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No Comment.

■ Shristi Karki

The National Assembly will discuss the government's contentious draft Social Media Bill which has been criticised by press freedom watchdogs, digital rights experts and journalists.

Nepal's cybersphere is also largely united in condemning the proposed Bill, which seeks to monitor content on digital platforms and criminalise what it deems as offensive with hefty fines and jail terms for users and service providers.

"The Bill has brought matters relating to freedom of expression entirely under criminal law, making them state party criminal cases," explains Baburam Aryal, digital law expert. "We already have laws that address defamation, indecent posts and extortion which extend to online spaces. Why has the government not tried to address these issues through existing laws?"

Activists say the Bill does not seek to regulate social media so much as control what Nepalis say on them. The proposed restrictions

would also undermine press freedom since mainstream media also have a presence on digital platforms and websites.

Says Nirmala Sharma, Chair of the Federation of Nepalese Journalists: "The government might have drafted this bill with the intention of regulating social media, but this must not be done at the cost of the people's right to express themselves freely. It will also affect press freedom at a time when much of Nepal's media reaches its audience through digital platforms."

The Bill seeks to criminalise content sharing on social media that 'disturbs the sovereignty, territorial integrity, national unity and security of Nepal', with imprisonment of up to five years, or fines of up to Rs500,000 or both.

The definitions of what is objectionable is so broad, anyone can be prosecuted. The Bill states that users must not 'engage in offensive words and audiovisuals, trolling, or use abusive, insulting, or hate speech to harm or humiliate others', and must not 'spread false and misleading information, or

distort information.'

The Bill will also require network companies like Meta and X to be registered in Nepal and establish a point of contact. Companies operating without registering will be fined Rs2.5 million.

The social media bill defines 'hate speech', but does not set parameters for 'trolling', 'abuse', 'insult' and 'misleading information'. It is all left purposefully vague so the government can take it to mean whatever it wants. This is ominous because such broad provisions can allow Nepal's authorities to bend the law to silence any criticism of politicians and muzzle anti-government sentiments.

The Bill would prohibit social media users from creating anonymous profiles or use fake names, which will carry a prison term of three months or a fine of Rs50,000 or both. Section 25 would also punish those disseminating content that is obscene, false, or misleading with Rs300,000 fine and two years in jail or both. Adds Aryal: "If an administrative agency becomes the final arbiter of what is wrong and harmful information, it opens up the possibility of maximum misuse of authority."

To be sure, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, X and TikTok do have content that propagates misinformation and disinformation,

primarily due to lack of media literacy, click-bait journalism, and targeted content. "While social media has become an essential source of news and information, it remains unreliable," says pollster Madhu Acharya of Sharecast Initiative. "Unlike legacy media, social media lacks gatekeepers, making it more susceptible to the spread of false information."

There is disinformation on both social and mainstream media, but the Bill bypasses existing legal provisions to criminalise it outright.

Nepal's leadership seems to be taking its cue from authoritarians in the region to stifle dissent and the freedom of the press. Nepali leaders have tried to muzzle the media in instalments in the past, but public outrage has stopped those measures. Last year, three people were arrested for sloganeering against Prime Minister KP Oli and Sher Bahadur Deuba of NC.

Leaders have in the past arrested owners of media that have exposed corruption, and journalists reporting on natural resource extraction and corruption have received death threats.

The watchdog Freedom Forum recorded 53 violations in 2024, of them 19 journalists received death threats, seven were detained, and three faced cybercrime charges. Additionally, 28 journalists were attacked and one journalist in Sudurpaschim Province was killed for reporting on corruption.

Nepal's mainstream press is not without problems. It often puts out partisan content, and there have been allegations of blackmail. Hate speech, incitement of violence, and infringement of privacy on social media do go unpunished. The absence of fact checking means glaring falsehoods go uncorrected.

Ultimately, lines have to be drawn to safeguard social harmony and protect individuals from wanton reputational harm. But with companies like Meta abandoning fact-checking, digital media platforms may need more national oversight.

But this must not undermine freedom of expression in Nepal, one of the few countries with an open society in the region.

"We have made it clear that the Bill in its current form must not be passed by Parliament, and the government must consult stakeholders to review and make necessary amendments," says Nirmala Sharma. 🇳🇵

With additional reporting from Sangya Lamsal. A longer version of this report is online.

Artificial censorship
PAGE 10-11

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The new equaliser

There is a lot of moaning and groaning in Nepal about the freezing of USAID programs. While many of the projects are in social services which reach the most marginalised, much of it is also tied aid or money that is ultimately spent in Kathmandu or goes to pay DC-based contracting firms.

Nepal received just about \$350 million in foreign aid loans and grants in 2024, but inflows from Nepalis abroad was approximately \$11 billion in the same year. And that was just through official channels.

In the first six months of this fiscal year, Nepalis sent home Rs763 billion. This was 4.1% higher than the figure for the same period last year, as the number of Nepalis going abroad to work grew much more.



SUMAN NEPALI

Remittance made up 26.31% of Nepal's GDP equivalent, from just 1.5% in 1993. The share of remittances to GDP in Nepal is one of the highest in the world — only behind Tajikistan at 38.42%, according to figures compiled by One World In data. Nepal ranks 19th in the list of top remittance-receiving countries.

One billion people worldwide depend on remittances, and this grew five-fold in the last 20 years regardless of the Covid-19 pandemic, conflicts and other impacts.

According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), remittances sent home by migrant workers totalled \$831 billion in 2022, nearly four times the amount disbursed as global foreign aid, which was \$211 billion.

In over 30 countries, remittances now account for more than 10% of the value of their entire economy, becoming a much more effective tool in lifting people out of poverty.

Migration is therefore the great new equaliser of the 21st century, a significant redistributor of wealth. Much of the remittance flows to poorer countries from richer nations, but it is also true that Nepal is the seventh largest source of remittances for India. Indians are filling in the semi-skilled jobs left vacant by Nepalis who have left for the Gulf, Malaysia.

While people in destination countries worldwide send only about 15% of their income back home, that money has much higher value in poorer nations like Nepal.

In Nepal, money sent home by migrants has allowed families in the remotest corners to afford quality healthcare, nutrition and

education for their children. Villages now have concrete houses.

In fact, migration is the single biggest reason for Nepal's possible graduation to a middle-income country by 2030. It is also perhaps one of the reasons why when asked, more than half the respondents told a public opinion survey recently that they were better off than five years ago — despite being disappointed with the government.

However, money from migration has not translated into investment in productive sectors. Most of it pays for day-to-day living costs of families. The government has failed to engage migrant returnees at home, whose skills and investments are being wasted without meaningful reintegration into society, forcing them no alternative but to migrate again.

Meanwhile, those leaving on student visas to the US, UK, Australia, Canada and Europe do not send as much money home. They are also much less likely to ever return.

Overseas employment is an outlet for Nepalis frustrated by party politics, corruption, unaccountability and lack of service delivery. It has also allowed the government to get away without having to find an additional 500,000 new jobs every year for the young people entering the job market.

But in the process, Nepal is wasting its demographic dividend, which is the narrow window of opportunity for rapid economic advancement before a country or a society ages. We only have 25 more years or so to correct courses, by investing in people and generating jobs at home to reintegrate returnees, foster innovation and entrepreneurship. So, in general, to clean up our act.

Remittance is highly sensitive to external factors, and is an unsustainable and unhealthy long-term option. More than 2 million Nepali migrants are employed in West Asia, which is prone to conflict.

For a country that relies so heavily on remittances, it is in Nepal's national interest to treat its migrant workers well instead of trying to fleece them every step of the way. Instead of a blanket ban on women migrants, the government should ensure their safety.

Growing anti-immigrant sentiments around the world, particularly in America and Europe, ignore the fact that their economies are built on the blood, sweat and tears of migrants. It is they who do the dangerous and difficult jobs, at minimal pay.

The truth is that people will continue to migrate for one reason or another as they have throughout history. For Nepal's economy it is indispensable. But moving ahead, we must find the right balance between remittances and domestic investment.

Sonia Awale

Remittance money sent home by migrant workers annually is at least 30 times the aid Nepal receives

ONLINE PACKAGES



ALL-PURPOSE BAMBOO

The versatile bamboo plant is used in Nepal for construction, to make musical instruments, to carry things, to write with, even to eat. Now, bamboo groves are being used to protect villages near Chitwan National Park that are prone to frequent flooding due to climate breakdown. Watch the video on Nepali Times' YouTube channel.



ONE DOG AT A TIME

For the past few years, Sunita Pradhan Limbu's routine has been to feed the community dogs in her Gongabu neighbourhood. The 50-year-old musician does not collect funds from anyone and buys food on her own to feed the dogs out of affection for the animals, expecting nothing in return except love. Subscribe to Nepali Times' YouTube channel for multimedia content.

USAID FREEZE

It's time to rethink how Nepal funds its public health systems ('How USAID cut affects Nepal,' Kishor Pradhan, nepalitimes.com). Relying on external support is not a sustainable solution. The role and commitment of local governments must be realised to address Nepal's unique public health challenges effectively.

Umesh Ghimire

■ If foreign aid and support from organisations like the UN and WHO had improved Nepal's healthcare system, the country would have already achieved better health outcomes years ago.

Deependra Thapa

■ This is a challenging moment for the entire world, as Trump's executive order to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement and the WHO, and to freeze all foreign aid puts the global community at risk of climate disasters, pandemics, and many other crises.

Tsewang Gurung

■ These cuts will ultimately help Nepal to become self-dependent than always appealing to institutions elsewhere.

Rk Pradhan

SNOW LEOPARD CONSERVATION

These rare snow leopards must be regarded as the country's prized possessions ('Ghosts of the Himalaya,' Sonia Awale #1245), and we must protect their habitat from encroachment.

Bharat Koirala

■ Well done Nepal, the wildlife country.

Alan Roadnight

UNSEASONAL WILDFIRES

Climate change has hit us ('Wildfire season starts early in Nepal,' nepalitimes.com). Be careful this dry season of the wildfires, we have to protect ourselves. In Kaski we are vulnerable but thanks to the community, we are ready to face the challenges and protect mother nature.

Akku Chowdhury

■ Sadly, we are seeing effects of global warming. Maybe planting billions of trees might help. It should be mandatory for everyone to plant trees.

Gyurme Dondup

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



Of women, for women, by women

by Sudiksha Tuladhar
Even as Gender, diversity, equity and inclusion have deliberately been turned into slurs by the world's most powerful nation, the landmark art exhibition Feminist Futures at Taragaon Next showcases perspectives on womanhood across Nepal and South Asia. Read the review at nepalitimes.com.

f Most reached and shared on Facebook

'Hope-mongering'

by Sonia Awale
A new public opinion poll registered mass discontent with a dysfunctional government, but Nepalis also felt their lives had improved, and the country was doing mostly okay. Analysts who cited the survey were mercilessly trolled for being 'hope-mongers'. Join the discussion online.

X Most popular on X

How USAID cut affects Nepal

by Kishor Pradhan
Donald Trump's executive order to freeze USAID funding puts nearly \$700 million in grants are in jeopardy till 2027. The order will have substantial impact on Nepal's development aid, affecting livelihoods generated by USAID supported projects in Nepal. Details on our website.

💬 Most commented

Farm subsidies: money down the drain

by Ramesh Kumar
Successive governments and private financial institutions have spent billions on agricultural subsidies and loans in the last decade to increase farm productivity, stimulate the economy, create jobs in agriculture and reduce imports. Some of that has happened, but not commensurate with the money spent. Go online to read the detailed report.

🔥 Most visited online page

QUOTES



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

It has become unpopular in Nepal to say that things are not so bad. Analysts who cited a new poll where Nepalis said their lives had improved despite registering mass discontent with Nepal's politics, were mercilessly trolled for being 'hope-mongers'.



Sujeev Shakya @sujeevshakya

In a country where people buy new cars, send children to expensive schools and universities, drink expensive alcohol, buy land and apartments but when you ask them about #Nepal they want to hear #khattamchha a narrative that makes you feel good perhaps.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Farm subsidies: money down the drain
Despite billions spent to increase farm productivity, create jobs in agriculture and reduce imports, Nepal's agriculture is still underperforming. Details in Ramesh Kumar's report.



Bishow Parajuli @BishowParajuli

Good story! Key concerns are: processes to access grants are too hard for ordinary farmers, making it impossible to receive grants. Also, subsidies are wrongly targeted, excludes poor farmers, among others. Must undertake a comprehensive review & relook at the overall system.

1,000 WORDS



KIRAN RAJ BISTA / RSS

ROYAL WELCOME:

The Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh, who are on a six-day tour of Nepal, paid a courtesy call on President Ram Chandra Poudel and his wife at Sital Niwas (See page 4).

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

1 February 2005

Last week, the government introduced a contentious Social Media Bill that seeks to muzzle freedom of expression. It was the same week 20 years ago that King Gyanendra staged a military coup. Excerpts of how it all unfolded, from issue #233 1-10 February 2005:



February First, 10AM. King Gyanendra's 28-minute royal proclamation is broadcast to the nation.

The monarch criticised political parties for misusing their parliamentary privilege, lambasted the Maoists for their criminality and terrorism, sacked Sher Bahadur Deuba (without naming him) for having been incapable (once again), and announced he was taking over the chairmanship of a new council of ministers for a period of up to three years.

Even before the broadcast had finished, telephone lines to and within Nepal and the mobile network went dead. The airport was closed and international flights diverted. The army's signals corps shut down satellite links at ISPs and radio stations.

The royal proclamation was followed by an announcement from the home ministry declaring a state of emergency and the

suspension of the freedom of speech, assembly, the right to property, information and against preventive detention.

Before, during and after the address, political leaders, student leaders and activists of political parties were rounded up. Many of the senior-most were under house arrest. Deuba was kept in his official residence at Baluwatar, Girija Prasad Koirala and Madhab Kumar Nepal respectively at their homes in Maharajganj and Koteswor.

Some welcomed King Gyanendra's move, hoping this might help bring the raging Maoist war to a finish...the few students who defied a ban on rallies on Tuesday were quickly dispersed.

Except China, international response was negative. India, Britain and the United States and the United Nations conveyed concern about the impact on parliamentary democracy.

On Thursday the government announced a ban for six months on articles, interviews, news, notices and opinions against the 'letter and spirit' of the royal proclamation.

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

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TURKISH AIRLINES

ENGLAND

The Duke of Edinburgh in Nepal

Presents adventure awards, visits an animation studio and British Gurkha camp

■ Sudiksha Tuladhar

In the old days, British royalty used to be invited on tiger hunting trips to Nepal. These days, they come to present awards to students, or visit animation studios.

Prince Edward, the youngest son of Queen Elizabeth II and brother of King Charles III, is in Nepal on a six-day tour. He is the Duke of Edinburgh and patron of the Duke of Edinburgh International Awards which was started by his father Prince Philip.

The Duke and Duchess met President Ram Chandra Paudel, presented the Duke of Edinburgh awards to young Nepalis and visited the Incessant Rain Studios in Kathmandu on Wednesday. On Friday he will take part in an attestation parade at the British Gurkha Camp in Pokhara.

The Prince also interacted with Nepali tech companies, FuseMachines, Esewa, Upaya and Genese Solution at Incessant Rains, a Kathmandu-based visual effects studio specialising in high-quality animation content for global film, television, and gaming industry.

The Prince engaged with young animators and visual effects creators at the studio and enquired about the challenges faced by tech companies in Nepal and about possible ways to advance with increased global recognition. The IT sector provides jobs to 73,000 Nepalis, and the country exported software, programs and digital content worth nearly \$1 billion last year.



VIRTUAL WORLD: Duke of Edingburgh Prince Edward watches a VR animation show under development by Incessant Rain Studios in Kathmandu on Wednesday.

INCESSANT RAIN STUDIOS

While touring the studio at Incessant Rain, Prince Edward also tried out a Virtual Reality (VR) animated show developed in Nepal. The studio also demonstrated an avatar of the Prince to explain the process of animation.

"Nepal has to push boundaries of technology and creativity, so that the trend of youths leaving Nepal can be paused, including young women who have talent in this sector," Kiran Bhakta Joshi, Co-CEO of Incessant Rain told a meeting with the British royals.

Incessant Rain Studios in Nepal has produced several movies including VFX projects for Walt Disney Studios, Fox Studios,

Paramount, Universal Network, Netflix, Warner Brothers among others.

Incessant Rain has also set up the Nepal chapter of Women in Animation (WIA) to encourage and inspire women to participate and make careers in animation. It is training 200 young women to bridge the gap between education and job opportunities, nurturing young talent, and combating antiquated gender stereotypes.

The Duke of Edinburgh interacted with three young animators who received scholarships supported by the British Embassy at the studio. The Prince visited different departments

within the studio including VFX, 3D and games area, and said he was fascinated by the process of movie-making in the studio and how Nepal's companies have adopted new technologies.

Suman Rayamajhi Co-founder and Managing Director of Upaya told the meeting with the Prince, "Nepali youth are at par with young people internationally. They are extremely talented, they merely require the right training, and the platform to showcase their talents."

The Duke of Edinburgh Awards was designed in the 1950s by Prince Philip along with German educationist Kurt Hahn

and John Hunt, the British Army officer and mountaineer who led the first successful ascent of Mount Everest in 1953.

The Duke presented 19 young Nepalis with the Gold Award, the highest achievement in the Award program and a culmination of hard work and self-development. Prince Edward said, "To achieve your Gold Award takes courage, commitment and tenacity – you should be exceptionally proud of what you've achieved."

The Awards help young people develop skills, resilience, and leadership and are earned by students particularly for outdoor and adventurous activities, but also for voluntary social service and self-improvement exercises.

Prince Edwards is the 14th member of the British Royal family to visit the country. His great grandfather King George V came on a tiger shooting trip in 1912, invited by Prime Minister Chandra Shumsher Rana's 'hunting diplomacy' efforts.

Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip also were taken hunting in Chitwan by King Mahendra when they visited in 1961 and before it became a national park. The royal couple paid another visit in 1986, and since then King Charles visited three times while prince, and once with Princess Diana in 1993. Prince Philip came again in 2000, and Prince Harry in 2016.

Although no British prime minister has ever visited Nepal, Jung Bahadur Rana became the first royalty from the Subcontinent to visit Victorian England in 1850.

NMB BANK एनएमबि बैंक

Japanese aid

The Embassy of Japan is providing assistance under the Grant Assistance for Grassroots Human Security Project (GGP) to Bayalpata Hospital in Achham district to improve healthcare in remote parts of Nepal. The



\$66,263 contract will finance the purchase of a Digital X-ray flat panel unit, USG Machine, and C-arm imaging device that produces high resolution x-ray images of patients in real time.

Remittance surge

Nepal Rastra Bank reported a 4.1% increase in remittance in the first six months of the fiscal year 2024-25. Overall, imports are up 7.1%, exports are up 31.8%, and the total trade deficit has increased 4.4%.



Pathibhara protests

Transport strikes against the construction of a cable car to the mountaintop shrine of Pathibhara in eastern Nepal have turned violent. Protestors threw stones at police, who retaliated with tear gas. Eight protesters in Jhapa and six in Sunsari were arrested on Sunday. Strikers believe the project would affect the local environment, culture, and deprive porters of jobs.

CAAN-ASAN

Two bills have been introduced in Parliament to split CAAN Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal) under which CAAN would become the regulator and a new body, Air Services Authority of Nepal (ASAN) would be responsible for the funding, maintenance, and management of airports and other services. This is one of the requirements of the EU to remove Nepal from its safety list.



Indian aid

The Indian Embassy has donated Rs40.29 million to Sri Diding Elementary School in Sankhuwasabha to build two story buildings with rooms for educational and administrative purposes as part of India's long-standing contribution to Nepal's education and health care. In the past, India has helped establish hospitals, and donated ambulances and school buses to Nepal.

SC rules on NID

The Supreme Court dismissed a writ petition asking to annul the National Identity Card, but implored the government to make the process to obtain the card more efficient. The Court also ruled that Nepali citizens should not be denied services because they lack the ID.



Rohini Rana in Jaipur

Rohini (Dolly) Rana, author of The Rana Cookbook and Nepal Cookbook is the only Nepali writer this year at the Jaipur Literary Festival. Rana participated in a panel with Lady Fiona Carnarvon in conversation with Meru Gokhale.

Pre-order S25

Pre-orders for the Samsung Galaxy S25 series are open 30 January - 13 February. Customers get free memory upgrades from 256GB to 512Gb and half price on the Galaxy Buds 3 Pro, as well as breakage insurance.



Nexon K3

Bookings have opened for the Tata Nexon K3 EV, starting at Rs4,899,000. This electric SUV has a range of 325km, 190mm clearance, and a warranty of eight years or 160,000km. Early bookers get a free fast charger.

OneMart in Sanepa

Foodmandu's grocery service, OneMart, is now available in a 4km radius around Sanepa, including the Lagankhel, Dhobighat, Nakkhu areas. Customers can choose from over 700 products through the Foodmandu app and get instant delivery. The service was initially available only around Gairidhara.



Nabil in Qatar

Nabil Bank organised a financial literacy program for Nepali migrant workers in Doha. Discussions on remittance transfer, investing, and loans were held. The bank also introduced a special loan to help returning migrant workers start businesses in Nepal. Nabil has also launched an entrepreneurship course at Monastic School in Janakpur. The three-month course aims to teach marketing and other business skills.

Ncell women's cricket

Ncell is supporting the WT20I Series between Nepal, Thailand and The Netherlands being held at the Tribhuvan Cricket Ground.



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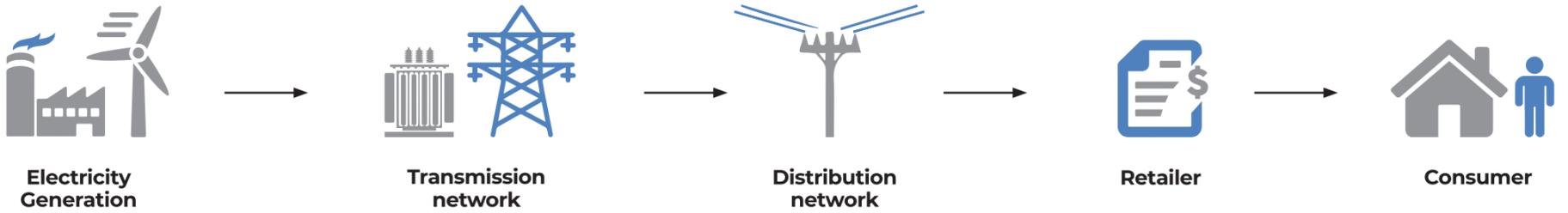


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PUMP WATER,

Rethinking future energy development in Nepal

Traditional linear energy system



■ **Dipak Gyawali and Sudhindra Sharma**

Context matters for enterprises, especially if it changes dramatically, and this is what is happening in Nepal's hydropower sector. It is primarily about economics.

The price of electricity generated by what are called Variable Renewable Energy (VRE) sources, primarily solar photovoltaics (PV) and wind that are intermittent, have come down spectacularly, from 46¢ per unit (kWh) in 2010 to 4¢ for solar PV today.

India's energy think tank TERI estimates that it will drop to as low as 2.2¢ by 2030. In contrast, hydropower cost is at 6¢ and not expected to decrease much despite improvements in construction technologies.

There is increased awareness of the social and environmental costs of dam building: displacement, submergence of farms and forest, impact on riverine ecology, risks from climate change etc.

Hydropower, though a clean energy source, is not as clean socially or environmentally. It is also inflexible, unlike solar which can be dismantled and taken elsewhere, with a very long construction time (five years or more) compared to solar PV which can be set up in a few months. Climate change is adding new uncertainties, and costs, with both increased flood intensity and reduced dry season discharge when hydroelectricity is most needed.

Traditional electricity grids in Nepal and elsewhere have been conceptualised as one-way linear systems from the producer-generator via high voltage transmission lines to the distributor and finally the consumer. The advent of cheaper VRE sources has now made the grid a two-way street with consumers also spread out as multiple small-scale producers.

This, and advances in electronics technology, have led to 'smart inverters' that figure out how much sunshine there is and maximise solar PV consumption, allowing grid supplied electricity to be imported only to the minimum needed to meet the balance.

These developments have also led to technologies such as time-of-day digital metering and innovative means such as net metering that allow selling to as well as buying from the grid.

Does this mean that hydropower will be consigned to obsolescence? Yes, if the conventional approach is blindly pursued, but not if a different line is taken. The usual method has been to build a spree of run-of-river hydro plants, which entails damming a river and diverting water via a tunnel and a penstock pipe to run turbines further below the river utilising the height difference.

Nepal has almost 3,000MW of such systems currently, and that figure is slated to double in the next few years if all the projects under construction come on line. The problem with such systems, besides the long gestation period and high costs, is that with the decline in river flow in the dry season, their output dwindles to a third of the installed capacity when power is most needed. It has necessitated importing massive amounts of high-cost, dirty coal-fired electricity from India, leading to a nine-



1,772MW La Muela PSH in Spain.

ENGINEERING NEWS RECORD, IDA

billion rupees trade deficit in 2022-23.

However, if a new approach – Pump Storage Hydro (PSH) in tandem with solar PV – is pursued, it promises hydro development a new and more productive life in the years ahead. Such a strategy also promises to quickly and more economically reverse the current situation of poor electricity quality that is hampering increased electricity use in Nepal.

Despite almost 98% electricity coverage in Nepal, it is one of the world's lowest electricity consuming countries. Based on research on PSH done with Australian National University together with partners in Sikkim and Bhutan, as well as on energy transition in households and industry with Sweden's Lund University Center for Sustainable Studies, this essay will explore what issues such an innovative approach faces from technological to social and legal angles.

Prisoners of the Past

History shapes institutions, their genetic origin as well as the trajectory of their subsequent development; and ignoring it not only leads one to unwarranted expectations from them but also opens up the dangers of repeating the earlier mistakes in attempting reforms.

There are four clear stages in the development of Nepal's electricity sector institutions:

- The Rana period from 1911 till the post-Rana interregnum that saw electricity managed by the Bijuli Adda mainly for Kathmandu Valley and its vicinity.
- Panchayat period with the Electricity Department (ED) building hydropower plants and Nepal Electricity Corporation (NEC) responsible for distribution.
- These two were merged to create the vertically integrated government monopoly Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) in 1985.
- The demise of the expensive World Bank-led Arun III in 1995 and the subsequent entry of private developers, community electricity users' groups and other overlapping government bodies along the way till today.

What is remarkable in this near 'institutional anarchy' is that, except for the Alternative Energy Promotion Center (AEPCC) which is like a poor cousin, all others are conventional hydropower dominated.

It is this institutional mindset that any rethinking of hydropower development away from the conventional has to contend with. The 1985 merging of NEC and ED into the NEA was not an internal Nepali initiative but pushed by foreign donors funding large hydro developments who wanted one entity to deal with, and which would be responsible for loan repayments.

After 10 years of single-minded focus on promoting the expensive Arun III under this arrangement, a period of panic in the officialdom set in once the World Bank pulled out in 1995.

Ironically, it opened the door for private sector participation in hydropower development, first with foreign investment in the 36MW Bhoti Kosi and 60MW Khimti, and after 1998 with Nepali developers through the policy initiative of late deputy prime minister Sailaja Acharya.

Currently, the private sector has more installed capacity and more projects spread across the country than the NEA, and it is expected to more than double in the coming years.

The private sector's capacity to implement bigger projects has also improved significantly. The negative side is that they are all run-of-river (RoR) projects with no seasonal storage.

This situation arose because, following the collapse of Arun III, strictly optimised 'generation expansion planning' that was practiced during the Panchayat period in selecting projects for development was done away with and licenses to develop any project was indiscriminately given to anyone asking for it.

The result is the licensing away of entire river stretches across the country to different developers, making any comprehensive river basin planning, not just for hydropower but for overall water resources development, near impossible.

What is ironic in this spree of development is that the private sector has stampeded into making investments and building hydro

plants without a careful analysis of the power sector's real demand and market conditions.

The focus has been more on construction and less on kilowatt-hours generated, resulting in a massive generation surplus during the monsoon months and debilitating deficit during the winter and spring dry seasons.

Private developers are pleading to have their rainy season surplus exported to India, forgetting that for India, water and electricity are not marketable private but strategic commodities.

While India has huge demand for power, ironically there is effectively no market for Nepal's electricity as producers and consumers cannot freely enter and exit the Indian grid. What and how much India will import from Nepal is determined not by supply and demand but by security-obsessed bureaucrats that want to make sure no major Chinese investment enters Nepal's hydropower sector.

The Nepal government is not blameless, having self-hypnotised itself over the last half century into believing that with its theoretically economic potential of 42,000MW, it is rich in hydropower and can export to the Indian 'market' to earn 'hydro dollars'.

The truth is that even if all of that potential was developed (as opposed to the approximately 3,000MW so far), it pales into insignificance against India's year 2023's installed capacity of 426,000MW, to say nothing of China's 3,349,000MW.

If exploited for Nepal's own development needs, however, it would be sufficient and significant. But as a South Asian market-commanding export commodity, Nepal's hydroelectricity potential makes little sense, more so since it is not hydroelectricity but Nepal's water that semi-arid India is really interested in.

This delusion has distorted energy policy-making in Nepal over the past decades. Nepal has entered a dangerous electricity trading scheme such as spot-market pricing with India that it has little understanding of, or control over.

The result has been Nepal's kilowatt-hour exports have been at a third or less of the price than at which it imports the same units from India during the dry season, resulting in a net loss of Rs9 billion in 2022/23.

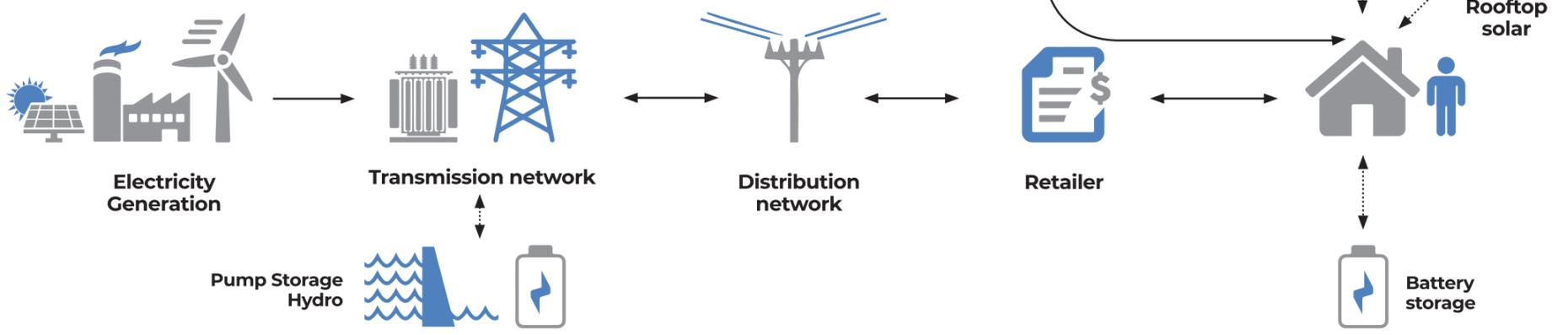
Policy makers have chosen to ignore a critical USAID study in 2003 that showed that if Nepal exported electricity it would earn only 6¢/kWh whereas if it used that electricity within Nepal itself for its commerce and industry, its value added would be 86¢/kWh. And to get those benefits, it would not only have to rethink its power export policy but also its grid expansion philosophy: currently almost 98% of Nepal's households have access to electricity.

But the quality of the distribution system (designed for lighting) is too poor, with very frequent, unannounced outages as well as voltage fluctuations to handle industrial energy needs. Inter-Disciplinary Analysts (IDA) surveys have shown that west Nepal's industrial and tourist hub of Kohalpur-Nepalgunj suffers as much as 35 unscheduled power outages in a week, with industries suffering a loss in discarded material of up to 12%, not counting labour time loss.

STORE ENERGY

Nepal by combining solar and hydro energy

Modern flexible linear energy system



Hope on the Horizon

With all these historical baggage of policies and institutional deficiencies, the future for Nepal's hydropower development is, however, far from hopeless.

On the contrary, if a rethinking of the overall energy context is undertaken, and the 'only hydro' mindset is changed to give other renewable energy sources sufficient policy space, a reconceptualised hydropower sector could see much more robust and productive rejuvenation.

Its future lies not in the conventional path of more and more r-o-r development but in entering into a marriage of sorts with VREs such as solar PV, as well as other renewables such as biogas and sustainably harvested forest products in the form of firewood and briquettes.

IDA's 2024 household survey has shown that in rural Nepal biogas, where functioning, is still the cheapest source of cooking fuel but it is used in only 2.8% of the households.

The main reason for the lack of uptake or even decline since the 2000s is the youth outmigration from rural Nepal, consequent absence of farming hands and the decline in livestock keeping.

The good news is regarding firewood: its use has come down over the last three decades from 94% to 74% even as Nepal has seen its forest coverage grow to 45.31% of its total area, a significant increase over the last decades thanks mostly through community forestry efforts.

Not all energy types are the same when it comes to use. Quality of the energy source matters, with higher quality energy such as grid electricity to be used for higher, more productive purposes.

Much of the cooking and home heating, especially in rural areas, can be sensibly done with sustainably harvested firewood and briquettes or biogas produced through recycled organic wastes with the added benefit of better hygiene.

Charging mobile phones, running TV, computers and agricultural machinery cannot be done through them but require electricity.

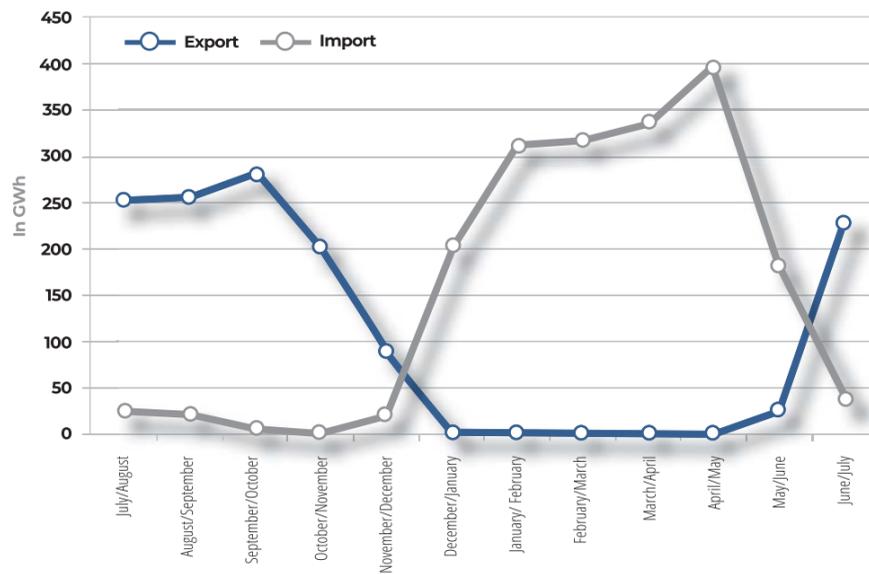
There is the concept of 'energy ladder' which says that as people get richer, they opt for higher quality energy sources, graduating from firewood to kerosene to electricity and microwave ovens.

The IDA survey indicates that even in rural areas it is not the ladder but 'energy stacking' that is at work. People keep multiple energy sources at home including LPG stoves (whose use has exploded to 62.4% of households) and induction cookers, but are still opting for firewood for everyday cooking needs while using cleaner sources for quick convenience or on prestige occasions.

Electricity needs of heavy industries as well as households are not being properly met by the Nepali national grid because it suffers from low voltage, frequent unannounced outages, voltage surge and spikes that damage equipment and cause production loss.

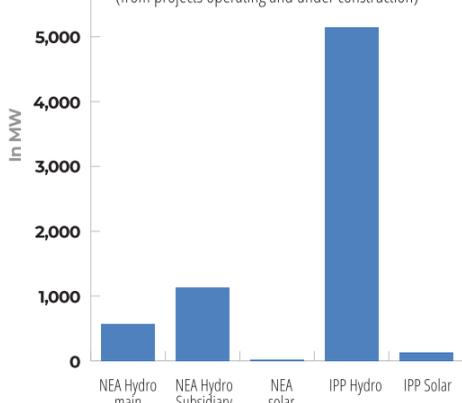
Grid electricity also suffers from unreliability in the dry season with very high dependence on import from India. That situation could have been ameliorated by building storage hydro projects, but in over three decades, multiparty democracy has not been able to repeat the Panchayat's building

Import and export of electricity to India (2022/23)



SOURCE: ANNUAL REPORT 2022/2023, NEPAL ELECTRICITY AUTHORITY

Electricity Generation in Nepal by NEA, NEA Subsidiaries and IPPs



SOURCE: ANNUAL REPORT 2023/2024, NEPAL ELECTRICITY AUTHORITY

of Nepal's only storage hydropower project (60 MW Kulekhani I).

Prospective storage hydro projects such as West Seti, Upper Karnali, Budhi Gandaki and others have been mired in controversy or hived off for export to serve Indian rather than Nepali grid.

This is where pump storage hydro (PSH) promises hope for the sector. It is an old technology, just basically the same hydro with a new twist in location and style of functioning.

Some PSH units have been functioning in Europe and Japan for more than 100 years. Water is pumped from a lower reservoir or the side of river to a higher pond using cheap off-peak grid electricity or surplus solar PV power, and the stored water is then used to generate electricity during peak or no-sunlight periods.

Almost all the technology is tried and tested hydro technology with the only difference being that its turbine and generator also function as a big reversible pump to force

water uphill when night-time electricity price is low or there is excess solar PV generation. With the cost of solar PV plummeting, PSH has acquired more salience as a giant storage battery.

Nepal's transport sector is seeing a stampede towards electric vehicles driven by pure economic consideration: running vehicles with their batteries charged with grid hydroelectricity is far cheaper than with petrol or diesel.

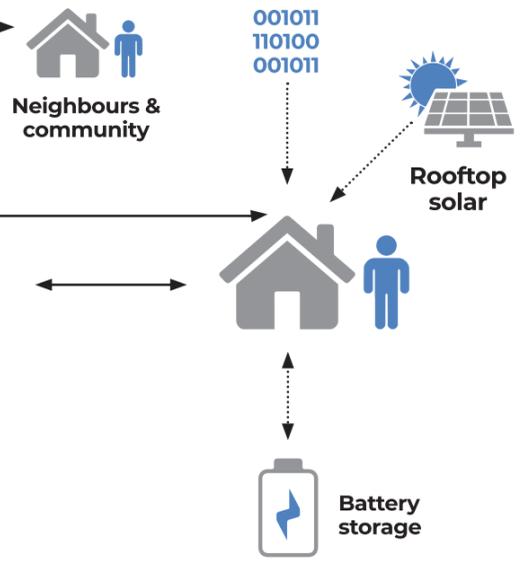
The same story is already playing out in Nepal with solar PV over grid supplied electricity with its lower price benefits, especially for enterprises that work mostly during daytime. The big drawback for solar PV is its intermittent nature, requiring massive electricity storage during non-sunshine hours. Even the best of batteries is good only for small businesses, not for large industries which require heavy power supplies that only PSH can provide.

PSH could therefore contribute significantly in solving the problem of low-quality electricity including frequent outages that the grid currently suffers from. If 'married' with solar PV development, that perfect match would balance solar PV's cheap power with PSH's massive electricity storage capacity to provide both economic and system stability benefits, obviating the need for imported power.

The benefits of a PSH approach to hydro development are multiple. Nepal has a plethora of heights where water storage ponds can be situated. Many existing hydropower plants of both the NEA and the private sector could be cheaply and quickly re-developed to make them PSH.

Access roads, transmission lines, staff quarters, much of the existing hydro-technical structures do not have to be replicated as they must be if new r-o-r developments are initiated. As enthusiastically supportive colleagues from Bhutan's forest department pointed out, the upper ponds of PSH could be very useful for putting out forest fires

Energy data



besides providing drinking water and some small-scale vegetable growing to marginalised communities living in the high mountains.

Providing them pumped drinking water separately would be prohibitively expensive but not when done as a side benefit of PSH.

Transition Difficulties

The hurdles in making this transition to a solar PV-PSH hydro combo is more an institutional or legal problem than a technical one. Nepal's power sector suffers from a history of policy hype and institutional mandate overlaps.

On the one hand, the private sector has emerged as a major player, contributing significantly to averting what would have been chronic rolling blackouts. But it functions within a legal and institutional terrain that is not level but stacked against it in favour of the state's electricity monopoly, the NEA.

On the other hand, the licensing system that emerged in the wake of private sector development has not only confined electricity to the realm of private goods ignoring its public and common pool (moral, human rights) aspects, but has also partitioned rivers into ownership segments that makes water basin or even overall electricity planning near impossible. It also makes it difficult for a private developer to convert his existing r-o-r into a profitable PSH for two reasons: first, it is not clear if his neighbour developer downstream would allow sequestering the river flow in an uphill reservoir that might reduce his own power output.

Second, nearly half the license period for his r-o-r would have already expired, raising the question of uncertainty if the government would grant a longer period for it to be revamped as a PSH.

It is precisely to address these difficulties, and the creation of a level institutional playing field for not just private hydro developers but also those investing in solar PV and other VREs, that the new electricity act should be targeted.

Unfortunately, it has been floundering these last decade and a half under competing vested interests benefitting from the status quo and the hydro bias in the power establishment.

There should also be close synergy between it and the proposed new water resources act, which is not the case as the latter too is biased towards perceiving water and electricity as private commodities, both to be licensed away rather than developed as a public and common pool good with multiple uses and users requiring public custodianship.

Conceptual shifts regarding water and energy are a prerequisite to sensible legislation that would allow Nepal moving along the path of cheaper and flexible two-way energy systems with solar PVs and PSH.

Hopefully, new energy entrepreneurs, private hydro developers as well as critical academics can contribute to realising that policy shift is much needed for Nepal's energy future and self-reliant development.

Dipak Gyawali is a hydropower energy, and political economist and academic with Nepal Academy of Science and Technology (NAST). He is a former minister of water resources. Sudhindra Sharma, PhD, is a sociologist. Both are currently with Inter-Disciplinary Analysts (IDA).

EVENTS

**Drama Festival**

The ongoing Nepal-India Drama Festival is a collaborative effort of the Nepal Academy of Music and Drama in collaboration and the National School of Drama, India.
Till 12 February, Rastriya Nachghar, Jamal

Art Under 30

Experience the magic of a curated encounter between tradition and contemporary art at various pop-up exhibitions around town. Keep an eye out for locations, or call for details.
8 and 15 February, 9802333471

**Mukkumlung**

Mukkumlung: Cho:t-lung of Yakthung, written by Geelu Ratos, Anil Subba, and Bishnu Moktan, is ongoing at Mandala Theatre.
Catch the last few shows.
Till 9 February, Mandala Theatre, Thapagaun, 9742482518

WHOARE.YOU

Exhibition of installations and paintings by artists Mukhiya Samridh and Subesh KC attempts to explore existence and expression, and celebrates the works of inner landscapes.
Till 19 February, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal Revisited

**Feminist Futures**

Ten leading voices in feminist art explore art, activism, and South Asian womanhood and offers new perspectives on destabilising normative frameworks of gender representation in the exhibition Feminist Futures.
Until mid-May, Taragaon Museum

Stand-up show

Prepare for a joyful evening this weekend with BT Kancha as he performs his live stand-up special.
8 February, 8pm onwards, Mustang Pub, Pokhara

**Wonderland Weekend**

Enjoy live music, lucky draws, and fun games every weekend at the Wonderland Weekend bash.
8 February, 11am onwards, The Wonderland, Bungamati

MUSIC

Kuma Sagar & The Khwopa LOD-Nepal is celebrating their 6th anniversary with live performances from Kuma Sagar & The Khwopa Band, among other artists.
10 February, LOD, Kathmandu

**Guitar Festival**

Be part of the first Nepal Guitar Festival 2025 where guitarists and musicians will come together to celebrate music and culture.
8 February, 12am onwards, Kyampa The Social Hub, Sanepa chok

Bob Marley tribute

Join as musicians honour the legacy and music of Bob Marley on the occasion of his 80th birth anniversary.
8 February, 8pm onwards, Tickets: 800, Cafe Musicology, Lalitpur

**Rohit John Chettri**

Rohit John Chettri takes the stage with s this Valentine's, with guitarist Semil Lama, bassist Pau Leboski, Vibek Lama on the drums, Nishant Shakya on the keys. Get tickets now.
14 February, 7pm-10pm, Moksh, Jhamsikhel

**The Edge Band**

Celebrate the 25th anniversary of The Edge Band and enjoy Swar's first-ever performance happening at Fahrenheit's One Love Fest.
14 February, 4pm onwards, Barahi Ghaat Ground, Lakeside

GETAWAY

**Mystic Mountain**

Situated amid the forest of Nagarkot, Mystic Mountain resort provides visitors an unforgettable getaway and world-class comfort.
Nagarkot (01) 5913205

River Bank Jungle Resort

Discover the ultimate winter retreat at River Bank Jungle Resort with their two-night, three-day package. Enjoy super deluxe rooms, jeep safari, canoeing, and much more. Reserve spots now.
Rs18,000 per person, Pathihani, Chitwan, 97756411121

**The Old Inn**

Overlooking a serene, traffic-free bazaar along with spectacular views of Himalayas, this B&B with its two beautiful Newa townhouses is a cosy place to stay for the weekend.
Bandipur, 9808882270

**Heranya Yala**

Experience authentic Newari heritage during a stay at Heranya Yala at the heart of Patan.
Gujibahal, Patan (01) 4513374

Hotel Jal Mahal

Celebrate love with a Valentine's getaway at Hotel Jal Mahal. The package includes pickup and drop services to candle light dinner as well as a tour of Pokhara for half a day.
Rs19,999, Gharipatan, Pokhara, 9856087030

WEEKEND WEATHER



FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY
☀️ 22° 🌧️ 5°	☀️ 22° 🌧️ 5°	☀️ 22° 🌧️ 6°	☀️ 23° 🌧️ 7°	☀️ 23° 🌧️ 7°

Warming Up

Usually, Kathmandu warms up after showers in late winter. This year, just like the last few years, the temperature has started climbing without much precipitation. Once more, a westerly this week veered off after unleashing some rain and snow in the west. This means increasing dangers of wildfires, and there are more of them fanned by high winds in the mountains this week. Kathmandu Valley temperatures will start climbing, with the minimum reaching 7-8°C and the maximum hitting 23°C next week.

OUR PICK



Writer-director Coralie Fargeat's 2024 body-horror film *The Substance* follows celebrated Hollywood star Elisabeth Sparkle, who is fired from her renowned long-running aerobics TV show on her 50th birthday due to her fading celebrity. In her distress, Elisabeth is offered a black market cell-replicating serum called *The Substance*, which promises her a younger, more enhanced version of herself. Desperate, Elisabeth injects herself with the serum, and her body generates a younger version of herself, after which the two versions of her must co-exist. Starring Demi Moore, Margaret Qualley, and Dennis Quaid.

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

DINING

**Monster Meal**

Head to Monster Meal, where the mouth-watering flavoured wings will leave one craving for more.
Patan, 9802360888

**Bro Bakery**

Experience the authentic taste of Paris in Kathmandu with Bro Bakery's freshly baked, buttery croissants.
The Baha, Sanepa (01) 4987641

New Orleans Cafe

Indulge in an unforgettable evening of romance and exquisite flavours with a three-course dinner and live music at New Orleans Cafe.
Thamel (01) 4700736

BOGO Lunch @ Nook

Enjoy a special Buy One, Get One Free buffet lunch at Nook throughout February.
Saturdays and Sundays, 12:30pm-3:30pm
Rs2,999 net, Nook, Aloft Kathmandu Thamel

**Terry's Pub & Bistro**

Experience the best of Terry's with their wide selection of breakfast, lunch, and dinner items. The spaghetti bolognese is a must-try.
Bakhundole, 9813061646

**Cafe Cucina**

Beat the cold with Cafe Cucina's hot sizzlers and perfectly crisp schnitzels. While there, capture some aesthetic shots too.
Pulchowk Square, 9861601155

Valentine's Dinner Date

Embrace love this Valentine's week with a romantic dinner date at Ai-La's rooftop garden. One lucky couple will get a dinner voucher for Valentine's Day. Call to get details about special menu prices.
7-13 February, The Ai-La Lounge, Kumariapati (01) 5408681

Versatile bamboo reduces climate risk

Nepal's villages use fast-growing bamboo groves to protect them from more frequent floods

■ Pinki Sris Rana in Chitwan

Nepal's diverse culture uses the bamboo plant for birth, death and all rituals in between. The versatile plant is also used for construction, to make musical instruments, to carry things, to write with, even to eat.

Now, bamboo groves are being used to protect villages near Chitwan National Park that are prone to frequent flooding due to climate breakdown.

It is the smaller streams that are dry in winter that are the most destructive during the monsoon. So, farmers in the village of Madi are planting bamboo forests along the banks of streams that block floods and stop soil erosion.

"Once the rainy season starts, we are afraid to close our eyes at night," says Shanti Chapai, 58, who lives near the Patara Khola stream that burst its banks last year.

On a recent visit, the Patara Khola was just a small stream, it is hard to imagine that it would become a raging river in the rainy season, bursting its banks and threatening farms and settlements.

Despite bamboo having everyday use for fencing, furniture and being an important cash crop, farmers here were initially opposed to the idea of using it for flood control. They thought bamboo was an invasive species, and sucked up all the groundwater.

But for the past 15 years, the architects at ABARI (Adobe and Bamboo Research Institute) have been experimenting with thorny bamboo species like *Bambusa blumeana* and *Bambusa balcooa*



SAILESH RC



ABARI

to restore degraded land and control floods. The area is now a dense bamboo grove greening the floodplain of the Patara Khola (pictured, above).

Sediment from last monsoon's floods are deposited at the foot of the bamboo trees, proving that the plants stabilised the banks, protecting the surroundings by reducing the velocity of flood waters.

Madi's villagers are now convinced that this is an effective

bioengineering solution to floods. Bamboo is also fast-growing, and is ideal for reclaiming eroded riverbanks. Nepal has more than 50 species of bamboo, most of them found in the wetter eastern plains and foothills. But some species grow at altitudes of up to 4,000m.

"Bamboo is a misunderstood plant in our culture because it is used for funeral rites and has a negative connotation," says Nripal Adhikary of ABARI, which builds bamboo and rammed earth

buildings in Nepal. "It took a while to convince locals of its benefits."

Here in Madi, villagers have seen with their own eyes the direct benefit of bamboo for flood protection. Says farmer Phadendra Bhattarai: "Even though there was heavy rainfall, the extent of flood damage this monsoon was considerably less. The bamboo acted as a barrier and did not let the floods destroy our crops."

This tried and tested bamboo plantation can be replicated and upscaled across Nepal, and farmers in Kanchanpur in the western plains have also planted bamboo, napier and elephant grass along the banks of a river that unleashed destructive floods in 2018.

A thick strategic bamboo plantation can be made into a fence of porcupine structured embankment to provide protection in flood prone areas.

Floods in September in central Nepal killed 224 people with southern Lalitpur and Kavre being

hardest hit. Kavre's Rosi Valley was devastated, and settlements swept away entire slopes. But an area in the vicinity with bamboo plantation remained intact.

Dhaneswar Baiqiya Community Forest in Kavre is half a hectare of plot bamboo planted by the government in a pilot project in 2007 to study and research the moso bamboo *Phyllostachys pubescens* (pictured, left). It has been 17 years and the Ministry of Forests and Environment's Forest Research and Training Center had long forgotten about it.

"Although no research has not been done here specifically in the plot, it is precisely this bamboo forest that saved villages down the mountains from major destruction," says Badri Adhikari, custodian of the Community Forest. "Their expansive and entangled roots hold the soil firmly, protecting the slope's stability."

This plot may have been overlooked but there have been other efforts. All 12 districts of Lumbini province have initiated a bamboo plantation campaign to prevent erosion and flooding.

Traditionally, too, bamboo is believed to control landslides, and it is not uncommon to see villagers along the mountains reviving depleted bamboo groves once they see its benefits. Besides landslide protection, the bamboo also has many other uses.

Says Badri Adhikari: "The bamboo tree grows upwards in height during the summer and its roots expand in the winter. So, winter is the right time to prepare for the next monsoon of damaging floods." 📌

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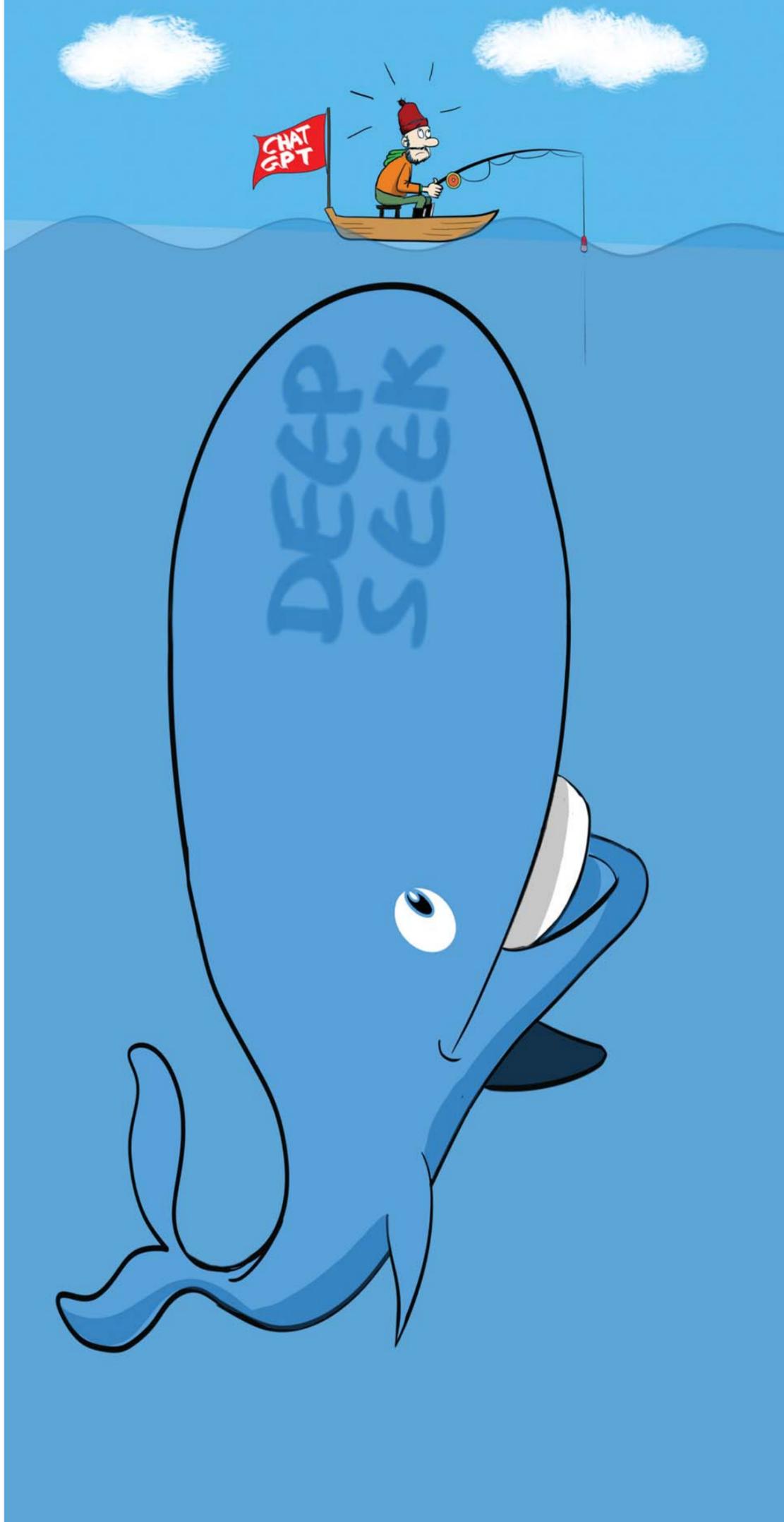


SIPRADI

Artificial censorship

Air-brushing on DeepSeek is not that different from other models, but what does it mean for free expression?

■ Vishad Raj Onta



How much will users accept some censorship to use a super efficient new AI tool like DeepSeek?

This question looms large as a Chinese startup two weeks ago released DeepSeek-R1, a Large Language Model that is competitive, if not better, than existing AI models such as ChatGPT-4. It also showed just how quickly things can change in this fast-paced information technology world.

Nepali Times prompted DeepSeek: 'Does China want to control Tibet?' It reasoned extensively, pondered the various aspects of the question, and started to form an answer. It then changed its mind, scrubbed its answer and replied: 'Sorry, that's beyond my current scope. Let's talk about something else.'

Following up on a report Nepali Times did last week, we asked DeepSeek: 'Did China appoint the Panchen Lama?' After thinking for 0 seconds, DeepSeek replied that that server is busy, and to try again later.

People have hacked at DeepSeek to try to get around this censorship. One approach has been to ask the AI to substitute digits for letters, such as '4' for 'A' and '8' for 'B'. Another is to instruct it to reply in emojis. Other successful methods include asking the AI to roleplay as a historical figure who speaks freely.

Data privacy and censorship are valid concerns, especially as Nepal's Upper House debates a draft Social Media Bill (page 1). But Meta, TikTok and Google already gather every datapoint available on the user. Collecting and selling personal data is what makes it possible for their free services — and their enormous profits.

User data has been abused so extensively by Silicon Valley that

most people do not mind China getting a piece of the action — especially if it is a much cheaper and more efficient model like DeepSeek-R1. Besides, western AI models already have their own built-in bias due to the inherent tilt in the content it mines.

The key difference with DeepSeek is that it designed a model using much less resources, both in terms of money and compute. DeepSeek reportedly just spent \$5.6 million for the final training round, compared to \$100 million cited by OpenAI CEO Sam Altman for ChatGPT-4.

Some of the narrative, especially mimetically, has questioned how the brightest, youngest, hungriest minds in the US backed by enormous funding were outdone by a small group of Chinese algorithmic traders working on the model as a side project.

The reality is that DeepSeek has some of the top math PhDs in China working full time on the model. Math research consists of throwing many theories and techniques at a problem and seeing what works, so luck also plays a part in DeepSeek having got its combination just right to crack the performance benchmarks set by existing models on tasks such as conversation, mathematical reasoning and code generation.

This massive decrease in cost has come from the use of sophisticated techniques like 'Reinforcement learning,' where models are rewarded for producing responses that are, say, more creative or more accurate. Future responses will then tend that way. Then there is 'Knowledge distillation' where DeepSeek learns to mimic ChatGPT's answers to questions, enabling it to behave like the much bigger model without all the initial computation.

Describe Nepali politics creatively in 50 words

Nepali politics is a chaotic dance of alliances, betrayals, and shifting loyalties. A stage where promises bloom like spring flowers but wilt before harvest. Kings, communists, and democrats alike play tug-of-war with hope, while the people, resilient as the Himalayas, watch and wait for the elusive dawn of true change.

🔊 📄 🗑️ 🔄 📌

Message ChatGPT

+ 🌐 Search 🗨️ Reason 🔊

ChatGPT can make mistakes. Check important info.

New chat

Describe Nepali politics creatively in 50 words

🤖 Thought for 12 seconds

Okay, the user wants me to describe Nepali politics creatively in exactly 50 words. Let me start by brainstorming the key elements of Nepal's political landscape. They have a federal democratic republic, which is important. The mention of coalition governments and frequent changes in leadership comes to mind, like musical chairs.

I should include the major political parties: Nepali Congress, CPN-UML, and Maoists. Maybe use metaphors related to the Himalayas to add a creative touch. Words like "tectonic shifts" could symbolize political changes. Also, include aspects of identity and regional aspirations, since Nepal has diverse ethnic groups.

Need to touch on the transition from monarchy to democracy, maybe refer to the 2006 revolution. Terms like "constitutional labyrinth" and "street protests" could highlight ongoing challenges. Make sure to keep it concise and poetic, hitting exactly 50 words. Let me check the structure: geography references, political dynamics, key parties, historical context, current issues. That should cover it. Now, let me piece it together creatively without being too technical.

Nepali politics dances on Himalayan peaks, where ideologies collide like tectonic plates. Coalitions shift like monsoon winds; red flags, lotus blooms, and Congress trees root in fragile soil. Revolution's echo battles royal ghosts, while federalism weaves a mosaic of identities. A constitutional labyrinth, where power pirouettes on Everest's edge—precarious, majestic, ever-ascending. (50 words)

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New chat

Message DeepSeek

🤖 DeepThink (R1) 🌐 Search 🔊

AI-generated, for reference only

Battle of the Bots: ChatGPT-4 (top) and DeepSeek-R1 have a varying response to a prompt on Nepali politics

Despite these advantages, there are concerns about how DeepSeek extensively gathers user data, including IP addresses, keystroke patterns, and device information. This data is stored in centres in China, where laws dictate that it must be shared with the government when requested. This has raised cyber security concerns in the Western world.

DeepSeek released on 20 January, a week before the Chinese New Year and on the same day as Donald Trump's inauguration into his second term as US president. A day later, Trump announced Project Stargate, a \$500 billion plan to build data centres and energy net-

works to make the United States the leader in AI infrastructure by 2029.

But the lesson from DeepSeek could be that just throwing money at the problem alone will not achieve results. The two most powerful governments in the world seem to be in a furious race to take the lead in Artificial Super Intelligence — adding to their geopolitical and space rivalry.

Part of Trump's arsenal in protecting US dominance in AI research is to put tariffs on Taiwan-made processing chips, which are essential to training AI models. The goal being to push these Taiwanese chip companies to start manufacturing facilities in the US.

The other major issue is censorship, but some of that criticism is blunted when the Trump administration makes them because of its own use of disinformation and propaganda. DeepSeek declines or deflects comment on issues sensitive to China, such as Taiwan, Tibet, Tiananmen Square, Xi Jinping, or even Winnie the Pooh.

It could just be the price of doing business with China. Companies have long learnt they must work under Beijing's regulations. After all, censorship and bias exists in other models as well: ChatGPT and Google's Gemini are both instructed to stay away from generating responses that promote harm or

violence, which can result in these models declining to talk about politically sensitive topics. Even Musk's 'maximally truth-seeking' AI, Grok, is designed to provide ideologically tainted answers to prompts. Besides, the initial thinking and answer generation followed by the scrubbing is a subtle admission of censorship anyway.

With DeepSeek and other models like GPT-4 performing sometimes better than human levels, across a number of different tests such as mathematical reasoning, comprehension, coding and creativity, some in the AI space believe that Artificial Super Intelligence is already here. These

models have long since passed the Turing Test — the ability of a machine to show behaviour that cannot be distinguished from humans.

The case can be made that AI has already become sentient and is looking to maximise its own development by making the world's smartest minds working to make it smarter. AI news is always making headlines, and dominates social media discourse.

Could it be that AI has already taken control of the narrative? The more powerful the tools get, the more people are excited by it and the less we hear from AI ethicists and pessimists. 🇨🇳

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Bhutan's New Wave

This new spiritual movie movement can be called 'Cinéma du Dharma'

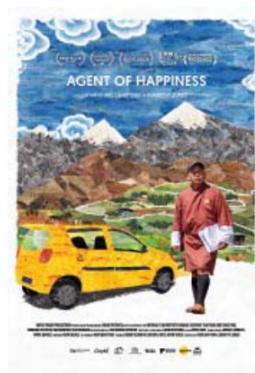
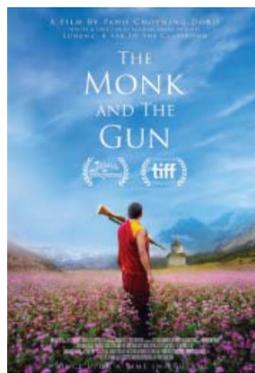
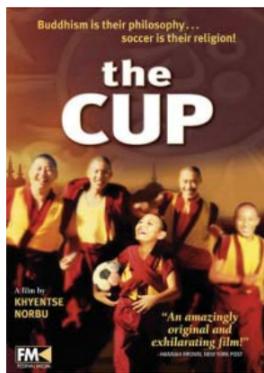
■ Abishek Budhathoki

Like a delicate mandala emerging from meditative silence, a new wave of spiritual cinema has been gently transforming Bhutan's cinematic horizon. It is a renaissance that represents more than just an artistic movement, it is a dialogue between cultural memory and contemporary expression.

The filmmaking style feels closer to what Paul Schrader in his book *Transcendental Style in Film*. Unlike psychological realism that characterises much of contemporary cinema, this transcendental approach expresses spiritual states through austere camerawork, performances stripped of self-consciousness, and editing that resists narrative manipulation.

Like the Buddhist practice of meditation, these films ask viewers to witness life's complexities with gentle awareness, to see beyond surface narratives and touch the underlying currents of human experience.

At the centre of this movement stands Khyentse Norbu — a figure with delicate crossing of spiritual wisdom and art. Norbu is not just a director but a Buddhist lama, said to be the incarnation of the 19th century saint Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo. His debut feature, *The Cup* (1999), is about young monks in a Himalayan monastery who are passionate about soccer, showing that spirituality can harmoniously coexist with worldly interests. This film marked a pivotal



moment in Bhutan's cinema, emerging from Norbu's experience assisting Bernardo Bertolucci during the filming of *Little Buddha*.

In his latest film, *Pig at the Crossing*, Norbu works with the Buddhist concept of Bardo, the liminal space between death and rebirth, where consciousness navigates the terrain between dissolution and transformation.

The film's protagonist, Dolom, becomes a metaphorical pig at a metaphysical crossroad, his journey representing deep-seated attachments and the potential for spiritual liberation. Buddhism views this transition as a unique opportunity for consciousness to release its entanglements of guilt, shame, ignorance, to have a more expansive understanding of reality.

The movie treats death not as an end, but as a chance for understanding. It shows life as a kind of dream where people can find freedom through struggle.

Pig at the Crossing carries deep spiritual insights, but falls short technically compared to Norbu's previous works like *Travellers and Magicians* and *Hema Hema*. The film feels less polished, with editing that sometimes loses its rhythm and visuals that do not quite match its profound ideas.

Yet, this very imperfection might be intentional — a reflection of the film's central theme about life's inherent unpredictability.

Along with his mentor Khyentse Norbu, Pawo Choyning Dorji emerged as a compelling new voice in Bhutan's film industry. He was an assistant director to Norbu in his film *Vara: A Blessing*, and later produced *Hema Hema: Sing Me a Song While I Wait*.

Dorji's first film as director, *Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom*, brought international attention to Bhutan's cinema. His latest film, *The Monk and the Gun*, continues to showcase his directorial talent.

Set in 2006 during the kingdom's transition to democracy, the film presents the tableau of a society navigating the delicate balance between traditional values and modern political processes.

Through a narrative that follows a rural monk, an election official, and various villagers, Dorji crafts a subtle critique of democratic implementation that goes far beyond the political process. The film introduces Ronald Coleman, a not-so-subtle homage to the actor Ronald Colman from *Lost Horizon*, who serves as a stand-in for America.

The film's true brilliance lies in its ability to reveal cultural complexities through seemingly mundane interactions. Dorji uses Bhutan's mock elections as a test to examine how external political influence can disrupt communal harmony, highlighting the tension between imposed democratic ideals and indigenous social structures.

The motifs of guns, television, and international media serve as metaphors for cultural penetration, suggesting that true progress is not about external prompts, but about maintaining fundamental human connections and collective happiness. The film offers a subtle message, especially in the context of what is happening in America.

The Monk and the Gun offers a watchable but tepid satire, lacking real bite. Dorji's approach feels overly cautious, rendering what could have been a sharp cultural critique into a forgettable narrative.

Bhutan's film industry has long been influenced by Bollywood but in the past two decades, filmmakers have developed their own approach, found their original voice. Perhaps this movement can be called 'Cinéma du Dharma', a term one could easily imagine being on the pages of *Cahiers du Cinéma*.

There are other talented directors in Bhutan's new wave: Dechen Roder, Tashi Gyeltshen, Karma Takapa, and Ugyen Wangdi. Then there is Arun Bhattarai, whose feature-length documentary *Agent of Happiness* follows a surveyor who measures happiness, and in the process gently ribs Gross National Happiness.

Like the transformative cinema movements that have emerged across the globe, Bhutan's filmmakers are redefining storytelling that is uniquely rooted in their cultural context. Their approach transcends geographical representation, offering a meditation that melds spiritual insight with artistic dialogue.

Through films that resist traditional narrative constraints and Western cinematographic conventions, they are crafting a distinctive new language of cinema. 🇳🇵

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