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The Great Game, 2nd Half

■ Sonia Awale

The grant paralysed Nepali politics, and nearly brought down a government. After acrimonious wrangling, Parliament three years ago this week ratified the \$500 million US project for roads and transmission lines.

Just as the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) started awarding contracts this week for sections of transmission lines, substations, and highways, Donald Trump suddenly pulled the plug.

The Finance Ministry said it had received an email last week from Washington that payments for contracts were ‘suspended’ by Trump’s executive order. It is not clear if the stay is only for 90 days, and the MCC has asked for a waiver for Nepal and other countries.

“This is a temporary suspension, we believe it will eventually work out as it is supposed to,” says former National Planning Commission Chair Biswo Nath Paudel. “If not, the Americans will lose credibility

around the world.”

In January, the MCC approved an additional \$50 million to cover increased costs, and Nepal is chipping in its own \$197 million.

“We will take loans to complete the transmission lines if we have to, and Nepal is now capable of operationalising projects of that value,” Paudel told us.

The MCC was caught up in the Sino-US competition for dominance in the region. It was Washington’s response to Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Abandoning MCC will leave Nepal open for China to step in with its own infrastructure.

“I don’t see the Chinese replacing the US in terms of dollar-to-dollar aid in Nepal, including on the MCC, which is also an export-to-India-oriented project,” says Amish Mulmi, author of All Roads Lead North. “But, yes, China can use the aid and investment vacuum left by the US to assist Nepal.”

The debate about whether Nepal should accept the MCC polarised politics, even splitting leaders within parties. Conspiracy theories

and disinformation spread like wildfire in Nepal’s cybersphere, alleging that the MCC was a ploy to base US missiles in Nepal aimed at China. The Chinese added fuel to the fire, trying to stop ratification.

Not surprisingly, the suspension of MCC contracts this week was greeted with the same trolling that filled social media during the MCC debate and after ratification in 2022. This time, the posts have an additional ‘we told you America was not a reliable partner’ refrain.

One self-described influencer posted on X: ‘The MCC has only been suspended, it should be entirely cancelled...(it) is an absolute military trap.’

Finance Ministry officials last week assured that the MCC would not be affected by the freeze on USAID supported programs worldwide, including Nepal.

On Wednesday at Mar-a-Lago, Trump singled out Nepal, and said USAID’s \$20 million to support federalism and \$19 million for conservation was a “fraud”. Other US-supported government programs

worth \$131 million to improve healthcare, education, agriculture and inclusion are halted.

In 2022, USAID and Nepal signed a five-year Development Objective Agreement worth \$659 million for climate adaptation, environment protection, gender and reproductive rights. That is also now in limbo.

Slashing all this assistance has impacted over 300 consultancies and non-profits in Nepal, and threatens to undermine past successes in maternal and child health, women’s empowerment, free press and rural development.

Says Mulmi: “What the US withdrawal on MCC will do is further erode US credibility inside Nepal, particularly since it was such a politically charged subject. It will also signal a change in its stance on China in South Asia, as the MCC was a direct challenge to the BRI and Chinese investments in infrastructure.”

If there is one lesson from all this, it is that foreign assistance is rarely a free lunch and often comes with strings attached. Nepal should look out for itself and be self-reliant, after all basic health care and environmental protection are responsibilities of the Nepali state, not of donors.

This means investing in infrastructure and development to create jobs at home, actually spending budget outlays for capital expenditure, and making optimum use of domestic resources such as hydropower.

Says Bishwo Nath Paudel: “The MCC was never anti-China. In fact, India and China are our most important neighbours. What is really important for us is to leverage their growth to pull us along.”



BOOKISSUE

Nepal: A History from the Earliest Times to the Present

जङ्गबहादुर इन ईश्वरप्रसाद

भिक्षु, व्यापार र विद्रोह: नेपालको भोट-चिन सम्बन्ध र भारत

हिमालपारिको हुरी: गणतन्त्रपछि फेरिएको नेपाल-चिन सम्बन्ध

Nepal in the Long 1950s

PAGE 6-7

Little People Big Dreams: Tenzing Norgay

Sanu and the Big Storm

PAGE 9

Rivers of the Asian Highlands: From Deep Time to the Climate Crisis

Unruly Waters: How Rains, Rivers, Coasts, and Seas Have Shaped Asia's History

छालबाटो: केलाशदेखि गङ्गासम्म

PAGE 10-11

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NATUREKNIT

South Asia 2040

For South Asia, 2024 was an eventful year. A pro-democracy student uprising in Bangladesh ousted Sheikh Hasina who took refuge in India. Sri Lankans voted in President Anura Dissanayake from a party that once waged a Marxist insurgency.

In India, voters withheld whole-hearted support for the BJP's divisive religious extremism. But the defeat of the AAP in Delhi this month showed that the ruling party will go to length to influence elections.

Pakistan, Bhutan, and the Maldives also had elections last year. And in Nepal, the two biggest parties, the Nepali Congress (NC) and the UML ousted the Maoists and formed their own coalition government, appointing K P Oli as the country's 14th Prime Minister in 15 years.

All this is happening against the backdrop of a breakdown in the post-World War II global order, with the rise of populist anti-migration climate deniers undermining democracies.

Smaller South Asian nations now risk becoming geo-strategic battlegrounds for regional rivals India and China as they compete to fill the vacuum left by America's retreat.

In the Maldives, relations with New Delhi soured after the election in 2024 of Mohamed Muizzu, seen to be pro-China. Chinese 'debt trap diplomacy' is said to have contributed to Sri Lanka's economic collapse.

In Nepal, China has openly supported unity among Communist parties, while India and the West tried to split them. The suspension of USAID and MCC (page 1) may lead to greater Chinese and Indian engagement (read: interference) in Kathmandu's unstable politics.

In November the Stockholm-based International IDEA and the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) convened the 'Democracy in South Asia Outlook Forum' in Colombo to ponder the direction South Asian democracy might be heading in the next 15 years.

Civil society, media, activists and academics brainstormed about four scenarios for 2040: Decline, Continuation, Disciplined Improvement and Transformation. The conclusions have been published in IDEA's South Asia Democratic Futures report, summarised here:

Decline is a scenario in which democratic decay will mean governments and media will be completely under crony-capitalist control by 2040, and censorship will be the norm. AI will determine media content, elections will only reflect the politics of patronage. Irreversible ecological breakdown will exceed the capacity of governments to set right on their own. India-China tensions will spill over into conflict in South Asia.

Continuation is business as usual in South Asia. Politics will be increasingly dominated by authoritarians and populists, governments will continue to rely on foreign financing, outmigration will accelerate, pollution will have rendered the region's urban centres unliveable by 2040.

Disciplined Improvement is a slightly better situation in which regional alliances, collaboration, civic engagement, and a new generation of leadership will respond more effectively to catastrophic weather events, mass migration and conflict. The polycrisis will prompt governments to work together by reviving regional cooperation through SAARC. Air quality will be so bad that India and Pakistan will be forced to cooperate and clean up.

Transformation envisions South Asia as a centre of democratic progress and innovation by 2040, a 'solarpunk' society, where nature, technology, and social harmony coexist. The West's anti-migration wave will reverse the brain drain, with youth-led action against the climate crisis. Regional cooperation, even rapprochement between India and China will fill the gap left by the declining influence of the West.

Which way South Asia will go will depend on the leaders we elect or throw out in the coming decade. Policy reforms and action today will

determine where we will be as a region in 2040. South Asia must not allow democracy to be dismantled, and trends in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal offer hope. But India's gravitational pull, and how it deals with China that will determine the region's fate.

Recent aid cuts and the West's apathy towards cleansing and conflict in Gaza and Ukraine exposes the erosion of the moral values it says it espouses. Smaller South Asian countries like Nepal are on our own to deal with the crises in democracy, development and climate.

The USAID and MCC cuts are a sobering reminder that while India and China may step in, their support will also have strings attached. We have to put our own economic and political house in order, keep neighbours happy, and at arm's length (page 6-7).

Fifteen years is not too far away to determine our collective democratic destiny. **Shristi Karki**



Imagining Democratic Futures: South Asia Foresight Report 2025
International IDEA, 2025
45 pages



MILAN RAI

What is in store for the region's politics, economy, and development in 15 years time?

ONLINE PACKAGES



Considered the national dress for men until 2021, daura suruwal is back in fashion. Senior politicians and bureaucrats wear it to work with a grey jacket and black topi. For the public, the dress is a go-to fit for marriages and social gatherings. Watch the video on YouTube and learn about how Nepal's official dress is tailored.



Ryo Honda is a Japanese chef who specialises in authentic but innovative Nepali cuisine using ingredients and spices that he has explored in Nepal, infusing it with local knowledge and nature. Watch him talk about their plans to expand in Nepal.

USAID CUT

Nepal, without significant natural resources or seaport and bogged down by cultural beliefs, has to make some tough choices to survive in the world economy ('Trump shock wave hits Nepal', Sudiksha Tuladhar, nepalitimes.com). Allowing US, China or India to subsidise the nation will lead to major concessions and dependence.

Sigmund Stengel

■ America and Americans are not obligated to spend their money on us.

Surendra Naral

■ Proficient use of domestically generated funds in the future will encourage the return and consequently the impact of well-selected/applied support from overseas.

Tony Jones

■ It is time to become self-reliant and gain self-respect, Nepal has a rich and proud culture and heritage.

Akku Chowdhury

TOURISM POTENTIAL

Nepal's tourism woes are predominantly because of domestic incompetence and corruption ('Missing out on Nepal's tourism potential', #1248). Remember when images from Thailand were used to promote Nepal in London?

Aksel Lydersen

■ Easy processes at Kathmandu airport and a train connection with China in order to establish a safety standard in land transport and ensure combined forms of travel would help Nepali tourism.

Dimitris T

■ It seems that almost everyone involved in the tourism and especially trekking sector in Nepal go out of their way to come up with policies and decisions that actively discourage visitors.

Roger Ray

BIHARI SHRESTHA

A wonderful, respectful eulogy ('Bihari Krishna Shrestha, 88', J Gabreial Campbell, #1248). I have had the pleasure of meeting Bihari Krishna ji and have also read the Karnali Lok Sanskriti books for my own work in the region. This series, unfortunately out of print now, is— to this day— one of the most comprehensive socio-collections of any particular region in Nepal.

Iván G. SOMLAI

WHAT'S TRENDING

Black, white, and grey

by Ramesh Kumar

Nepal may be put on the grey list of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the global money-laundering watchdog. FATF had advised legal, policy and structural reforms for Nepal to implement within a year. And while some laws were amended, implementation is another story. Read detailed report at nepalitimes.com



Most reached and shared on Facebook



India's trains connected Nepal

by Chandrakishore

Until the completion of the East-West Highway in the 1980s, Nepalis relied on Indian trains as the only means of travel within Nepal. Read the story with archival photos online.



Most popular on X

Trump shock wave hits Nepal

by Sudiksha Tuladhar

President Donald Trump's USAID cuts directly impact funding for gender rights and reproductive health in Nepal. The uncertainties serve as a reminder for Nepal to take greater responsibility for its own development and reduce dependence. Join the discussion online.



Most commented

Missing out on tourism

Nepali Times

While Nepal's tourism numbers have rebounded to pre-pandemic levels, domestic incompetence and regional geopolitics are holding back numbers for the coming year. More on our website.



Most visited online page



QUOTES



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Ban on female migrant workers to be lifted Nepal must recognise and protect its undocumented female domestic workers in West Asia while legalising migration, write Ayushman Bhagat and Sunita Mainali.



Bishow Parajuli @BishowParajuli

Glad for this opening! Bans and restrictions leads to an increased corruption and migrants falling into prey of human traffickers. Best way is to open up and provide maximum education and orientation for people to decide based on well informed knowledge.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Big tech is turning to various clean energy sources like wind, solar, hydropower, even nuclear power plants to power AI data centres. As demand grows, companies may look for new geographies with abundant clean energy, making Nepal a potential market.



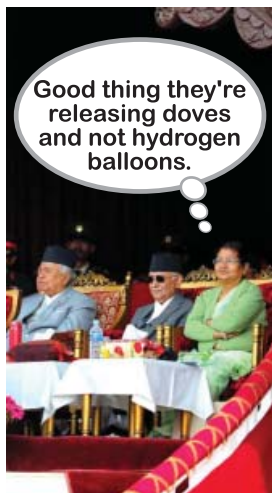
pigreen1 @pigreen1

Wishful thinking?

1,000 WORDS



DEMOCRATIC DAY: President Ram Chandra Paudel, Prime Minister K P Oli and how wife Radhika Shakya observing a parade at Tundikhel on Wednesday commemorating Democracy Day which marks the end of Rana rule in 1951. Radhika Shakya is launching her memoir titled Karuna on Saturday.



PHOTOS: SUMAN NEPALI



20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

“Hang in there”

A week after the 1 February 2005 coup by King Gyanendra, Nepali Times interviewed American Ambassador to Nepal James Moriarty. He urged the Nepali people to “hang in there”, to unite, to face the insurgency and also to rebuild democratic institutions. Twenty years down the line, perhaps these words would also be good advice for Americans under the chaotic second Trump term. Excerpts of the interview published on issue #235 18 – 24 January 2005:

Nepali Times: Your reactions on the developments after the royal takeover?

James Moriarty: We have said we are extremely worried and we want to see the detainees released immediately. We want to see constitutional freedoms restored. We also want to see the government reaching out to the political parties.

What has been your role in all this?

We have had to unfortunately remind the government that our assistance is under constant review and that these events are putting pressure on our provision of the assistance for the government of Nepal.

You met the king before February First, did you

know what was coming?

I want to state this as categorically as I can, I had no idea that this was happening. We had made it clear we thought multiparty democracy was the way to go. We were worried any sort of unilateral move by the king would end up walking the country back away from democracy.

There are allegations that was for public consumption but you covertly backed the royal move.

I say that is absolutely false. I know that is absolutely false. I am in a position to know and that is absolutely not the case.

How optimistic are you that multiparty democracy will be restored?

I think democracy here has deeper roots. I realise that Nepal is facing huge problems and the king says that is why he had to act. So be it. But again, he has stated that his goals are to return to multiparty democracy and address the Maoist insurgency effectively. We look forward to his doing so.

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

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Peak climbing season, 2025

Nepali mountaineering numbers have rebounded to pre-pandemic levels as government raises climbing fees

■ Vishad Raj Onta

Nepal expects a surge in mountaineering expeditions on Mt Everest this spring before fees are hiked to climb the world's highest mountain.

The number of tourists and mountaineers coming to Nepal has rebounded to pre-pandemic levels, mostly because of backlog and also since climbing from the north face of the mountain in Tibet was closed till last year, and China only issues permits for 300 climbers each season from its side of the mountain.

In 2019, Mt Everest had a record 877 summits, with 661 from Nepal and 216 from China. Last year, there were 861 successful climbs, with 787 from Nepal and 74 from the north. The number of summits from the Nepal side saw an increase of over 100.

There may be a surge in Spring 2025 given that it is the last climbing season before the Everest permit is increased from \$11,000 to \$15,000 in September. The fee increase is an attempt to reduce overcrowding on Everest, where traffic jams near the summit have given mountaineering a bad press worldwide.

However, such is the draw to climb the world's highest mountain that a \$4,000 hike in permits may not be much of a deterrent. Besides the fee, each climber spends anywhere up to \$100,000 for

logistics, equipment and hiring high altitude guides if they go through foreign operators. It is about half that if expeditions are handled by Nepal-based companies.

Nepal is trying to balance the negative publicity about overcrowding and garbage on Everest with the need to maximise revenue from the mountain and

is reluctant to have new rules and fees that would reduce expedition numbers.

"The government of Nepal is showing that it values money over lives," Alan Arnette, an Everest summiteer and blogger, told *Nepali Times* from Colorado.

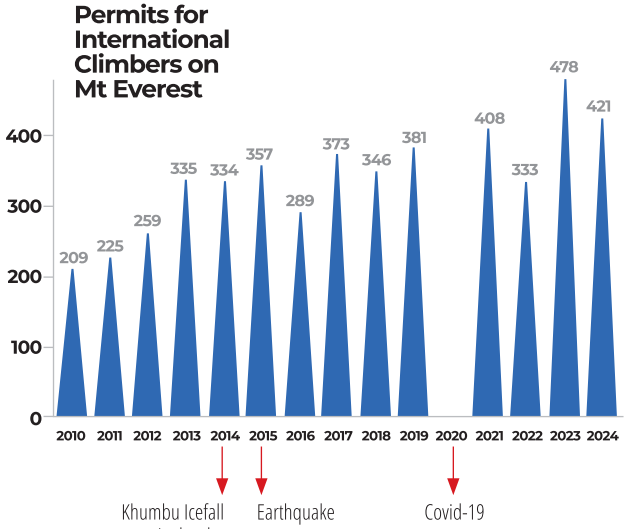
Mountaineering was always dangerous, and it was the adventure

that was the challenge. But the hazards have risen in recent years because climate breakdown has increased the frequency of avalanches, and made climbing more difficult as ice slopes turn into rock faces. Traffic jams above the death zone at 8,000m of Himalayan peaks have made climbing even more dangerous.

An additional factor is over-commercialisation of mountaineering in which operators cash in on global demand from climbers who have limited expertise in technical climbing, or cannot acclimatise. There were a record 18 fatalities on Everest in 2023, and eight in 2024.

Besides the fee increase, Nepal has also introduced rules to prohibit solo expeditions and to require all climbers to sew GPS chips into their jackets to track their location.

The ban on solo climbing has always been there since all mountaineers are required to hire guides. Of the 787 Everest summits from the Nepal side last






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MCC 'suspended'

The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) has been instructed by Washington to halt all payments to its Nepal contract. The \$500million deal to build transmission lines and upgrade highways was ratified by Parliament in 2022 after a prolonged controversy. Nepal was also contributing \$197 million for the project to build a 400kV transmission line that would have also facilitated electricity export to India. Earlier, the US Department of Government Efficiency DOGE announced through X that it has cancelled projects in



Nepal worth \$39M: \$20M for 'fiscal federalism' and \$19M for 'biodiversity conservation'. USAID has already suspended its operations in Nepal, affecting the health and media sectors. Read page 1 for details.



Kathmandu airport

Kathmandu airport will be fully operational from 31 March after a project to expand taxiways and aprons. The airport had been operating on a reduced 14-hour schedule (8am-10pm) since 8 November, which had caused ticket prices to go up. These hours were extended by 2 hours (7am-11pm) on 2 February. Normal hours (6am-12am) are set to resume from April 1.



Buildcon Expo

The 10th Nepal Buildcon International Expo 2025 is being held 20-23 February at Bhrikutimandap, Kathmandu bringing together Nepal's architects, construction, designers and engineers. Taking part are the Federation of Contractors Association of Nepal (FCAN), Society of Consulting Architectural and Engineering Firms (SCAEF), Society of Nepalese Architects (SONA) and Interior Designers Association of Nepal (IDEA).

Tiago.EV 2025

Official Tata dealer Sipradi has opened the Tata Tiago. EV 2025 for booking and delivery. The electric hatchback starts at Rs2,749,000 and has a range of 300km, a warranty of 8 years or 160,000km, and can charge 10-80% in one hour. Tata Motors and Sipradi Autoparts also organised Gurukshetra-2 to honour mechanics



across Nepal and test their knowledge through an exam. Abhishek Sunar from Surkhet emerged as Nepal's number one Tata 'Guru'. Motorbikes, TVs, mobiles and other appliances were distributed as prizes to top-performing mechanics, who also will get to add to and refine their skills at Tata plants.

S25 demand

Pre-orders for the Samsung Galaxy S25 series have been 60% higher than for the S24 series. Prices range from Rs104,999 for the S25 128GB to Rs199,999 for the S25 Ultra 512GB, with 0% interest financing plans available.



Root veg exports

100 tons of beetroot and 150 tons of carrots grown in Bharatpur are being exported to Germany by The Agranik Valley company. The carrots are being sold at Rs20/kg and beets at Rs50/kg.

E-Wallet merger

Leading digital wallets Khalti and IME Pay are merging. The companies hope that the union will help them compete with eSewa, which has 80% of the market. Khalti has 4 million subscribers, and IME Pay offers remittance services. The joint product may be called 'IME Khalti' or 'Khalti Pay'.

NAC-Japan Airlines

Nepal Airlines Corporation (NAC) has signed an interline partnership agreement with Japan Airlines per which Nepal Airlines passengers can directly travel to various American and western countries as well as Korea via Japan's Narita International Airport. The Japanese flag carrier is the 25th airline to sign passenger interline partnership with NAC while 28 airlines have also signed a cargo interline partnership.

NEA rated AA+

ICRA Nepal has given Nepal Electricity Authority an AA+ credit rating, which indicates a high level of financial stability. This score helps the NEA's plans to go public. The NEA made a record profit of Rs14.46B in fiscal year 23/24, and also saw increases in revenue, domestic energy sales, and exports.

Berger ISO Certs

Paint company Berger Jenson & Nicholson has earned ISO certifications for quality management, environmental management and occupational health and safety.



SAARC meet

The First Meeting of the SAARC Inter-Governmental Expert Group on Poverty Alleviation and Sustainable Development Goals with financial and technical assistance by the Asian Development Bank was held in Colombo this week. Delegations of SAARC Member States highlighted their priority areas including economic growth, quality education and health care, digital transformation, gender equality, empowerment of women and social inclusion, climate resilient agriculture and rural development.

IONIQ fastest lap

Hyundai's IONIQ 5 N achieved the fastest lap time by an EV at the Attack Tsukuba 2025 motorsport event in Japan. Nobuteru Taniguchi, who drove a slightly modified IONIQ, completed the lap in 57.446s.

year as many as 468 were hired guides and 319 their clients.

The rule on GPS sensors was announced in February 2024, and although it was a good idea, it was never implemented. Besides, the ‘chips’ turned out to be radar reflectors used to locate climbers buried by avalanches. In one case, an expedition company said it could not track a missing climber because he did not have a tracker.

“These rules exist only on paper,” says Behrouz Moghaddasi at White Mountain Rescue Training Institute who has over 20 years of experience in search and rescue, and has worked in the Himalaya since 2016. “The government has no contingency plan in the case of a major accident.”

Moghaddasi says that given the amount the government is collecting through permits from Everest and other Khumbu mountains, it should shoulder more responsibility. "In fact private companies are getting better at rescue operations, with little support from the government," he says.

The need to increase revenue was also perhaps what led the government last month to officially recognise six more peaks above 8,000m: four in the Kanchenjunga massif and two near Lhotse. The announcement was widely ridiculed in international mountaineering circles since it went against accepted criteria for 'topographic prominence'. A peak has to be at least 300m higher than the lowest point on a connecting ridge otherwise it is considered a sub-peak of the main summit.

The lack of coordination between different government agencies and ad hoc approach was most evident in the sudden on-again-off-again ban on helicopter flights in the Everest region

last month that created a lot of confusion. Helicopters are now flying again.


There are some ways to reduce fatalities and similar to measures taken in the Alps. Climbers are already required to have summited a peak over 7,000m before they attempt Everest, but safety could be increased if guides need to be internationally certified, and establishing search and rescue resources at Base Camp and Camp 2.

Even if these government measures are strictly implemented, clients and guides sometimes take unnecessary risks on mountains. Clients invest vast sums for their climbs and there is pressure to bag the peak even if the guide tells them it is too dangerous. Sometimes guides are ignored by determined clients, especially when there is a record or competition involved.

Many recent deaths would be preventable if guides turned clients back at the first sign of altitude sickness, or if teams followed basic avalanche hygiene. Another culprit is itineraries that are too lean, a result of companies competing to give clients the shortest trip possible to the summit and back.

"Every climber, solo or otherwise, should take Everest seriously and not expect to rely on any other expeditions," says journalist and climber Billi Bierling of the Himalayan Database in Kathmandu.

Global warming trends are making climbing more dangerous for example on the South Col route and Icefall on Everest, but it means climbing seasons should also be recalibrated. For example, spring expeditions could start earlier in March, and end later in June. The arrival of the monsoon has shifted and now usually breaks over Nepal in late June. 

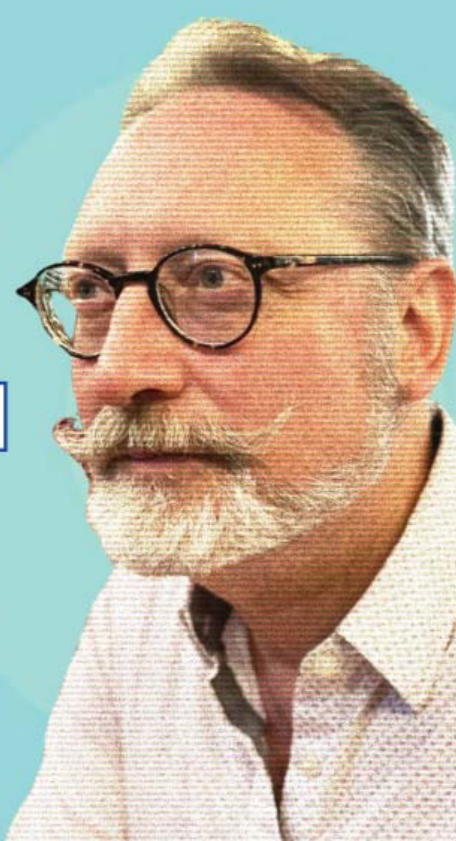


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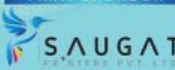
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A white Subaru Crosstrek SUV is shown from a front-three-quarter view against a light blue background. Green leaves are floating around the car, suggesting eco-friendliness. The car has a black roof rack and black wheel arches. The word "CROSSTREK" is visible on the front license plate area.

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Nepal is not a failed state, but it is

■ Sonia Awale

Frustrated with revolving door politics with the same tired, tested and failed leaders, Nepal's cybersphere is harking back to the good old days when we had strongmen rulers like Jang Bahadur Rana or King Mahendra. The century-long Rana oligarchy ended 74 years ago this week, and the Shah kings airbrushed Nepal's history to downplay their achievements and glorify their own dynasty. After the monarchy was abolished in 2008, the Shah kings were similarly vilified. But Nepali society is mature enough to realise that the truth is not all black and white. Jang Bahadur may have usurped power in a ruthless coup, but he was a geopolitical strategist way ahead of his time. Whatever you may say about King Mahendra's efforts in quashing democracy and pushing a unitary state, he defended Nepal's sovereignty and projected its international image right through the sensitive Cold War period. Jang Bahadur in England is a new Nepali language book by journalist Gajendra Budhathoki about the visit in 1850 by Nepal's prime minister to England and France, the first by a South Asian potentate. He met Queen Victoria and by all accounts was able to establish Nepal's presence on the world stage. Historians have long mulled why a devout Hindu like Jang Bahadur would want to break the taboo and cross the Black Waters. Budhathoki recounts the incident upon his arrival at

Southampton on 2 May 1850, when British customs officials tried to check the belongings of the Nepali entourage. Furious, Jang Bahadur threatened to sail right back to France if they opened any of the bags. Jang had three main reasons for his trip. Essentially he was on a spy mission to assess British military might to decide if it was worthwhile for Nepal to try to militarily take back territory ceded to British India in the Sugauli Treaty of 1816. So, Jang asked his perplexed hosts to show him cannon factories, artillery and naval yards. He even visited Woolwich Arsenal (now the Royal Arsenal) not once, but three times. Suitably impressed, Jang decided to be Britain's BFF, and even rode down to Lucknow with 3,200 Nepali troops to rescue the British from the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. As a reward, the British gave back the Tarai districts of Banke, Bardia, Kailali, and Kanchanpur (Naya Muluk). This close relationship continued with Jang's descendants right till the time the British left India in 1947. Jang Bahadur was also fed up with the Governor General Lord Dalhousie in Calcutta who tended to bully Nepal, and wanted to build direct contacts with his bosses in London. The British told him Dalhousie was their man in India, and Jang should deal with him. Jang's visit to France does not get as much attention in the book, but he was also trying to gauge France's strength and to see if its military was more powerful than Britain's. At that time, France was Britain's main rival and was trying to make inroads in India.

At the Louvre, Jang Bahadur was drawn to exhibits reflecting French military prowess. Later, when he met Louis Napoleon III, he asked if he could see a parade of 900,000 troops to assess France's military might. Freshly returned from Europe, an emboldened Jang Bahadur Rana led Nepal in a war against Tibet in 1855 which ended with the Treaty of Thapathali a year later. This was the third time Nepal and Tibet had fought, the first time being soon after Prithvi Narayan Shah in 1788. The Qing Dynasty came to the rescue of Tibet, and while both sides claimed victory, the Sino-Nepalese War ended essentially as a stalemate with the Treaty of Betrawati. All of this is detailed in Axel Michaels' book, Nepal: A History from the Earliest Times to the Present which is a recent English translation of his German Kultur und Geschichte Nepals published in 2018. Michaels is a Professor of Classical Indology and Religious Studies at Heidelberg University, and writes that Nepal mattered little to China. Proof of this is that while both Nepal and Tibet agreed to accept the suzerainty of the Qing emperor following the war, Nepal managed to retain its autonomy but Beijing asserted its control over Lhasa. And despite a clause in the treaty which stated, 'if a foreign power attacks Nepal, China shall support Nepal', China never did so during the 1814-16 war with the East India Company. This practice has continued to this day. Aside from token petroleum shipments, Beijing did not help out Nepal during the



A hand-drawn illustration of Jang Bahadur Rana upon his arrival on Southampton port on 2 May 1850, printed on the front page of the Illustrated London News.



MAO AND THE MONARCH: King Mahendra with Mao Zedong in Beijing during the king's state visit to China in 1967.

■ Sudiksha Tuladhar

Till about 200 years ago China and India were the world's largest economies, and that helped Kathmandu prosper as an entrepôt between the two. We have now come full circle. China and India are ascendant once more, and the two giant neighbours can be the locomotives to pull Nepal along if we play our cards right. That is the message in former Kantipur editor Sudheer Sharma's omnibus edition of two books that explore the historical and geopolitical dimensions of Nepal's relations with China. The two Nepali language books, भिक्षु, व्यापार र बिद्रोह (Monks, Trade and Rebellion) and हिमालपारिको हुरी (Trans-Himalayan Hurricane) follow Sharma's previous work प्रयोगशाला (Laboratory) which looked mainly at Nepal-India relations and was translated into English as The Nepal Nexus. The first book is predominantly about

A past foretold

Two new books urge Nepal to leverage relations with China and India in its own national interest

Kathmandu's historical links with Lhasa, and by extension Beijing. Vajrayana Buddhism played a significant role in bringing the two sides of the Himalaya together, allowing social and trade relations to thrive. Princess Bhrikuti, King Narendra Dev and Arniko were prominent historical figures, but thousands of lesser known monks, traders, and travellers also played their part in cementing Kathmandu-Lhasa ties. These connections were so strong that they endured three wars that the Gorkha Kingdom and Tibet fought against each other in which Chinese emperors sent military help to fight off the Nepalis. Although Nepal's historic connections with Tibet waned after the Chinese annexation of the plateau in the 1950s, it is on that foundation that present day Nepal-China relations are built. Till today, Nepal is the only country with a consulate in Lhasa, and the only international flights from Lhasa are to Kathmandu. But as Sharma notes, even back then, Nepal's proximity with northern India figured importantly in its

socio-economic and cultural connections with Tibet. Nepal was the corridor for the exchange of trade and faith between the Ganga plains and the Tibetan plateau. The road between Patna and Potala, Banaras and Beijing passed through Kathmandu Valley. Sharma traces this socio-political landscape to explain how it went on to shape the country's modern day relations with the neighbours. There were 2,000 Buddhist monks in Nepal during the reign of Lichhavi king Amshuverma, and Arniko established himself in the court of Kubilai Khan and took eight years to build the massive White Dagoba in Beijing. While Mahayana Buddhism spread from India, through Nepal to China and beyond, it was Communism that later came from China to Nepal. King Mahendra had great geopolitical savvy and navigated the complicated geopolitics of the Cold War to cultivate relations with both Nehru and Mao, while keeping both at arms length. Mahendra wrested aid to

Nepal is a fragile one

Indian Blockade of 2015. Even though Nepali leaders have tried to play India off against China, the two do not find Nepal important enough to fight over and prefer to leave it as a buffer state between them.

In that sense, Britain also did not press home its victory after 1816 and left Nepal alone. The malarial Jangles to the south, rugged Himalayan terrain and the lack of marketable products (except soldiers) may have persuaded the traders at the East Indian Company that it was not worth the effort.

There is a lesson from history here for Nepal: the country must look out for itself, and this requires deft diplomacy to understand what our giant neighbours really want and leverage it for our gain. This may require strategies like the ones made by Jang Bahadur and King Mahendra after all.

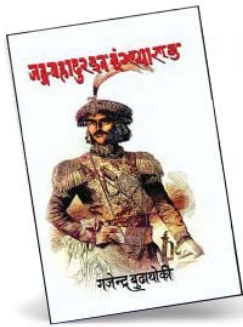
Michaels is not a fan of either the Rana or the Shah dynasties. He says that although the Rana era is characterised as ‘a century of tyranny’, the description holds true for the Shah period as well.

Michaels does not mince his words about Gurkha recruitment into the British and Indian Armies (another legacy of the Sugauli Treaty). He calls the mercenaries ‘cheap labour’ and Pushpa Kamal Dahal ‘represents a continuation of the King-Brahmin alliance’. In fact, he goes at length to discuss how the Khas-Arya used ‘Hindu state’ to homogenise a country that couldn’t have been more diverse.

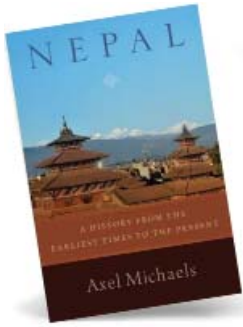
But democracy has not served Nepal well either. Corruption,

impunity and lack of transparency are rife. And so, Michaels asks if Nepal is a failed state. No it is not, but it is a fragile state.

He leaves us with these parting words: ‘If Nepal succeeds in continuing down this road, preserving its ethnic and cultural diversity, leaving the ethnic populations with a certain degree of autonomy, while at the same time integrating them into political decision-making processes, and if it manages the reforms needed for land-ownership, labour, education, infrastructure, then the country can become a model for unity in diversity, even in the age of leveling globalisation.’ 🇳🇵



जङ्गबहादुर राना
इंग्ल्याण्ड
Gajendra Budathoki
Express Printing Pvt
Ltd, 2024
111 pages
Rs350



Nepal: A History from
the Earliest Times to
the Present
Axel Michaels
Oxford University
Press, 2024
432 pages
Rs2,000 (South Asia
Edition)



2 literature festivals

The 12th edition of Nepal Literature Festival will be held 27 February to 2 March in Pokhara. It is the literary event in the country where international authors rub shoulders with Nepali writers, activists, artists, economists, and politicians to foster intellectual discourse.

Last year's festival had Kai Bird, co-author of the Oppenheimer biography American Prometheus, linguist George Van Driem, and from India Chandras Choudhury and Janice Pariat.

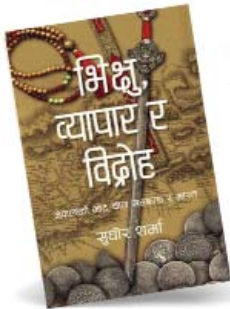
This year's chief guest is Indian politician, diplomat, and author Shashi Tharoor (pictured) whose latest book, The Battle of Belonging: On Nationalism, Patriotism, and What It Means to Be Indian was published in 2022.

And the annual children's literature festival Bal Sahitya Mahotsav will be held at Rato Bangala School in Lalitpur 9:30am to 4:30pm on 1 March in which the keynote speaker will be Newbery Medal recipient author Matthew Tobin Anderson.

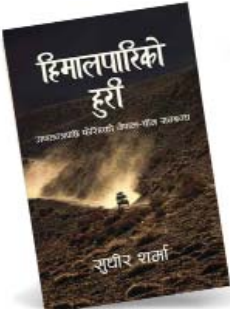
Bal Sahitya Mahotsav has been organised by Rato Bangala School every year since 2015.

on an even keel. It is significant that China has been surprisingly understanding of the presence of Gorkha soldiers from Nepal in the Indian Army along the disputed border where India and China fought a war in 1962, and after which there have been frequent skirmishes.

The two books should be read chronologically so as to track the trajectory of historical Nepal-Tibet ties right up to present-day Nepal-China relations. The most relevant concern for bilateral relations today, as Sharma points out, is Nepal's economic independence, sovereignty, and role in a transformed world order. 🇳🇵



भिखु, व्यापार र बिद्रोह
Sudheer Sharma
Kitab Publishers 2024
376 pages
Rs899



हिमालपारिको हुरी
Sudheer Sharma
Kitab Publishers 2024
279 pages
Rs699

Nepal in the world, the world in Nepal

Essays document political and socio-cultural evolution amid geopolitical upheavals in the 1950s

■ Shristi Karki

The post World War II decade of the 1950s saw the dismantling of colonial systems, establishment of a new world order with the United States replacing Britain. India and Pakistan had just gained independence and were still traumatised by partition.

In China, Mao Zedong came to power after 20 years of revolution, and promptly annexed Tibet. The Cold War between the US and the Sino-Soviet alliance led to proxy wars in Korea and Vietnam.

In Nepal itself, the Ranas were replaced by the Shahs in 1951, and ten years later BP Koirala became the first democratically elected prime minister — soon deposed in a coup by King Mahendra. Nepal opened up to the world and tried to keep a delicate balance between global and regional powers.

The book, Nepal in the Long 1950s, explores politics, economics and the socio-culture milieu in the decade following the end of the Rana rule. Edited by researchers Pratyoush Onta, Lokranjan Parajuli and anthropologist Mark Liechty, the book is a collection of 10 essays, the first six of which place Nepal in the larger geopolitical context, while the last four explore the role of foreign specialists and institutions in reshaping Nepal.

Prawash Gautam examines how the last years of Rana rule were marked by looser controls, enabling the emergence of the public sphere. One tea shop near Dharara became a space for socialisation, discourse, as well as political organisation.

However, while this teashop was unique in that it allowed customers from ‘lower’ caste communities, Gautam says caste-based discrimination and limited access to women still prevented public spaces from being inclusive.

Bandana Gyawali writes about how the Nepali notion of unnati (progress), was replaced by the concept bikas (development), a ‘more democratic’ term championed by the American aid programs that associated development with material gain which at the time meant little to Nepal.

Peter Gill's chapter discusses efforts to legislate and implement socio-economic reform, including birta abolition, tenancy rights, and land distribution. However, he writes, these reforms were ultimately a populist tool used by new leaders for political gain.

Sharad Ghimire delves into the state's disaster response in the aftermath of the deadly 1954 floods (pictured). Political incompetence and attempts to politicise the crisis led to the failure of relief led by Prime Minister M P Koirala, ultimately deepening rifts between himself and leaders of the ruling coalition — giving King Mahendra the chance to assert himself.

Meanwhile, the US answered Nepal's call for help in disaster management to curb possible Communist influence in Nepal, much to India's annoyance.

Pratyoush Onta examines how post-Rana politics encouraged Nepal to realise their intellectual freedom and pursue knowledge creation and distribution. The formation of the short-lived Nepal Sanskritik Foundation, set up by political leaders, scholars, and intellectuals like Bal Chandra

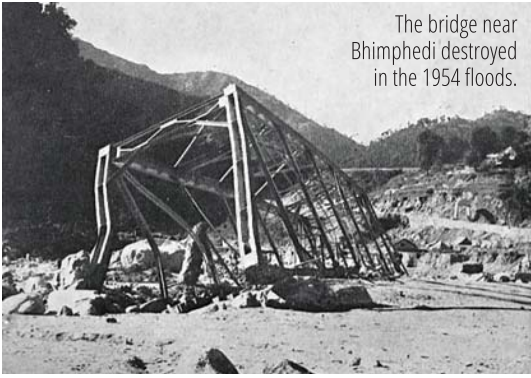
Sharma and Isvar Baral facilitated social research and knowledge enterprise.

Two chapters discuss the development of Nepal's education sector. Lokranjan Parajuli looks into how domestic and foreign actors impacted the founding of Tribhuvan University, documenting the role of queen consorts Jayanti Rajya Laxmi Devi Shah and Queen Ishwari Rajya Laxmi Devi Shah, even as Mahendra remained wary lest it produce intellectuals who would undermine his authority.

India and the US were vying to help TU, but China and USSR arrived to also support the higher education sector with fewer strings attached. This led to the US and India joining forces, and the US eventually let India take the lead.

In Jeremy Rappleye's chapter on the US development assistance and Nepal's modern education system, he recalls how American educator Hugh Wood's aid-centered blueprint for educational development in the 1950s was incongruous with what Nepali officials wanted. Wood's model laid the groundwork for Nepal's modern education, writes Rappleye, although it was not entirely appropriate.

Susan Heydon's research into Nepal's healthcare sector reveals that development in biomedicine was in large part due to assistance from Christian missionaries, despite Nepal's wariness towards them,



The bridge near Bhimphe destroyed in the 1954 floods.

visiting foreign healthcare experts, as well as international aid.

Former USEF Nepal director Thomas Robertson takes on the US ‘Four Point Program’ aimed at making Nepal reliant on American support. With the region in the grip of the Cold War, the US sought to expand its sphere of influence in Asia, in particular to stop India from going the way of China.

Nepal therefore became strategically important to America's aspirations for the region. This meant Washington poured aid into Nepal, including anti-malaria programs and land reform initiatives — in stark contrast to Doald Trump's current pullout of USAID, MCC and other programs.

Mark Liechty ends the book with his exploration into the life and times of Boris Lisanevich and his Hotel Royal which ushered Nepal into the age of tourism. But Boris was not particularly well versed in the art of hospitality, and while Nepal in this burgeoning sector realised the opportunities and went about realising those potentials Lisanevich continued to dwell in his anachronistic colonial fantasy of Nepal, not doing himself any favours. 🇳🇵



Nepal in the Long 1950s
Edited by Pratyoush Onta,
Lokranjan Parajuli, Mark
Liechty
Martin Chautari, 2024
ISBN: 978-9937-594-35-6
462 pages
Rs999

build infrastructure like the Kodari and Prithvi Highways from China, but also from India, the Soviet Union and the United States. In fact Nepal was only the eighth non-Communist country to receive foreign aid during Mao's China.

But when Nepal's Maoists launched an armed struggle against the monarchy, China's official media never called them ‘Maoists’. As far as Beijing was concerned, Mao was dead in his mausoleum. It was only later under Xi Jinping that China warmed up to Pushpa Kamal Dahal's ‘Maoist’ label.

The first book takes us to the point when the Constituent Assembly abolished Nepal's monarchy in 2008, and the second book, as the name suggests, looks at how the whirlwind rise of China has buffeted Nepal.

Sharma encourages readers to abandon Prithvi Narayan Shah's famous metaphor of Nepal being ‘yam between two boulders’ to it being more like a ‘narrow canyon’ between two big mountains, emphasising the challenges of maintaining sovereignty amid geopolitical pressures not just between India and China, but increasingly, with the United States.

We have to see how the new Sino-US Cold War will evolve under the second Donald Trump presidency. The suspension of the MCC this week will be an opening for China to push its own BRI infrastructure projects in Nepal (page 1).

EVENTS



Nepal Literature Festival

The Ncell Foundation Nepal Literature Festival is back for its 12th edition bringing fresh stories and inspiring discussions from the literary world.
27 February-2 March, Barahighat, Pokhara

Limitless Expressions

Visit the opening of the outcome exhibition AIR_MCUBE International Artists’ Residency 2025 featuring Valerie Clark from Australia. The exhibition will remain open till 25 February from 10am to 7pm.
Opening: 21 February, 5pm onwards, Gallery Mcube, Chakupat



Race Wars

The Biggest Racing Event of Nepal is set to bring together the boldest riders and showcase top-performing motorcycles, providing an exhilarating show for audiences.
21 February, 10am onwards, Ticket:Rs200, Satdabato Sports Complex

Watercolor Odyssey

Nepal Academy of Fine Arts and Siddhartha Art Gallery are hosting an exhibition of watercolors featuring artists from Bangladesh, China and Nepal.
25 February, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal Revisited



E-sports Championship

Get ready for the ultimate gaming showdown at the E-sports National Championship. Also includes performances from The Elements and Kuma Sagar & The Khwopaa.
21-22 February, Ticket:Rs700++, Dasharath Stadium, Tripureshwar

Jun ta Lagyo Taarale

Catch writer-director Ingi Hopo Koinch Sunuwar’s play Jun ta Lagyo Tarale, which tells the stories and struggles of relationships tied in desires and compulsions.
22 February-2 March, 4pm onwards, Ticket: Rs500, Mandala Theatre, Thapagaun



Art exhibition

The ongoing exhibition I am rooted, but I flow, curated by Pratima Thakali, showcases unique contemporary artwork of eight female artists who explore the fluidity of identity, culture, and transformation.
Till 8 March, Tuesday – Thursday: 11am – 6pm / Friday – Sunday: 11am – 7pm, Takpa Gallery

MUSIC

Kathmandu Open Air
Buckle up for the Kathmandu Open Air festival, featuring Purna Rai and Dajubhaiharu, Gauley Bhai, Jhilkey and the Company, Shephalika Dhakal, Dry Skunk, Sonagi Blues, Space and Oshin Karki.
22 February, 12pm onwards, Ticket:Rs800, Calm Tangalwood, Naxal



Kuma Sagar & The Khwopaa

Kuma Sagar & the Khowpaa have a Shivaratri performance at Tokha Urban Farm.
26 February, 6pm onwards, Ticket: Rs750, Tokha Urban Farm, Tokha

Space Saga Vol. 2

Head to The Bar Room for an electrifying night of cosmic beats and techno madness with Angie, B2B, Wylde, and Electrode.
21 February, 8pm onwards, Entry Rs:500, Z Street, Thamel



The Elements

The Elements will play a gig at the Global Tourism Trade Fair 2025. The line-up includes other artists including the Rockheads.
22 February, 2pm onwards, Ticket: Rs500, Global College, Baneshwor



Gazal Sessions

Make your way to Mirch on Saturday for evenings filled with gazals performed by the Indreni Gazal Band while enjoying Indian-inspired cocktails like an Imli Sour.
22 February, 6:30 pm onwards, Mirch, Jhamsikhel

GETAWAY



Meraki Wellness Retreat

The go-to retreat for comfort, rejuvenating hospitality and wellness. Relax with immersive experiences, guided yoga, healing therapies and much more.
Budanilkantha, 9801919001

Godavari Village Resort

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Godawari, Kathmandu (01) 5560675



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Pokhara, 9767470541



Grand Norling

Enjoy a calm and relaxing stay at Norling with their spacious bedrooms, a large balcony with sights of the golf course, monkeys and deer herds, and the beautiful garden.
Gokarna (01) 4910296

Lavanya Villa

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Dhulikhel, 9801087571

WEEKEND WEATHER



FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY
21° 7°	22° 7°	21° 6°	21° 6°	23° 7°

False Alarms

There have been a series of false alarms with westerly systems this winter. And the latest front over Nepal this weekend may be no different. While about 5cm of snow fell across the central Himalaya down to an elevation of 4,000m this week, there was no rain over Kathmandu Valley. If we are lucky we may see some brief light showers from 21-24 February, but don't bet on it. It will stay cooler than usual in Kathmandu, but will start warming up to the mid-20s by Tuesday.



OUR PICK

The Outrun, Nora Fingscheidt's 2024 English-language drama based on British author Amy Liptrot's memoir of the same name, tells the story of biology graduate student Rona and her life in London. Rona is familiar with the city's clubbing scene, but regular drinking soon turns into alcoholism, for which she eventually goes into rehab. Once out of rehab, Rona returns home to the Orkney Islands in Scotland where she grew up, splitting time between her separated parents. Amidst the wild beauty of the island, Rona attempts to come to terms with her addiction, and heal in the process. Stars Saoirse Ronan, Saskia Reeves, Stephen Dillane, Lauren Lyle, and Paapa Essiedu.

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



Invoke Café & Bistro

Start the weekend right with Evoke's all you can eat breakfast buffet, which includes a spread of continental delights, live stations, and local favorites.
Jhamsikhel, 9851111051



Sam Ye Garden

Head to Sam Ye's vibrant space for Tibetan, Chinese, and continental cuisine. Their keema noodles, gyuma, and wontons are must-tries.
Bijeswari, Swoyambhu, 9820150840



Sesame Bakery

Pick your favourite dessert menu from Sesame Bakery and Coffee's flavorful macaroons, mango-bingsu, strawberry shortcake and basque cheesecakes. Also explore options for coffee and hot chocolate.
Bakhundol, 9860554396



The Trails Cafe

The Trails Café is a rooftop gem with a vibrant bar that serves vegan options. Private karaoke rooms are available as well—call to book.
Phulbari Road, Boudha, 9860818867

Blenders

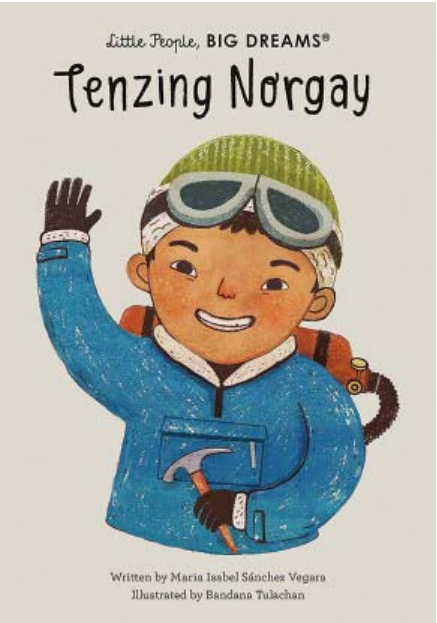
As the weather begins to warm up, get yourself a Blender's bottle of milkshake. Their light-bulb shaped reusable glass containers and classic flavors will keep you coming back for more.
City Centre, Kamal Pokhari, 9851219100

Illustrating innocence

Exploring Nepali identity, feminism, heroism through children’s literature and art

■ Sangya Lamsal

As a child, Bandana Tulachan used to flip through illustrated pages of books left behind by Japanese tourists visiting her home. She never thought she would become an illustrator, and even when enrolled in Kathmandu University’s Fine Arts program she was simply trying out different things. “Drawing just became the thing that I loved to do, and I developed a personal attachment to it,” recalls the thirty six-year-old, who is now a much sought-after illustrator of children’s books. Tulachan loves to read children’s books even as an adult, and is convinced they are formative in communicating to youngsters the right values of tolerance, kindness and cooperation. She says, “As children, we simply read the books, but as we grow older we begin to see the wisdom embedded in them.” Tulachan has seen for herself the immense power of storytelling, especially for children. Every book may not carry a grand lesson, but it exposes young minds to meaningful stories that reflect the world around them. “Childhood is such an important phase of one’s life,” she adds. “If something I create can bring joy to even one child, then it is worth everything.” Over the years, Tulachan has also grappled with the idea



of Nepali identity in her work. Early on, she was often told that her illustrations needed more ‘Nepaliness’ but for her Nepal is not a monolith. The country’s cultural diversity cannot be restricted to a few visual stereotypes. “Nepal has so many ethnicities, so many stories,” she says. “Instead of trying to homogenise it all into one identity, I explore it one space, one culture at a time.” Her comics story Shanti: Beyond the Veil was inspired by the life of poet and activist Shanti Chaudhary with whom Tulachan spent three days at her hometown in Bara, walking through the places that shaped her life. “She took me to her childhood home, her surroundings, the house

she moved into after marriage,” Tulachan recalls. “It felt important to tell her story.” The work was selected for Goethe-Institut’s Movements and Moments Project for its representation of indigenous feminist activism. Asked about her favourite work, Tulachan cites Sanu and the Big Storm, the very first book she both wrote and illustrated back in 2015, a challenge that initially terrified her. She recalls, “I wasn’t used to writing, and the process felt scary. But I had so much support to complete it.” More recently, Tulachan illustrated Little People Big Dreams: Tenzing Norgay. Having roots in Mustang, she has always felt a strong connection to the mountains.

And after visiting Solukhumbu, she immersed herself in visually telling the story of Tenzing Norgay’s life with drawings that use the grainy tone of early photographs. “It felt like a full-circle moment, illustrating a story so deeply rooted in the landscape I cherish,” she adds. The text is by Maria Isabel Sánchez Vegara and the book is published by Quarto/Frances Lincoln. Looking back, she knows it is far from perfect, but seeing children recognise and love the book makes it one of her most rewarding experiences. Tulachan sees exciting growth ahead for illustrators of children’s books with the rise of the art market and fresh, younger talent.

As for what the future holds, Bandana Tulachan is certain that more books lie ahead. “I want to make something amazing, something personal yet something that resonates with people,” she says. As Tulachan takes on more challenges, delving into animation and graphic novels, children’s book illustrations are still what hold a deep personal and emotional bond for her. And she likes it that unlike other writers or artists she does not have to explain her work. Says Bandana Tulachan: “Whenever you create something, a part of you goes into it, but I don’t feel the need to explain my art. Whatever people take from it is theirs to keep.”

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SIPRADI

Saving what is left of Himalayan

Not all mountain rivers need to be monetised, saving them will save us from climate breakdown

■ Kunda Dixit

Throughout human history, civilisations have been named after the rivers along which they flourished: the Indus Valley, Nile, Tigris-Euphrates. These cultures later collapsed, partly because they could not manage their water needs properly.

Three recent books about Himalayan rivers look at their history and geography, and how they nourished civilisations. The rivers gave birth to major religions, the waters and the mountains from which they sprang were revered.

Mythology and geology converge in High Asia. Mt Kailash is holy to Hindu, Jain, Buddhist and Bon faiths as the abode of the gods. Indeed, from its vicinity emerge Asia’s great rivers: the Indus and Sutlej, Ganga and the Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra).

Legend has it that Kathmandu Valley was once a primordial lake drained by Manjushree who cut a mountain with his flaming sword. There is scientific evidence that the paleo lake was indeed emptied in stages starting 40,000 years ago after a tsunami unleashed by an earthquake epicentred in Langtang.

The Bon faith describes the Tibetan Plateau as being pushed up from a roiling primeval sea, confirming evidence of the orogenesis of the Himalaya. In local lore, supernatural lha (animal deities) and lu (serpents, naga) moved from sea to land, just as evolution explains the emergence of amphibians and land creatures.

In Rivers of the Asian Highlands: From Deep Time to the Climate Crisis, Himalayan historian Ruth Gamble and co-authors begin by tracing the formation of the Himalaya, citing evidence that the Tibetan Plateau pre-dated the collision of tectonic plates 50 million years ago. The rivers co-emerged with the mountains, their waters cutting canyons through rocks as they were uplifted.

The gigantic pileup acted as a moisture trap for the proto-monsoon, the rain and ice sculpting peaks as they rose. But the uplift outpaced erosion on the Tibetan Plateau. These dynamic processes are still at work, but in many places across High Asia there is a new factor at play: modern infrastructure is increasing erosion faster than the uplift rate.

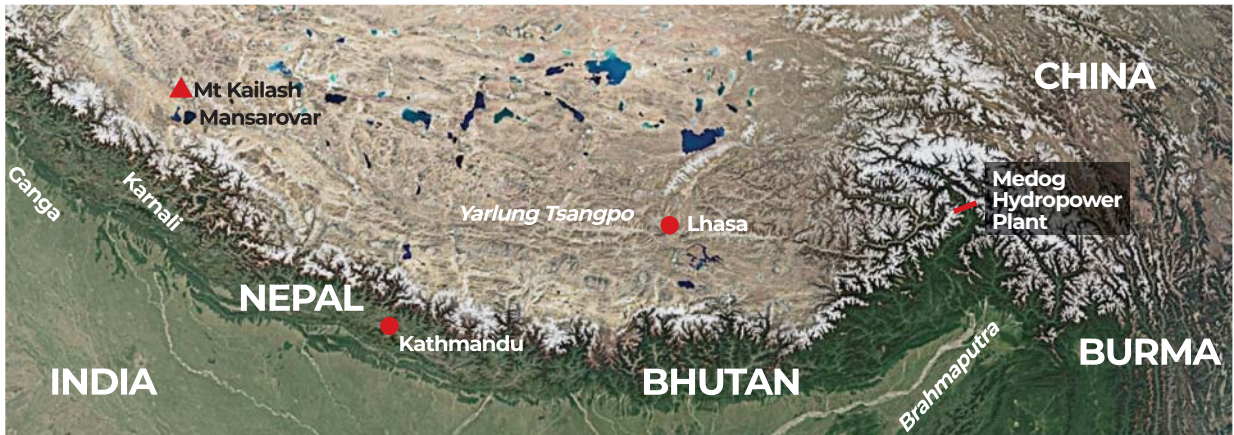
‘This is an example of human action overcoming tectonics,’ write the authors in Rivers of the Asian Highlands, in which the chapters look at Himalayan rivers on a planetary scale, trace their socio-cultural histories, to present-day engineering to regulate them. An ongoing dam-building spree and anthropogenic climate breakdown are changing the Himalaya and its rivers faster than has been seen for millions of years.

One example is the Medog Hydropower Station being built on the Yarlung Tsangpo at a bend on the Brahmaputra before it enters India. The river drops 2,000m within a 50km stretch, the gradient allowing it to generate 60,000MW — the biggest in the world.

Gamble and the authors of Rivers of the Asian Highlands highlight the Gravitational Potential Energy (GPE) of the Himalaya that allows falling water to be converted into electricity. But GPE also unleashes landslides, rockfalls, avalanches, Glacial Lake Outburst Floods (GLOFs) and Landslide Lake Outburst Floods (LLOFs), the risks posed by them magnified by



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FALLING WATER:
The braids on the Yarlung Tsangpo (Barhmaputra) near Lhasa before it enters a series of gorges where the world's largest hydroelectric plant is being built by China (above).

The Super Trisuli project in Nepal has ruined the most scenic and ecologically sensitive part of the river to generate just 100MW of power (above, right).

Boulders and sediment 80m deep brought down by the Teesta after a GLOF destroyed the \$1 billion Teesta III plant in Sikkim in 2023 (left).

Although the book’s title is ‘Asian highlands’, it focuses mainly on the Dri Chu (Yangtse) and Yarlung Tso (Brahmaputra). Readers looking for references to Nepal’s rivers will be puzzled, since Bhutan gets copious mention.

This is surprising since 70% of the annual flow in the Ganga is from tributaries in Nepal, some of them like Karnali, Arun or Bhote Kosi traverse the Tibetan rimlands. As demand for water grows in populous and increasingly affluent north India, and climate breakdown melts Himalayan glaciers, storing monsoon runoff on reservoirs in Nepal is going to be the geopolitical issue of the next decades.

The chapter on NGOs and Rivers also fails to cite the work of Nepal’s civil society groups like the Alliance for Energy that built international solidarity in 1995 against the Arun III on a river that starts in Tibet and flows into Nepal. Ultimately, the World Bank pulled out, allowing Nepal to invest in smaller decentralised plants.

India is building a cascade of power plants on the Arun which do not seem to have factored in the 2023 Sikkim GLOF that swept away the \$1 billion dollar Teesta III. The World Bank itself is back with the Upper Arun located directly below

climate change and seismicity. There is geological evidence that megafloods on Himalayan rivers are more responsible than mass wasting in weathering down the mountains. One big LLOF, for example, ‘moves 1,000 times more sediment than would otherwise be transported over millions of years’.

Permafrost melting in the Tibetan Plateau and in moraines caused recent back-to-back GLOFs in Chamoli in the Indian Himalaya, Melamchi in Nepal, and the South Lhonak in Sikkim — all deadly disasters that together destroyed billions of dollars worth of infrastructure downstream.

Rivers of the Asian Highlands travels from deep time to the present climate crisis, taking readers through neatly divided chapters titled Mountain Rivers, Climatic Rivers, Frozen Rivers, Living Rivers, Human Rivers, Agricultural and Pastoral Rivers, even NGOs and Rivers.

rivers

expanding glacial lakes in Tibet.

Despite these geographical gaps, the book reads like an encyclopedia of Himalayan rivers, looking at them not in isolation but as interconnected systems which need a multidisciplinary approach to study the geological, religious, cultural, infrastructure and climate aspects of the catchments.

Mt Kailash (Kang Rinpoche) is a case in point. It is fascinating to think that it was part of a much higher mountain range even before the collision of the continents that formed the Himalaya, and was probably buried in ice 3km thick till 15,000 years ago during the Last Glacial Maximum. Isostatic rebound is now raising the Plateau.

Lake Mansarovar and Mt Kailash are also the subject of the new Nepali language book खालबाटो (Wave Road) by environmental journalist Ramesh Bhushal who walked, rafted and drove from the source of the Karnali in Tibet, through 500km of Nepal, and on to where the river meets the Ganga.

In his entourage is activist, Megh Ale, who wants to stop dams and infrastructure on Nepal's longest and only free-flowing river. The book profiles his lonely upstream struggle to conserve rivers. "We worship rivers, but we don't love them," laments Ale.

Bhushal's book is as much about the landscape of this transboundary river as it is about the people he meets along the way, and their relationship with a river that most regard as a curse that is keeping them poor. They believe it flows out of Rakshas Tal (Lagngar Tso) in Tibet, regarded as a lake of demons, unlike the sacred Mansarovar.

The expedition proves that the Karnali actually starts in the mountains 50km southwest of the Mansarovar (Mapamyu Tso) at the Peacock Falls (Mapchu Khambap). The Indus is called Sengge (Lion), Sutlej is Langchen (elephant) and the Brahmaputra is Tamchok (horse), all starting within 60km of Mansarovar but flowing out in different directions.

This reverence for mountains and rivers may not be enough to save them from the impact of climate breakdown and modern infrastructure. Heat stress in the Subcontinent will coincide with

The Asian Highlands’ abundance of Gravitational Potential Energy (GPE) can support the region’s energy transition, but it needs to be produced in much less hazardous and less environmentally and socially impactful ways. The best means of doing this is through off-river, pumped-storage hydropower stations that back up solar and wind energy generators. Smaller projects such as this would also involve less risky tunneling and displacement.

**Rivers of the Asian Highlands:
From Deep Time to the
Climate Crisis**
by Ruth Gamble, et al.

If there is one consistent lesson in *Unruly Waters*, it is that water management never has been, and can never be, a purely technical or a scientific question; neither can it be addressed on a purely national scale ... the battle continues to understand the monsoons and mountain rivers that shape Asia.

**Unruly Waters:
How Mountain Rivers and
Monsoons Have Shaped South
Asia's History
by Sunil Amrith**

I have visited hundreds of rivers around the world, but for some reason I have never seen a river as beautiful as the Karnali. One day I would like to visit its source.

**River conservation activist
Megh Ale quoted in छालबाटो
by Ramesh Bhushal**

a shortage of water in the coming decades.

Sunil Amrith in his 2019 book, *Unruly Waters: How Mountain Rivers and Monsoons Have Shaped South Asia's History* takes a broader look at how geotectonics, geopolitics, colonialism and nationalism determined relations between human beings and rivers.



The Himalayan water cycle starts from monsoon moisture that precipitates with orographic uplift along the mountains, atmospheric rivers unleash cloudbursts, ground water emerges from springs that join up to flow down to rivers and the ocean. The Third Pole is the biggest repository of water. It is a hotspot both because of the climate crisis and geopolitical tensions, which undermines river basin cooperation, early warnings, ultimately in greenhouse gas mitigation, and planning for new risks faced by infrastructure.

After independence, India adopted the colonial extraction model for rivers. Inaugurating the Bhakra-Nangal Dam in 1953, Jawaharlal Nehru called it ‘a temple of modern India ... worthy of worship’. Gamble also alludes to this in her book about the European attitude about rivers as a resource to be ‘enclosed, extracted, scrutinised, commodified’.

Amrith profiles the work of Sir Arthur Cotton who was building canals linking rivers in British India at about the same time his contemporaries like botanist Joseph Dalton-Hooker were exploring the Teesta and other rivers to catalogue new plant species. India current National River Linking Project that would join 37 rivers with 9,000km of canals builds on Cotton's work.

And in Nepal, hydropower has become the holy grail. It unveiled an Energy Development Roadmap to generate 28,500MW by 2035 at a cumulative cost of nearly \$50billion. This means no river in

Nepal will be left free-flowing.

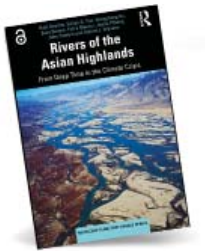
The Trisuli along the Prithvi Highway is being dammed for only 100MW of power, destroying the most scenic part of a river that has rapids famous with international white water rafters. Last year, the under-construction dam site suffered Rs200 million damage in a major flood.

In Sikkim, there is strong local opposition to rebuild Teesta III, but investors are looking at the huge economic windfall from the river that drops from 5,000m below Kangchenjunga to 300m within 80km — one of the highest Gravitational Potential Energy of any river in the world.

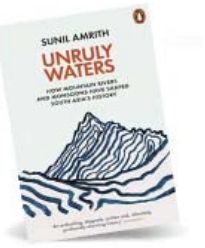
Besides Nepal and Bhutan, the 'watersheds' of the Himalaya are turning into 'powersheds' as India and China compete for hydro-hegemony. India is said to be planning to dam the Brahmaputra to offset the disruption caused by China's Medog Dam upstream.

The thread running through all three books is the need to recognise the ecosystem services that the inhabitants of High Asia provide by protecting our rivers. Not all rivers need to be monetised, conserving rivers and the cultures they retain protects a nation's natural wealth into the future as Himalayan humans try to survive climate breakdown.

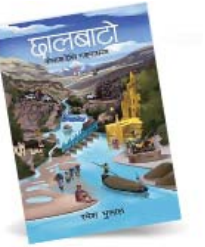
The highlands will be under even more pressure in the coming decades as people in the plains migrate en masse to higher latitudes or higher altitudes to escape deadly heat and ocean expansion. 🇺🇸



Rivers of the Asian Highlands: From Deep Time to the Climate Crisis
by Ruth Gamble, Gillian G Tan, Hongzhang Xu,
Sara Beavis, Petra Maurer, Jamie Pittock, John
Powers and Robert J Wasson
Routledge, 2024
295 pages Paperback £36.99



*Unruly Waters: How Rains, Rivers, Coasts, and Seas
Have Shaped Asia's History*
by Sunil Amrith Penguin, 2018
397 pages \$16.99 on Amazon



छालबाटो: कैलाशदेखि गङ्गासम्म
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