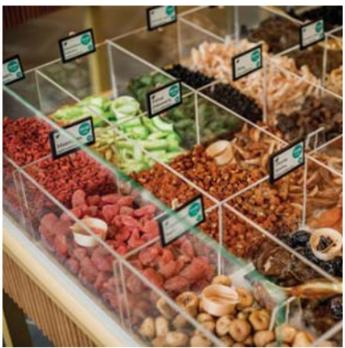
Don't miss out on the art exhibition Who Are You that celebrates the works of inner landscapes by KC Subesh and Mukhiya Sakridh.
24 January, 5:30pm onwards, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal Revisited

**Joke Jatra**

Attend the stand-up comedy special by Punchline Production this weekend for some much-needed laughter.
26 January, 12pm onwards, Tickets: Rs150+, Prithvi College, Pokhara

Feminine Futures

Ten leading voices in feminist art explore art, activism, and South Asian womanhood and offer new perspectives on destabilising normal frameworks of gender and its representations, in the exhibition Feminine Futures.
25 January, 4pm onwards, Taragon Museum

**Expo & Food Fest**

Be part of an exciting blend of culture, music, and food fiesta at the School Meet Expo 2.0 Cultural Food Fiesta 2025.
31 January, 10am onwards, Bhrikutimandap

DINING

**Kairos Cafe**

With its customisable breakfast, variety of juicy burgers, and an assortment of Italian, Spanish and English cuisine, Kairos Cafe is a must for all the foodies.
Jawalakhe, 9813493902

MUSIC

Small Room Rave

Vibe with Falcon and Funky Rabbit at the Small Room Rave. Entry is free.
29 January, 8pm onwards, Cafe Musicology, Lalitpur

**Kuma Sagar**

Enjoy the soulful music of Kuma Sagar & The Khwopa live.
31 January, 5pm onwards, Tickets: Rs500, Harisiddhi Newsuli

Live at Attic

Experience Sangharsha Band live every Friday night at Attic.
24 January, Until 10pm, Attic, Gyaneshowr

**Music Fest**

Get ready for an exciting live musical extravaganza with artists including Sabin Rai & the Pharaoh, Sushant ra Raga, and Jamesy.
25 January, 5pm onwards, Tickets: Rs700, New Road Mainstreet, Pokhara

**EDEN Live Session**

Experience an unforgettable and intimate evening under the stars with music from Pahlenlo Batti Muni.
24 January, 7pm onwards, Eden Amphitheater, Sanepa

**Dip In Donuts**

The delicious handmade donuts at Dip In Donuts will leave you craving for more.
Jhamsikhel Road, 9851249944

La Mari

Find freshly baked goods with a Parisian flair at this chic pâtisserie.
Hotel Ambassador, Lazimpat, 9801022302 / Gairidhara, 9801321215

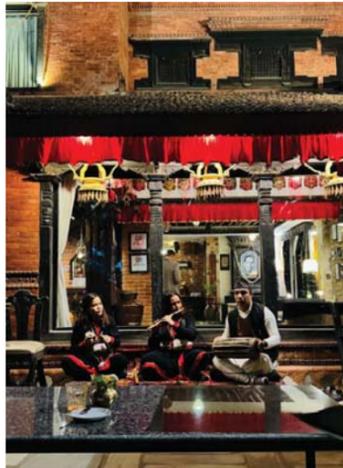
GETAWAY

**Atithi Resort & Spa**

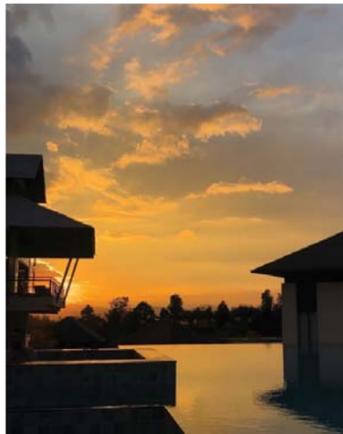
Take a break at Atithi, a quiet sanctuary for that fuses Nepali hospitality with modern amenities.
Lakeside, Pokhara, 985 1160080

Hotel Country Villa

Sat atop Nagarkot, Hotel Country Villa provides spectacular views at sunrise and sunset. A relaxing retreat for those wishing to escape the pandemonium of Kathmandu,
Nagarkot (01) 6680127/28

**Hotel Heritage Bhaktapur**

A Newari-style boutique hotel offers culture and comfort in the ancient city of Bhaktapur.
Suryabinayak, Bhaktapur (01) 6611628

**Dusit Thani Himalayan Resort**

Book an escapade to the lush emerald tapestry of Dusit, just an hour away from Kathmandu.
Dhulikhel, 9768437590

Soaltee Westend Premier

Located in the green plains of Nepalgunj, this resort is perfect for those seeking an eco-friendly getaway.
Nepalgunj (081) 551145

The Bell Bar & Bistro

Pick your favourite from handcrafted pizzas, panuozzi, pastas, steaks, and desserts at The Bell Bar & Bistro.
Jhamsikhel, 9806145807

**Achaar Ghar**

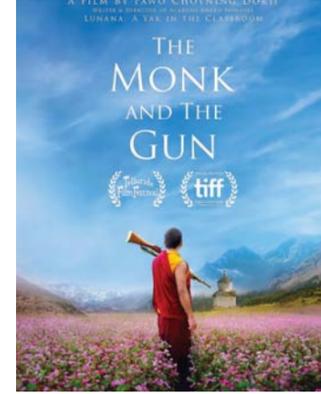
Nothing beats Achaar Ghar's home-cooked meal with an assortment of pickles to compliment it.
Kamalpokhari (01) 5916968

WEEKEND WEATHER



FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY
20° 4°	21° 4°	19° 4°	19° 5°	19° 5°

Warmest January
After an unusually warm winter January, Kathmandu Valley is looking at more normal temperatures in the coming days. The trend forecast for the weekend and next week is that the maximum temperature will drop to 20° C from the 25° C we saw this week. Minima will fall to 4-5° C. Some passing clouds on Sunday will make it colder. More importantly, there are no westerlies on the horizon, expect this four-month dry spell to continue and look out for wildfires (page 1).

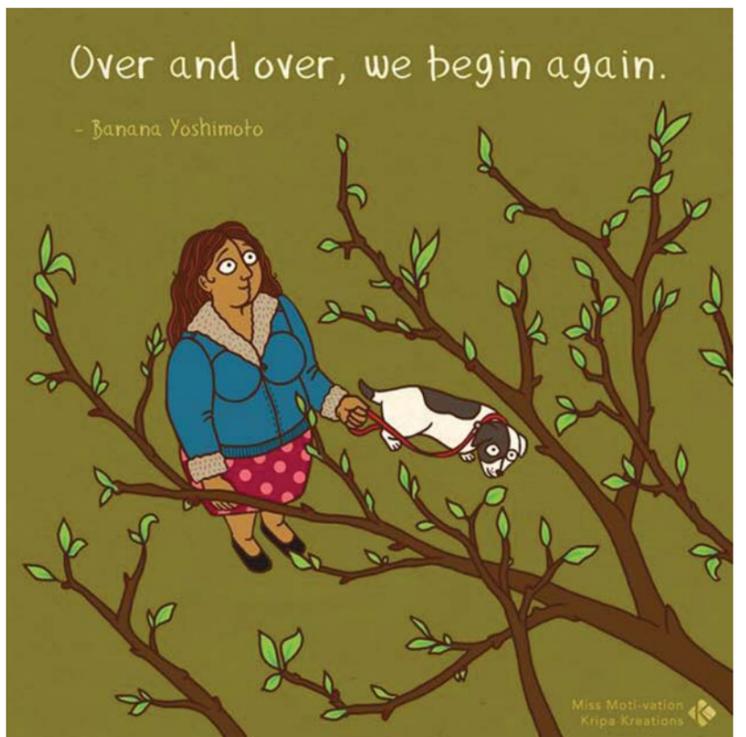


OUR PICK

Pawo Choyning Dorji's 2023 film The Monk and the Gun tells the story of Tashi, a young monk from the town of Ura who is tasked by his teacher to procure firearms in anticipation of the impending 2006 Bhutan election. As the young man sets out on his journey to acquire the weapons, he crosses paths with American Ron Coleman, who has arrived in Bhutan in search of an antique rifle for his client back home. Stars Tandin Wangchuk, Deki Lhamo, Pema Zangmo Sherpa, Tandin Sonam, and Harry Einhorn.

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

One more to remember

This is my baby, please take good care of him, she said.

On a very still wintry morning in Kathmandu, a black and white puppy bobbed about the pavement along Jamal. The municipality workers had just started sweeping the streets. Timorous rays of the sun lit the section where the pup had been tied to the railing.



SUBURBAN TALES
Pratibha Tuladhar

The pup, with long dangling ears and the droopiest eyes I've ever seen, tripped over my feet and tugged at my shoelace. I giggled. Tried to pick him up. A woman stepped out from one of the shops on the pavement.

Mickey! She called out and the pup went towards her, staggering with the weight of his ears. She picked him in her arms and took him inside. I followed.

She let me pet him for a bit. He nibbled at everything he could dig his teeth into -- my coat, my hands, my hair. I laughed. He likes you, the woman said. Why don't you take him? I can't, I said. I have a dog at home. Get one more, she said.

I fished out my phone, Nokia music express in those days, and called up my friend A. She squealed in joy and said, get him! I said I can't, because there's Cookie. But something transpired quickly during that call and it was decided we would gift the pup to our dear friend P.

Had we asked our friend P if he wanted a pup? No. But in that weird moment that was a phone call, A and I had made a decision that would be the puppy's life, woven into our friend P's. Such unfathomable draw, small moments of whim can sometimes hold.

I walked to the ATM, counted a thin sheaf of thousand rupee notes and handed it to the woman in the shop. Tears suddenly welled-up in her eyes, as though she regretted the decision she had made a minute ago. She held Mickey in her arms, kissed his face a million times and said: Be well! Then turned to me and said: This is my baby, please take good care of him.

I said he was going to be loved well.



Mickey in my arms, I walked towards the microbus stand in Jamal. He leapt up to chew my hair as I took quick steps down the footbridge. Inside the micro, he bit my hands some more. Fellow passengers who said cute and tried to pet him were not spared the attack. By the time I got home my hands were covered in bites.

I showed up on the porch with the droopy-eyed cocker spaniel baby in my arms. Cookie, my golden, who was about four then, glowered first then growled and then barked in jealousy. She wasn't going to make room for him.

I called up P and said I wanted to meet him. He was just back in Kathmandu after wrapping up an eventful life abroad and was

learning to get used to the familiar, all over again. P was so fragile at that time and so loved by A and me, that in our immaturity, we decided a dog would be the answer to everything he sought.

I waited for P outside Bhatbhateni, on one of those steely, airport-like seats. It wasn't a sunny day. When he showed up Mickey was in my arms, biting me when he could, but mostly watching passersby.

P came, stood before us and said: Can I hold him?

There was no Hi, nor whose puppy or girl or boy. Just, Can I hold him? And I remember passing Mickey into P's arms and suddenly feeling like something hard to name had happened.

He's yours, I said. And P sank slowly on the seat next to me like a weight had been dropped over him. But he held Mickey. Said thank you.

A tender boy holding a puppy—if you know this, you have known the sweetness of everything before the world turns us into adults. You know how some images stay in our mind forever? That moment is one of those images for me: of P and Mickey.

P got into a microbus with Mickey. It was the only time I saw the puppy. One day of his life and mine, intertwined. I thought many times to visit him, but never did for no reason.

Yet, in that moment when I handed him over, A and I had thrust a living responsibility into P's arms.

We hadn't asked for permission to do so. We were two reckless girls who assumed it was okay to decide a dog's destiny and in that, somehow, a young man's.

We assumed P would be joyous. And like only a sensitive person would, he embraced the puppy without a fuss, without anger, without rejection, almost as if he had been waiting.

In the weeks that followed, Mickey morphed into his new name: Havoc. Yes, that's who he had become. Cocker spaniels are a hyper breed and the puppy had unleashed his energy into P's home, destroying furniture and upholstery, nibbling at what he could not and chewing down what he could. Something of a little storm had been passed into P's home when we got him Havoc.

Over the years, Havoc went missing twice. The first time he did, a heartbroken P messaged me saying: Havoc is missing! Then he wrote an opinion piece, pining for his lost dog. Havoc eventually came home. He went missing again. There was no op-ed the second time, but he was found.

When P's other dog, Dali went missing, P hoped for such a miracle again. But miracles are liars that elude us when we need them the most. No prayer works. And one is left waiting, hoping something will change and the face of the beloved will be in sight again. But the change only moves even further away. Miracles are liars, Dali didn't return.

Havoc passed away last August. P, from receiving him from my arms to creating a fortress for him in his home, ensured Havoc led a long, eventful life. Last I saw an image of Havoc was of him as a geriatric dog, struggling with the ailments that seem to eventually get all our dogs.

When P told me he passed away, I didn't cry. But I saw an image of the puppy in the morning light in Jamal on a winter's day, leashed to the sidewalk, tripping on his own ears, readily running into a stranger's arms.

Hope you're in peace now after a lifetime of such and such, Havoc. And if you've met Cookie, tell her that now, perhaps you two can become friends? 🐾

Suburban Tales is a monthly column based on real people (with some names changed) in Pratibha's life.

WEATHERCOAT
LONG LIFE
EXTERIOR EMULSION WITH PU & SILICON

**घाम-पानी छेक्छ,
१० वर्ष टिक्छ**

चर्को घामबाट बचाउँछ

मुसलघारे वर्णबाट जोगाउँछ

१० वर्ष वारेन्टी

E-GoN

How going all-digital can make the Nepal government more efficient, and reduce corruption

■ Vishad Raj Onta

E-governance in Nepal was supposed to make the state more efficient and reduce corruption. But going digital has meant that things are harder to get done, and slower. And it has not stopped corruption.

Whether it has to do with biometrics for a new national ID, renew a driving license, obtain a passport, or get property registered, citizens have to shuttle between windows to get work done.

At each stop they are told a different story of the set of documents needed. When they finally have all the papers, there is still a five month wait, although printing and programming a card should really take five minutes.

There is a classic Soviet-era joke in which a Russian goes to buy a car and gets a delivery date for ten years in the future. He asks for an afternoon slot because he's got the plumber coming in the morning.

The whole ordeal is annoying, exhausting, and humiliating. It is also redundant, and does not save any paperwork. A passport should work as citizenship and National ID. There are four different types of private vehicle license plates on the roads, and all are valid.

E-government is inevitable because the digital divide is narrowing around the world. But Nepal's bureaucracy seems to not want to let go of finger prints on lokta paper even though the biometric system is available.

All this inconvenience is one

reason young Nepalis cite for leaving the country. They want to go to a place where they do not have to pay a middleman to get a driving license, and then wait two years for the card to arrive.

Ironically, Nepal's private sector has almost completely switched to digital payments, online shopping, and ride shares. There are 700 Nepali tech companies that code healthcare software, design AI applications, animation, video games for clients abroad. Last year alone, the country earned \$900 million exporting digital products.

It is not that the government is not trying to change things. A recent ordinance allows Nepali companies to have offices and invest abroad. BS 2080-89 has been declared an 'IT Decade'.

"Although great policies are made, the government does not release funds needed to implement them," says IT expert and former police DIG Rajib Subba.

"When you break down the score Nepal has received on the UN EDGI metric, most are because of policy. As we go digital, there need to be laws to define cybercrime."

E-governance specialist Nagesh Badu thinks policy is vital. When local governments are approached about cross-sharing data, they ask for the policy where it says they must comply.

Cross-sharing data is the main point of e-governance. What citizens are giving up in privacy they should expect to get back at least in convenience. It makes no sense to have to give out biometrics and still having to put thumb prints on paper.

"Many e-services are simply used for reporting purposes," Badu says. "If you have a five-column table you can't even create a sixth that gets you averages."

Separate systems for health and education may have records of the same child with no way to cross-reference them. Data is reported, but not used to support decision-making.

"The big problem is that these systems don't talk to each other," says Buda. Subba agrees: "Good e-governance relies on official organisations working together, to link data and get things done."

One reason it is not working is that these systems were made long ago, and without considering that collected data may have several users in various agencies.

Another reason government offices resist digitisation is that data transparency will reveal corruption. Even non-corrupt officials may fear how access to data might affect their jobs. Officials may use the excuse that a server is down, or that



a software does not work, to avoid adopting new systems.

One way to solve the problem is a start-from-scratch approach. The government recently released a 'Formation Order Amendment' for an e-governance commission. Part of it is to build a Data Exchange Platform, that would in theory link these different bases of information.

Another complaint about e-government is in using online forms. When filling out a form to renew a license, for example, it is near impossible to fill it out at home. The assumption is that form-filling middlemen outside the offices have people on the inside who ensure that the form websites only work on their devices or networks.

"It can also simply be because these are ancient systems that were not designed for the scale they currently face," says Badu.

It is assumed in systems engineering that systems have about a 13-year life span. Ten years to become obsolete, and three to make the needed changes. So instead of malice, it may just be that the systems were not maintained over time and hence need an upgrade.

Another factor slowing down e-governance is that policy-makers and bureaucrats do not know about tech, and have no concept of how a system works, or what it takes to maintain and improve.

At the top are political and administrative careerists, instead of people with technical knowledge

The rich get richer and more powerful

A co-winner of the 2024 Nobel Prize for Economics on why wealth is a poor metric for wisdom

■ Daron Acemoglu

Tech billionaires such as Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk are not just among the richest people in human history. They also are exceptionally powerful socially, culturally and politically. Which is why they were sitting near Donald Trump during his inauguration this week (pictured).

This is partly a reflection of the social status that our society attaches to wealth in general, but what matters even more than simple wealth is that these particular billionaires are viewed as entrepreneurial geniuses who exhibit unique levels of creativity, daring, foresight and expertise on a wide range of topics.

Many of them control major means of communication through key social media platforms, and you have something almost unparalleled in recent history.

Some individuals would always have more power than others, but how much power is too much? Once upon a time, power was linked to physical strength or military prowess, whereas now its perquisites usually stem from 'persuasion power', which, as explained in the book *Power and Progress*, is rooted in status or prestige. The greater your status, the more easily you can persuade others.

The sources of status vary greatly across societies, as does the extent to which it is unequally



distributed. In the US, status became firmly linked to money and wealth during the Industrial Revolution, and income and wealth inequality skyrocketed as a result. While there have been periods in which government intervention sought to reverse the trend, US society has always been structured around a steep status hierarchy.

This structure is problematic for several reasons. For starters, the constant competition for status and the persuasion power it confers is largely a zero-sum affair, because status is a 'positional good'. More status for you means less status for your neighbour, and a steeper status hierarchy implies that some people

would be happy while many others are unhappy and dissatisfied.

Moreover, investments in zero-sum activities tend to be inefficient and excessive compared with investments in non-zero-sum activities. Is it better to spend a million dollars on gold Rolex watches or on learning new skills?

Both might have intrinsic value, the beauty of the watch versus the pride of acquiring new knowledge, but the first investment merely signals that you are richer and more capable of conspicuous consumption than others. The second, by contrast, increases your human capital and might also contribute to society.

The first is largely zero-sum, and the second is largely non-zero-sum. Worse, the first can easily get out of hand as everyone spends even more on conspicuous consumption to stay ahead of others.

Commentators often ask why someone with hundreds of millions of dollars would ever need hundreds of millions more. There are few things that you cannot afford if you already have \$500 million, so why long for \$1 billion? Because 'billionaire' is a rank of status.

What matters is not the spending power, but the prestige and power that it confers relative

to one's peers. Under a 'wealth is status' equilibrium, a mad dash by the ultra wealthy to amass ever more wealth becomes inevitable.

There are evolutionary and social bases for linking persuasion power to status and prestige. After all, it is individually rational to learn from people who have expertise, and it is reasonable to link expertise to success.

Moreover, this form of learning is good for communities, because it facilitates coordination and a convergence toward best practices. However, when status is linked to wealth and wealth inequality grows very large, the foundation underpinning expertise starts to crumble.

Consider the following thought experiment. Who has greater expertise on carpentry, a good, master carpenter or a hedge fund billionaire? It seems natural to choose the former, but the more that wealth confers status, the greater the weight attached to hedge fund billionaires' views, even on carpentry.

Or consider a more relevant contemporary example. Whose views on freedom of speech carry more weight today: a tech billionaire, or a philosopher who has long grappled with the issue, and whose evidence and arguments have been subjected to scrutiny by other qualified experts? Millions of people on X have implicitly chosen the former.

The deeper we are drawn into the 'wealth is status' equilibrium, the more we might come to accept



and work experience. This means IT projects are now seeing large levels of corruption, which causes policy-makers shy away from moving any digitisation initiatives forward.

Electronic Files

The lack of expertise also stalls progress. The Dahal government in June 2023 closed down the National Information Tech Centre so it could have a fresh start. However, it took time for work to be done on a replacement body, during which contracted workers were not paid and server licenses expired.

And when executors asked for money to restart efforts, the debate was whether a dissolved body could be given money.

“Someone with tech know-how wouldn’t have made that decision abruptly. They might have had a better exit strategy,” says Badu.

To be sure, Nepal has taken big leaps in digitisation. E-payments by phone are now everywhere: allowing convenient payments of utility bills online. You can even get bailed out of jail via QR code.

On a smaller scale, Subba has an example of a system that took one police report directly to who it needed to go to, saving 12 signature-collection trips for the peon to ‘move’ the file.

“Even that is fantastic progress,” he says. Complaints about the systems can be looked as things to fix instead of as permanent faults.

A fresh announcement is that

the National ID will be available on the Nagarik App, and it can be used to fill out passport and bank forms quicker. The Nagarik App is a good idea in theory: one app that holds different IDs and certificates, and can be used for Singha Darbar passes and lots more. However, the app has got failing reviews online.

“The screen does not proceed to the UI for entering the OTP. Stuck in middle of nowhere. Please, fix the issue,” says one. ‘I’d signed up and uploaded all my documents, but the app made me re-register from the beginning,’ says another. ‘Everytime there is some kind of issue,’ says one frustrated user. ‘I think this app is made by interns,’ another Nepali gets to the point.

With all these systems and

data, there is also the question of security. When all financial systems become digital, so do heists. Computer bank robbers can get into organisations through security flaws in old printers, for example.

“They choose to strike near holidays, which buys them more time to launder the money, often millions of dollars. They transfer funds to high-privacy places and exchange it for casino currency. A heist last Tihar used this strategy,” recalls Subba.

“Data is the new oil,” he adds. Biometric data in the hands of the wrong people can be used to steal identities, authorise bank transactions, or for blackmail. The more places Nepalis have to give their biometrics, the more the chances that their personal data will be leaked.

Sometimes the developers of softwares are corrupt themselves. A supposed passport data breach that involved Nepalis in Saudi Arabia turned out to be orchestrated by a software company to try and get the embassy to adopt new versions of the software.

Other lapses have involved the SUTRA system. Two days of revenue data was simply lost, and had to be re-entered from physical records that were lucky enough to have been preserved.

The government now needs to make IT and e-governance as much of a priority as hydropower or migration. As every Nepali has to engage with the government many times during their life, having an inefficient system collectively wastes colossal amounts of time and resources.

Becoming Singapore

Singapore’s GoBusiness, for example, is an online platform designed to be a ‘one-stop shop’ for those looking to set up businesses. The platform connects business owners to different

government services, including company registration and license applications.

Companies are allowed to have 100% foreign ownership and can be up and running in 1-3 days. The result? High levels of direct foreign investment and more entrepreneurs.

Contrast that to Nepal’s dealings with SpaceX’s Starlink Internet services. Starlink already works in countries like Nicaragua and Nigeria, and adopting it can save the government massive amounts of internet set-up and maintenance, especially in rural Nepal.

But the government decided not to go ahead because of a policy that states that at least 20% of the business should be local.

“We have the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, but it is focused mainly on the communication part,” explains Badu.

India has a Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology. The new Trump government has close ties with the tech industry through Musk, Bezos, Zuckerberg, who were all seated at his inauguration (Editorial, page 2).

Trump’s cabinet includes an AI Czar, and he has already announced a potentially \$500 billion private sector investment project for AI infrastructure in the US.

Digital will be the way things are done, and Nepal better be already on it. Given how fast things change in the tech industry, Nepal and its e-government plans must be ramped up and executed at the highest levels.

Policies need to be more strategic: it should be assumed that new approaches will bring new problems. A smooth, minimal bureaucratic process should become the expected norm and not a pleasant surprise. 🇳🇵

the supremacy of tech billionaires. Yet it is difficult to believe that wealth could be a perfect measure of merit or wisdom, let alone a useful proxy for authority on carpentry or freedom of speech.

Moreover, wealth is always somewhat arbitrary. If the tech sector had not become so central to the economy and if it was not driven by such strong winner-take-all dynamics, today’s tech tycoons would not have become so rich. The fact that Gates and Musk have been taxed less does not make them any wiser, but it certainly has made them wealthier and thus more influential.

While some of the wealthiest individuals do not use their wealth-derived status to influence critical public debates (think businessman Warren Buffett), many do.

Gates, Musk, businessman George Soros and others do not hesitate to weigh in on matters that are important to them, and while it is easy to welcome such contributions from those whom we agree with, we should resist this temptation.

It makes a lot of sense for society to tap into the knowledge and wisdom of those with expertise on a given topic, but it is counterproductive to amplify the status of those who already have plenty of status.

It is not entirely the fault of billionaires that US policy is fueling massive inequality around the world. However, they should bear responsibility if they misuse the immense status that wealth affords them under conditions of rising inequality.

That is especially true when they leverage their status to advance their own economic interest at the expense of others’, or to polarise an already divided society with provocative rhetoric

or status-seeking behaviour.

If unaccountable billionaires already wield too much undue social, cultural and political influence, the last thing we should want is to give them even bigger public forums, for example to Musk through his ownership of X. Instead, we should pursue stronger institutional means of limiting the power and influence of those who are already privileged, as well as reconsider the tax, regulatory and spending policies that created such massive disparities in the first place.

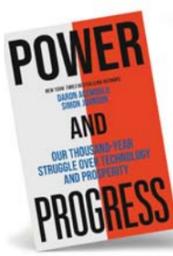
The most important step would also be the most difficult. We need to start having a serious conversation about what we should value, and how we can recognise and reward the contributions of those who do not command vast fortunes.

While most people would agree that there are many ways to contribute to society, and that excelling in one’s chosen vocation ought to be a source of individual satisfaction and the esteem of others, we have disregarded this principle and are at risk of forgetting it altogether.

That, too, is a symptom of the problem. 🇳🇵

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Daron Acemoglu, professor of economics at MIT is the co-winner of the 2024 Nobel Prize for Economics with Simon Johnson with whom he also wrote *Power and Progress: Our Thousand Year Struggle Over Technology and Prosperity*. The other winner was James Robinson.



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My grandfather's footsteps

A Japanese student tracks down the site where his mountaineer grandfather helped build a public facility 25 years ago

■ Sakuya Yamanoi

Growing up in the village of Tochigi in the Japanese island of Honshu where only 17% of people have a passport, little did I dream that one day I would find myself in my 37th country, Nepal.

Nepal is special to me because this is where my quiet, soft-spoken and adventurous grandfather Takeo Yamanoi came in the 1950s to climb peaks. He was a mountaineer, and he loved Nepal and the Himalaya.

My grandfather started climbing

in his high school mountaineering club. In 1950, he was caught in an avalanche that killed four friends and team leader. He was miraculously saved when rescuers saw his fingers in the snow.

Rather than giving in to fear, he channelled this tragic experience into an even deeper appreciation for mountains. He would tell us in his characteristic understated way: "In mountaineering there are no judges or spectators."

His philosophy was that climbing is not all about triumph or

setting new records, but a personal commune with nature. His passion for mountains ultimately took him far away from a Japan that was just recovering from war.

And it was in the Himalaya where he found his calling. In 1958, he tried to climb Himalchuli, the world's 18th highest mountain. He could not reach the summit, but this only fueled his passion for climbing. In 1964, he climbed the technically difficult Baruntse (7,162m). I can imagine the sense of accomplishment he felt gazing out

at hundreds of peaks all around, including Makalu and Mt Everest.

My grandfather found new ways to stay connected with Nepal, and give back to the land and the people that welcomed him with open arms.

Among other things, he helped build a public toilet in Patan in 1999. The Paropakar charity gifted him a painting of Lord Buddha visiting his birthplace after enlightenment as a token of appreciation. I was captivated by this art work as a boy.

He did not talk much with us

about his achievements, and the only information we have about his climbing and social work in Nepal is limited to a few photographs and what friends wrote about him.

As I learnt more about him through pictures and books, my desire to trace his footsteps to Nepal only grew. I was in Kathmandu this month on a university fieldtrip, and tried to track down the public facility he built.

In one of the few pictures (left) he had, there was a clue to where it was: Ward 6 of the Lalitpur Sub-Metropolitan City. I asked around, but no Nepalis I met had leads.

Eventually, I found my way to Ward 6 and tracked down its chair, Rupendra Raj Shakya. At the Ward office, Shakya welcomed me with a red khata (pictured), and identified the person in the middle of my grandfather's photograph as his predecessor. And he took me to where the toilet once stood.

It was a parking lot, but I felt a sense of fulfilment following my grandfather's footsteps. His legacy had endured in the hearts of the Nepalis he touched and his spirit is now passed down to me.

As our plane took off from Kathmandu, the mountains came into view. I could imagine that quiet man in climbing boots and ropes, gazing up at the impossibly high peaks. Every time I recall his gentle heart and humility, his spirit of adventure whispers to me, reassuring me that no matter where I go, he is by my side.

His love guides my steps, just like the climbing ropes that guided him up Himalayan mountains many decades ago. 🇳🇵

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