

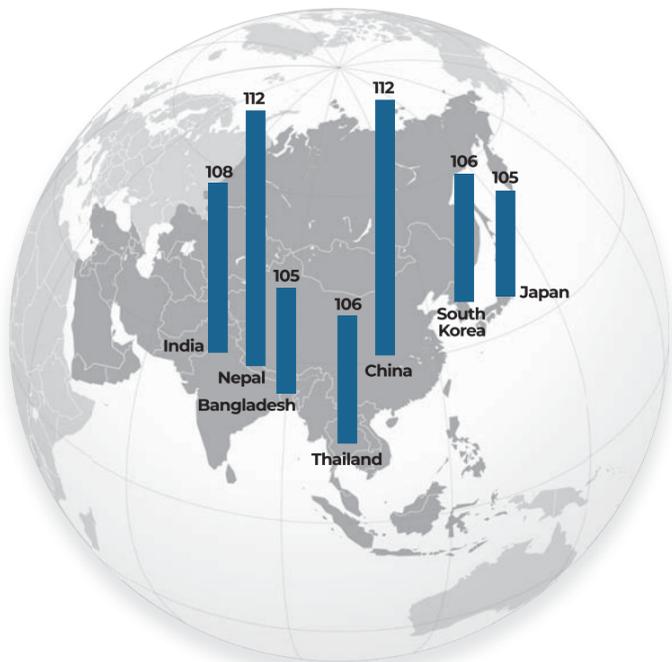
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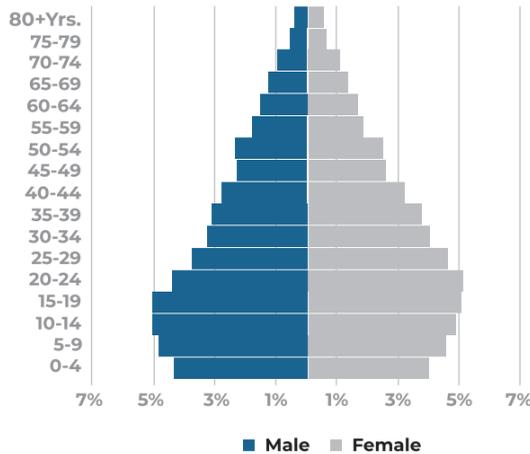
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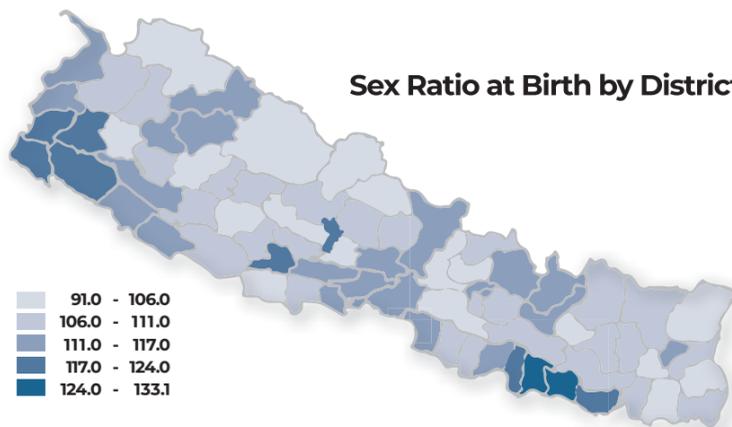
Sex Ratio at Birth 2021



Nepal Population Pyramid



Sex Ratio at Birth by District



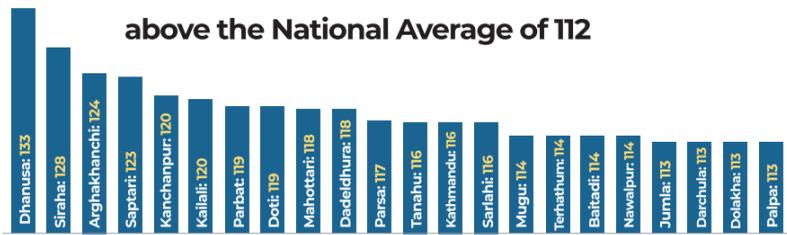
MORE BOYS THAN GIRLS

Sex ratio at birth (SRB) represents the number of boys born for every 100 girls. Globally, biological birth ratios are slightly biased towards male babies. The theoretical or expected sex ratio at birth is 105 male for every 100 female live births. Higher values indicate that there are more newborn boys than girls.

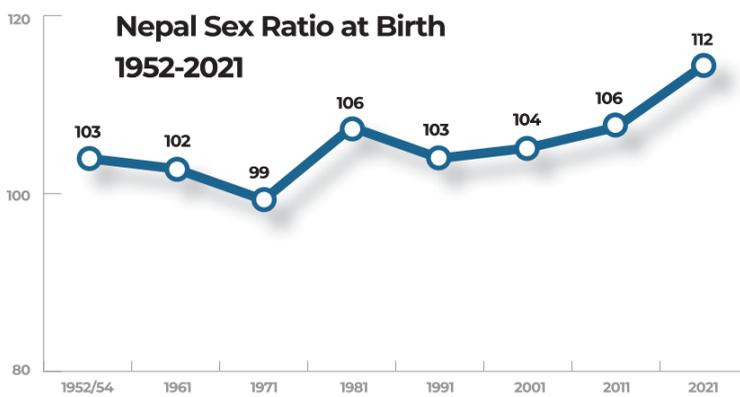


Nepal's 2021 census showed a national sex ratio at birth of 112 males per 100 females, up from 106 in the 2011 census. Population experts and social scientists find this worrying because it could lead to long-term demographic disparities. The reason for this skewed sex ratio at birth is entrenched patriarchy and socio-cultural norms that favour boys, and availability of portable ultrasound machines to determine sex, even though clinics are not allowed by law to divulge the sex of the foetus. Another factor is Nepal's plummeting total fertility rate, which is now at replacement level of 2 children per couple, down from 4.6 in 1996. **FULL STORY PAGE 4-5**

Districts with Sex Ratio at Birth above the National Average of 112



Nepal Sex Ratio at Birth 1952-2021



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Public-Private Collusion

A cabinet meeting last week appointed former journalist Sharad Ojha as the new chair of the Nepal Insurance Authority, the regulator of the sector. Ojha has no qualifications for the post as required by the Insurance Act.

His family ties to Nepali Congress president Sher Bahadur Deuba has been cited as the reason he got to bypass appointment criteria.

This is just the latest example of bending the law to appoint cronies and special interest groups to leadership positions in regulatory bodies. It has become the norm in Nepal.

Ojha's predecessor was former Home Secretary Surya Prasad Silwal, who was suspended two months before the end of his term in December after the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA) filed a corruption case against him in the Special Court. Days after Ojha's appointment, the court cleared Silwal of corruption charges.

Before Silwal, the Nepal Insurance Authority was led by Chiranjivi Chapagain, a relative of Chandra Dhakal of the IME Group. Chapagain is accused of granting approval to 10 insurance companies under dubious circumstances and favouring IME Life Insurance's approval.

Most of these recent individuals were appointed heads of regulatory bodies under PM Oli and Finance Minister Bishnu Paudel and probably at their behest.

The appointments at the Nepal Insurance Authority and SEBON reflect a blatant disregard for the rule of law. Such practice is also rampant in the cooperatives and real estate sectors, where illegal financial dealings and bad faith business has become standard operating procedure.

Meanwhile, Energy Minister Deepak Khadka, also a hydropower entrepreneur, is set on ousting Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) managing director Kulman Ghising. He previously ordered the removal of Dudhkoshi Hydropower Project CEO Bimal Gurung for criticising him on social media.

The minister has a major conflict of interest because of his involvement in private energy sector, and is pressuring parliamentary committees and regulatory bodies to amend the law to allow the sale of 50% of the shares of hydropower projects during the so-called 'lock-in period', which prevents the sale of promoter shares.

Now, lobbyists have set their sights on the Nepal Rastra Bank (NRB). Maha Prasad Adhikari's tenure ends in April, and the same groups behind the appointment of the chiefs

of SEBON and Nepal Insurance Authority are going door to door of leaders to have their candidate appointed.

The book *Why Nations Fail* by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, co-winners of last year's Nobel Prize for Economics with economist Simon Johnson, describes how public institutions are misused, weakened, and pushed toward failure by those with access to power.

Regulatory bodies are crucial to maintaining fair competition and ethical market practices. They exist to serve Nepal's public. However, they are being deliberately undermined by special interest groups paying off authorities for plum positions that will enrich them and their political patrons.

The government ordered the Department of Money Laundering to 'wait' as the body sought permission to take action against Ajeya Sumargi for illicit dealing.

It was thus unsurprising that the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) placed Nepal on its grey list in February for failing to take effective and result-oriented action to prevent money laundering.

The international community has raised a red flag against malgovernance, political interference, conflicts of interest, and impunity. The world is watching, but Nepal's politico-corporate interests are too deep in greed to care.

Ramesh Kumar



BHANU BHATTARAI

Government agencies supposed to protect the public interest operate at the whim of powerful lobbyists.

Meanwhile, intense lobbying by interest groups with ties to both Prime Minister Oli and PM-in-waiting Deuba allowed Santosh Narayan Shrestha's appointment as the chair of the Securities and Exchange Board of Nepal (SEBON) in December. Shrestha promptly paid his dues to the groups that put him in office by preparing to grant them permission to operate stock exchange.

Shrestha was preceded by hotelier Ramesh Kumar Hamal, the recommendation procedure and committee for whom were changed to ensure his appointment.

During his tenure, Hamal hastily amended a law that allowed specific companies to sell premium stocks, and another one allowing the operation of stock exchanges with private sector investment instead of public companies. None of this raised eyebrows.

Hamal's predecessor Bishma Raj Dhungana, a former Nepal Rastra Bank official, was dismissed as SEBON chair following allegations of irregularities.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Remittance Economy

Twenty years ago this week, we wrote about the growing contribution of migrant workers to the national economy. Things have only gone south since. In the first six months of this fiscal year, Nepalis sent home Rs763 billion while in 2024, remittance made up 26.31% of Nepal's GDP equivalent, from just 1.5% in 1993.

Excerpts from the report published on issue #237 4 - 10 March 2005:

For the last 15 years, Ganesh Lama has been working as a manager in Qatar. He can't believe how convenient it is to send money home. Until a few years back, Ganesh depended on friends to deliver cash to his wife and children in Kathmandu. He had to wait for months to find someone reliable.

Today, all Ganesh does is go to the Doha Bank in Qatar once a month to transfer the money to Nabil Bank in Kathmandu. "It's done in minutes," he says. The process of money transfer to Nepal from abroad has not just become efficient but it is now possible to accurately measure how much money Nepalis abroad repatriate to their home country every year.

Even so, only 40 percent of Nepali workers overseas use



remittance companies. The rest still rely on the hundi system, which takes up to two weeks, is unreliable and the operator takes a big cut.

Now, Western Union and 25 other recognised remittance companies help with transfers from all over the world to all over Nepal. "People are more confident about sending money home for a nominal service charge," says Arun Acharya from Annapurna Travel, which has been working on remittance banking for the last 10 years. Since 2001, the flow of remittance to the country has grown 15-20 percent every year and in 2004 money from overseas Nepalis crossed Rs 100 billion-

making it a bigger source of foreign exchange than tourism and all exports combined.

"It's remarkable, the contribution Nepal's overseas labour force is making to prop up the national economy," says Prajuman Pokhrel of Nabil Bank, which is the main agent here for Western Union. There are now an estimated 1.2 million Nepalis working in 40 countries, not counting India.

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

ONLINE PACKAGES



WHO BUILDS KATHMANDU

The foundation of Kathmandu sits atop the blood, sweat and tears of construction workers in the informal economy. They may have been designed by famous architects, but were built by day labourers. Watch the video on our YouTube channel.



THE WAR IN YOUNG MINDS

There is entire generation of young people who were either not born or were too young to remember what it was like to live in fear of the soldiers, police or guerrillas. Watch this 2023 video on YouTube where young Nepalis talk about the decade-long conflict, and what they know or don't know.

NEPAL DEVELOPMENT

What Nepal needs is sustainable development, turning the whole country into an amusement park is not the way forward ('Progress and/or Preservation', Editorial, #1250).

Pawan JB Rana

■ Wise words about rethinking development. I just wish people would listen and act appropriately.

Ian Wells

■ Development must come with responsibility. Nepal needs to adopt a 'small is beautiful, less is more' mindset and be an example for the world.

Akku Chowdhury

TRUMP PRESIDENCY

The Trumpists believe that a state should be run like a business, a company ('Trump's First Month', Robert R. Kaufman, nepalitimes.com). This proves nothing other than that they are not statesmen, but merely simple accountants.

Edi Mühlemann

■ This US administration only wants short term results, and they will get them — at the cost of many.

Renate Schwarz

BHUTAN AND NEPAL

This is an interesting longread about the history of Nepal and Bhutan, and their environmental and geopolitical challenges ('Small Bhutan dreams big', Sonia Awale, #1250).

Isabella P.P

■ Interesting that Bhutan could expel the Lhotshampa and then develop a modern, special zone; and Gaza may be emptied out to assuage Trump's desire for some beachfront Riviera ('Nepal is rising', weekly newsletter, Kunda Dixit).

Ivan G. Somlai

SDG TARGETS

Withdrawing from multilateral mechanisms being displayed by our top leaders makes me dwell on words like ecocide ('Combining IPCC targets with SDGs', nepalitimes.com).

Dion Harper

DIASPORA DIARIES

I'm glad that Sajita Lama made it home ('Enslaved Nepali migrant worker rebuilds her life', Sajita Lama, #1250).

Sigmund Stengel

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



Happy to just potter around Bhaktapur

by Sudiksha Tuladhar

Pottery now thrives in new ways beyond commerce, and has become a creative outlet and therapeutic escape for those stressed by the pressures of modern life. Read the story at nepalitimes.com and watch video.



Most reached and shared on Facebook

Illustrating innocence

by Sangya Lamsal

Bandana Tulachan has seen for herself the immense power of storytelling, especially for children. The illustrator is exploring Nepali identity, feminism, heroism through children's literature and art.



Most popular on X

Progress and/or Preservation

Editorial

Our understanding of development must go beyond cable cars on sacred sites or hotels and hydropower in protected areas. Progress does not have to come at the cost of environmental and cultural harm. Join the discussion online.



Most commented



Small Bhutan Dreams Big

by Sonia Awale

Despite a painful history, Nepal and Bhutan share the same socio-economic, geopolitical and environmental challenges, and there is untapped potential for them to learn more from each other and cooperate. Full story from Thimpu on our website.



Most visited online page

QUOTES



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

The government needs to work on a long-term strategy to promote quality tourism, but government decisions are ad hoc, lack coordination and are not followed through.



Hem Sagar Baral @WorshipNature

Government is a failed name in Nepal's tourism development and management. Tourism flourishes in Nepal because of our natural capital only and some entrepreneurs are capitalising more than others. It's a highly underrated and underdeveloped sector in Nepal.

1,000 WORDS



NEPAL PHOTO LIBRARY

ALL THAT GLITTERS:

Lalitpur Metropolitan City this week introduced battery powered carriages patterned after ones used by the British monarchy for tourists to explore heritage sites in Patan. The carriage is doing trial runs through the narrow streets, and has been ridiculed on social media.

Times

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The slaughter of our daughters

Gender-biased sex selection ranks Nepal the highest for sex ratio at birth in the region

■ Shristi Karki

Public health expert Aruna Uprety was flying from Dolpo to Nepalganj a few years ago when she struck up a conversation with a pregnant woman who told her she was travelling to the city for a doctor's appointment.

Uprety's initial happiness at learning that rural women were actively seeking prenatal care turned into shock when the woman, who had two daughters, said she would terminate her pregnancy if the ultrasound showed a female foetus.

When Uprety recounted her conversation with nurses at a hospital in Nepalganj, they did not bat an eyelid, telling her that pregnant people came from all over the Karnali to get ultrasounds for sex-selective abortions.

This example, multiplied tens of thousands of times every year, is visible in the 2021 census data: there are significantly more male than female live births in Nepal, giving the country one of the highest sex ratio at birth (SRB) in Asia.

SRB indicates the number of boys born for every 100 baby girls. Globally, biological birth ratios are slightly biased towards male babies, and the theoretical or expected SRB is 105 males per 100 female live births. Higher values indicate much higher numbers of newborn boys than girls.

According to the 2021 census, Nepal has a SRB at birth of 112 males per 100 females, up from



SUMAN NEPALI

106 recorded in the 2011 census. Dhanusa district bordering India has the highest SRB (133) while Mustang in the trans-Himalaya has 92 boys per every 100 girls born. The Madhes (118) has the highest SRB among Nepal's provinces.

Experts are worried that this trend could lead to long-term demographic disparities, and say there has not been enough research into the drivers of this imbalance.

"Nepal's skewed sex ratio at birth is one of the most concerning demographic issues," says

Yogendra B Gurung of the Central Department of Population Studies at Tribhuvan University.

Contributing to this is gender-biased sex selection (GBSS) and other forms of discrimination and inequality enabled by Nepal's patriarchal, socio-cultural, traditional structures.

Gender-biased sex selection determines the outcome of a pregnancy, and can be postnatal or prenatal. Postnatal sex selection can be due to neglect, differences in maternal nutrition and child care,

or infanticide of a girl child.

Prenatal gender-biased sex selection occurs prior to or during conception, either by the selection of a particular sex during fertilisation, or through termination of pregnancy when the sex of the foetus is determined. Across the world, GBSS is an outcome of a preference of sons over daughters.

The census result proves that Nepalis are increasingly opting for sex selection and consequently, sex-selective abortions through the use of prenatal diagnostic technologies

to determine the sex of a baby, even though the law prohibits clinics from revealing the sex of a foetus.

"There are three detriments that enable gender-biased sex selection: our socio cultural norms, and the preference of sons over daughters, and the availability of technology that is able to determine the sex of a foetus," explains Apekchya Rana Khatri at the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in Kathmandu. "We analysed the social and demographic trends, and identified Nepal as one of the countries where GBSS prevails based on the prevalence of these three issues."

Many Nepali families prefer sons because they are still expected to solely carry forward the family lineage, provide economic benefit to the family and actively engage in society, take care of their parents in their old age, perform funeral rites, and gain inheritance.

Imbalanced sex ratio at birth is not just a problem in Nepal. The sex ratio at birth of countries in the region, including India and China reflect socio-cultural norms that ascribe more importance to boys.

Sex ratio at birth in India (108) is mostly due to cultural factors, while in China (112) it is a legacy of the previous One Child Policy. The imbalance has actually begun to improve in the past years in both countries. However, in Nepal, the opposite has happened: SRB rose from 104 in 2001 to 106 in 2011 to 112 in 2021 (graphs, page 1).

The 2021 census also shows that sex ratio at birth in Nepal's urban municipalities is 114 -- higher than

NMB BANK एनएमबि बैंक

Turkish Holidays

Turkish Airlines launched its holiday package service globally in which tourists can arrange flights, hotels, rental cars, and insurance through holidays.turkishairlines.com. Prior to this, this service was only available for flights out of Turkiye. Now, major markets such as the UK, Mexico, and Australia have been integrated, with the US soon to follow. Packages are



offered in over 60 countries. To mark the launch, the Airlines is offering airport lounge access and discounts of up to €350 to first-time travelers to Turkiye who book through their platform. Other benefits include miles earned on non-flight bookings, guaranteed refunds, flexible payment plans, and one piece of luggage complimentary.

Turkish is also connecting Istanbul and Phnom Penh via Bangkok with thrice weekly flights starting 10 December. Phnom Penh will be the 20th city in East Asia served by the carrier.

Embossed Plates

The government has prepared guidelines to mandate embossed plates on vehicles. New vehicle registrations and ownership transfers will require installing the digitised embossed plate. Installations can now be done at private workshops as well as at transport offices. Nepalis abroad may designate a family member to stand in for them to change plates. Implementation was delayed due to allegations of kickbacks and opposition to not using Devnagari letters and numerals.

Melamchi burst

Another Melamchi pipeline burst in Thapathali on 3 March, collapsing a section of the road outside the Paropakar Maternity Hospital. Nearby houses and shops were flooded and traffic disrupted. The municipality has begun repairs. The damage was caused by the NEA drilling to install underground cables.

Pokhara-Lhasa

Himalaya Airlines is starting a new flight between Pokhara and Lhasa from 31 March. The weekly flight will be the first regular international flight connecting Pokhara's international airport that was inaugurated more than two years ago. It will also be only the second international destination from Lhasa Gonggar Airport. The trans-Himalayan flight lasts 55 minutes and wings past Mt Everest, Lhotse Makalu and Kangchenjunga. Himalaya Airlines is Nepal's joint venture private airline with Tibet Airlines and the carrier will be using its Airbus 319s on the route. The outbound flight from Kathmandu to Lhasa will return to Pokhara, overnight there to fly directly to Lhasa the next morning before returning to Kathmandu. Himalaya Airlines operates flights to six Chinese cities, and travel industry hopes this will boost Chinese visitors to Pokhara.



Sipradi Awarded

Tata dealer Sipradi won 7 awards and a certificate of recognition for 'Pioneering EV Expansion' at the Tata Motors One World 2024. Tata EV models such as Nexon, Tiago, and Punch have proved popular in Nepal. Electric vehicles made up 75% of new car sales in Nepal in the past year.



BYD Hi-Tech Week

Cimex has concluded its BYD Hi-Tech Week at The Everest Hotel on 2 March to showcase new EV models and technology like an autopark feature and nail tests. Cimex is also offering a 10yr/200,000km warranty on all cars booked until 9 March. Xie Yu, counsellor at the Chinese Embassy in Nepal, attended the opening ceremony of the event.

WASH Nepal+India

Nepal and India signed an agreement to collaborate to solve water, sanitation, and waste management problems. India has carried the Jal Jeevan and Swachh Bharat Missions recently, and Nepal hopes to learn from their experiences.

FuAsian Turns 1

Holiday Inn Express's rooftop restaurant FuAsian marked its 1st anniversary by releasing a new menu that keeps some signature dishes while also adding new ones.

Ncell best MNC

Ncell was awarded for corporate excellence in the Multinational Company Category at the 4th HRM Awards. The telecom company has paid over Rs320B taxes and used Rs2B for various social initiatives such as health camps. Ncell's new Magic Resources offer, gifts customers bonus data and talk-time when buying certain data packs.

LPG Strike off

The Nepal LPG Association which had been threatening to stop selling gas from 24 March because of cylinder dealer commissions to reflect inflation and more investment in safety has called off the strike after an agreement was reached with the government. The price of a cylinder of gas has risen from Rs1,910 to Rs1,922.75.



Mahindra Care Fest

Mahindra Utility Vehicles distributor Agni Group organised a nationwide Care Fest 2-7 March. Customers who took part got a free 45-point check-up and body wash, plus discounts on lubricants and spare parts.

Cathay Awards

Cathay Pacific honored its top Nepali travel and cargo partners at the annual Wings of Excellence awards. Osho World Travel Nepal and Bon Travel & Tours, and Pioneer Cargo and Shangrila International Freight were awarded.

Old Durbar+Paubha



Yeti Distillery honoured paubha artist Samundra Man Singh Shrestha for his contribution to traditional Nepali art. Shrestha and Yeti recently collaborated

on Old Durbar's 15 Year Old Scotch, with the bottles carrying art from Shrestha's 'The Mythical Creatures' series.

rural municipalities (109). This is in contradiction to the belief that discrimination against girl children is less among educated and better off city dwellers than in rural areas.

Better access to healthcare institutions might also account for higher sex ratio at birth in urban areas. In the case of Madhes Province, access to both legal and unsafe abortion across the border could be why SRB is higher.

"Nepal's sex ratio at birth shines a light on the deeply-entrenched patriarchy in our country," says demographer Gurung. "And it also clarifies the misconception that traditional and conservative mindsets and discriminatory practices exist exclusively in rural communities, because the data points to educated, economically well off people engaging in practices like GBSS."

Historically, agrarian societies like Nepal preferred to have many sons because men were considered better suited to physical work. Today, many Nepalis hope to have male children so that they can migrate overseas, earn livelihoods, and support their families.

"Although evolving political, legal, and social systems have given women more robust rights to education and rights to inheritance, and ensured their participation in the workforce, the implementation of interventions is another matter," says Aruna Uprety. "Our cultural and especially religious practices have continued to reinforce gender inequality."

Experts say they have been unable to collect relevant data from medical and health facilities.

"Even when we identify the issues contributing to sex-selective practices, we are largely working on assumptions because there is no officially-backed data about sex-selective abortions through legal channels or unofficial and unsafe providers," says Won Young Hong, UNFPA Country Representative for



Nepal. "We need to obtain more data from hospitals, clinics and the many other service providers so that we can conduct more extensive research."

Another dimension to sex determination, selection, and sex-selective abortion is that it is not always a pregnant person's choice to terminate a pregnancy if they find their child is female. Studies at local levels have revealed that husbands and mothers-in-law play pivotal roles in decision-making regarding prenatal sex determination.

Nepal's decreasing total fertility rate also contributes to a warped sex ratio at birth. Two decades ago, Nepal's total fertility rate was 4.6, today a Nepali mother on average gives birth to only 2.1 children -- which is at replacement level. And since Nepalis are having fewer children, especially if they plan to have only one child, they want to make sure they have a son.

Studies by the Center for Research on Environment Health and Population Activities

(CREHPA) show that while neither women nor men have a preference for the sex of their child during the birth of their first child, having a female child first will lead to a preference for sons from the second birth, the preference increases in subsequent birth orders.

Although Nepal's sex ratio at birth is skewed towards boys, the country has more women than men, as differences in lifestyles contribute to a higher male mortality rate. The 2021 census shows that Nepal's sex ratio is 95.6 males per 100 females (population pyramid graph, page 1).

However, the male to female ratio from ages 0-19 has gone from 102 in 2011 to 107 in 2021, mainly due to rising sex ratio at birth. In the coming decades, the number of females above age 19 will decline.

The number of males under 20 being higher also proves that gender-biased sex selection has been going on in Nepal for at least the three decades, says Gurung.

"Nepal's sex ratio at birth could

indicate a larger demographic shift in the long run where the male population outnumbers the female population," he adds.

This would in turn have an impact on fertility, male-female partnerships and marriage dynamics, the work force, and Nepal's existing social structures as a whole. In particular, a population significantly skewed towards males might make women and girls more vulnerable to abuse, sexual exploitation and assault, trafficking, forced marriages, and other serious crimes, say experts.

Studies have also found that birth registration right after the birth of a child is not common in Nepal, and some couples register the birth of sons and ignore daughters, which may be reflected in fewer recorded female live births.

Cultural norms and practices do not change despite laws, and Nepal needs to do much more to change societal values, protect, and educate its women and girls. UNFPA, for example, in 2021 supported the Ministry of Health and Population to draft the first-ever national strategy to address gender-biased sex selection, its implementation already in place.

The agency's Ruparantan program also equips adolescent girls with practical skills and knowledge on gender equality and decision-making.

But for this to work, new policies and political will to implement them by the government are critical. Strong regulatory mechanisms to monitor prenatal sex determination technologies will also be required.

In addition, Nepal needs systems in place to guarantee safety and security of its ageing population, so that there are less financial and socio-cultural pressure on sons to take care of their families, and less incentives for parents to opt for male children.

"The state needs to prepare to provide adequate services for the elderly population, especially with the anticipation of the growth in ageing population," says Won Young Hong at UNFPA.

India has stricter regulations over the use of prenatal diagnostic technologies to determine the sex of a baby, as well as rigorous campaigning across state and national levels like the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao program that have helped address the country's declining female births.

Nepal also needs to address the drivers of its skewed sex ratio at birth while safeguarding the reproductive rights of women and the right to safe abortions.

Access to these services have contributed significantly to lowering the maternal mortality rate. Abortions are important for medical emergencies, for survivors of sexual assault, for family planning, and to ensure the right of women to choose what to do with their own body.

"Safe abortion is a right, and cutting off access to it will not stop gender-biased sex selection," says Aruna Uprety. "Legality has no bearing on people's decisions--women were getting abortions in private facilities across Nepal and India even when it was not yet legal."

What is needed is a multi-sectoral approach that addresses existing socio-cultural norms, what women need to be empowered and linked to jobs, as well as policies that promote women and girls, giving them opportunities.

Adds Uprety: "Socio-cultural interventions are just as important as legal and policy ones, and we cannot address society's preference for sons unless we look critically at our patriarchal cultural practices. Gender discrimination is a cross-cutting issue." 🇳🇵



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Female Nepali double-decker driver in Dubai



DIASPORA
DIARIES 59

This is the 59th edition of Diaspora Diaries, a regular series in Nepali Times with stories of Nepalis living and working abroad.

■ Shanti Bhandari

Growing up in Okhaldhunga, my sisters never went to school. I got a chance to take functional literacy classes and learned to read and write. This made me realise the importance of education, so I asked my father to send me to school. He agreed.

I had to create this situation for myself. I was fortunate to get my father's approval despite his initial reluctance because the trend back then was to marry off daughters after they reached 14 or 15. That was all he had known.

Fortunately, my father did not insist on me marrying young. It helped that my brothers in Kathmandu were supportive.

What was it about marrying young that did not appeal to me? I am not sure. But the thought of it used to make me anxious because conversations with my aunts back then made it seem like they had to give up on everything once they got married. There is no freedom to do what one wants in life.

For example, even when there were free all-women adult literacy classes in our village that many of my aunts were keen to join, their families did not approve. Some accepted life the way it was ("चस्ते त हो नि"). Others were sad about having to kill their ambitions.

Marrying young felt too restrictive for me, I just was not ready for it. Instead, I came to Kathmandu after Grade 8 to join two of my brothers.

Between working as a cook at an office and attending school, where I often had to miss my last class to make it to work on time, I somehow managed to pass my SLC.

I then did odd jobs like work as a receptionist and later as a cashier at a Chinese restaurant. I also invested with my brother on Momo Palace, a restaurant that unfortunately did not succeed because there was not enough money to buy a refrigerator, and there were long power cuts in those days.

After finally getting married and having a child in 2010, I was a stay-at-home mom for a bit. After the 2015 earthquake, I left for the UAE leaving my son behind with my family.

I first worked at a beauty parlour, waxing, straightening hair, threading. Many of my clients were Filipinas with whom I used to have engaging conversations. I asked for advice about career prospects, and they were generous with suggestions.

I was always fascinated with driving. Back in Nepal, I used to be in awe of women who drove six-wheelers. I used to wait for auto rickshaws driven



by women, and had a deep sense of appreciation for what they did because they were breaking barriers.

My customers from the Philippines said they drove company cars or were chauffeurs for Emirati families. I was really interested, and used to call them up in the evenings to seek more advice.

The work at the parlour was a necessity, I knew my interests were elsewhere. But the idea of driving on the busy streets was scary at

first. But my customers assured me that it was difficult at first, but once you understood the rules, how the system worked, it was safe and driving was very doable.

Initially, I faced challenges obtaining my driving license because back then the work visa category determined eligibility.

For example, only those in the transport sector, in managerial positions and in security qualified for a license.



It was disappointing, but I sought a job at a transportation company and worked as a school bus driver's companion to manage children on their way to school and back, what we call a खलासी in Nepal.

I enjoyed the job as the children were friendly, and reminded me of my son of similar age back home.

I worked there for a couple of years, even though the pay was 300 Dirhams less than my wages in the

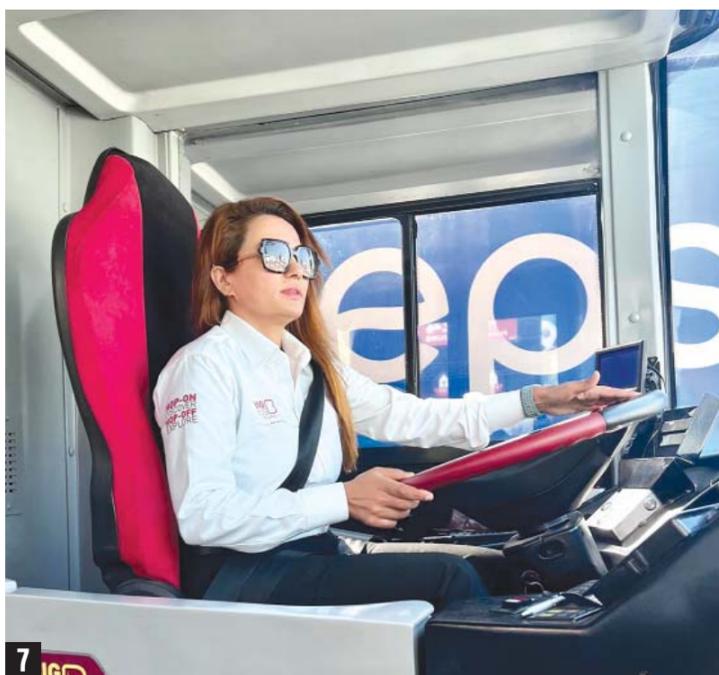
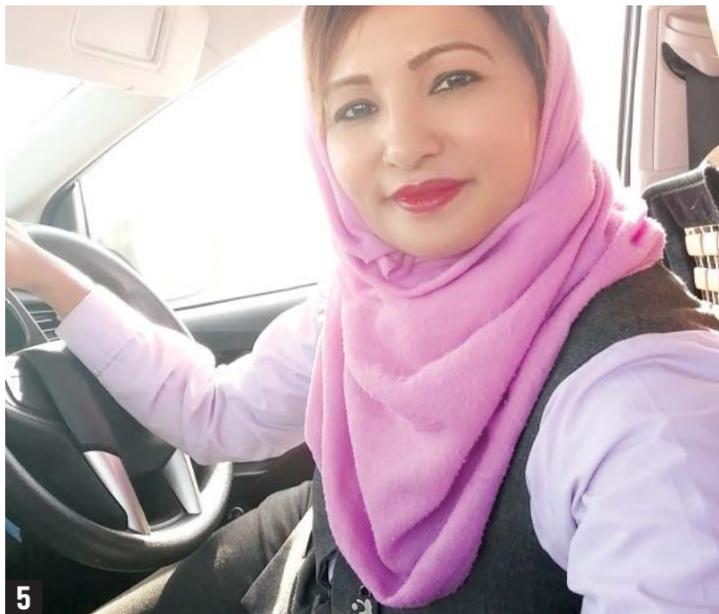
salon. But I was so committed to a driving job that I just wanted to get a toehold to obtain a UAE-license.

I was the only woman in driving class, the others would be curious about where I was from and why I wanted to drive. I took the lessons seriously, and worked hard to study traffic rules. Such was my determination to obtain a license.

I passed both theoretical and practical tests at one go, and bought a cheap car. My dream had been

to push boundaries

Dubai has charted her own path through life



only woman in a group of 35 during the road test, I used to avoid the 'ladies first' offers because I wanted to see how others before me did so I could observe them.

I was already a nervous driver, and I got even more nervous when they offered to let me go first. Eventually, I was one of the only seven who passed in the group of 35 drivers.

Finding a job as a woman bus driver was somewhat tougher than getting the license. Abu Dhabi did not allow it due to the absence of policies for female bus drivers, so I had to look for a job in Dubai.

I was thrilled when I was finally hired by a company that invested in my training as I taught myself the route. With my trainer's help, I used to draw a map of my route with the relevant stops. After the workday, I drove through the route in my car to make sure I was familiar with it.

Since then, I have been driving a double-decker bus and taking tourists to old and modern Dubai.

It is important to stay curious and keep pushing ourselves. I have invested a lot of money in getting a bus license, classes and other skills training, and I see it as an investment for my future.

I don't know what awaits me. I am 41 now, but want to keep trying new things, and refuse to let my age determine my drive. If I did, I would have stuck to my parlour job instead of taking risks and a pay cut.

Many people choose to play it safe in life, but I have always believed in stepping outside my comfort zone and challenging what is considered appropriate work for women.

That is what I tell Nepali youth who are considering going abroad for work: do not migrate empty-handed without any skills. Paper certificates do not hold much value if they do not translate into practical abilities.

I enjoy my job driving the Big Bus. Earnings aside, it is rewarding to be appreciated by tourists who hop on. They want to take pictures, and ask me about myself. At traffic stops, people crossing the road sometimes wave at me.

Such appreciation is like an extra bonus pay, and it motivates me even more. I feel proud to know that I am the first woman double decker bus driver in the tourism sector here.

Nepalis in Dubai also shower me with a lot of affection. They tell me they have seen me on the news or on social media, and want to take selfies with me, smiling widely.

My son tells me how his teachers and friends back home asked about me after seeing video interviews about my journey. It was a proud moment for me recently to drive my son around Dubai on the double decker. 🇳🇵

to drive my mother around, and in 2017, my mother and son came to Dubai, their first trip abroad.

I was emotional back then because my father had died unexpectedly just a month after I left for the Emirates. He had asked me to buy him a touch phone, but he died before I even made my first pay check with which I planned to buy it for him.

He would have loved to see me driving around Dubai. I took my

mother around and also bought her a phone. What I could not do for my father, I did for her. My son was a bit distant at first, as we had been separated for two years. But by the time they were headed back to Nepal, he could not stop crying and clung on to me.

I first started by driving a taxi. There were a few women driving taxis, including two Nepalis. Initially, it was difficult to find my way around Abu Dhabi. If I missed

one turn, it could delay customers, and some who were regular on that route would create a fuss.

I wanted to avoid them complaining to my employer, so I would apologise and ask them to just pay their regular fare. Some agreed, others understood that I was a beginner and paid the full fare.

I steadily got to know my way around, and drove taxis for five years. I used to read the local news quite a bit to stay informed about

traffic law updates.

One day, I read that there were women from the Philippines and African countries who were driving buses. I decided to get a bus license.

When I first went to apply for it, they questioned me about why I wanted to drive a bus. I told them confidently that I could drive a bus, which was met with much surprise and amusement.

I took the classes, the solo female student yet again. As the

STEERING MY OWN LIFE:

1 With my parents before leaving Nepal for the UAE in 2015. My father died soon after I left.

2-3 With my mother in Dubai in 2017, when I worked in a beauty parlour, but passion was always to learn to drive.

4 It was a proud moment when I took my son and mother around the UAE in my car in 2017. Wished my father was also there to see me.

5 I drove a taxi around Abu Dhabi for five years, but always wanted to do more.

6-7 After getting my bus driver license, I am driving this tourist double-decker around Dubai.

8 My son on the top deck of my Big Bus when he visited Dubai recently.

EVENTS

**Women Leadership Summit**

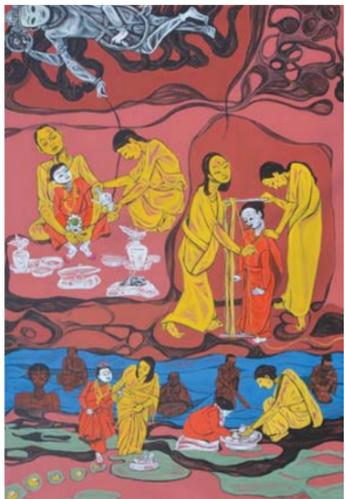
The Women Leadership Summit 2025 will bring together trailblazing women from diverse industries and include interactive panels and networking opportunities where women share their journeys, insights, and strategies for driving change.

16 March, 11am-6pm, The Soaltee Kathmandu

Holi pool party

Experience the thrill of a Pool Party, and enjoy a festive Holi with friends. Also grab some food, and groove to the beats of live music and DJ performances.

13 March, 11am onwards, Saanvi Hotel Restaurant, Boudha

**Accelerate Actions**

Twenty talented women artists from Nepal and Malaysia will showcase their creations through a diverse range of mediums including painting, ceramics, and printmaking on the occasion of Women's Day.

9 March, 5pm onwards, Classic Gallery, Chakupat

Heritage Holi Festival

Gather with friends and loved ones to celebrate Holi under the open sky at Heritage Garden.

13 March, 11am onwards, Ticket: 1,000+,, Heritage Garden Sanepa

**Color Splash**

The Annual Color Madness is back, with live performances by Kuma Sagar & The Khwopa band and other performing artists like Finzok, Bee-Bass.

13 March, Tickets: Rs1000, Hotel Malla, Lainchaur

The Thread Project

Artists Constanza Bitthoff from Argentina and Manish Lal Shrestha from Nepal have collaborated to explore intricate connections woven through art, culture, and creativity.

Till 16 March, 5pm onwards, Gallery Mcube

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, 11am-7pm, Takpa Gallery

MUSIC

Rangover at Lavie

Celebrate Holi with vibrant music from Sushant and Raga as well as Bibash Jk alongside DJ sessions. Enjoy the true spirit of the festival with complimentary beverages.

13 March, 10am onwards, Ticket: 800, Lavie Garden, Boudha

**Sushant KC**

Sushant KC will be in Bhaktapur this weekend 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

Echoes In The Valley

The 9th annual Echoes In The Valley will be a two-day celebration of music, culture, and community, and will feature live performances by 18 national and international musicians. Other activities include music therapy, pottery workshops, and a photo exhibition. Entry is free.

7-8 March, Madhyapur Thimi

**DJ Alok in LOD**

DJ Alok is set to light up LOD with their unique sound this Friday, promising a high-energy night. Take friends along.

7 March, 7pm onwards, 12am, Tickets: Rs2,000, LOD - Lord of the Drinks, Thamel

**Rockheads**

Vibe to the Rockheads as they continue to redefine Nepali rock with their innovative sound and dynamic performances.

15 March, Omnia Club, Kathmandu

DINING

**Elements Restaurant & Bar**

Stop by Elements Restaurant for lunch, and try their signature dishes: Chicken Cordon Bleu, Wine Glaze Chicken, Pork Chop, Grilled Fish with Butter.

Baluwatar (01)4543163

GETAWAY

**Atithi Resort & Spa**

The Camellia Spa in Atithi Resort is a must visit in Pokhara. With a variety of services ranging from ayurvedic massages to steam and sauna, Camellia is a sanctuary for those looking to eke out some me-time.

Lakeside, Pokhara (061) 456760

Monday Bhaleshwar Special

Mondays at Chandragiri Hills will be more special as locals can enjoy a 25% discount on cable car tickets from 8am to 6pm starting 14 March. Visit Bhaleshwar Mahadev Temple, experience the serene surroundings, and take in the breathtaking Himalayan views.

Chandragiri Hills, 9802069900

**Dalai-La Boutique Hotel**

This boutique hotel, decorated with historic artifacts, is an attraction in itself, and gives visitors an opportunity to step out of Kathmandu's chaos and into peace and serenity.

Thamel (01) 4701436

**Nana Jungle Resort**

Located near the Narayani River, Nana Jungle Resort is a premium establishment that prioritises sustainable tourism. The fusion of serene wilderness and modern comfort awaits visitors.

Chitwan National Park, 9802000916

The Inn Patan

What was once a traditional brick and timber Newari house has been transformed into a beautiful heritage hotel. Experience the vibrant history of Patan Darbar Square during a stay here.

Patan, 9851066897

**Kyubi's Kitchen**

Kyubi's Kitchen is the place to go for customisable bowls of noodles, platters filled to the brim with dumplings, spicy noodles, kimbap, corn dogs, da-pow and more.

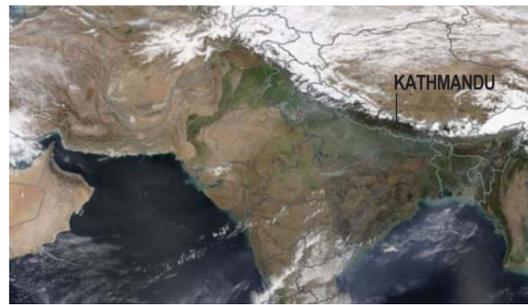
Jhamsikhel, 9808218582

Genesis Cafe

Whether you're looking to work, relax, or catch up with friends, Genesis Cafe offers the perfect blend of cosy ambiance and delicious food, with a menu featuring specialty coffee, hearty all-day breakfasts, fresh salads, and a variety of desserts.

Panipokhari (01)4002788

WEEKEND WEATHER

**Spring in the Air**

This weather satellite image on Thursday (left) shows a system moving in all the way from the Mediterranean that may start to make its presence felt in central Nepal on Friday, with a chance of some precipitation on Saturday. After that it could remain sunny with some passing clouds, but nothing serious. Temperatures in Kathmandu will rise to more normal levels for this time of year.

OUR PICK



Palestinian activist Basel Adra has grown up witnessing and resisting the forced displacement of his people by the Israeli military. Adra takes up a camera as the occupation tears down homes and destroys his community in the Masafer Yatta region in the West Bank. In the process, he meets and befriends Yuval Abraham, an Israeli journalist. The two young men's friendship is marked by the stark contrast of their lives. Directed by Basel Adra, Hamdan Ballal, Yuval Abraham and Rachel Szor, No Other Land won Best Documentary at this year's Academy Awards.

गर्मी मौसममा संक्रामक रोगबाट बचाउ र बचाऔं

- गर्मी मौसममा मलेरिया, कालाजार, डेंगी, हैजालगायतका विभिन्न संक्रामक रोगहरू फैलिन सक्छन् ।
- संक्रामक रोग फैलाउने झिँगा, लामखुट्टे, भुसुना आदिको नियन्त्रण गरौं ।
- संक्रामक रोगबाट बच्न शुद्ध र उमालेको पानी पिऔं ।
- बासी तथा सडेगलेका खाना नखाऔं ।
- घरभित्र र वरपरको सरसफाइमा ध्यान दिऔं ।



नेपाल सरकार
विज्ञापन बोर्ड

Crave Bakery

Indulge in Crave Bakery's delectable pastries. Among their standout creations are the rich chocolate mousse and matcha-infused delicacies.

Manbhawan (01)5432111

**Fire and Ice**

One of the Kathmandu's first pizzerias, Fire and Ice offers dozens of variants of genuine Neapolitan pizza to choose from. Try the Paesena: topped with mozzarella, spinach, zucchini, bacon, garlic, and parmesan.

Thamel (01) 5350210

**Sizzling by Doko**

Satisfy cravings for bold flavours at Sizzling by Doko. Choose from a menu that includes sizzling platters, juicy burgers, loaded fries, and comforting rice bowls.

Jhamsikhel, 9801046708

Nook special offer

Ladies: celebrate Women's Day at Nook over this weekend, with a 30% discount on the restaurant's à la carte menu. Reserve a table now.

7-9 March, Nook, Aloft Kathmandu Thamel, 9801976054

Back where they belong

Paubha paintings are returned to Kathmandu, 45 years after they were smuggled out

■ Saraswati Rashmi Shakya

Few places in Nepal have been as stripped of their sacred art as Itumbahal, one of the five main Buddhist monastic enclaves in the heart of Kathmandu.

The plunder of the temple and its environs started in the 1970s. Powerful forces colluded to smuggle artefacts out, to collectors and museums in the West.

Now, after 45 years of tireless effort spanning generations, three paubha paintings stolen from Itumbahal have been returned from New York.

Proof that they were stolen from the monastic enclave came from a 1978 photograph of the Yetkha and Kacha Bahas, taken by Chiniya Tamrakar for the Department of Archaeology (DOA).

“This photograph was taken during an inventory-keeping process of the DOA. Who would have thought it would one day offer such clinching proof of the theft,” says Tamrakar.

Three wall paintings were stolen from Itumbahal on 14 September 1980: Chintamani Lokesvara with His Companion dating back 300 years, a 600-year-old Gaganshim Bharo with His Wives, and Four Supplicants before a Divine Couple from 1704CE.

The paubha paintings, which measure about 1.5m in length and width, had been hanging on the wall of the inner sanctum of Itumbahal, which dates back to the 11th century CE, the oldest, largest, and most prosperous enclave in the heart of Kathmandu.

They were not for public display except during the month-long Gunla festival every August. It was during this festival in 1978 that Chiniya Tamrakar had taken the photograph.

The thieves entered the sanctum through a small opening in the wall to steal the three paubha. Priests and caretakers were shocked to see them missing when they came in for morning rituals.



NEWA GUTHI NEW YORK



SANJAY ADHIKARI

“This was in the early 80s, and the news of the theft spread quickly. I was quite young but I managed to tag along with my brother to catch a glimpse of the empty wall,” recalls 68-year-old Prem Tara Shakya. “Sadly, looting

was pretty common in those days and the culprits got away with it.”

The crime was reported to the Hanuman Dhoka Police Station, the DOA and Customs at Kathmandu Airport a day after the theft, but the FIR went missing after a mysterious

HOME AGAIN: Bijay Man Singh and members of the Newa Guthi New York raised funds to fly back home the three paubha paintings as well as 17 other stolen artefacts (above).

Nepali officials with the repatriated paubha paintings at Kathmandu airport this week (left).

fire broke out in the police post.

Nevertheless, the president and secretary of the Itumbahal Sudhar Samiti, Chandra Bahadur Shakya and Swasti Ratna Shakya, did not give up. From reporting the crime 45 years ago to tracking down the sacred paintings through the internet, they have tirelessly worked to bring the paubha back.

In 2003, Stephen Truax Eckerd, the coordinator of ImaginAsia Family Programs at the Smithsonian Institution came to Nepal to research an exhibition about the Himalaya. During this trip he came to Itumbahal and left copies of the paubha.

Repatriation is a lengthy process that involves years of correspondence, research, hunting for proof, and deciphering clues. Chandra Bahadur Shakya started by writing to Eckerd about the

theft of the paubha, asking to not exhibit them.

He also wrote to the Nepal government about what steps to take for repatriation, and to the art dealer in New York for any information about the three stolen paubha.

The missing paintings were being publicly displayed, and their location was established. Tamrakar's photo from 1978 was conclusive proof that they had been stolen from Itumbahal.

In 2006, an official letter certifying that the paintings were stolen and not sold was sent to Bhesh Narayan Dahal, curator and investigating officer at the DOA in Kathmandu.

Swasti Ratna Shakya who had witnessed the crime scene, got the DOA, the Police, and Customs involved on behalf of her father, who died in 2003.

Sanjay Adhikari, litigating officer and secretary of Nepal Heritage Recovery Campaign, tracked the paintings and held many online meetings between Chiniya Tamrakar, Itumbahal officials, the Manhattan District Attorney, and FBI officials in New York.

After the Manhattan DA acquired the stolen paintings, they were handed over last week to Chakra Kumar Subedi, Acting Consul General in New York.

The paintings were then turned over to Bijay Man Singh and the Newa Guthi in New York, who raised funds to get the three paubha as well as 17 other items flown back to Nepal.

On Tuesday, all of the repatriated artefacts were delivered to Saubhagya Pradhananga and Sarita Subedi at the DOA. They had been gone 44 years, 5 months, and 20 days.

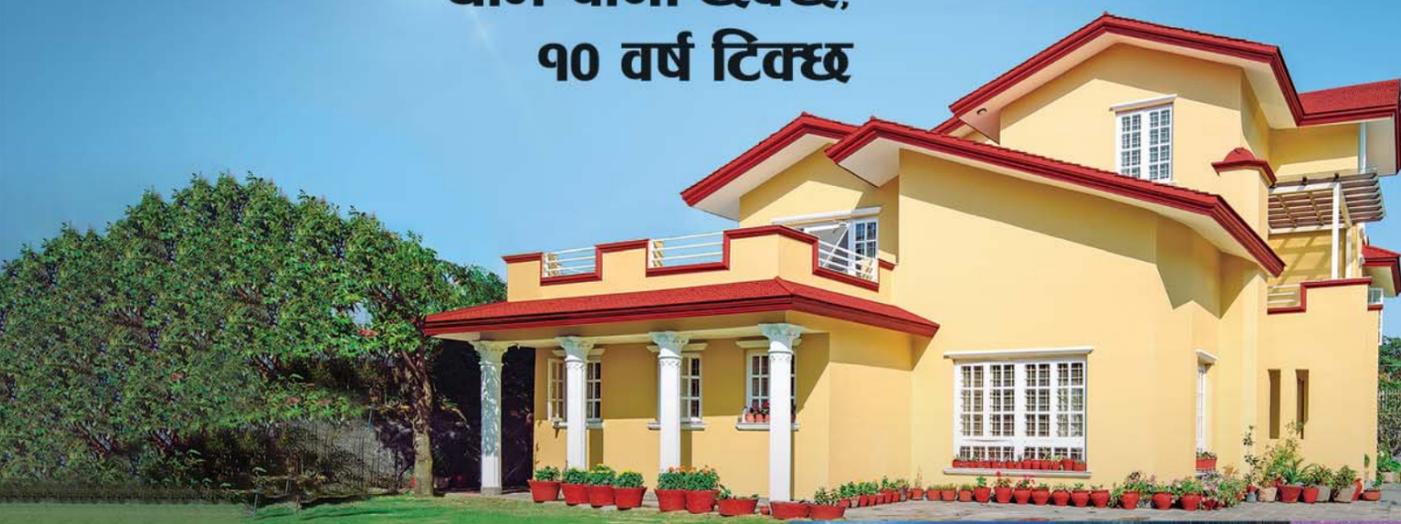
These much-revered traditional paintings of the gods and goddesses are now back where they belong, and not in museums abroad, or in someone's living room. 🇳🇵

Saraswati Rashmi Shakya is a PhD scholar at the Central Department of Buddhist Studies of Tribhuvan University.

WEATHERCOAT
LONG LIFE
EXTERIOR EMULSION WITH PU & SILICON

**घाम-पानी छेक्छ,
१० वर्ष टिक्छ**







चर्को घामबाट बचाउँछ



मुसलघारे वर्षाबाट जोगाउँछ



१० वर्ष वारेन्टी





IGFF

Women first in 2027

Empowering women to enter politics and preparing candidates for elections two years away

■ Sangya Lamsal

There was a time not long ago when Nepal had a female president, a female Speaker of the House and a female Chief Justice. Women accounted for 33% of seats in Parliament following the provision in the 2015 Constitution that mandated at least one-third female representation.

It looked like Nepal was way ahead of everyone else in the region and much of the world. But by the 2022 elections, the country regressed.

Women were token figures used by male party bosses to use Proportional Representation seats. The increase in numerical representation of women has not necessarily resulted in substantive changes for citizens.

In the 2017 elections, political parties primarily assigned women to the deputy position in local governments with less authority than male chiefs. They treated their nominations as a mere formality, rather than a genuine commitment to female leadership.

The Local Level Election Act 2017 mandated that half the chairpersons/chiefs, vice-chairpersons, or deputy chiefs of municipalities, as well as the chief and deputy chief of District Coordination Committees must be women.

However, in the 2022 elections, the parties blatantly disregarded the quotas and deliberately fielded more male candidates. Electoral alliances and coalitions were more important for party bosses than female representation. The alliance of the Nepali Congress (NC) and CPN (Maoist) parties meant that male candidates got the preference. Women's representation in municipal positions declined by 20% between the two elections.

A briefing note on gender norms in local government and women leaders by Janaki Women Awareness (JWAS) highlights the exceedingly low representation of women in 2017 and 2022. Out of 753 local units, only 18 women were elected as mayors or chairpersons, some of the municipalities just ignored the provision for the deputy to be a woman.

Much like other sectors where women face gender-based discrimination and challenges, female politicians in Nepal experience the same treatment, if not worse. Many are openly disrespected, not allowed to speak

or are barred from performing their duties. Those who are doing well are barely recognised while the likes of Balen Shah and Harka Sampang hog the headlines.

All that may be about to change. A group of Nepali feminists have come together to empower local women leaders, amplify their influence within political parties and electoral structures to ensure the constitutional right to inclusion is not just promised but realised.

The Inter-Generational Feminist Forum (IGFF) has launched a nationwide campaign to secure equal representation for women at all levels of governance, and raise awareness about women's role in local elections while challenging gender-based discrimination.

"Everyone, including women and men, must jointly work for this initiative if we are to have a better future ahead. Everyone must think of what our responsibility is and what contributions we must make for our upcoming generations," says Rita Thapa, founder of Tewa and member of IGFF.

A travelling caravan called Anupam Abhiyan will follow the East-West Highway, visiting grassroots communities to promote women's empowerment and political participation. Freedom Studio, the campaign's creative partner, has been producing graphics and multimedia content, documenting the journey through social media platforms.

Locally-led parades and marches are being organised in Taplejung, Mustang, Sindhuli, Jumla, Parsa, Ramechhap and other districts. Their slogan '८४ मा महिला पहिला' (Women First in 2027) highlights the focus on bringing judicial, inclusive, and equitable representation of women at all levels in the 2027 elections.

Rajya Laxmi Shrestha was one of many women who found their voice and independence. With training from the Women Empowerment Center in Kirtipur, Shrestha began sewing bags, turning her skills into a source of income and managing her household on her own terms, unlike in the past when she relied on her husband.

As the Anupam rally moved through Kirtipur, Rajya Laxmi played the flute and used music to communicate the movement's message forward. The campaign spreads love and kindness so people are prioritised over power, building a sense of community and emotional attachment to those involved.

"Leadership is not a position, it is an attitude. Being a leader and performing leadership duties regardless of being in a leadership position is true leadership," explains activist Sharu Joshi Shrestha, another IGFF member.

Shrestha likens the campaign to a sacred duty, and hopes that it will empower women from all walks of life, especially those from marginalised communities.

Regardless of legal provisions, politics is inclusive for women only on paper. In reality, it follows an entrenched patriarchal script. The campaign is an example of how women can organise themselves in solidarity and with a sense of purpose to change the way this country is governed.

When rallying women step into leadership and claim decision-making power, real change goes a step ahead. Nepali women have already proven to be as good, if not better, managers and leaders. In the rare few wards and municipal councils where both the chair and deputy are women, they have demonstrated better governance and service delivery — even if the two are from different parties.

Elsewhere, the lack of women and indigenous engagement in decision making has set back action in reproductive rights, wage equity, healthcare access, and violence against women.

Between 23-24 March, the campaign will gather in Padmalaya in Nawalpur with a focus on community health and well-being. The team also holds virtual meetings every Sunday, apart from their grassroots messaging.

One of the coordinators of Anupam Abhiyan and founder president of Mitini Nepal Laxmi Ghalan says they also focus on intersectionality such as whether it is a Dalit woman, a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, or someone from any political background to ensure participation without any bias.

"If women can run households, why can't they run the country?" Ghalan says as she highlights the importance of political engagement: "If we don't step in at the party level, our voices will go unheard and our issues unresolved. In the upcoming elections, why settle for 33% representation when we can aim for 51%? Women deserve not just token positions but real leadership." ■

The sacred

■ Vishad Raj Onta

Last week was Shivaratri, and this week it is International Women's Day on 8 March. What better way to marry the two than to investigate Shakti, the feminine creative aspect of the universe.

Shiva's consort has many names: Parvati, Shakti, Durga, Uma, Gauri. She is the embodiment of motherhood, love and fertility, and she balances Shiva's destructive attributes with creation.

Alongside the triumvirate of Brahma the creator and Vishnu the preserver, is Shiva the destroyer-creator. He is the Lord of making things end so that the new can take their place.

Hinduism may be perceived and practised as a multitheistic religion, but in its tenets, all is one, the gods and their many avatar are but different names given to the one truth of existence and reality. And in this, Shiva can be referred to as the Supreme Being.

Shiva is considered masculine, and conceptualised as pure consciousness -- call it soul, transcendent spirit, whatever that exists beyond the material. Shakti is feminine energy and is a dynamic reality. The union of Shiva-Shakti symbolises creation and the coming together of male and female energy.

One of the most sacred texts in Hinduism is the Shiva Purana, and it describes Shakti as having a 'parturient' trait. Parturient is used to describe a woman in labour, so Shakti is thought of as fertile, and always on the verge of creation if the pure consciousness of Shiva wills something.

This may seem to suggest that the feminine aspect is submissive and waiting for the masculine form to act and uphold the need for creation. But we have to see this as a human conceptualisation to make sense of our own existence and the need to explain reality.

Another way to interpret the gendering could be that the masculine is not of much use if the feminine does not exist. In other words, what good would it be if there was nothing to be conscious of, and there was only a destroyer. It is the feminine form that holds the power of creation.

Parvati may have been regarded as feminine because she creates, gives birth. And consciousness as masculine because of its association with Shiva, the yogi-ascetic.

The Shiva Purana perspective is that both are balanced and the same, and neither can exist without the other.

'Just as Shiva, so also the goddess. Just as the goddess so also Shiva. No difference shall be thought of between the two as between the moon and the moonlight', says the text, which is part of the Shaivite literature corpus.

In fact, the composite deity of 'Ardhanarishvara' expresses precisely this union and can be translated as 'the Lord who is half woman'. Ardhanarishvara is a depiction of a being that is split straight down the middle: the right half is traditionally Shiva with his masculine features and Nandi the bull consort, and the left side is Parvati or Durga with feminine traits and a tiger consort.

"The paintings and statues of Ardhanarishvara show that Shiva and Shakti are both inseparable and the same," explains historian and author Govinda Tandon.



"This is all the Hindu concept of ekam sat vipra bahudha vadanti, that truth is one, but called by many names," Tandon adds, pointing out that the the bull and tiger consorts co-exist in the divine pair, although they would be prey and predator, further reinforcing the concept that opposing characteristics can prevail in the same being.

The Shiva-Shakti postulation of the coexistence of opposites exists in other faiths as darkness giving way to light. It is an attempt to understand the universal truth that what appears to be antithetical are essential to reality, and meaningless without the opposite aspect.

Other philosophies also share this understanding of dual oneness. Ancient Chinese belief systems came up with Yin-Yang, where Yin is receptive and dark, and Yang is active and bright, each containing a seed of the other.

The message is not to rank one better than the other, but that maintaining a balance between the two is key to living in Tao, or the natural path of the universe.

Western thinkers have also described the two as Chaos and Order, or Nature and Culture. Too much chaos, and nothing sustains itself (think Nepal's politics). Too much order, and everything stagnates, like in a dictatorship where anything that deviates from the strict command is punished, and nothing truly new and revolutionary is allowed to foster.

All of these ways to see the duality somewhat echo each other, although they may not be exactly the same. But what is common to all these ideas of Shiva-Shakti, Creation-Destruction, Ying-Yang, Light-Darkness, is the same overarching message: that both forces are inseparable and must exist in a cosmic dance for it to be optimal.

Nataraja is another manifestation of Shiva, where he dances with wild abandon (Tandava), symbolising the creation and destruction of the universe. In Tantricism, creation follows destruction as Shiva and Shakti join in this union.

This notion also aligns with the latest discoveries in astrophysics of matter and antimatter, and the singularity in a black hole where time and space merge.

female energy of Shakti

The divine union of Shiva and Parvati shows society functions best when men and women respect each other as equals



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The Shiva-Shakti duality can also be regarded as a singularity. A photon, for example, is a quantum of light and can be both a particle and a wave. In the 'wave-particle' duality, light can behave as a particle when hitting something,

but act as a wave when travelling through space.

Or, take the Observer Effect in quantum physics. Electrons fired at a card with two slits will behave like waves, creating ripple patterns beyond the slits. But introduce

a detector, and the electron behaves like a particle, the ripples disappear.

Shiva is tangible reality, Shakti is pure energy. Some physicists who study sub-atomic particles say that the deeper they investigate,



SHIVALAYA: The Pashupatinath temple in Kathmandu is one of the holiest in the Hindu world, and is located at a site where Shiva and Parvati once took the form of antelopes.

This 12th century stele of Uma Maheswar depicting Shiva and Parvati (left) was stolen from Tangal Hiti in Patan 45 years ago and returned to Nepal in 2018 from The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

the more they begin to see the hand of a Supreme Being.

The scriptures and their depictions of the divine transcend and exist in the everyday world around us. Evolution, for example, is possible because of natural selection through the act of reproduction, the fusion of gametes from two parents that creates the genetic variation so they can 'be fruitful and multiply'.

Govinda Tandon used to be the chair of the Pashupati Area Development Trust committed to managing and conserving the temple dedicated to the benign

manifestation of Shiva, one of the holiest Hindu shrines in the world.

The temple itself is regarded as the site where Shiva and Parvati once took the form of antelopes on the forested banks of the Bagmati.

For Tandon, there is a strong message from the divine union of Shiva-Shakti, Uma-Maheswar, Gauri-Shankar, Shiva-Parvati: "The masculine and feminine principles existing in the same form as equals should inspire us. Societies, families work best when men and women respect each other as equals. One complements the other." ■






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