

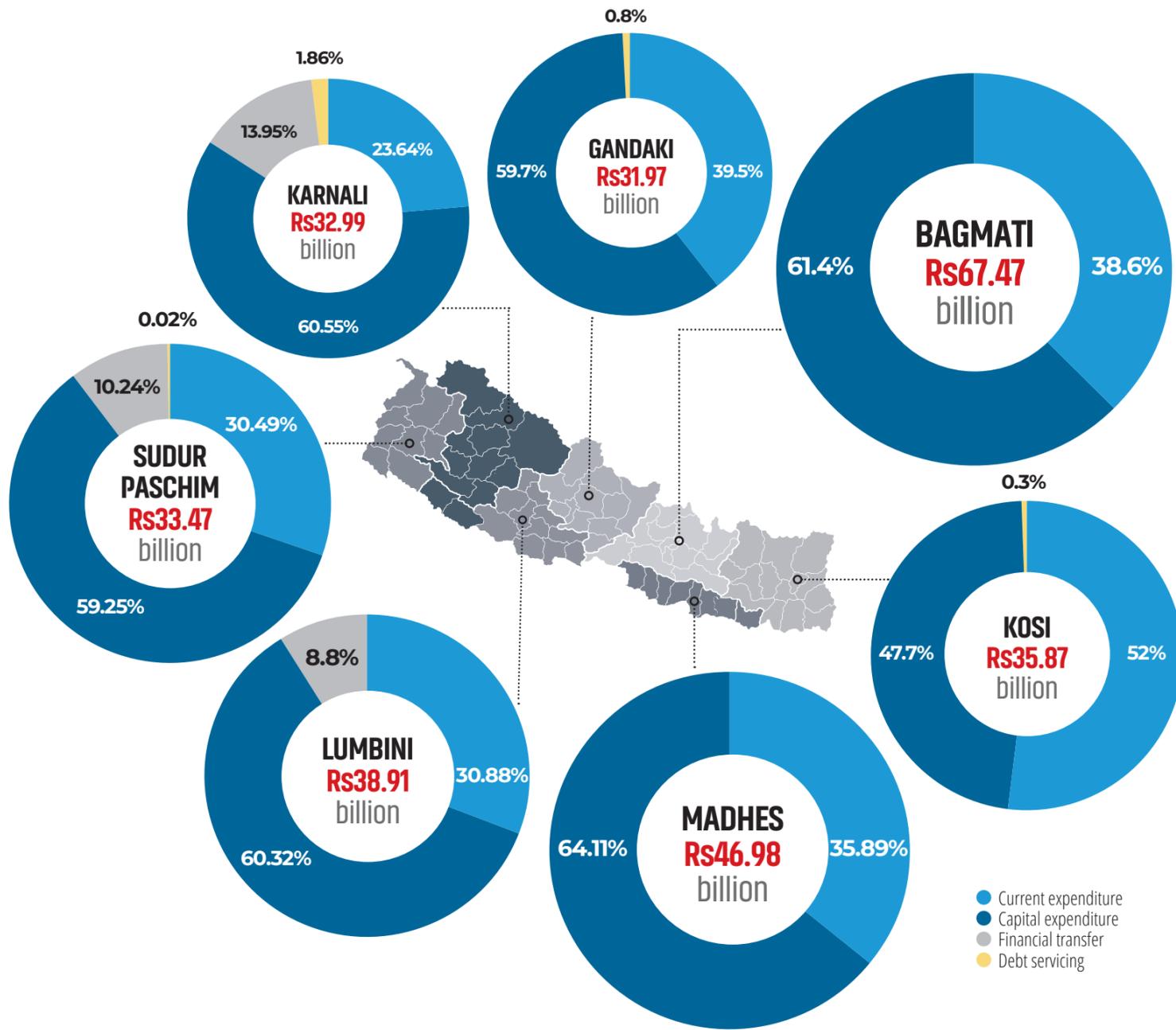
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## Federalism Express

■ Shristi Karki

This week, all seven of Nepal's provincial governments announced their annual budgets even as debate in the federal parliament over the central budget has been stalled for two weeks due to obstruction by the opposition RSP.

There are no big surprises in the provincial Red Books — they are all in the red with reduced allocations from the centre. Even so, while Gandaki and Lumbini have slightly reduced the size of the budget compared to the preceding fiscal

year, the budget for the other four provinces are marginally bigger.

Even though revenue is short, the central and provincial governments have chronically been plagued by their inability to spend what has been budgeted, especially under capital expenditure. Five out of the seven provinces have in fact spent less than half of their allocated budget, the other two have fared only slightly better.

The provinces' underspending, as well as the flurry of last minute budget dispensation across projects (known as 'असारे खर्च' after the current Nepali month) has been attributed

to competing political interests, mismanagement and kickbacks on projects.

For instance, while Lumbini has been able to spend 59.1% of its allocated capital expenditure, Madhes Province has managed to spend just 16% of its development budget even though it has the second biggest budget among the seven provinces for the upcoming year (chart, above).

Even as provinces struggle to spend their budgets and implement development projects, the federal leadership in Kathmandu continues to display its reluctance to decentralise power to the provinces, and to hold tightly to the purse strings, rendering the provinces largely functionless.

August marks the tenth anniversary of the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution and the establishment of a three-tiered system

of government that envisioned the devolution of political power from Kathmandu to provinces and local municipalities.

In the decade since, local governments have been lauded for their performance as the country's municipal units saw multi-sectoral grassroots development. Rural municipalities and elected ward councils were forced to be more accountable to voters since they were in close proximity (page 4).

However, the mainstream political parties and their leaders have continued to override the authority granted to provincial governments by the Constitution — especially when it comes to revenue collection, policy-making, and decisions on development projects.

FULL STORY PAGE 4

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# World wars

Ukraine. Sudan. Gaza. Iran. This may not seem like a world war, but we are getting dangerously close to one.

Here in Nepal, we may think we are far removed from it all, but there are about 2 million Nepalis in Israel and the Gulf states, and an escalation would devastate our remittance-driven economy.

The Israeli attacks on Bandar Abbas and Iran's threat to mine the Strait of Hormuz, set off some panic buying at petrol stations in Kathmandu this week. Petroleum makes up a quarter of Nepal's import bill.

Ten Nepalis were killed in the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023, and one is still held hostage in Gaza. Nepali soldiers in the Russian Army are fighting and getting killed on the Ukraine front.

There are Nepali green card holders enlisted in the US military, and some of them took part in the Pyongyang-style military parade in Washington DC on 14 June. While the DPRK tries to deter enemies with military might, Trump's parade was a warning to his own citizens not to step out of line.

In the background are warlike warnings on 'Truth Social' from the leader of a global superpower about joining Israel to bomb Iran.

Meanwhile, the other superpower is hitting apartments in Kyiv with guided missiles. Tv talk show guests in Moscow talk flippantly about nuking London.

Ukraine's audacious drone attacks on Russia's strategic bomber fleet proved what had been obvious for some time — the nature and scope of warfare has changed.

India and Pakistan in May also used UAVs and missiles against each other. And in a new twist, Pakistani J-10 fighters are said to have shot down two Indian aircraft, at least one of them a French-built Rafale jet.

Even if those reports are not true, air forces around the world are reassessing the capability of Chinese weaponry.

In both the India-Pakistan aerial combat in May and the ongoing Israeli raids on Iran, some of the targets were nuclear installations. We have to see if President Trump follows through on his warning to evacuate Tehran, but analysts see the US possibly deploying bunker buster bombs on underground Iranian nuclear weapons facilities.

Iran's leaders have warned of retaliation,

and US bases in Bahrain, Qatar and UAE could be targets. If that happens, all hell will break loose. While hoping that saner voices prevail, the world has to prepare for the three flashpoints that carry the danger of crossing the nuclear threshold: Russia-Ukraine, Israel-Iran and closer to home, India-Pakistan.

Nuclear deterrence may have prevented New Delhi and Islamabad from incinerating each other's cities with atomic weapons, it also showed how a small miscalculation could have led to such escalation.

Both countries had primed their populations through propaganda and mass media to bay for blood. On social media Indians and Pakistanis were already nuking each other with hate speech, exhorting their leaders to press launch buttons.

In all three conflicts, that is where the danger lies: public so consumed by manufactured hatred magnified by the social web that the notion of nuclear deterrence has become meaningless.

Ukraine's drone attacks deep within Russia and India's use of loitering munitions have changed conventional warfare. Expensive stealth bombers, main battle tanks, surface-to-air missile launch sites

are all obsolete because these legacy weapons can be destroyed by drones which can be ordered online on Amazon.

The way these three world wars are being waged, and the loss of America's nuclear umbrella have also triggered a rearmament race.

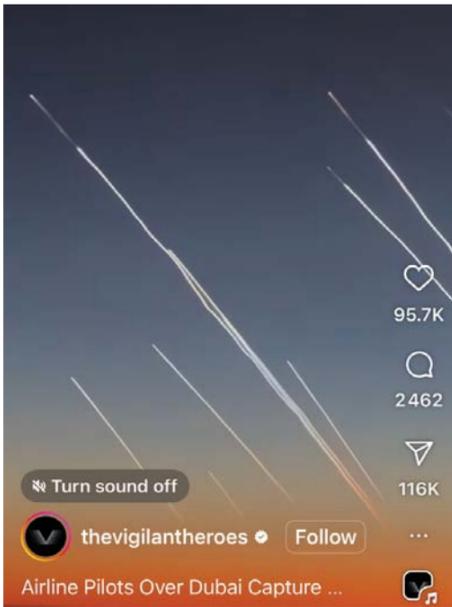
Money has been diverted from development, climate mitigation (and in a tragic irony) famines unleashed by wars.

We in Nepal worry about radioactive fallout from a limited or all-out nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan. But there is also the danger of a showdown between a wounded Iran and nuclear-armed Israel, or even Russia's use of tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine. There are also the ever-present danger of nuclear terrorism by non-state actors.

And if all that was not worrying enough, here is another danger: the spread of millions of drones equipped with AI targeting.

As Stuart Russel at the University of California Berkeley warns in his film Slaughterbots, the world may need another disarmament treaty to control weapons that are not controlled by humans.

**Kunda Dixit**



**Ongoing conflicts have shown the changing nature of warfare, and it is not going to be under human control.**

## 20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

### Bhutan Refugees

These two words have a very negative connotation in Nepal today because of the scam that exposed top-tier bureaucrats and politicians in issuing false papers to Nepalis pretending to be refugees from Bhutan so they could migrate to the United States.

Twenty years ago this week, on the occasion of World Refugee Day on 20 June, photographer Ashok R Shakyu travelled to Jhapa and Morang to document life in the refugee camps. Instead of despair, he found hope, and a vibrant community. Excerpts from the issue #252 17 - 23 June 2005:

This is life behind the bamboo curtain in the refugee camps of Jhapa and Morang. The rest of the world may have given up on them, their own government in Thimphu may hope they will be forgotten. But the Bhutanis here haven't given up and they haven't forgotten. What is surprising to a visitor is the lack of overt frustration or visible signs of despair.

As a photographer, I toured the camps in search of sadness but found hope. I searched for photogenic misery



but found bright eyes and easy smiles. I searched for fatalism but found a vibrant community that is forgiving towards its tormentors. I looked for loneliness but found friendship. In Beldangi, I came across a wedding, life carried on here. They still look back at Bhutan as the promised land they will one day return to. If they don't their children will, of this they are sure.

Unlike the rest of Nepal where the conflict has made people suspicious of strangers, here I was welcomed into homes and offered tea. We can learn a lot from our Bhutani brothers and sisters especially since many of us Nepalis are now refugees in our own land. What does it mean

to lose that which is most precious to us—our homeland? How can we come to terms with our suffering and not be guided by anger and revenge?

Whoever did this to such gentle, generous and compassionate people are the ones we should pity.

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

## ONLINE PACKAGES



Chuman Gharti Magar taught himself bee-keeping so he would not have to migrate for work. Magar is now the proprietor of Malrani Mauripalan Kendra in Musikot, where he keeps 150 hives of local Asian honeybees which produce 5-10 quintal of honey every season. Watch video on our YouTube channel.



For the past few years, Sunita Pradhan Limbu's routine has been to feed the community dogs in her Gongabu neighbourhood. The 50-year-old buys food on her own to feed the dogs out of affection for the animals. Watch the video on YouTube, and subscribe to Nepali Times' YouTube channel for multimedia content.

### NEPALI STUDENTS

As an American, I weep. May this be very temporary and may we once again welcome international students including brilliant Nepali students ('America no longer prime destination for Nepali students', Sudiksha Tuladhar, #1265). But how can we ensure safety now? A tragedy of epic proportions.

**Carroll Dunham**

■ The UK is heading in the same direction. This is disgusting, after we have been given so much throughout history.

**Christine MacDonald**

■ This is why we need decent international universities in this part of the world. Preferably in Nepal and Sri Lanka.

**Sasanka Perera**

■ This makes me furious. How is this helping to promote America in the world today?

**Maureen Drdak**

### PAUBHA IN PARIS

How could the paubha be stolen so easily unless our own people were involved ('Priceless paubha in Paris', Shaguni Singh Sakya, #1265)?

**Megha Tamang Chaudhary**

■ Actually the paubha is better off being there, at least it is getting the care and attention it requires. If it gets returned, it will be stored in some dusty old corner or get stolen again.

**Saugat Ghimire**

■ We cannot take good care of it in Nepal, as we saw last time when stolen artefacts were returned. It is safer there and we should let the world learn and admire its beauty there.

**Naman**

### FREE PRESS

We trust and believe in the media of Nepal to stand up to all oppression with a particular commitment regarding its own responsible free voice ('No freedom after expression', Man Bahadur Basnet, #1265). One trusts too that the threats will serve to further strengthen the media.

**Tony Jones**

## Times.com

### WHAT'S TRENDING

#### Priceless paubha in Paris

by Shaguni Singh Sakya  
A 361-year-old paubha painting stolen from Kathmandu is now in storage at a Paris museum. Art curator Shaguni Singh Sakya writes why this is such an important heritage item, and should be returned to Nepal. Visit nepalitimes.com for the details.

**Most reached and shared on Facebook**



#### No freedom after expression

by Man Bahadur Basnet  
The government has been misusing the Electronic Transactions Act to intimidate journalists, including Dil Bhushan Pathak last week, tarnishing Nepal's status as the country with one of the freest press in Asia. Join the discussion online.

**Most popular on X**

#### America no longer prime destination

by Sudiksha Tuladhar  
Thousands of Nepali students dreaming of an American education have been forced to look elsewhere as the Trump administration's visa restrictions make their future uncertain. Follow us for the latest developments.

**Most commented**

#### Morals in murals

by Sangya Lamsal  
Folktales passed down through generations have been transformed into visual stories and brought to life in Roshan Bhandari's exhibition, Once Upon A Time / एकादेशमा at Takpa Gallery. Read the review on our website.

**Most visited online page**

## QUOTES

**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
The warrant against Dil Bhushan Pathak was issued under the Electronic Transactions Act. That Act was legislated to regulate online transactions and money laundering. The government has been resorting to that law to intimidate and jail journalists.

**prakash khadka @khadkap21**  
Rulers guarantee freedom of speech to you but don't guarantee safety in the aftermath of the freedom you use.

**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
We need to recognise that background risk is undeniably rising, lives are at risk, and we need to invest in building systems that can help anticipate events like Blatten (which takes time, time that others don't have) immediately, writes Austin Lord.

**pigreen1 @pigreen1**  
The shape of things to come

## 1,000 WORDS



DIWAKAR CHHETRI

### PRESSURE ON THE PRESS:

Police issued fresh summons to journalist Dil Bhushan Pathak on Tuesday despite the Patan High Court the day before issuing a temporary order halting his arrest. Pathak is in hiding ever since the Kathmandu High Court served a warrant after his YouTube explainer about the alleged involvement of the scion of a former prime minister in a hotel deal. Media organisations have protested Pathak being charged under the Electronic Transactions Act.

Another court ruling to Bizmandu and Nepalkhabar to delete stories about alleged kickbacks to the CEO of SEBON, and to henceforth not publish news about it is being challenged in the courts.

Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP) has become a common method to intimidate Nepal's free press.

A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER 

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# Still Kathmandu Centric

Earlier this month, Gandaki Province decided to suspend its newly-introduced Ride Sharing regulatory guideline after the Prime Minister's office sent a letter instructing it to temporarily halt implementation following nationwide protests by public transport entrepreneurs associations who oppose the new regulation, and many of whom are affiliated to the ruling parties.

The federal government's circular overriding a provincial decision on local transport went against the Constitution and infringed upon the rights of the provinces.

"Our federalism was supposed to be a cooperative system," explains federalism expert Khim Lal Devkota. "But citizens and civil society, the political leadership and bureaucracy across all three levels of government have not yet let go of their Kathmandu-centric mindset."

The dissatisfaction with dysfunctional provincial governments has contributed to the perception that federalism is wasteful and should be scrapped, a narrative that the pro-monarchist parties have used in their rallies to get rid of the 2015 Constitution.

It is true that federalism was an outcome of the peace process, and a demand the Maoists wanted fulfilled in exchange for giving up arms. But devolution was never allowed to deliver at the grassroots.

"Nepal's three-tiered government was the result of our vision not of a limited government, but one with maximised capabilities of looking over all affairs of the state," explained political scientist Sanjeev Humagain at a recent event discussing the rise of right-wing populism in Nepal and globally.

"But perhaps we have not fully understood the concept of this political system, or we think of federalism as a transitional idea until we eventually adopt another form of governance," he added.

A recent survey by Social Science Baha gauged how Nepal's 'local elite', people who wield socio-political influence at the



subnational level, view federalism. As expected, the survey found that a majority of the respondents feel positively about the performance of local governments.

The survey also showed support for federalism, but there was dissatisfaction with the functioning of provinces, along with recognition that there was too much interference from political parties and their leadership in Kathmandu reluctant to cede authority to them.

"The state of federal and regional party politics marked by ever-changing alliances leading to frequent changes in government at both levels has eroded confidence in the provincial governments being able to perform efficiently," read the report. "Government officials and civil society representatives alike also viewed provincial governments as passive recipients of the federal governments' plans, policies and projects contradicting the very purpose of creating provincial governments in the first place."

But not everything can be blamed on the central government. Many provincial leaders are happy to be proxies of their parent parties, and lack initiative to use their constitutionally mandated right to self-governance.

Opposition to federalism is also fueled by the idea that it has merely decentralised corruption, that it unnecessarily triplicates overhead costs of government and is wasteful. The general feeling is that it is an expendable and costly second tier of government.

But data contradicts this. Nepal's Economic Survey 2024/25 shows that the share of provinces in the total national expenditure last year was just 10%, and has remained consistent since the first elections under the federal system in 2017.

Says Khim Lal Devkota: "Federalism is still nascent in Nepal, and we must give it a chance to stand on its feet. Nepal must not be a laboratory to experiment with new systems of governance just because the existing one is not working fast enough for our liking."

**Shristi Karki**

## NMB BANK एनएमबी बैंक

### Turkish Best in Europe

Turkish Airlines won Best Airline in Europe for the tenth time at the 2025 Skytrax World Airline Awards held at the Air and Space Museum in Paris. The carrier also received other honours: the World's Best Business Class Onboard Catering, Best Business Class in Europe, Best Business Class Onboard Catering in Europe, and Best Economy Class in Europe, among others.



Skytrax awards are based on direct feedback from millions of international passengers. Turkish Airlines Chair Ahmet Bolat said: "To be recognised once again as the Best Airline in Europe by our valued guests is a source of immense pride for us. We are driven by our timeless tradition of Turkish hospitality."

Turkish Airlines also placed an order for a Boeing 737 MAX full Flight Simulator from Havelson to bolster its pilot-training resources. Currently the carrier operates two B737 MAX, two A320neo/ceo and one B737NG simulator besides simulators for 787, Airbus A350 and A330 jets in its fleet.

### Dirty air in Nepal

A World Bank report has found air pollution to be the number one risk factor for death and disability in Nepal. Air pollution reduces Nepali life expectancy by 3.4 years on average and causes 26,000 premature deaths every year, and also impacts labour productivity, tourism, and aviation. Its economic cost is more than 6% of Nepal's GDP. Solutions include electric transport, industrial adaptations to cleaner fuels, forest fire prevention, and partnering with India to control crossborder pollution.



### Upper Maiwa hydro

A group of banks including Global IME and NMB banks signed financial closure for the 31.9MW Upper Maiwa Hydro project in Taplejung. The banks are covering Rs4.85b of the Rs6.37b estimated, with the remaining to be raised by Saurja Holding from its shareholders through a rights issue.

### Ncell Sadhain ON

Ncell's Sadhain ON Crorepati program offers customers the chance to win Rs10 million. All customers who buy an Ncell pack worth Rs99 or more over the next 12 weeks are entered into the lottery. Every pack Rs499 or more counts as five entries. Ten customers will also win Rs100,000 each week. Winners will be announced every Sunday 6:30PM on the Ncell YouTube Channel, App, and on Kantipur tv.



### Soaltee x Marriott

The Soaltee Kathmandu has partnered with Marriott to become part of its Autograph Collection, which are hotels chosen for unique, authentic experiences. The partnership, the first of its kind in South Asia, connects Soaltee to Marriott Bonvoy's loyalty program which may attract more international guests.

### Drive Now, Pay Later

MAW Vriddhi's Drive Now, Pay Later allows customers to drive the Deepal S07, S07L, or L07 without needing to make payments for the first six months. The offer also comes with exchange bonuses, free road tax and insurance, and wall and portable chargers.



### Choila Burger

The World Burger Tour is Hard Rock Cafe's annual competition to mark the opening of its first location in London in 1971, in which chefs across the brand's cafes, casinos, and hotels create burgers inspired by local flavors. The Kathmandu location is a Choila burger 14 Jun - 5 Aug, with a buff patty, choila sauce, fried egg, and a cabbage-cucumber relish.

### Gold, Silver tax

Gold and Silver traders in New Road protested the government's imposition of a luxury tax on gold and Value-Added-Tax on diamonds and gemstones.

### Royal Tulip Kathmandu

The Royal Tulip hotel has opened in Gwarko developed by The Massif Hotel and managed by Sarovar Hotels. It is set to be Nepal's largest hotel by room/suite count, with 308. The hotel also has a large event space and various dining options.

### Everest x Chino Hydro

Everest Bank signed financial closure worth Rs5.9 billion for the 30MW hydro project on the Chino River in Manang. The project is contracted to a Chinese firm, with completion expected in two years. The electricity will be connected to the national grid via a substation in Dharapani. Meanwhile, the 6MW Rele Khola Hydropower Project in Narayang built at a cost of Rs1.35 billion has been connected to the national transmission grid through the Dana substation.

### Parliament standstill

Opposition RSP lawmakers protested the government's handling of the visit visa scam in by wearing blue ribbons. The party says it was human trafficking, and want Home Minister Ramesh Lekhak to resign. Discussions on the budget are stalled. Also, RSP's Rabinendra Mishra was released by the Kathmandu District Court after posting a Rs300,000 bail. The former journalist was arrested on 28 March for taking part in a violent pro-monarchy protest.



### Best schools

Kopila Valley School in Far West Nepal has been selected as one of the top 10 finalists for the World's Best School Prize for Environmental Action. The eco-friendly school in Surkhet uses local materials for construction, harnesses the sun and sewage for energy, harvests rainwater and minimises waste. The winners and finalists will be invited to the World Schools Summit in Abu Dhabi, in UAE on 15-16 November.



PHOTOS: DURGA RANA MAGAR

# Pokhara's Century Man

Colonel J P Cross of the British Gurkhas celebrates his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in his Nepal hometown

■ Durga Rana Magar in Pokhara

Before the first light of the day strikes the pinnacle of Mt Machapuchre after a night of rain, John Philip Cross is already up and about on a morning walk around his home with his Japanese Spitz, Luka.

Once a British Gurkha officer who led Nepal's soldiers to battle in many wars, after retirement Cross decided to spend the rest of his life in Pokhara, where many of the fighters he commanded were from. He has outlived most of them.

As he prepares to celebrate his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday on 21 June, he is still sprightly and with a strong memory. Cross keeps meticulous count of how long he has been in Nepal, and rattles it off: "80 years, 6 months, and 3 days."

Born in 1925, Cross served in the British Army during World War

II with the Brigade of Gurkhas on the Burma front, during the Malaya Emergency, and the Indonesian Konfrontasi in Borneo where he was captured and nearly executed. He retired from the military in 1982, and settled down in Pokhara.

Cross is now a Nepali citizen, but it was not easy and took him "32 years, 6 months, and 2 days". But that was just a piece of paper. Cross Sa'b was already Nepali in mind, body and soul.

the Colonel has travelled across the mountains and Tarai, and has written 21 books about the wars he witnessed, his linguistic research in Nepal and other things Nepali. He speaks at least 13 languages including Nepali, Tamang, Gurung and Magar.

What are the secrets to his longevity? Till before the Covid pandemic, Cross used to walk 20km each day. ("Exercise is the best medicine, keep moving.") The virus

brought him down, but he still remains active. The Nepali diet of fresh vegetables, dal and bhat power keeps him strong, and he drinks milk tea in the morning like every good Nepali.

These days, he limits outings to essential programs and special occasions, but continues to help young Nepalis preparing for recruitment into the British Army. He remembers the exact number of people he has mentored: "8,119."

His instructions to aspiring soldiers are grounded in three key values: react to the unexpected, stand up and be counted, and develop self-esteem. He passes these on not just as military advice, but as a life philosophy: "Do as you would be done by."

Over the decades, Cross has forged a special bond with Budhiman Dura Tamu 'Dhamphu' (pictured above) whom he met

in 1977 as a young British Army applicant rejected because he was too short. He regards Budhiman as his own son, and the bond is so deep that a village astrologer once said they shared the same mother 400 years ago in England.

Budhiman and his family care for him at his home in Pokhara's Dhampu Niwas. Some years ago, Cross had eye surgery and after returning to Nepal, Budhiman wanted to see if his friend would still recognise him.

"We met, and were face to face," Budhiman recalls. "He gave me his hand and said 'My life is here'."

The 100<sup>th</sup> birthday is not merely a celebration of the passage of time

or a reminder of the history of nations, it honours a life lived to the fullest.

J P Cross has transcended borders and his life celebrates universal brotherhood.

Born under the Union Jack and forged by the fires of great wars, Cross has lived where mountains are so high they pierce the sky.

His advice to fellow Nepalis is simply: "Good health and peace at heart, that's a good life." Cross is now working on his 22<sup>nd</sup> book. 🇳🇵

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# Himalayan tipping points

Exhibition uses art to communicate climate breakdown in the mountains at an emotional level

■ **Sudiksha Tuladhar**

Average global temperatures are nearing 1.5°C above pre-industrial times, pushing the planet close to irreversible climate tipping points. The Himalayan region is warming even faster.

The exhibition *At the Tipping Point: Art and Ecology from the Rooftop of the World* communicates the triple environmental crisis of global warming, pollution and biodiversity loss through art.

The focus is on High Asia: this is not a distant threat, but a present danger reshaping the natural world.

The exhibition at Taragaon Next features work from 12 artists, including Amit Machamasi, Chris Jordan, Himali Singh Soin, Joana Moll, Maksud Ali Mondal, Monica Ursina Jäger, Robertina Sebjanic,

Salil Subedi, Samyukta Bhandari, Sauganga Darshandhari, Ursula Biemann and Utsa Hazarika.

Many of them highlight Nepal's strategic location and call for a 'fundamental rethinking of the ecological imagination—where the local and the global, the visible and the invisible, the scientific and the spiritual converge' through photographs, paintings, multimedia visuals and sounds.

"The world wakes up when you say Everest, it is an important barometer to look at Himalayan ecology," says curator Arshiya Lokhandwala from India. "The idea was to see not just local but global threats as well."

The exhibition began on 5 June with powerful performance art titled *Earth Emergence* by Salil Subedi who allowed himself to



# Façades and flowers from Nepal

Illustrator's show pays homage to the botanical diversity of heritage

■ **Shristi Karki**

The Barun trees surrounding Patan's Agnishala temple are bowed with age — curving over stout brick walls of the temple, its gnarled branches threading through power lines. Rain drips from its glossy green leaves onto the temple courtyard.

The trees are said to have existed for as long as the sacred eternal fire has burned in the temple.

Botanical illustrator Neera Joshi Pradhan was on a heritage walk through Patan when she saw white flowers blanketing the ground, and recalled visiting the temple for puja with her family as a young girl.

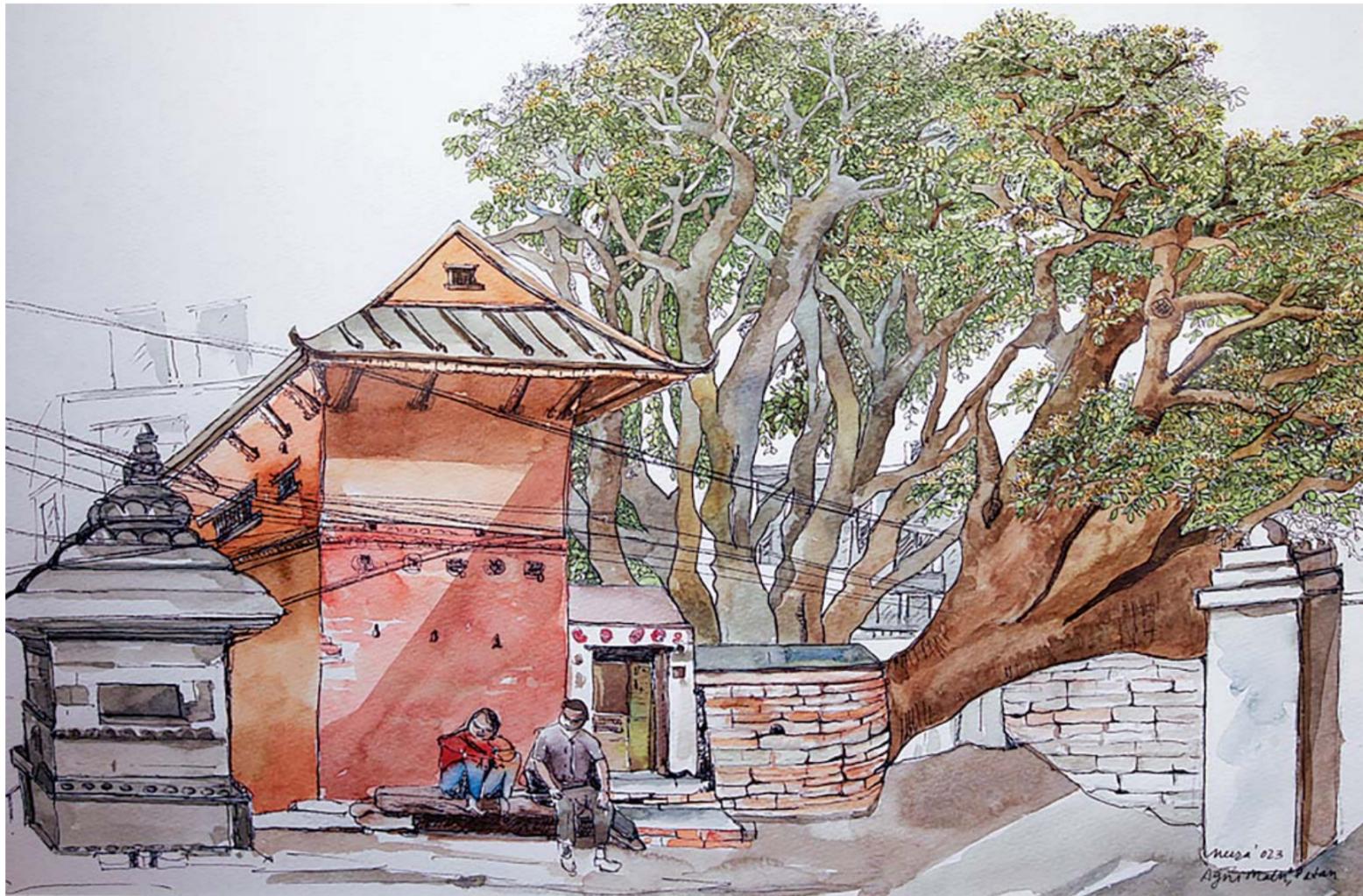
"I realised that while we look with much awe at Nepal's temples and architecture, we tend to neglect our natural heritage," Joshi says. "Once that realisation set in, I started sketching them."

In 2021, Joshi was also invited to the Florence Biennale, and she extended her stay to spend time with family there. There she was hit by a strong urge to sketch Italy's historic buildings and plant life.

The results of this interplay of our natural and cultural heritage are currently on exhibit at The Kalā Salon's *From Nepal to Italy: Drawings of Flora & Vernacular Architecture*.

More than 40 pen/ink and watercolour drawings are a departure from her signature scientific botanical illustrations. They explore the history, heritage, and indigenous plant life of Kathmandu Valley as well as Rome, Florence, and Brixen.

"Neera's latest collection is a bit different from the botanical illustrations that she is known for,



and is a really beautiful project that shows her capabilities as an artist," says Sophia L Pandé, curator at The Kalā Salon. "Even in her depiction of architecture and heritage, the flora are a constant presence."

Joshi's artwork include pieces she did during her downtime more than a decade ago, before the thought of painting Nepal's architecture and flora together had really crossed her mind.

One such painting from 2013 includes a view of Swayambhu poking out of its forested hill, with blue-green hills in the background and the concrete of Kathmandu Valley spread out, painted from her

perch on Kirtipur.

Her more recent works from 2023 include pen/ink watercolours of monkeys playing beneath the shade of a Mayal Tree in Swayambhu, the Barun trees at



fall from the back of a tractor trailer filled with wet red clay.

Amidst sounds of gongs and singing bowls, the audience was taken into a journey of Mother Earth as Subedi approached what appeared to be Mount Meru.

Chris Jordan's Midway: Message from the Gyre and Albatross (pictured, left) was eight years in the making and depicts the stark fallout from environmental degradation. His eerie images of dead baby albatrosses covered in plastic waste serve as a powerful critique of globalised consumerism.

Samyukta Bhandari's Echoes of Survival addresses the plight of sparrows amidst urban noise. The exhibits consist of a labyrinth of exposed wiring, ceramic sparrow figurines and mirrors, representing the friction for coexistence between sparrows and humans. The mirrors with the sparrow figures symbolise the birds colliding on windows.

Maksud Ali Mondal's Fungal Habitat presents a self-sustaining ecosystem through the life cycle of a mushroom. As the audience moves through the exhibit, the scent of fungi permeates, olfactory proof of decay and renewal.

The Newari tradition of food,

harvest, and communal bonds are the highlight of Yomari wo Yomhari and Grain of Gold by Sauranga Darshandhari.

Says the artist, "In Newari tradition, Yomari is made of rice flour, and the grains are grown from the soil. Hence, linkage with the earth. These traditions are passed on from one generation of women to another."

Such communal bonds are very much tied with the land and harvest, but rapid and haphazard urbanisation has had much adverse impact. Amit Machamasi explores this in Not the Same Anymore, The Irony, and Seeds and Tools. What were once fertile farms are now plundered and platted.

"There must be development, roads must be expanded, but not at the cost of nature," says Machamasi, pointing to another photograph. "This crow became homeless when the tree that it was nesting in was cut to widen a road." 🇳🇵

*At the Tipping Point: Art and Ecology from the Rooftop of the World*  
Until 31 August  
10AM to 5:30PM  
Taragon Next  
Hyatt Regency premises

architecture as backdrop.

In one painting from Italy, titled Balcony, Brixen, the veranda painted in faded brown with its pen and ink detailing of the intricate railings, is reminiscent of Kathmandu Valley's Newa architecture.

"Seeing the balcony took me right back home," says Joshi.

And even when buildings and architecture take up much of the portraits, the plant life is striking. Joshi has captured Supari trees towering over Patan Museum, ivy trailing up the soft yellow façade of a house in Brixen, pink flowers blooming in window boxes along a canal in Venice.

Joshi's attention to detail allows viewers to identify some native plants like the Barun tree flowers in Patan and sweet chestnut native to Italy. Joshi is perhaps the only botanical illustrator in Nepal, and her detailed, vibrant drawings balance scientific accuracy with artistic expression to document and preserve Nepal's native plants. Her exhibition is also accompanied by a colouring book with botanical art.

"As we increasingly face natural disasters and the effects of the climate crisis, it is even more crucial to recognise our indigenous flora and save them," says Joshi.

She wants the public to be able to access some of this knowledge so that young people are at least able to identify plant life around them.

"This is what I am able to do from my side, but there needs to be institutional and policy-level attention to native plant knowledge and conservation," Joshi says.

Adds Pandé: "We are very happy to have released her book as an accompaniment to the exhibition. I hope this is the beginning of something much larger to document and conserve our native plant life." 🇳🇵

*From Nepal to Italy: Drawings of Flora & Vernacular Architecture*  
By Neera Joshi Pradhan  
Curated by Sophia L. Pandé  
Until 6 July  
11AM - 8PM  
The Kalā Salon, Chhaya Center, Thamel

# pal to Italy

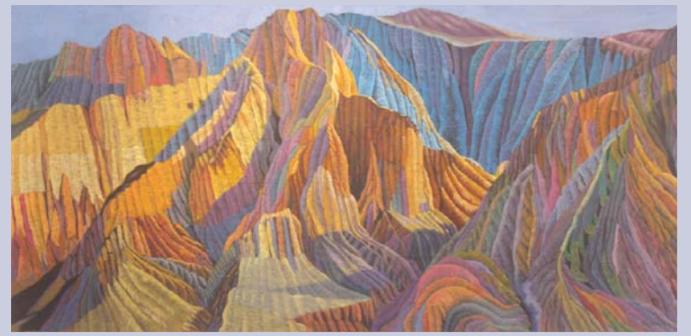
## ge sites in two countries



Agnimath (above, left), and Panyu trees with their soft pink blossoms swaying in the breeze.

In Italy, Joshi walked along cities sketchbook in hand, admiring the view and stopping at public

benches and gardens whenever inspiration struck. Her drawings are serene explorations of everyday life in Italy — people walking through cobblestone alleys or sitting in parks, with the sweeping



# An amalgamation of artists

## Exhibition collects both seasoned and upcoming Nepali artists

An amalgam is an alloy of metals, but at Siddhartha Art Gallery it is a collection of 61 Nepali artists showcasing their work together.

It is not just established and upcoming artists themselves, the exhibition is also an amalgam of the medium they work with: drawings, acrylics, ceramics capturing the diversity of voices, perspectives, and methods.

"We have brought them all together to show their diversity and the span of their expression," explains Sangeeta Thapa of Siddhartha Art Gallery who curated the exhibition at its inauguration on 8 June. "It has provided a platform to multiple artists to showcase their work and interact with each other."

Krishna Tamrakar presents four works including a pressure cooker, a plastic bag of onions, a woman's handbag and a pair of slippers -- all inside threadwork cages. "This series explores the unsettling transformation of accessibility into inaccessibility. What was once dear to us, in relationships or in life, maybe unreachable the next moment. The objects are metaphors, and the threading are the unspoken barriers we impose on each other," says Tamrakar.

Nabin Nalbo's portraits of famous personalities stand out, it is as if the people will step out of the frames and speak in real time. Nalbo says he has represented inspiring people in his art: "It reflects a sense of belonging to the Nepali identity."

Manish Lal Shrestha's creation of the ace, queen,



Spread out over two sections of the gallery, it has works by well-known Nepali artists like Kiran Manandhar, Manish Lal Shrestha, Binod Pradhan, Sabita Dongol to Krishna Tamrakar, Manorama Khatri, Nabin Nalbo and Tenzin Rigdol.

Each artwork pushes viewers to develop perspectives of their own. Sabita Dongol's Flow of Life displays a woman with four hands, with trees, animals, utensils and a comb in the backdrop. Dongol uses combs as the central motif.

We asked her why. "It is an expression of innate femininity. It untangles the hair, is a symbol of problem-solving and harmony. The four hands represent the multitasking role women play."

In Silent Boundaries,

king and jack of diamonds also gives a different sense of visual appeal, using coffee granules. Shrestha says he is trying to visualise the current debate about monarchy in Nepal. "Whether the king or commoners, leaders should be open-minded and sharp, just like a diamond. The game of cards is what politics is all about."

Viewers may want to pay multiple visits to Siddhartha Art Gallery to take in all of this vast exhibition. It is best to be inspired in instalments by the artistic talent on display and be moved by them. 🇳🇵

**Sudiksha Tuladhar**

*Amalgam 2025*  
Siddhartha Art Gallery  
Babarmahal Revisted premises  
Until 8 July  
11AM to 5PM

## EVENTS



## Flora &amp; Architecture

Botanical illustrator Neera Joshi Pradhan's ongoing exhibition features a collection of pen/ink and watercolour art that explores the cultural and natural heritage of Kathmandu Valley and various Italian cities. Review on pages 6-7.  
Till 6 July, The Kalā Salon, Chhaya Center, Thamel

## Film screening

Alliance Française's French New Wave: Film Screening/Dialogue, involves weekly movie screenings and conversations every Thursday. The first screening, this week, is Jean-Luc Godard's Breathless.  
Till 17 July, 5:30pm, Alliance Française de Kathmandu, Pulchok



## Labim Bazaar

Support small and local businesses by shopping for fresh and baked goodies, agro products, thrift items, handicrafts and much more at Labim Bazaar.  
Saturdays, 10am-4pm, Labim Mall, Pulchok

## At the tipping point

At the Tipping Point: Art and Ecology from the Rooftop of the World at Taragona Next features work from 12 artists who bring the climate emergency in the Himalaya into focus through photographs, paintings, multimedia visuals and sounds. Review on pages 6-7.  
Until 31 August, 10am to 5:30pm, Hyatt Regency premises



## Chiyasingkharka hike

Be one with nature this Saturday in the lush trails of Chiyasingkharka on this 15km medium-moderate level hike, organised by Hike for Nepal.  
21 June, Rs1,300 (first-timers) / Rs800 (repeat hikers), 9828054244

## Manjira: The Muted Melody

Manjira is a tense psychological drama following an encounter that forces long-buried truths to surface. It is a Nepali adaptation of Death and the Maiden by Ariel Dorfman, adapted by Som Nath Khanal and Sandesh Ghimire.  
Till 22 June, 5:15pm onwards, Ticket: Rs500, Mandala Theatre, Thapagaun

## Standup Comedy

Flex your funny bone at Mondays are Funny, a standup comedy open mic session happening next week.  
23 June, 6:30pm onwards, Rs300, Jhameel Pub

## MUSIC

## Bipul Chettri

Bipul Chettri is set to make his return with an intimate live performance, bringing his signature indie-folk sound to the stage again.  
21 June, 9pm onwards, Ticket: Rs1,000, XO Club



## Purna Rai

Purna Rai and Dajubhaiharu are performing live at XO Club in Thamel. From soulful melodies to high-energy beats, you will find it all here.  
25 June, 9pm onwards, Rs999 (early bird ticket), Thamel



## GONE ELVIS

Enjoy a live performance from Gone Elvis at Hard Rock Café. Check out their limited-time Choila Burger too.  
9801986771, Hard Rock Café, Sherpa Mall, Darbar Marg

## Grunchiez

Grunchiez is back with their new album Gaas Baas Kapaas. Be a part of this celebration as well as a musical experience packed with fresh sounds.  
21 June, 12pm onwards, Ticket: Rs500, Reggae Bar, Thamel



## Bikram Sambat

Bikram Sambat will be performing covers of some of the biggest hits across genres. Dance and sing along with the band, and have a good time.  
24 June, 9pm onwards, Shisha Lounge & Bar, Kathmandu

## DINING



## Dine @ Aloft

This June and July, Nylgiri celebrates the superheroes of K-Town with skyline views and special offers. Enjoy 50% off on all food and drinks on Super Man Sundays for the gentlemen, and Wonder Women Wednesdays for the ladies.  
Till 31 July, Aloft Kathmandu Thamel, 9801976054

## About Town

## GETAWAY



## Hotel Jal Mahal

Hotel Jal Mahal lives up to its name, boasting three large swimming pools on its sprawling property. A dip in one of them is the perfect way to remedy the summer afternoon heat.  
Gharipatan, Pokhara, 9856087030

## Balthali Village Resort

A simple and cosy retreat just beyond Kathmandu Valley, Balthali Village Resort is ideal if you're seeking to getaway but not stray too far from the city.  
Panauti, Kavre, 9851087772



## Barahi Jungle Lodge

Revel in the beauty of the surrounding Chitwan National Park at Barahi Jungle Lodge. This eco-jungle hotel offers a variety of rooming options, from private villas, boutique guest rooms, and suites with a private swimming pool. Check out their excellent spa, too.  
Megauli, Chitwan, 9851331247



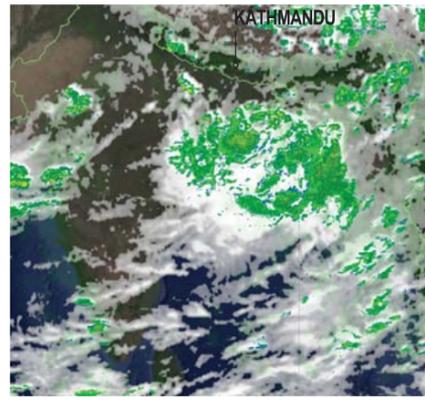
## Milla Guesthouse

If one prefers the quiet and admires a mix of old and new, this is the perfect place to stay. Not too far from the city, yet worlds apart.  
Bhaktapur, 9817849759

## Yatri

Indulge in a relaxing spa treatment which includes a full body massage, body scrub, sauna and steam at Yatri Suites and Spa.  
Amrit Marg, Thamel (01) 4545285

## WEEKEND WEATHER



## Monsoon Routine

We have now settled down to a more normal daily monsoon pattern in Kathmandu with slanting sun in the mornings, clouds building up by mid-afternoon, and rain by evening into the night. The precipitation rate is expected to pick up over the weekend, with frequent squalls. Sunny spells in between will make things sticky. The maximum temperature should stay below 30C at most times, but it will feel like 35.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
27° 21°	28° 21°	28° 20°

## OUR PICK



British crime thriller Dept. Q, based on a book series by Danish author Jussi Adler-Olsen follows former top-rated detective Carl Morck in Edinburgh as he is assigned to investigate the disappearance of a prosecutor who has been presumed dead for years. Morck is returning to work following a shooting incident that left his partner paralysed and another policeman dead. The nine-episode thriller premiered on Netflix on 29 May 2025 to much critical acclaim. Stars Matthew Goode, Chloe Pirrie, Alexej Manvelov, Kelly Macdonald, Leah Byrne and Steven Miller.

## 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 चिन्ता पुरस्कार जस्ता आर्थिक प्रलोभनका प्रस्तावको भरमा नपरौं ।
- आफूले प्रवाह गरेका सन्देश वा सूचनाबाट समाजमा पर्नसक्ने नकारात्मक प्रभावको ख्याल गरौं ।
- आफ्नो सन्देशले कुनै व्यक्ति वा अन्य कुनै समुदायको आत्मसम्मानमा चोट नपुऱ्याऔं ।



नेपाल सरकार  
विज्ञापन बोर्ड

## Turkish Kebabs

Head to Turkish Kebabs and Pizza Hub for authentic Turkish cuisine. Try the traditional Dhurum wraps.  
Ekantakuna (01) 5439733



## Mamagoto Nepal

Mamagoto serves a variety of Asian fusion dishes. Enjoy Maki Rolls, Satays, Dumplings, Ramen and more, served alongside cocktails at this eatery.  
Panipokhari, 9802320960



## Tukche Thakali Kitchen

Having a hard time deciding what to make for lunch? Head to Tukche for vegetarian, chicken, or mutton thalis, with rice or with dhindo.  
Gairidhara (01) 4530356

## Baker's Den

Is a loved one's birthday coming up, or need a just-because cake? Order from Baker's Den. They also have fresh doughnuts, muffins, bread and more.  
Naxal (01) 4416560

# Repatriation for reconciliation

An international conference in Nepal hears how the return of stolen cultural artefacts can heal societies

■ Sonia Awale

An international conference on looted cultural objects in Nepal was strategising about how to repatriate sacred icons, when news broke that a 400-year-old jewel studded gilt-copper necklace stolen from Kathmandu was up for auction in Belgium.

The Matrika Necklace from the reign of King Pratap Malla (1641-74 CE) was being auctioned at the Veilinghuis Loeckx in Gent, with the event beamed live on [www.invaluable.com](http://www.invaluable.com) on 17 June (box).

One participant, criminologist Emiline C H Smith from the University of Glasgow, stepped outside the conference to call the Brussels auction house and the Dutch gallery where the necklace was sourced from. The item was withdrawn from the auction just before the gavel came down.

The auction house initially mentioned Astamangala Gallery in the Netherlands as provenance when it was actually stolen from a Kathmandu temple, and the item was similar to another rare necklace (pictured, right) looted from the Taleju Temple in 1976, and now housed at the Art Institute of Chicago. That 400-year-old object was taken off display there after Nepali activists started demanding its return last year.

Interestingly, the necklace in Chicago was also in the logo design of the International Conference on the Recovery of Cultural Heritage held in Patan from 16-18 June where experts and activists from Nepal and around the world discussed the repatriation of stolen cultural artefacts. In Nepal, the idols were being worshipped when looted, and activists say their return helped in healing and reconciliation of communities.

Journalist Devendra Bhattarai broke the story of the necklace in Chicago. He found it ironic that the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was deporting undocumented Nepalis, while wanting to hold on to Nepal's heritage items in its museums.

"The US authorities want evidence that the object was stolen, and to prove that Nepal's royal family is not allowed to sell or gift such artefacts," Bhattarai tells *Nepali Times*. Actually a cultural artefact cannot be gifted, even by the royal family.

"We from the community are asked to provide proof when the burden of proof should lie with the holders of the artefacts," said Kanak Mani Dixit of Nepal Heritage Recovery Campaign (NHRC) that convened the conference during



his opening remarks. "Collectors and museums want to run you down, prevaricate, so you lose your patience, and in time lose your interest."

NHRC partnered with Nepal's Department of Archaeology to organise the conference, which also looked into the impact of cultural property thefts from Kathmandu Valley, Simraungad in the Tarai, Nuwakot, and monastic villages in the trans-Himalaya.

"There were and are hundreds of monasteries in Mustang, but most of them are totally empty," historian Ramesh Dhungel told one session. "It makes you want to cry. The monks sleep in locked rooms with their idols so they are not stolen at night."

Most of the looting of cultural heritage items in Nepal took place during the absolute monarchy days in the 1980s. Dhungel remembers three helicopter loads of stolen thangka, idols and scrolls airlifted from Olangchungola to Kathmandu at the time. Most of them ended up with American and European collectors, and unsold items no one wanted are still at the National

Museum in Chhauni.

There are documents to identify powerful people in Kathmandu who sold the objects to smugglers. But there were also the likes of Lain Singh Bangdel and Jürgen Schick who did pioneering work to document thefts in their books *Stolen Images of Nepal* (1989) and *The Gods Are Leaving the Country: Art Theft From Nepal* (1997).

Today, anonymous investigators at Lost Arts of Nepal have been using social media to document the whereabouts of stolen objects in museums so that repatriation activists can bring them back.

Even as the international conference was ongoing on Wednesday, Lost Art of Nepal informed the conference about finding a 800-year-old Bodhisattva Avalokiteswar statue that had been at Thambahil in Kathmandu next to a Shiva Linga.

This most-sought after object was stolen in the 1980s and auctioned by the Doris Weiner Collection at Christie's in 2012 for \$2,490,500 and is now at the Berkeley Art Museum.

"Lost Arts of Nepal has been the biggest source for media and activists. We must acknowledge them for their hard work in tracking down these items," said Kunda Dixit, who hosted a panel on the role of media in combating the illicit trafficking of artefacts.

So far, 198 sacred objects have been returned to Nepal: 125 from the United States, 29 from China, 22 from the United Kingdom, 13 from India, 5 from Australia, and one each from Germany, Austria, Italy and a European collector.

There are still 105 identified but not returned items in private collections, museums and auction houses in Sweden, the UK, France, Switzerland, the US, Austria, Australia, China, Singapore, Thailand and Belgium. And there are thousands more which have vanished without trace.

Bradley J Gordon, a lawyer with Cambodia's Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, was thrown out of The Met in New York last year. He also spotted scores of antiquities from Thailand and Nepal in the storage of the museum only a few weeks ago.

"Many of the art dealers selling artefacts from Cambodia were also selling cultural objects from Nepal," Gordon told the panel. Bruce Miller Antiquities of Sausalito in California with Bangkok-based Douglas Latchford have been named as those involved in selling stolen objects from Cambodia and Nepal to collectors and museums.

The conference also heard case studies from Cambodia, India, Poland, Vietnam, Lebanon, Syria and Afghanistan with a special focus on existing laws and international frameworks for repatriation as well as new digital interventions such as augmented reality, photogrammetry and data-driven provenance.

Plunder of heritage items from war zones like Syria and Afghanistan is rife, said Amr Al Azm of the Shawnee State University in the United States. "Antiquities do not suffer as much in the actual battles, as they do from thieves while a conflict is going on," he added. "They sell the stolen items through social media accounts, the platforms are the great magnifier in this international trade in stolen cultural items."

There are often differing views when it comes to the prosecution of heritage theft. Some believe in punishing perpetrators with jail time and fines, while others prioritise getting the objects back to inspire pride in youth to continue their tradition, to educate the community about the culture and spread awareness about trafficking.

"We can use repatriation activism to increase the perception of risk, to convince people to not enter into the business because they don't want to end up in jail or publicly humiliated, to make people think about their reputation either positively or negatively," said Erin L Thompson, art crime professor in New York during her keynote at the conference.

She added: "Things are just starting to come back, we will find so many uses of repatriated objects in the years, decades, and generations to come. It's taken hundreds of years of theft for these objects to leave their culture of origin, and I think it will take hundreds of years to bring them back. But we have the opportunity now to shape what those hundreds of years will look like." 🇳🇵



## BREAKING: Auction halted

On the evening of 17 June, participants at the Kathmandu conference discussing Nepal's stolen heritage items found out that a 400-year-old gilt-copper Matrika necklace donated by Pratap Malla was being auctioned in Belgium. This was a moment of truth, the very thing the conference was trying to shed light on.

One of the participants, Emiline C H Smith, a lecturer in criminology at the University of Glasgow heard about the auction while at the conference. The pre-bid for the necklace was €1,200, but it would have sold for many times more.

She informed the Belgium art crime police squad after gathering more information on the necklace. She found out that the item was up for auction that very day, 17 June, and it would be livestreamed. The necklace from Nepal was at lot 328, and the auction



order was already at 250. Time was of the essence.

Smith stepped out of the conference hall in Patan to try to call the auction house in Brussels, couldn't get through and sent them an email, commented on their website, and posted on Bluesky and Facebook. She also emailed the Dutch gallery mentioned in the provenance.

During the live auction on [www.invaluable.com](http://www.invaluable.com), the lot came up for sale. But suddenly the auctioneer got a message from someone off-screen. He stated in Dutch: "This piece cannot be sold because there are problems with the origin. Withdrawn."

After the dramatic cancellation of sale, Smith found out that the former owner of the necklace was a Tibetologist who acquired it in 1995 from a collector

in Groningen, who had purchased it in the 1970s from a gallery in Amsterdam.

"The art market needs to know that there is no excuse to auction off invaluable and inalienable Nepali cultural objects like this stunning Pratap Malla necklace," Smith told *Nepali Times*. "Nepali activists have worked tirelessly to raise awareness about the devastating consequences of the market demand for Nepal's irreplaceable cultural heritage, so auction houses, art dealers and buyers should know better by now. We can all hold them accountable for their role in the looting and destruction of Nepal's heritage." 🇳🇵

# The Big Bulls of Bardia

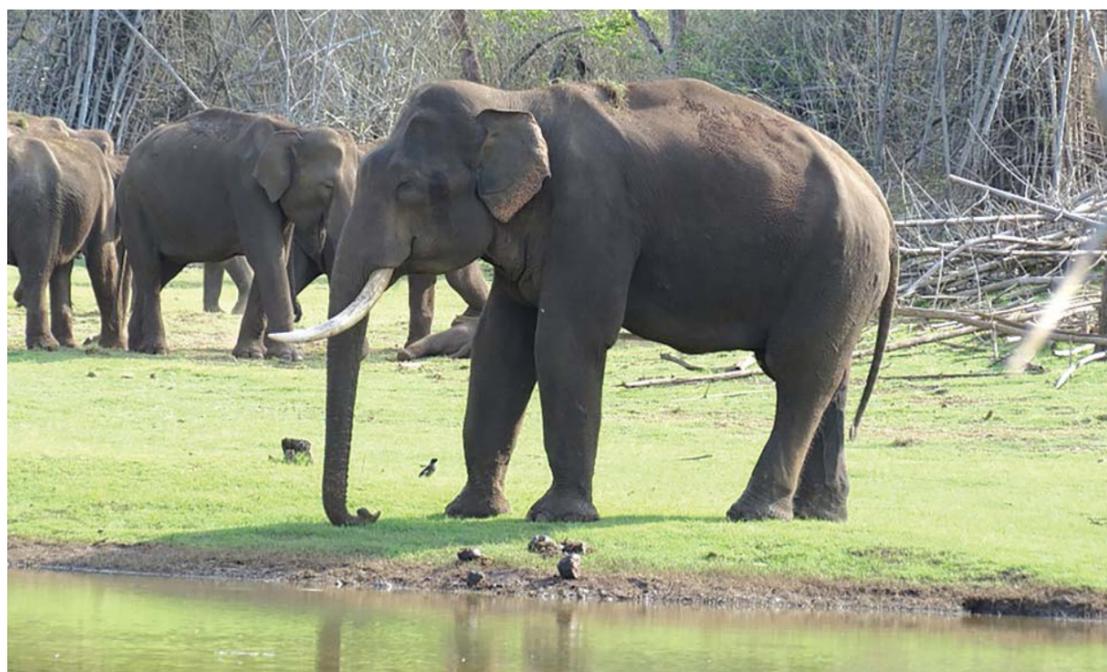
Nepal's wild elephants were not descended from extinct mammoths, but evolved separately

■ Sanjeeta Sharma Pokharel

Nearly 30 years ago, three wild bull elephants, Raja Gaj, Kancha, and Thula Hatti, roamed boldly through the dense forests and grassy plains of Bardia and Suklaphanta in western Nepal. With their towering height and massive build, bull elephants have evolution on their side, traits that not only command attention but also boost their chances in the race to reproduce.

What truly set these bull elephants apart from other Asian elephants, however, were their distinctive head domes and exceptionally powerful build. Raja Gaj, standing at an impressive 3.5m tall, was among the largest Asian bull elephants ever recorded.

Their massive size and unusually high head domes caught the attention of elephant enthusiasts across the globe and sparked speculation: could these bulls be the last living links to the extinct elephant-like species: the



SANJEETA SHARMA POKHAREL

Mammoth or the Stegodon?

In 1995, that curiosity turned into a quest. A team led by John Blashford-Snell of The Scientific Exploration Society in the UK, alongside the world-renowned paleontologist Adrian Lister, an expert on extinct proboscideans (the group that includes elephants and their long-gone relatives), embarked on a special expedition to Nepal to resolve this mystery.

## ELEPHANTS IN THE ROOM:

Photo from Dr Adrian Lister's collection of Raja Gaja, with high head domes, sighted in Bardia in 1993 (right).

Ganesha, a wild male bull, from the forest of southern India (above).



NICK BROWN

Venturing into the wilderness during the peak of the dry season, the expedition team tracked and studied these male elephants, along with other bulls like Bahadur Gajah, across the plains of Bardia. Lister meticulously measured

the body and head sizes of these wild bulls and compared them with those of wild elephants in Indian forests, ultimately debunking the myth that the Nepali bulls were related to mammoths or Stegodons. Instead, they were exceptionally

large Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*), and their size was simply a result of the abundant food and water found in Bardia's thriving ecosystem.

But this exploration took a fascinating twist. Lister noticed something else that was remarkable about the skull shapes of Raja Gaj and Kancha: a high, domed forehead, strikingly similar to that of an extinct species, *Elephas hysudricus*, whose fossils have been discovered in the Siwalik Hills of northern India, considered a likely ancestor of today's Asian elephants.

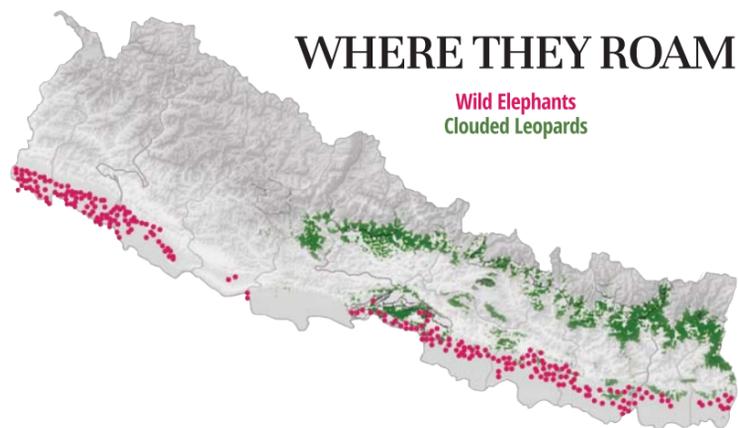
This suggested that the Bardia bulls might still carry ancestral traits from a species that walked the earth hundreds of thousands of years ago. Even more intriguing, the bulls looked different from male elephants in southern India, proving just how much geography and local environments can shape the bodies of wild animals.

The results were published on a paper in the Journal Elephant titled Exceptional Size and Form of Asian Elephants in Western Nepal in 2000.

In the 1990s the story of Nepal's giant elephants made headlines around the world. Today, infrastructure and human development disturb ancient migration routes and floodplains. How many more mega-bulls like Raja Gaj, Kancha and Thula hatti still roam the forests of Nepal, unseen and unstudied?

Raja Gaj was about 70 years old in 2007 when he disappeared. The story of Nepal's bull elephants is a powerful reminder of what still lies hidden in the natural world and how much we stand to lose if we stop paying attention. 🇳🇵

Sanjeeta Sharma Pokharel is an elephant biologist and Assistant Professor at The Hakubi Center for Advanced Research and Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University.



## WHERE THEY ROAM

Wild Elephants  
Clouded Leopards

# Leopards in the clouds

Nepal's elusive clouded leopards are threatened by habitat loss and human activity

■ Yangchen Sherpa

Deep in the fogbound forests of Nepal lives the clouded leopard, a cat so mysterious, so rare and elusive, that it is thought to be a creature of myth.

Known as धुवाँसे चितुवा, the clouded leopard (*Neofelis nebulosa*) is named for its unique cloud-like fur pattern distinctly different from a tiger's stripes, or a leopard's spots. Its coat is a perfect camouflage for the underbrush of Himalayan cloud forests.

It hunts stealthily by night, has strong limbs and flexible ankles allowing it to climb and descend trees with ease. Villagers who live close to the habitat of this enigmatic cat, do not even know it exists.

The clouded leopard was once thought to be extinct in Nepal, but was rediscovered in 1987, and since then it has been sighted in regions ranging from eastern Tarai's lowland forests to the subtropical hills of western Nepal at elevations between 301m to 3,498m.

But unlike the tigers and rhinos in Nepal's plains, or the snow leopards that stalk the Himalaya, the clouded leopard rarely makes headlines or draws public attention.

The clouded leopard is listed as Vulnerable by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and protected under CITES Appendix I. It is found in dense tropical, sub-tropical and temperate forests of south and



CASEY DYKE

south-east Asia.

In Nepal, sightings in previously undocumented areas like Sunsari, Udayapur, and Jhapa suggest the cat may be more widespread than previously thought. Most of what experts know about these cats comes from chance sightings or camera traps in protected areas.

In 2018, an amateur photographer sighted a clouded leopard in Sunsari, making it the first ever non camera-trap photograph of a wild clouded leopard in the country.

Indeed, vast regions within

their habitat range (map) remain unsurveyed, and there's no comprehensive data on clouded leopards since no census to determine its number has ever been conducted. The Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) estimates a population range of 300 to 400 clouded leopards in Nepal.

"Despite its relatively wide distribution, the clouded leopard remains one of Nepal's least studied wild cats," says Karan Shah, wildlife researcher and educator.

Globally, clouded leopards have

lost 34% of high-quality habitat and nearly 20% of moderately suitable areas across their habitat range between 2000 and 2018.

In Nepal, the forests that clouded leopards depend on are being cleared for roads, agriculture, and other development work, much of this habitat loss occurring outside protected zones.

The expansion of roads and human settlements has led not just to habitat destruction, but has also opened the door to human wildlife conflict and poaching.

Between 2006-2020, 26 clouded

leopard pelts were confiscated across Nepal. These are trafficked for decoration and traditional medicine. Live animals are sold in the black market as exotic pets.

The data likely represents only a fraction of illegal activity involving clouded leopards due to the lack of active monitoring of the species.

Clouded leopards feed on monkeys, rodents, and deer. And although these cats, unlike other carnivores, avoid human settlements, they are known to feed on livestock in rare cases, especially as the destruction of their habitat has affected their prey density.

"It is rarely in direct conflict with humans and is not usually a target for persecution. Yet, it suffers indirectly from habitat degradation, forest fires, trapping, and carcass poisoning, activities often aimed at other species or driven by broader environmental pressure," says Shah.

But despite the challenges, there have been some improvements in conservation efforts. Improved technology and survey efforts have helped researchers detect the presence of clouded leopards in new areas.

However, a systematic nationwide survey is urgently needed to establish the species' true population and distribution. Clouded leopards need as much attention as rhinos and tigers.

Saving the clouded leopard is not just about safeguarding a rare species, but also preserving the forests that filter our air, protect our water, and support countless other wildlife. 🇳🇵



ICIMOD

## Call of the wild

Two wild elephants were found electrocuted to death in Sunsari and Jhapa in a single day earlier this week.

On Monday, a wild male elephant, estimated by officials to be around seven years of age, was found dead in a cornfield near the Kaushiki Community Forest in Sunsari's Barahakshetra Municipality.

In Jhapa's Mechinagar, a female wild elephant estimated to be 40 years old was found dead in a cornfield, also on Monday.

In February, a soldier stationed at Chitwan National Park shot a wild elephant to death allegedly after it charged at a patrol group attempting to coax it back into the forest.

Human-elephant contact has been increasing across communities near Nepal's protected areas because the animals are not allowed to

graze in the forests like they used to. Villagers also blame domesticated elephants for attracting wild ones. Communities in buffer zones have taken to setting up electric fencing to prevent elephants from getting into their fields.

More than 60 elephants have been killed, a significant number due to electrocution. On the other hand, 350 people are estimated to have lost their lives in elephant attacks over the past 24 years in Nepal.

Nepal's Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation estimates up to 265 wild elephants (*Elephas maximus*) across Bardia National Park, Chitwan National Park, Koshi Tappu, Parsa, and Shukla Phanta National Park. An additional 150 elephants are domesticated.



# Music without borders

Sounds of Kathmandu took the centre stage at the Sydney Opera House with a message of shared harmony

■ Sangya Lamsal

Nepal's top maestro mixed the traditional sounds of Nepal with world music at the Culture in Sync concert at the Sydney Opera House on Thursday to bring a message of peace and healing to a troubled world.

Hari Maharjan's musical extravaganza had a rich blend of instruments, including the dhime drum and flute from Nepal, the Mongolian yatga, Iranian tanbur, Australian bass and piano, creating a diverse musical experience.

"When music-enthusiasts from different places and paths of life are grooving to the same tune, we're all speaking the same language," Maharjan told us.

The Hari Maharjan Project jammed with a multinational line-up blending traditional Nepali sounds with modern jazz. The performance offered a borderless cosmopolitan musical experience rooted in Nepal's heritage as a healing response to wars and planetary climate breakdown.

Maharjan grew up in Kathmandu surrounded by the sound of the dhime drum and was influenced by 1970s rock, mixing the sounds of east with west. He picked up the guitar in school and quickly formed a deep connection with the instrument.

"Music to me is the play between sound and silence," he told us. "All instruments



have their own essence, but I am connected most with the guitar, not just because it's glamorous, but because it carries melody, rhythm, and harmony all at once."

Over the years, Maharjan has explored other genres as well, collaborating with bands like Nepathya, Karma, Robin and the New Revolution, Kutumba, composing and performing. While each experience offered unique insights, he always returned to the folk rhythms of his Newari roots.

That homecoming takes shape



in his album Swoniga, named after the ancient word for the Kathmandu Valley. The album draws inspiration from teeming streets, ringing of temple bells, and the songs of everyday struggles and shared solidarity.

"These are the sounds Kathmandu Valley gifted me, and I am giving back with my album," he added. Many of these tunes had their live premiere on the iconic stage of the Sydney Opera House on Thursday evening.

Maharjan has released other instrumental albums: Kalakarmi in 2008, Sudina in 2012 and Going into Three before the pandemic in 2019.

He served as Music Theory Professor at Kathmandu University, and is credited with introducing 'Gypsy Jazz' in Nepal, blending jazz and local tunes.

Culture in Sync began as a bold idea two years ago when Gajendra Shahi of Sangam Productions approached arranger-guitarist Nirvana Bista with a vision to take Nepali music to the global stage, such as the Sydney Opera House.

Once a student of Hari Maharjan, Bista has grown into a respected bandleader in his own right and now carries forward his mentor's legacy through this ambitious collaboration.

To guide the Sydney audience through this cultural journey, bilingual listening cards with introductions were handed out in both Nepali and English. With ambassadors attending, the event highlighted Nepal's role in global dialogue where music became a language of shared harmony.

Maharjan's next project is to perform his music from the slopes of Mt Everest. But for now, his message to fans is: "Keep celebrating music. When you listen, we get to create. And when you truly hear us, you become one with the music." 🇳🇵

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