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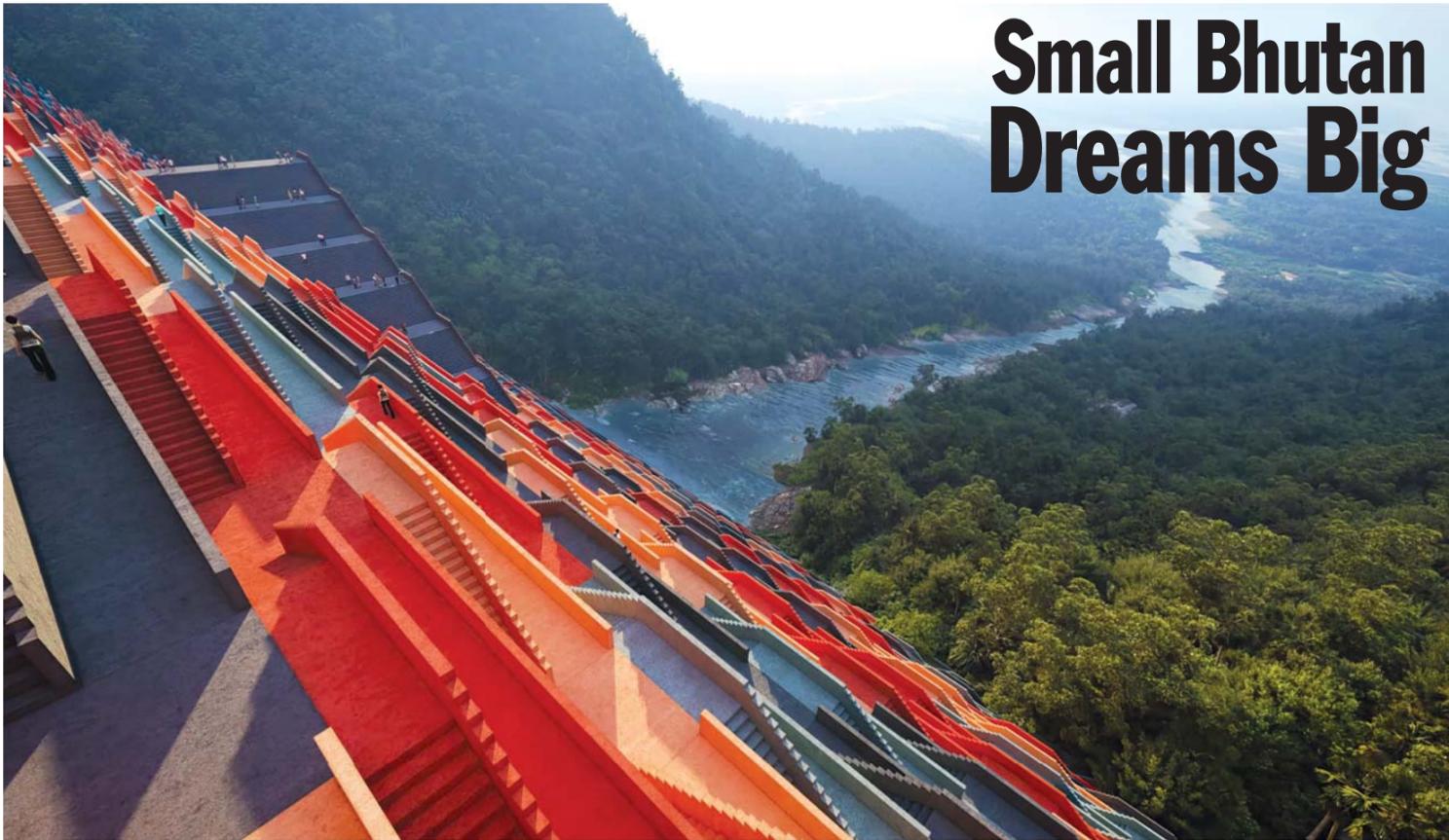
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Small Bhutan Dreams Big

■ Sonia Awale in Thimphu

In Bhutan, this is one sentence one hears often: "We are learning from Nepal's mistakes." Nepal indeed sets examples for what not to do.

But Nepal has not forcibly evicted one-sixth of its population like Bhutan did in the early 1990s. Over 100,000 of the refugees lived for 15 years in camps in eastern Nepal before being resettled around the world.

This history has strained relations between the two Himalayan nations which share the same socio-economic, geopolitical and environmental challenges. Despite the asymmetry in size, Bhutan and Nepal can learn more from each other and cooperate.

Both have abundant clean energy sources, both are sandwiched between two giant neighbours. They also struggle to create jobs at home for their youth.

Bhutan's defence and foreign policy are handled by New Delhi, and there is a heavy presence of the Indian Army along Bhutan's border with China, especially along the disputed Doklam region. Nepal is nominally more independent, and has tried to steer equidistant relations with India and China.

Bhutan generates 2,326MW of electricity from plants built mostly

by Indian companies and half this power is exported to India. The government's Druk Holdings and Investment is looking to harness an additional 15,000MW of hydroelectric and 5,000MW solar power for which it will need over \$25 billion in investments.

Bhutan's officials accept their geopolitical reality, and live with exclusive Indian involvement in its energy planning.

Nepal pursued a different path, with private producers and international investors generating nearly 70% of its electricity. But India has gradually asserted itself in Nepal's hydropower development, sidelining Chinese involvement, and pressuring Nepal not to allow outside investment in large reservoir projects on its rivers.

The cascade of three out of four big hydropower plants in the Arun Basin in eastern Nepal are all being built by an Indian state enterprise, roughly along the same model as Indian projects in Bhutan.

"We are a 100% hydro energy portfolio with about 2.5GW installed capacity with about another 1.5GW in the pipeline in the next year or so," says Ujjwal Deep Dahal, CEO of Druk Holdings and Investment. "While we are a net exporter of energy, winter demand is increasing and we look to invest in additional power and

importantly firm power."

Nepal also imports electricity from India in winter when its rivers run low and demand is highest, but this is at a more expensive price than it exports during the monsoon.

Ecological and climate concerns are prompting Bhutan to diversify from harnessing hydropower to exploring pump storage, geothermal and solar power – a model that Nepal could also pursue.

While tensions between India and China affect Bhutan more than Nepal, Kathmandu has failed to adopt a more independent water and energy strategy. Despite being four times larger than Bhutan, Nepal has only 3,300MW of installed capacity. It has also failed to increase domestic demand by electrifying industries, irrigation, transport and household consumption so surplus energy is not wasted.

Nepal's goal is to generate 28,000MW by 2035 but transmission and distribution infrastructure will have to keep pace. The suspension of the US-supported MCC project may further delay energy trade and distribution.

Climate collapse is rapidly melting Himalayan glaciers, and it is going to be risky building large

MINDING ITS OWN BUSINESS:

Rendering of the creative design on a hydroelectric dam that is to be built specially to power Bhutan's ambitious Gelephu Mindfulness City Project.

expensive hydropower plants in Nepal and Bhutan. Both countries must learn from a glacial lake flood in 2023 that swept away the 1,200MW Teesta III Dam in Sikkim.

The eastern Himalaya in Nepal, Bhutan, India and southern Tibet are affected more severely by glacial lake expansion, and combined with seismicity pose a major threat to energy security in the region.

"We cannot predict disasters like these but we can't also be fatalistic. We need to be pragmatic and strike the right balance," says Pema Gyamtsho from Bhutan, who is Director General of the Kathmandu-based International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD).

"We have to invest in risk assessment before developing mega infrastructure. Where the risk is high, we should opt for smaller hydropower and other alternatives like solar and biogas. We should have options rather than putting all our eggs in the same basket." 🇳🇵

**READ MORE:
GDP, GNH, GMC
PAGE 4-5**

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NATUREKNIT

Progress and/or Preservation

Negotiations to end the controversy over a project to build a cable car to the mountaintop shrine of Mukku Lung/Pathibhara in Taplejung have stalled.

The 2.7km project is set to go from Phungling up to a peak sacred to the Yakthung (Limbu) faith and its Mundum culture, as well as to Hindus.

The \$22 million investment is from entrepreneur Chandra Dhakal's IME Group, which says the cable car will promote tourism, create jobs and boost the local economy by enabling more pilgrims to visit.

A section of the Limbu community is intensely opposed to the project for its impact on the fragile ecology of the 3,800m mountain as well as defiling the cultural and spiritual significance of Mukku Lung.

The cable car project has polarised opinion not just in Taplejung, where there have been violent scuffles between protesters and police, but the global Nepali public sphere. It has also shown the ineptitude of Nepal's leaders in failing to balance development with environmental and socio-cultural sensitivities.



SEWA BHATTARAI / NT ARCHIVE

The row is just the latest example of the desecration of nature and culture in the name of 'development' such as unnecessary airports and roads, ill-conceived viewtowers, expressway alignments, or crushers mining river beds.

Mukku Lung/Pathibhara (pictured) also has an ethnic identity dimension that has historically been ignored or suppressed.

Thousands of ancient trees had already been cut along the cable car route before the protests even began. The Initial Environmental Examination (IEE) is shoddy work, similar to the cut-paste job justifying Nijgad airport.

Protests have spread to other parts of eastern Nepal, amidst simmering anger about the failed promise of autonomy through federalism. The cable car protests have flared up from the still-smouldering agitation to rename Kosi Province as Kirat Province.

There is a political dimension, with the government backing the cable car and other hydropower projects on indigenous land.

Opposition figures and local politicians have found it expedient to latch on to the agitation. Clashes have erupted frequently between security forces and the 'No Cable Car' protesters. In January police fired at

activists in Kofle Pati, the site of the base station, critically injuring two. Kosi Province was shut down for days in protest.

Opponents of the project have argued that the benefit of the cable car will mostly go to the investors and their government backers, while local porters, hotels and small businesses along the trail will lose their jobs.

But the Limbu community is itself divided over the cable car project. Phungling Municipality mayor Amir Maden supports it, arguing that it will lift the local economy. Padam Chenji Mabo, the newly-elected vice chair of Kirat Yakthung Chumlung who supports the project, had black soot smeared on him by activists from the Mukku Lung Conservation Joint Struggle Committee.

The controversy must be familiar to Chandra Dhakal, whose company used political clout to go ahead with the Chandragiri Cable Car in 2016 despite concerns about hasty permits, and turning a government forest into private property.

The IME Group has three other cable car projects across Nepal, and another one is proposed to Kori Peak inside the Annapurna Conservation Area. The National Planning Commission this month gave 'national priority project' status to the project despite a Supreme Court interim order to halt it.

The government has pushed through legislation to blunt strict laws about infrastructure and private sector projects inside protected areas. This threatens to undo decades of progress in conservation that has doubled Nepal's forest cover to 46% of area in

30 years.

Despite speeches at international climate summits, politicians are allowing cronies to unleash 'development'. Those like us who raise questions about this trend are labelled 'anti-development' or 'dollar-chasers'.

Our understanding of development must go beyond cable cars on sacred sites or hotels and hydropower projects in protected areas. Progress does not have to come at the cost of environmental and cultural harm. Is another cable car the priority for Taplejung, or the development of sustainable tourism, organic agriculture and education? Which will do most good?

One model could be the IT Academy in Taplejung that this newspaper wrote about last year which is training and retaining local software engineers to slow brain drain by providing online jobs. Rural Nepal needs more investments in projects like these that offer solutions, not create more problems.

The government has halted construction of the Pathibhara cable car project for now, and invited activists to resume negotiations.

That is a positive step, but should have been done even before the project got underway.

Shristi Karki

Nepal needs development, but development needs to be redefined.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Rebels without a cause

Nearly a month after the 1 February 2005 coup, Nepali Times reported how the Maoists were cutting off towns and highways. Tens of thousands of people including our reporters were stranded and forced to walk long-forgotten mountain trails.

Here is an excerpt of an editorial published 20 years ago this week on issue #236 25 February - 5 March 2005 where we said somewhat prophetically that the coup might have given the rebels an opportunity to join mainstream politics:

It is clear that the rebels have now gone beyond caring about public opinion. Their actions point to total indifference to what the people think about them and their revolution: setting fire to ambulances, opening fire on bus passengers and snipers shooting at anything that moves. Turning into what they consider the last lap, they are choking off the towns to spread panic and frustration so as to prove things



aren't better for the people post-February First...

...Improbable as it may seem, February First has actually given the rebels an opportunity to join the political mainstream. In his reaction, Prachanda himself called for solidarity with the political parties and civil society. But he should know it won't happen until his party renounces violence. The political parties may have messed things up, but they are still the only entities that don't owe their survival to the barrel of a gun. This is the time for all forces that want social change to unitedly address the structural problems

in the polity to ensure long-term peace and development. It's still not too late for parliamentary democracy and a progressive, enlightened monarchy to co-exist and take us there together.

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

ONLINE PACKAGES



CRAFTING CLAY

Bhaktapur's potters have been practising their ancestral profession for generations. But what was once solely a traditional craft is now a modern business offering people a hobby, a pastime and even healing. Watch the video on Nepali Times' YouTube channel, and read the story on page 6-7.



SAJITA'S HOMECOMING

Watch the video prepared by the activist group This is Lebanon in 2022 of Sajita Lama's homecoming at Kathmandu airport and interviews with her Lebanese employers. Parts of this video may be distressing to some viewers. Read Sajita's story three years later on page 10-11.

MCC SUSPENSION

I will never laugh or sneer again over what is perceived as governmental corruption in Nepal or anywhere else ('The Great Game, 2nd Half', Sonia Awale, #1249). The current administration in the US is making everyone else look like amateurs.

Candace Kolb

■ As much as I love Nepalis and spend so much time there, the sad reality is that the government is totally corrupt and does nothing for its own people. Get your act together and do not depend on others for basic needs. Sadly, the people will suffer but it is a reality.

Roger Ray

■ Nepal's struggle highlights the risks of relying on shifting US policies and the challenges of balancing between major powers.

Sunil Sakya

■ The Nepal government should be able to fund healthcare for its own people as a priority.

Stewie McLean

BANDANA TULACHAN

Wonderful work by Bandana Tulachan ('Illustrating innocence', Sangya Lamsal, #1249). There should be more illustrated works, comics and animations about icons from the Eastern Himalaya, who could be role models for our children.

Aashish Bhandari

■ Nepal has so much creativity and talent. This is what the country must invest in for future generations.

Renate Schwarz

BOOK REVIEW

Nepali leaders should focus on the national interest than self-interest ('A past foretold', Sudiksha Tuladhar, #1249). This has been the question and hope for centuries now.

Zwon L. Ninglekhu

■ It is obvious that Nepal should leverage foreign relations in its national interest, but that is not easy due to its reliance on India.

David Seddon

NEPAL TOURISM

Whatever tourists Nepal gets is despite the government, not because of it ('Missing out on Nepal's tourism potential', Nepali Times, #12498).

Krishna Joshi

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING

Himalayan rivers

by Kunda Dixit

Three books recognise the ecosystem services that the inhabitants of High Asia provide by protecting our rivers. Not all mountain rivers need to be monetised, saving them will save us from climate breakdown. Read the reviews by Kunda Dixit at nepalitimes.com



Most reached and shared on Facebook

South Asia 2040

Editorial

A new report presents four scenarios for South Asian democracy in 15 years: Decline, Continuation, Disciplined Improvement and Transformation. Where South Asia will be as a region in 2040 will depend on the leaders we elect or throw out in the coming decade. Read the editorial online.



Most popular on X



The Great Game, 2nd Half

by Sonia Awale

The lesson from MCC suspension and USAID cuts is that foreign assistance often comes with strings attached. Nepal should look out for itself and be self-reliant. Basic healthcare and environmental protection are responsibilities of the Nepali state, not of donors. Join the discussion online



Most commented

The past foretold

by Sudiksha Tuladhar

China and India can be the locomotives to pull Nepal along if we play our cards right. Two new books by Sudheer Sharma urge Nepal to leverage relations with neighbours in its own national interest. Read the review on our website.



Most visited online page

QUOTES



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

"The US withdrawal from MCC will further erode its credibility in Nepal as it was such a politically charged subject. It will also signal a shift in its stance on China, as MCC was a direct challenge to the BRI and Chinese infrastructure investments."



Hem Sagar Baral @WorshipNature

We should not rush to conclusions! This is an interesting time the world is witnessing—we must wait and observe!



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

USAID and MCC cuts are a sobering reminder that while India and China may step in, their support will have strings attached. Smaller South Asian countries like Nepal are on our own to deal with crises in democracy, development and climate.



ART @AmulyaSir

Just like British empire and its exclusive influence started fading after 1950s, USA influence eclipsing begins in 2025 on irrevocably and so will India despite its reluctance but forced by its macroeconomic and political fundamentals to keep up with China

1,000 WORDS



RATNA SHRESTHA / RSS

#LEGALISE: A sadhu smokes cannabis on the eve of Maha Shivaratri at Pashupati on Wednesday. A Bill to legalise marijuana cultivation is pending in Parliament.

Times

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GDP, GNH, GMC

Bhutan's audacious Gelephu Mindfulness City mega-project is a risky gamble on the future

■ **Sonia Awale** in Thimphu

On 17 December 2023, Bhutan's King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck announced the setting up of the Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) to be an international hub focused on energy, connectivity and skills for the 21st century.

The city will be a 2,500 sq km Special Administrative Region to take advantage of Bhutan's clean energy to power an information technology corridor with AI data centres. It will try to replicate Singapore in a city three times larger, with its own hydropower plants generating 5,000MW.

"Gelephu will become a gateway connecting Bhutan to the world and the future," the King said. "The road we have chosen is a gateway to the world – to markets, capital, new ideas, knowledge, and technology towards our future, and to chart our destiny."

The rapid spread of energy-intensive generative AI applications have prompted technology companies to scout for clean energy sources to power their data centres. Some like Amazon and Google are even building their own small nuclear power plants.

"Investing in green energy with our hydro potential of over 35,000MW is a priority and the strategy on AI data centres are an important anchor industry," says Ujjwal Deep Dahal of Druk Holdings and Investment.

Bhutan's Finance Minister Lyonpo Lekey Dorji told visiting



Rendering of a section of the Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC), which is currently under development.

GMC

editors here earlier this month that energy cooperation under the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the South Asia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) were going nowhere, and a new framework was needed.

"Significant connectivity challenges, poor infrastructure, and often tense diplomatic relations lead to limited cross-border trade

and movements of goods and people," Dorji added. "The GMC is envisaged to help not only Bhutan but also the South Asian region, and particularly the neighbouring states of India."

Economists say that if countries in the region could go beyond geopolitical differences and increase trade, each country in South Asia stands to gain from the

regional energy trade. While Nepal and Bhutan have export potential for clean energy, Bangladesh can reduce its carbon footprint by buying cleaner fuel from neighbours.

"There are significant benefits if you increase investment in transmission across the region, increase connectivity, with more liberal trade," says Simon Stolp of

the World Bank.

In the first phase, the GMC will build infrastructure including an international airport, and a regional railway linking Gelephu to Assam with a six-lane highway.

Bhutan is one of few carbon negative countries in the world, and officials assure that 60% of the GMC area will retain its forest cover with two protected areas, a national

NMB BANK एनएमबि बैंक



Turkish Bowling

Turkish Airlines hosted its annual bowling tournament for its partner travel agencies in Nepal at the OOPS bowling centre in Dhumbarahi. There were 14 three-member teams competing. Lucky Travels and Tours was first with 742 points, and they will now get to take part in the grand finale bowling tournament in Istanbul in May where 167 of the Turkish flag-carrier's destinations from 80 countries are competing. Roaming Nepal Travel and Tours (Roaming Nepal) came in 2nd place with a total score of 682 points while Pangolin Travels and Tours (Ticketing Commandoes) secured the third spot with 670 points.

"The tournament was a great opportunity to bring the participants from different agencies and showcase their skills and compete with each other," said Serkan Başar, General Manager of Turkish Airlines in Nepal. The carrier started the bowling tournament in 2012 to foster relationships with business partners in countries where it operates. Turkish has the widest operation network of any airline in the world.

Nabil SSE

Nabil Bank's School of Social Entrepreneurship program held a workshop in Biratnagar in collaboration with Mahendra Morang Adarsha Multiple Campus. Entrepreneurs, industry representatives, and government officials attended. The Bank claims that SSE programs have created 117 businesses and 1,200 jobs.

E-Governance

The Government of Nepal has made public a blueprint for e-governance and is seeking comments and improvements. The document emphasizes the 'once-only' philosophy, which states that Nepalis should have to give their personal data only once. It also details plans to improve rural internet access and build data centers that allow different bodies to share information.

Samsung E-Sports

The first E-sports National Championship was held 20-22 February at Dashrath Rangasala. Gamers competed in PUBG Mobile, e-Football and four other games. They played the finals on the recently launched Samsung Galaxy S25 Ultra, which has a Snapdragon 8 Elite processor and a 6.9" 120Hz display. Nepal imported 1.2 million smartphones worth \$19 billion in the last seven months which is about 180,000 more phones than in the same period last year. Mobile phones costing between Rs20,000-30,000 make up the largest share of imports.

Ncell Nepal Lit Fest

Ncell is sponsoring the 12th edition of the Nepal Literature Festival 27 February - 2 March in Pokhara. The festival, organised by non-profit Bookworm, will host over 200 writers and have over 50 events, including book launches, discussions panels, and live music. Meanwhile, from 23 February - 23 March, Ncell customers can get

Ncell bonus data of upto 10GB and prizes by buying data packs through the Khalti App. The deal is valid on the SadhainON, Home and Away, and 999 Unlimited packs. Prizes to win include wireless earbuds and QFX movie tickets. Ncell has also launched two new data packs. The 90 Unlimited pack costs Rs90 for 48 hours of unlimited data, and the 50 Data pack costs Rs50 for 1.1GB of data valid for three days. These are in line with Ncell's SadhainON mission of making it possible for their subscribers to always have an internet connection.

New Marriott GM



Kathmandu Marriott, Fairfield by Marriott, and Moxy Kathmandu have appointed Michel Koopman as the new General Manager of the cluster. "It is an honor to lead these exceptional properties and contribute to Nepal's vibrant tourism and hospitality sector,"

said Koopman, who has over 30 years of experience in hospitality around the world.

BYD Hi-Tech

BYD dealer Cimex is organising the first BYD Hi-Tech Week from 27 February - 2 March at The Everest Hotel. The week will enable customers to see the latest hardware and software technology from BYD, engage with new vehicle models and discuss the latest EV trends. Tickets are available on e-Sewa.

Mahindra Care Fest

Official Mahindra distributor Agni Group is organising nationwide check-up camps from 2-7 March. Customers can get a free 45-point checkup and body wash at this Global Care Fest, as well as discounts on lubricants and spare parts. There will also be deals on second-hand Mahindra vehicles.

British Council

The British Council held its New Directions conference 21-22 February in Delhi to discuss new approaches to English learning and its assessment. A parallel session was also held in Kathmandu. The main themes of the summit were English for Employability, AI in English Education, Assessing Young Learners, and The Role of English in Multilingual Education.

Peugeot Scooters

Agni Motoinc has launched two models of the French brand Peugeot Motorcycles in Kathmandu. The Django is a retro-bodied 125cc scooter priced at Rs571,000 available in four color options. The Speedfight 2 is a modern-looking 150cc scooter priced at Rs632,000 available in two color options.

NICE Pokhara

The first edition of the Nepal, India, China tri-nation tourism Expo (NICE) 2025 was held in Pokhara 25-26 February. Over 600 delegates from the three countries participated. The Expo aimed to attract a higher number of tourists from India and China, two of the world's biggest, and growing, outbound tourism markets.

Energy to India

Plans to build transmission lines to trade electricity with India have gained momentum. The transmission line between Dhalkebar and Muzaffarpur is getting a capacity upgrade from 600MW to 1,000MW. Other transmission lines, such as one in between Nijgad and Motihari, plan to be completed between 2027-29.



Tata Curvv EV

Official Tata distributor Sipradi has launched the top variant of the much-awaited Curvv EV in Nepal. The SUV is priced at Rs5.699 million and has a 55kWh battery, 500ltr of boot space, 186mm ground clearance, 380km range, 10-80% charge in 40min, and many safety features.



park and a wildlife sanctuary. The Danish architecture firm Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG) has been hired to come up with a sustainable urban plan.

GMC is also Bhutan's response to the increasing outmigration of its young people, primarily to Australia — a problem similar to what Nepal faces.

Youth unemployment in Bhutan in 2022 was 28.6%, and in 2023, 1.5% of the country's 800,000 people moved just to Australia to work and study. Bhutan has a total fertility rate of 1.4, which is much below replacement level.

These demographic trends have raised questions about Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) approach to development. It has been hailed as a new age concept by some and ridiculed by others, especially because the regime has never answered for the eviction of one-sixth of its population in the 1990s (box).

In that sense, the GMC could be Bhutan's way of turning the page on GNH. Officials here said privately that Gross National Happiness has been largely misunderstood to be an idealistic dream, but it does not

mean de-emphasising economic growth or GDP per capita.

In the first 20 years, the Gelephu Special Administrative Region will be a 'mindfulness city' under complete autonomy with a legislative, judicial and governance system independent from the rest of Bhutan. After that will be the 'convergence phase', when the rest of Bhutan will have caught up with Gelephu in terms of development and socio-economic status.

Gelephu was chosen for the mega-project because of the narrow strip of plains in a mostly mountainous country. This will make it easier to build infrastructure, especially the proposed new international airport which will be an alternative to Paro in which only specially trained pilots are allowed to land because of difficult terrain and weather.

"GMC represents a new era for growth and opportunity for Bhutan, a bold experiment in governance, sustainability and economic transformation, all the while preserving Bhutanese identity, cultural and spiritual heritage," explained GMC's Rabsel Dorji. "We have the unprecedented

opportunity to build a Special Administrative Region from the ground up, and for Bhutanese this is a nation-building experience."

Officials say that GMC needed to be a Special Administrative Region in order to speed things up, including decision-making so there would be no bureaucratic hurdles to foreign investments.

But will such a separate 'state' not create a gap between haves and have nots, much like other parts of the world which have set up Special Economic Zones? Officials here are convinced that since GMC is the brainchild of King Jigme himself, it will succeed without compromising Bhutan's culture.

Bhutan lies in the emerging economic corridor between South Asia and Southeast Asia, which has close to half of the world's population. The idea is that with better connectivity, GMC will be strategically located to attract investors, residents and retirees.

Planners here hope this will also replenish Bhutan's shrinking population and allow just GMC to accommodate up to 2 million people — more than double Bhutan's current population.

Bhutan has the third highest GDP per capita in South Asia after the Maldives and Sri Lanka because of income from hydropower and tourism. It now wants to build on this for future growth with clean energy and connectivity.

Added Rabsel Dorji: "The quality of life in Bhutan is very good but one could say the standard of living could improve. With the GMC, we are trying to mix the two such that people have high-paying jobs while retaining the Bhutanese way of life." 🇧🇹



Bhutan Refugee Camp in Beldangi-2 in Jhapa district, Nepal.

The Gelephu connection

Situated along Bhutan's southern border with India at a point where the mountains meet the Brahmaputra plains, Gelephu was home to some 40% of the country's 100,000 Nepali-speaking Lhotsampa people.

Many of their family members were forcefully evicted from Bhutan over 30 years ago. Rights activists have opposed the GMC project, especially since many of the refugees still have land titles for property they left behind in Gelephu.

People from Nepal were first invited by the Bhutan government to populate the lowlands in the south from the mid-19th century onwards. Over time, Nepali-speaking people accounted for one-sixth of the population of Bhutan, and were relatively better off because of their agrarian lifestyle in the fertile southern plains.

"However, their growing

numbers and the formation of a political party were perceived as a threat to the cultural and political order of Bhutan," notes Human Rights Watch in an explainer.

The Lhotsampa ('people from the south') were driven across India and dumped in Jhapa and Morang from 1990-92. They lived in refugee camps until they were resettled in the United States, Australia, New Zealand and some European countries between 2007-2016.

Now, 6,577 refugees, most of them elderly who want to go back to Bhutan, remain in the camps even after UNHCR and WFP withdrew support in 2016.

Back in Gelephu, there is still a township of 15,000 people. One of the families there is that of a Bhutanese sociologist. In a carefully worded reply, he told us in Thimphu: "All of my childhood memories will soon be gone, but perhaps it is for the greater good."

Nepal as an AI power bank

The country can use surplus clean energy to attract climate-friendly investments in generative AI data centres

■ Bikash Pandey

High tech firms are power hungry, and the climate crisis is driving them to seek renewable sources of energy. Nepal's surplus electricity generation capacity coincides with this surge in global demand to power generative AI data centres.

Data centres have become major drivers of electricity demand globally in the last two years, but the lack of clean energy remains a major hurdle to expansion.

Along with coverage area and number of racks, a key parameter to measure use of information technology in each country is the amount of power they use for data centres. For example, the US currently uses 50MW of data centres per million people compared to just 1MW in India. In Nepal, investment in data centres has just begun.

About 1.5% of global electricity is currently going to power data centres and data transmission. Improvements in IT hardware, efficient cooling methods, and gains from the shift to efficient cloud and hyperscale data centres have allowed growth in energy demand to remain small even as data centre services have grown since 2010.

After 2022, this picture has begun to break down due to the exponential growth in power requirements for AI which far exceeds accompanying gains in energy efficiency.

The growth of AI applications was made possible by breakthroughs in Deep Neural Network models and hardware to run them, enabling image recognition and generation, natural language processing and many other previously 'high-compute applications' which required a lot of computational power.

These advances laid the groundwork for large language models such as GPT-4o (OpenAI), Claude (Anthropic), Gemini (Google), Llama-3 (Meta/Facebook), Grok (xAI) among others. The growth of large language models and generative AI has changed the role of data centres from



FREEPIK

managing content, data storage and data processing to training large AI models and running AI inference to serve user applications from those models.

Growth in generative AI is expected to push data-centre electricity use by 4-10 times by 2030. Companies such as Google and Microsoft are already consuming as much electricity as The Netherlands.

Big tech is sourcing power from all the clean energy sources they can find to meet net-zero targets: wind, solar and hydropower. They have even invested in nuclear plants to power AI centres.

As demand rises, companies will be looking for new geographies with abundant clean energy. This presents an opportunity for Nepal to market its surplus clean energy from hydropower and solar. The country could promote itself as a destination for data centres, as Bhutan is doing with its Gelephu Mindfulness City (report, above).

Nepal's data infrastructure is not well developed. The recently announced partnership between the Chaudhary Group's BLC Holdings and India's Yotta Data Services

to build Nepal's first supercloud 4MW data centre in Ramkot could pave the way for private sector investment into data centres.

Yotta already runs some of the largest hyperscale data centres in Mumbai and Delhi, and this investment could allow the company to be the provider of digital services in the Subcontinent's high growth IT sector.

To catch up with per capita IT services at the level of India, Nepal would need seven more Ramkot-sized data centres using about 30MW of power. With its readily available clean energy and proximity to large population centres in Northern India and Bangladesh, Nepal could in theory provide the compute infrastructure necessary to power the future AI training and inference services for local applications and markets.

To provide IT services at the level that the US population currently consumes, Nepal would need 1,500MW of power just to power data centres for its own needs. While this is unlikely to happen anytime soon, Nepal could provide data centre services for

the upcoming AI needs of some of the 500 million people living in the Ganga basin.

India is already a regional powerhouse in data centres and has about 1,600MW of capacity, and generative AI is estimated to push computational requirements with power needs expected to grow between 25-30% each year through to 2030.

With the right investment climate, and investment into fibre optic infrastructure and IT parks, Nepal could leverage its plentiful power supply advantage to offer locations for a portion of this investment.

This would provide a much needed boost to Nepal's ongoing efforts to establish itself as a technology hub and provide jobs to the 15,000 IT professionals that are being trained in the country each year.

Data centres are part of a larger technology ecosystem. AI model training and maintenance require skilled expertise in every industry from finance to healthcare, as well as to train fraud detection models, and label X-ray and MRI images and diagnostic data to build intelligent medical tools.

NTC's recently installed XGPON network standard that can deliver up to 10 Gbps downstream speed and 2.5 Gbps upstream does provide the basic level of connectivity needed for AI applications, but it is only available in Kathmandu and needs to be expanded to other urban centres.

Nepal's investment climate for private companies remains far from ideal, and government regulations need to be relaxed to allow global companies and non-resident Nepalis to bring in investment to take full advantage of this new digital infrastructure. 🇳🇵

Amrit R Pant contributed with AI expertise while writing the article.

Bikash Pandey is Director of Clean Energy and Circular Economy at Winrock International. People Power is his regular column in Nepali Times on global energy issues relevant to Nepal.

■ Sudiksha Tuladhar

Pottery has deep history in the Kathmandu Valley civilisation, the clay soil of the former lake bed perfectly suited for terracotta ware, bricks and tiles. It is a livelihood that builds on heritage, especially in Bhaktapur and Thimi where traditional potters (कुमाल) have been moulding and firing clay vessels for centuries.

Beyond its role in daily life and rituals, pottery blends functionality with the cultural and spiritual, and continues to thrive in new ways. Moulding clay on a potter's wheel has become a tourist attraction and therapeutic escape for those stressed by the pressures of modern life.

Crafting objects from clay is a tradition passed down through generations for the Newa people of Bhaktapur, particularly the Prajapati and Awal clans. Modern machinery has allowed the craft to develop new products and practices.

Most have broadened their product range by including glazed ceramic and refined clay products, opened showrooms and conducted classes for enthusiasts.

"Ceramics are more in demand since they have longer life and alternatives to plastic," says Ratna Prajapati of Cera Nepal.

Ceramic products are used in crockery, while clay cookware is regaining popularity. Once solely a traditional craft, pottery is now a modern business offering people a hobby, a pastime and even healing.

"People prefer to use ceramics for cookware rather than plastic and other products," says Riya Prajapati of Prajapati Ceramic in Boudha.

The pottery industry faced hurdles during times of prolonged power cuts, and the 2015 earthquake in which Bhaktapur was particularly badly hit. However, the Covid-19 pandemic was a turnaround, as many people picked it up as a pandemic hobby.

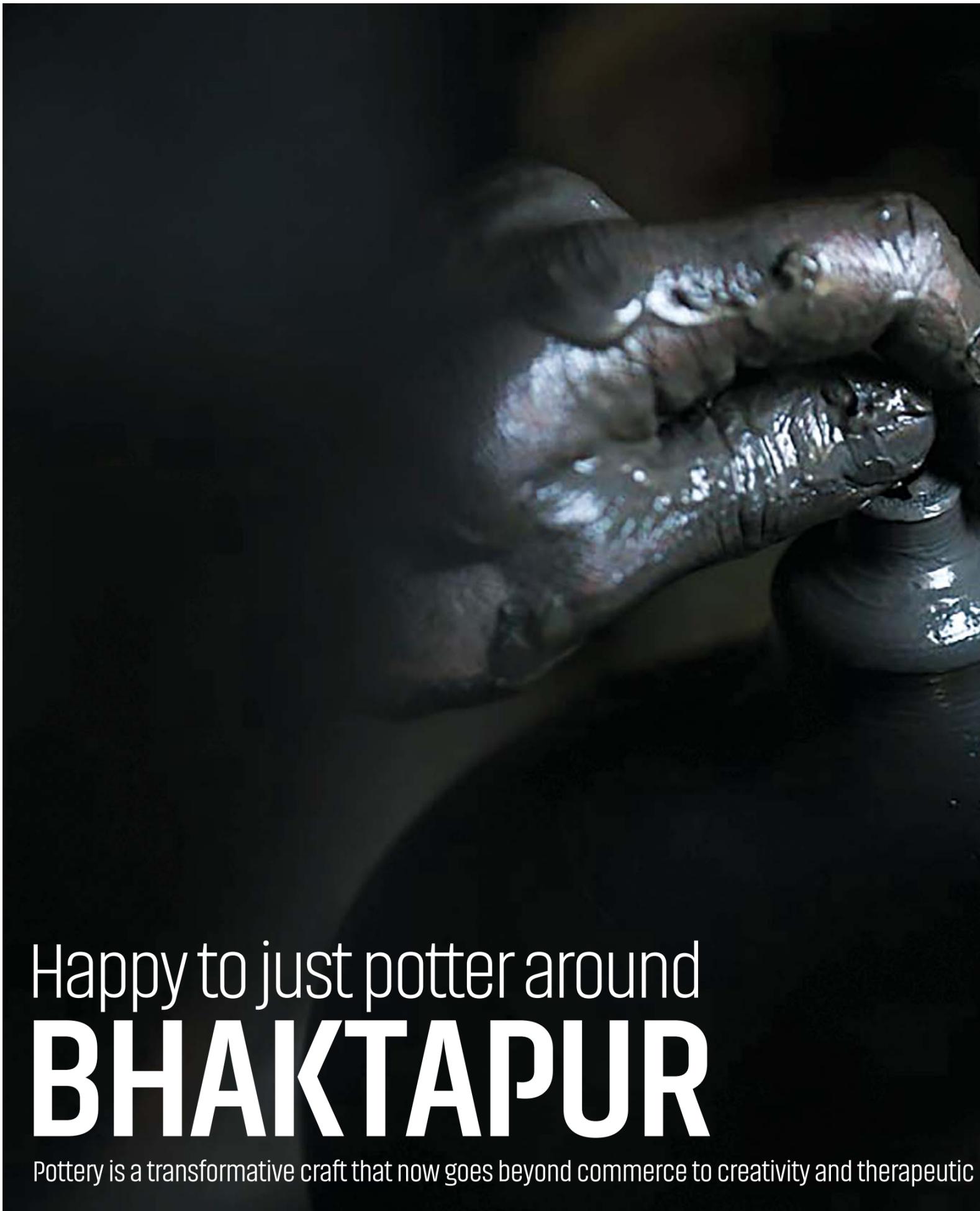
Ratna Prajapati recalls many students and Kathmandu-based expats started reaching out for pottery classes at the time.

Previously, it was mostly foreigners who were interested in pottery classes, but more and more Nepalis are enrolling for hobby or relaxation.

The Pottery Training Centre at Bhaktapur (pictured, top right) currently has the capacity to train 10 people at a time, but is enlarging its studio to accommodate 30-40 students.

"I started pottery when I was 9. Initially, we used to make पाला (ceremonial clay cups for oil lamps), but we have expanded to mugs and other ceramics," says Sajan Prajapati of the Pottery Training Centre. "Age is not a barrier to learn the craft and art of pottery."

Pottery is a blend of relaxation, self-expression, and ultimately delivers a sense of achievement. It has been proven to offer solace to those facing emotional challenges, while also boosting self-confidence and a sense of self-worth, as individuals create something from shapeless clay.



Happy to just potter around BHAKTAPUR

Pottery is a transformative craft that now goes beyond commerce to creativity and therapeutic





ic healing



PHOTOS: SUMAN NEPALI



POTTERY TRAINING CENTRE



Pottery History

Pottery making is nearly as old as human civilisation, with the first terracotta objects found in archaeological sites dating back at least 10,000 years. Potters fired moulded clay into objects for everyday household use.

Later, terracotta was used as building material for bricks, tiles and even sewers. A different type of clay was then developed to shape porcelain objects, either as utensils or art. Some of the earliest porcelain was fired in China 1,500 years ago.

Pottery arrived in Kathmandu Valley probably from both the Indus Valley

Civilisation and China about 5,000 years ago. The fine clay found in the lake deposits was an ideal raw material for household objects, and most early buildings in the Valley were made from bricks and tiles by firing clay in kilns.

Pottery flourished as an art form and reached its most creative peak during the Malla Period (12-18th century CE) when all the kingdoms in the Valley competed to build grand temples and monasteries. Pottery also took on an artistic function in rituals and continues to have deep cultural significance.

It also provides a nonverbal way for people to process their feelings, giving them a sense of control and a creative outlet.

“A student with a disability once visited our studio with a group, and she made better shapes from clay than others,” recalls Ganesh Hari Prajapati, Riya’s father. “Children are naturally restless and always on the move, and pottery helps them concentrate. Even while they wait for their turn, they play with lumps of clay.”

In addition to regular product sales, Bhaktapur’s new clay entrepreneurs now process bulk orders from hotels and restaurants looking for more eco-friendly solutions. A traditional terracotta water jar, for example is naturally cooled by evaporation as water seeps through the porous clay.

Subin Suwal, 28, is also with the Pottery Training Centre in Bhaktapur and conducts regular classes for individuals and groups of Nepalis and expats.

He says, “Nepalis typically join shorter classes, while tourists opt for longer, more detailed sessions to immerse themselves in the craft. Interest is growing because it can be a stress reliever, and participants get a sense of satisfaction seeing the end product.”

Some of Ratna Prajapati’s student customers have bought their own wheels and now make products at home, and even sell handmade ceramic products to augment their cash income.

Pottery helps improve focus and can calm the mind. Ratna Prajapati says he notices this among some of his customers who initially look like they are going through tough times because they are distracted and uninterested. But after watching their friends enjoy moulding clay at the wheel, they are drawn to give it a try themselves.

“We see their moods instantly uplifted, they brighten up and suddenly take an interest in their surroundings,” he adds. “Pottery as a hobby helps people when they feel a disconnect with life.” This becomes more important with mental health becoming a major priority, and the spread of mobile phone use among younger people.

Prajapati Ceramic, for example, takes pottery to the next level by offering therapy using the GEM Method, (Guide, Engage, and Motivate) to improve mental health and restore focus in younger visitors. The Studio combines pottery making with music and counselling conversations with customers.

While pottery classes can be a respite from social media addiction, pottery business owners themselves are taking to mobiles and digital media to grow their businesses through networking and collecting online reviews.

Riya at Prajapati Ceramics adds that most customers these days come to her studio after seeing online reviews and videos that she puts up on Instagram and other platforms.

She says, “I feel digital outreach is important, we get out to a large number of people, and sharing the positive impacts of pottery is just a click away.”



CRAFTING CLAY

Bhaktapur’s potters have been practising their ancestral profession for generations. But what was once solely a traditional craft is now a modern business offering people a hobby, a pastime and even healing. Watch the video on Nepali Times’ YouTube channel.

EVENTS

**Love: Above and Beyond**

Listen to poetry and vibe to music at Maahol's upcoming poetry event Love: Above and Beyond, which seeks to celebrate love in all its forms. Also available are games, stalls, and complimentary drinks.
28 February, 6pm onwards, Tickets: Rs400, Busy Bee Cafe, Thamel

Digital Art

Artist Ashim Shakya will be showcasing best of his digital artworks in a month-long exhibition titled Pravidhi: A New Realm in Kathmandu. Take a break from your busy schedule and go take a look.
1 March, 11am onwards, Gallery 108, Darbarmarg, 9705801108

**Nepal Literature Festival**

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

Aama's Village

Aama's Village: A Vanishing Era of Survival, Community, and Sacredness features Broughton Coburn's black-and-white photographs, taken 50 years ago in Nepal. The exhibition will be followed by an interactive session.
2 March, 4:30pm onwards, Taragaon Next

**Bal Sahitya Mahotsav 2025**

The 10th edition of Bal Sahitya Mahotsav organised by Rato Bangala Kitab, Rato Bangala School and Rato Bangala Foundation will include thought-provoking interactions with authors. Matthew Tobin Anderson, Newbery Medal recipient, is the keynote speaker.
1 March, Rato Bangala School, Patan Dhoka

DINING

**The Yard**

With organic produce brimming with flavour, The Yard is the perfect place for a hearty, healthy meal. Get their best-selling Mushroom Bruschetta, or try the fresh and vibrant Caesar Salad.
The Yard by Oasis Garden Homes, Sanepa (01) 5432965

MUSIC

Shivaratri Music Festival

The 18th edition of Maha Shivaratri World Music Festival-2025 will feature artists Ganga Bardan, Namaste band, Sabin Rai & The Pharaoh and many others. Watch them live at Lakeside.
1 March, 1pm onwards, Ticket: Rs500, Lakeside, Pokhara

**Jubin Nautiyal**

Indian playback singer Jubin Nautiyal, who is making waves in the music industry with his soulful vocals and powerful stage presence, will be in town performing for Music for Autism.
1 March, 2pm onwards, Ticket: Rs2000+, Hyatt Regency Ground

Ghazal Sessions

Make your way to Mirch this Saturday for an evening with the Indreni Ghazal Band and authentic Indian kebabs, curries, and cocktails.
28 February, 6:30 pm onwards, Mirch, Jhamsikhel

**Sushant KC**

Sushant KC will be in Bhaktapur next week serenading the audience with his unique blend of contemporary pop and Nepali melodies. Get tickets now.
8 March, 3pm onwards, Ticket: Rs900+, Sallaghari ground, Bhaktapur

Pariwartin

The Trios Music Fest, featuring the band Pariwartin, aims to celebrate pop rock and alternative music. The line up also includes performances from Tribal Rain, Kta Haru, and Velvets.
1 March, 12pm onwards, Tickets: Rs500+, Bhrikuti Mandap Ground

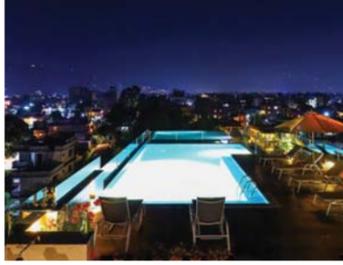
**Le Sherpa**

Enjoy European cuisine at Le Sherpa with dishes like Chicken Cannelloni, Morel Mushroom Ravioli and Grilled Chicken Leg, all crafted with local ingredients. They also hold a Farmer's Market on Saturdays.
Maharajgunj (01) 4528604

Cafe Hessed

Hessed serves the best kind of cupcakes and doughnuts, and for those craving savory, their many flavours of Gimbab — veg, buff, chicken, and tuna — is a must-try.
Pulchowk (01) 5430933

GETAWAY

**Dahlia Boutique Hotel**

A luxury hotel at the bank of Phewa Lake with panoramic mountain and city views, Dahlia Boutique Hotel is your perfect repose at the end of a long trek.
Lakeside, Pokhara (061) 456505

Himalayan Deurali Resort

Escape the hustle and bustle of city life and immerse in the super deluxe suites at Himalayan Deurali Resort. Each room comes with a private balcony that offers panoramic views of the Phewa Lake, Machhapuchre, and the Annapurnas.
Kaski, 985600162

**Shaligram Hotel, Spa**

Rejuvenate at Shaligram Hotel's Mantra Spa and Wellness, located within their lush, green premises. Unwind in their serene, peaceful garden, the perfect setting for a relaxing reset.
Jawalakel, 9802073899

**Serene Resort**

Serene Resort, where Himalayan vistas meet comfort, is the go-to place for a peaceful retreat or an adventurous getaway.
Nagarkot (01) 6680189

Kasara Chitwan

Escape to luxury at Kasara Chitwan, where elegant villas and private pools meet Chitwan National Park's stunning wilderness. Enjoy gourmet dining, thrilling jungle safaris, and holistic spa treatments.
Patihani, 9801249337

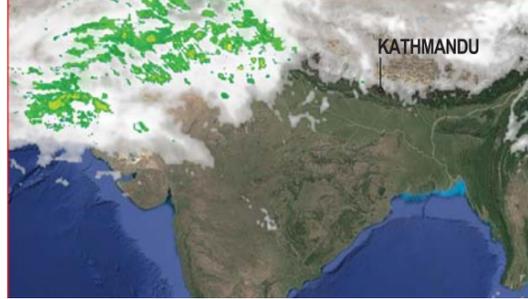
Utpala Cafe

Utpala is a monastery restaurant, perfect for those looking for healthy vegetarian and vegan options. Come to their Saturday Farmers Market to get fresh produce, baked goods, and more.
Boudha, 9810700763

**Taza Treats**

Savor the flavors of the Middle East at Taza Treats. Taste their signature Baklava and Knafeh and get an assorted boxes of sweets to go.
Jhamsikhel, 9801114002

WEEKEND WEATHER



FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY
19° 12°	22° 11°	24° 11°	25° 11°	25° 11°

Rain, Come Again

Locals believe it has to rain in Kathmandu on Shivaratri, which was on Wednesday. It looks like this year's rain will be delayed by two days, with showers expected on Friday from a wide westerly front moving across Nepal (satellite image on Thursday, left). The precipitation could be heavier in higher terrain with snow down to 4,000m. Good news for farmers and firefighters. Kathmandu Valley will be going from unseasonably cool to unseasonably warm from next week, with temperatures climbing to the mid-20s.

OUR PICK



A hitman passing through town wreaks havoc on a quiet community. A couple covers up the hit-and-run of a member of a crime family. A probation officer and his girlfriend try to steal a valuable vintage stamp but run into bigger problems. Two criminal organisations compete to maintain control over Kansas City. A kidnapped housewife escapes her captors and pretends nothing happened. Created by Noah Hawley, Fargo is an anthology crime drama series based on the acclaimed 1996 film. Set in the American Midwest, it follows a changing cast of characters and the conflicts in their lives.

MISS MOTI ESCAPES

KRIPA JOSHI



सामाजिक सञ्जाल प्रयोगमा सचेतता अपनाऔं

- सामाजिक सञ्जालमा अपरिचित व्यक्तिको साथी बन्ने अनुरोधलाई विश्वस्त भएर मात्र प्रतिक्रिया जनाऔं ।
- अपरिचित व्यक्तिलाई जथाभावी साथी बन्न अनुरोध नपठाऔं ।
- सामाजिक सञ्जाल तथा अन्य विद्युतीय माध्यमबाट चिह्ना पुरस्कार जस्ता आर्थिक प्रलोभनका प्रस्तावको भरमा नपराँ ।
- 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

With love, labour and writing

South Asian writers write about their craft in new book

■ Alfa M Shakya

If there is no one way to live life, there is no one way to be a writer. And if writing advice could be summed up into a book written specifically for the South Asian writer and reader, *How I Write* would be just the one.

Edited by Sonia Faleiro, founder of the literary mentorship program South Asia Speaks, the book is a collection of conversations that began as masterclasses at the program.

Once exclusive to the fellows in the program, the book makes the invaluable knowledge and experience of 30 writers open to all.

Featured writers have deep connections with South Asia and write about the region's life through fiction and non-fiction, prose and poetry. A conversation between two writers, the interviews are candid, thoughtful, and poignant, even funny.

In one light-hearted moment, Mira Kamdar asks Suketu Mehta how writing and life relate to each other, and before diving into the details of the answer, Mehta mentions, "I've been cooking a lot."

Mansi Choksi shares a vulnerable side of the publishing world, when she felt like a failure because *The New York Times* did not review her book. Moments like these remind us that an aspiring writer must eventually graduate from the label of 'genius' or 'artist', to a life with real responsibilities



Mansi Choksi



Manjushree Thapa



Kamila Shamsie



V V Ganeshananthan



Vauhini Vara



Suketu Mehta

and expectations, and write within the joys and pains of that very life.

Read Kamila Shamsie with Sanam Maher when it is difficult to let go of the words. Shamsie is stoic about chopping off 30,000 words if her writing calls for it. Read V V Ganeshananthan with Sonia Faleiro when the writing process takes forever. It took Ganeshananthan 18

years to write *Brotherless Nights*.

Each conversation is a stand-alone piece and does not require to be read in chronological order. But the conversations themselves are inevitably in conversation with each other.

The book also introduces writers with South Asian roots to readers. Many of their works,

while accomplished in their own right, are not readily available in bookstores in Kathmandu. What *How I Write* does is give the reader reasons to come across the writers when and where possible.

The conversations in the book do not shy away from critiques, like the West-dominated publishing industry and its repercussions

on the reader and the writer, a theme explored throughout many interviews. Vauhini Vara shares, '...it must be really frustrating to be a writer in South Asia interested in writing for a global audience, say the US, because there's this very restricting idea in the US about what's interesting and what's going to sell.'

Many agree on the need to stay true to one's story and to fight through what the industry might at times force on the writer. Adding on to what the industry refers to as a marketable writer, Manjushree Thapa says, 'It's been important for me to step back and say, "Look, I need to keep evolving as a writer, and I need to be honest to my writing desires. I don't want to be just a writer from Nepal who did this in the past. I'm going to write in the future."'

The lived experiences of the writers are stories in themselves. Some have gone and done their MFAs, some stumbled into writing, some are journalists who are writers, some are writers who have never studied journalism but teach journalism, and some host podcasts.

There is no one way to be a writer, there is no one designated path. But if there is one common overlapping idea, is it this: there is no easy way to write, no quick fix. With every book, the writers are lost. They experiment, they learn. They toil through doubt and continue to write for the love and labour of it all. 🇮🇳



How I Write: Writers on Their Craft
Edited by Sonia Faleiro
Harper Collins India, 2024
283 pages
Rs1,118 (Paperback)



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Enslaved Nepali migrant worker



DIASPORA
DIARIES 58

This is the 58th edition of *Diaspora Diaries*, and a followup to #4 in this series, published in *Nepali Times* #1104, 25-31 March 2022. We recommend reading that piece, available online at our website, before this one.

■ Sajita Lama

It has been three years since I returned to Nepal from Lebanon. I did not think I would make it out alive after 12 years working for a family that never paid me.

I returned empty-handed, and it was my mother who supported me. Without her, I do not know what would have happened to me.

For some time after returning, I did not do anything. But I finally gather myself together, and trained as a beautician. Perhaps it was the trauma of my experience overseas, but I was introverted and did not socialise much in class.

No one knew what I had been through in Lebanon. My troubles were mine to keep. I did not share them with anyone.

The training centre also offered



ANOTHER LIFE: (From l-r, above) Sajita Lama with her mother in 2022, after returning from Lebanon where her employers did not pay her for 12 years of domestic work. Sajita Lama with her mother today, pondering her future in the tin hut where she cooks for a living. Lama also runs a catering business through Instagram.

us jobs and I tried working for a few months on facials, hair straightening. But the chemicals made my chest hurt, so I quit.

I found it therapeutic to cook, and started preparing meals for households. I cook the morning and evening meals for a family. Sometimes I cater home gatherings.

These orders come mostly from referrals and word of mouth, and I can cook single-handedly for 40-50

people. Everyone has appreciated my food, which makes me happy. My specialty is Thakali food.

I learn a lot of recipes from YouTube. I have had no formal training, but I have a lot of experience from cooking for the Lebanese family. It is just that the meals I prepared there were less oily and more bland.

I listen to music and try to enjoy cooking, but I often have flashbacks

that take me back to those 12 years in Lebanon. How could they get away without paying me anything? All the toil amounted to nothing.

Here, in Nepal, people pay me by the hour or sometimes on a daily basis. There are tips. Even though it is not a lot, at least I am paid here. It was so different in Lebanon.

I see migrant workers who have returned to Nepal with money they

have saved which they invest. I came back with nothing. In fact, I barely made it back alive.

But, I am trying to move on and I have made progress. I keep myself busy, and get paid for it, and this work allows me to socialise a bit with my customers.

After returning from Lebanon I kept confusing Arabic and Nepali. By now, my Arabic has died. I weighed around 30kg when I came

The real truth about migration

Despite anti-immigrant sentiment, rich countries owe much of their success to the contributions of migrant workers

■ Ian Goldin

The brouhaha between the tech bros led by Elon Musk and Donald Trump's nativist supporters over whether to restrict skilled immigrants reflects a deep underlying tension between the politics and economics of migration.

Today's rich economies owe much of their success to migrants who, by choice or through coercion, laboured on their plantations, factories, mines, and homes.

Far from displacing local workers, migration tends to boost employment among native-born citizens. Studies have consistently shown that countries with significant foreign-born populations experience faster and more sustained GDP growth.

Many countries depend so heavily on migrants that their economies would collapse without them. This is especially true in some Gulf countries. Migrants make up roughly 90% of the labour force in the UAE and Qatar.

Elsewhere migrants fill critical labour gaps, doing jobs that require specialised skills, such as programming, plumbing, or surgery, while lower-skilled migrants handle vital tasks that locals are unwilling to perform like fruit picking and elder care.

Thriving economies naturally attract more migrants, who, in turn, boost productivity and fuel economic growth in a virtuous cycle.

Anti-immigration politicians often portray migrants as a burden on public budgets. In fact, foreign workers contribute more in taxes than they receive in benefits. Even undocumented migrant workers contribute to government revenue.

Refugees, unlike economic migrants, can sometimes become a burden on social



SUMAN NEPALI

systems. But this is largely due to restrictive immigration policies in countries like the UK, where asylum seekers are prohibited from working and forced to rely on public services.

Increased migration also offers clear demographic advantages. Most advanced economies, as well as many developing countries, including China, now have birth rates below replacement levels.

By 2050, the number of people aged 60 and older worldwide will double to more than two billion. Workers will be required to pay the taxes that sustain social systems and perform the growing range of jobs that cannot be automated or done remotely, like elderly care, personal services, and hospitality.

But there appears to be little correlation between demographic realities and public attitudes. Countries with the world's lowest fertility rates like Japan and South Korea are among those most opposed to migration.

Nevertheless, public attitudes toward migration can and do change as people grow

more accustomed to foreigners in their midst.

But if migration offers such clear benefits, why do so many people and politicians oppose it? Surveys show that people tend to overestimate the size of their countries' migrant populations.

Politicians, often assisted by audience-hungry media,

have learned that sensationalised images of foreigners 'flooding' or 'swamping' their countries attract those who confront job insecurity, limited access to public services, or unaffordable housing.

Walls and fences have long been a favoured tool of anti-immigration politicians. But while they serve as powerful symbols of sovereignty, physical barriers instead of deterring migration tend to trap as many people within a country as they keep out.

There are currently more than 13 million undocumented workers in the US, many of whom have been in the country for decades. Deporting them en masse would undermine the economy, harming US-born workers.

The result would be increases in housing, food prices, the cost of elderly and infant care, hospitality, and other services.

Implementing a mass deportation program would face enormous legal, logistical, and economic obstacles that would likely take years to overcome.

The effects on the countries from where migrants come are equally important. While India, China, and the Philippines produce the largest number of educated migrants, regions like Sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean, and Central America lose university graduates.

Remittances from migrants abroad exceed aid and investment combined. In Lebanon, they account for 28% of GDP, and between 32% and 48% of GDP in Tajikistan, Tonga, and Samoa. (In Nepal it is 24% of the GDP.)

Migrants often take on dangerous jobs that local workers avoid. Migrant women, in particular, are frequently employed as cleaners, cooks, and caregivers – isolated and insecure jobs often lacking basic protections.

The anti-immigration sentiment sweeping the US and many other countries contrasts with the growing recognition among economists that cross-border migration can benefit host and source countries alike.

So far, the economists have been ignored. Increasingly restrictive policies targeting migrants from developing economies have jeopardised an essential lifeline for those seeking to escape poverty, conflict, and destitution while damaging the economies that shut the door on them.

Crafting a more humane and open immigration system remains one of the biggest challenges facing policymakers. First, voters and politicians must acknowledge that migration is, and always has been, a fact of life. It has a history of profound loss and sorrow, but also of new opportunities and extraordinary progress. ■

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Ian Goldin is Professor of Globalisation and Development at the University of Oxford and the author of *The Shortest History of Migration* (Old Street Publishing, 2024, *The Experiment*, 2025).

rebuilds her life

"No one knows what I had been through in Lebanon. The troubles are mine to keep."



back and could not eat anything. Now I at least have an appetite even though I do not eat a lot.

I try to forget everything about my overseas experience, except an ongoing legal case for back payment of my wages. I still have not received my dues. I don't know when or if I ever will. I have been assured that such legal cases take time and I will eventually get paid.

I am now thinking of migrating overseas again, this time to work

in a parlour or as a cook. Dubai, maybe. But with the case pending, I am hesitant to leave because what if I am needed here for official reasons pertaining to my case that require my presence? I cannot just leave and immediately come back.

If I receive all my back pay, I may not even migrate. I will start a small खाजा घर, ideally an eatery near a bus park where it is busy and there is a good flow of people. I don't have big aspirations, I will start small and expand step by step.

I can survive on what I am doing now. But that is it, I cannot do more. At this age, I have it in me to spend a few years overseas and return to invest in a business.

But sometimes I fear another traumatic experience. What if things go wrong again? I still have to confront the demons inside me. Then I think, just because it happened once it does not mean it will happen again.

I mostly try not to think about my time in Lebanon. One of the

daughters I took care of was two-and-half years old when I got to Beirut. The other was born while I was there and I took care of her from the very next day after her birth. By the time I left, they were both grown up.

My mother keeps reminding me to keep looking ahead and forget what has happened. She reminds me that there is nothing I cannot achieve. My dream, which seems unrealistic now, is to own a house in Kathmandu. I will live on the second floor and on the first floor I will take care of the poorest, the sick, those without anyone to turn to for support.

I will feed them and take care of them. It would give me so much joy. But I do not know if I will ever achieve this dream. To help others, you first have to be in a position to help yourself. 🇳🇵

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

Diaspora Diaries #4

Excerpt from Nepali Times, #1104, 25-31 March 2022

I first came to Lebanon when I was 18 years old. I lived in the country for 12 years as a domestic worker. Of the 12 years, I was only paid my salary for 1 year and 9 months.

My case is unique because unlike others, I did not realise that I was being cheated through most of my stay there. I got along well with the family that I worked for.

When they said they were saving up my wages in the bank, I believed them. Why would I not? They were like family, or so I thought. The idea of taking home a lump sum of money all at once was very appealing to me. After all, I had come to Lebanon to earn money to support my family back home in Nepal.



Now I realise that I was too trusting, and it was naive of me to believe that we were like family. They were just exploiting me, and trying to squeeze as much work from me as possible without paying for any of it.

When I had first left Nepal in 2010, I had a 5 rupee note with me given to me by my sister-in-law. I kept that red bank note with me throughout my time in Lebanon.

And that is all the money I brought home with me. I have now laminated the 5 rupee note. I will not forget this Nepali money because that is all I left with, and that is all I returned with.



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Gifting sight in Hetauda

A camp where eyesights have been restored to thousands since 1997

■ Lisa Choegyhal in Hetauda

The grey mist hangs heavy in the early morning, wrapping the trees, silencing the birds and reducing the sun to an orange disk. Rows of patients sit on blue plastic chairs after an overnight in the community hospital, wrapped in shawls and blankets following eye surgeries the day before.

Mostly elderly, each has one eye neatly taped with gauze. One man in a blue fleece cap (right) has both eyes covered.

This morning the bandages are due to come off. All tremble in anticipation of the revelation of restored sight as much as the chill of the Tarai winter.

The Gift of Sight annual eye camp is one of Rotary Club of Kathmandu Mid-Town's oldest projects. Avoidable blindness continues to be severe in Nepal's rural areas, the most prevalent problem being cataracts obscuring sight in older people.

Every year since the first camp in a school in Chitwan in 1997, the number of patients has been growing. In Hetauda, patients come from Chitwan, Makwanpur, Bara and further afield.

In two days, 124 cataracts have been removed and intraocular lens implanted. This was an initiative originally inspired by Sanduk Ruit of Tilganga, who had identified Makwanpur as being particularly susceptible to eye disease due to



PHOTOS: LISA CHOEGYHAL

SEE YOU: A double cataract patient looks out at a newly-revealed world after bandages were removed. Ophthalmologist Sunil Thakali inserting intraocular lenses on patients at the Hetauda Community Eye Hospital in January (below).

mineral deficiencies, waterborne infections, smoke induced by wood fires and genetic defects.

Many patients who had one eye done last year are here for their second cataract removal and intraocular lens surgery. The operations are done in the state-of-the-art Hetauda Community Eye Hospital opened in 2008.

Free accommodation and meals were provided to patients, their relatives and attendants during the pre- and post-operative period. Each was given counselling, dark glasses and medication before discharge and sent home by bus.

Ophthalmologist Sunil Thakali operates under bright lights, peering through a microscope. The eye of the otherwise swathed patient is propped open with a metal frame whilst the hard cloudy film that has shrouded their sight is coaxied out.

The nurse confidently and calmly anticipates the surgeon's needs, handing him sharp instruments and syringes in a well-rehearsed ballet.

The extracted small dark disk is on a green cloth, and the new lens, calibrated for each individual, is inserted with precision tweezers into the eye.

The invaluable gift of sight is bestowed on another Nepali who could otherwise never afford it. Over the years the groundwork for the eye camps has been undertaken by Rotary Club Hetauda, led by Siddhi Lal Shrestha. His special skill is motivating

local governments, religious organisations, scouts and volunteers for the eye camp.

This year 1,065 people were identified needing surgery in preliminary screening. They were brought to Hetauda Community Eye Hospital, with free transportation, accommodation and food.

Continuity to the Gift of Sight project has been possible with decades of financial support from Rotary Clubs of Garden City Singapore, Yuanshan Taiwan, Tainan East Taiwan, Jingfu Taiwan, Science Park Taiwan and personally from CC Chong from the Garden City Singapore Club.

As the sun struggles through the fog, we are invited to peel off the bandages from the wrinkled upturned faces, guided by hospital staff. It is impossible not to be deeply moved by the emotion of the moment.

Thakali moves along the rows with his team, checking the patients, while humbly acknowledging and appreciating him. Already the new day's patients are queueing in the arrival area, awaiting the doctor's return for another full day of work.

A man in a blue fleece cap looks out at his newly revealed world with an expression hard to describe. 🇳🇵

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