

Big, beautiful Bills

Shristi Karki

It cannot be a coincidence that after pushing Bills to constrict freedom of expression and allow greater surveillance of citizens, Nepal's government is now tightening controls on civil society.

In a series of recent moves journalists have been sued for contempt of court, imprisoned for YouTube videos, or ordered by courts to desist from investigating corrupt officials.

An amendment to the Print and Publications Act aims to hand the power to shut online media to the Chief District Officer (CDO). Another draft Bill would allow a political appointee to head a new Media Council with the power to revoke a journalist's license. The draft counter-intelligence Bill would let random officials to arbitrarily tap phones, read emails and trail citizens.

Now comes yet another draft Bill designed to replace the Social Welfare Council (SWC) with direct government control over registration, regulation, and management of non-governmental organisations, nonprofits and charities. There are more than 54,000 NGOs, 200 international NGOs registered with the SWC.

The draft makes civil society organisations needlessly jump through hoops to carry out work that complements the government in the social sector. Critics say

the Bill was drafted without any consultation with civic groups.

"This Bill's content is questionable, whether it intends to allow for civil society organisations in Nepal a free space to operate," concludes SP Kalaunee, Country Representative of BlinkNow Foundation and Chair of the Association of International NGOs in Nepal (AIN). "The draft seems oriented towards controlling rather than facilitating the work of civil society organisations."

The Bill will be open for feedback from the public, and integrates the National Directives Act (1961), Association Registration Act (1977), and the Social Welfare Act (1992) and proposes dissolving the SWC and replacing it with a new Social Welfare Department under the Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens.

Non-government groups will now be required to get approval from the Registrar Office, the CDO or the provincial government depending on their area of operation. Those working across provinces will have to get permission from the federal government.

The government says the Bill is intended to vet organisations to see if they are engaged in espionage, violate national security, assist a foreign state, commit treason, cause strife between federal units, or incite communal violence.

CSOs working in Nepal have long called for legislation to better facilitate their work, minimise administrative and bureaucratic red tape which have posed operational challenges. But they are opposed to such drastic control.

The NGO Federation of Nepal also issued a statement this week calling the Bill 'retrograde and cumbersome'. It added: 'Most of its provisions are intended to further constrain and control civil society organisations rather than facilitate and strengthen them, and reduce the role of citizen participation ... it is an attack on our civil liberties, inclusivity, and transparency, and curtails our democratic values and constitutional rights.'

Nepal's graduation from least-developed country status next year may mean less aid, and higher interest rates on loans from multilateral creditors. The closure of USAID and reduction in bilateral grants means the work of INGOs will be even more vital - especially to meet its SDG targets by 2030.

"We are competing with other countries at a time when the global aid environment is shrinking, so the support we receive is directly dependent on a conducive environment for INGOs to operate and function," says Kalaunee. "INGOs follow regulations of the nations they operate in, they will not protest or wait around for governments to change their minds or policies."

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Size does not matter EDITORIAL PAGE 2

30 years after Baby Arun PAGE 6-7

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Size does not matter

Small nation states can punch above their weight if they have clean, competent leaders

Kunda Dixit

Nepal's leaders often make grandiose promises that they will turn the country into Switzerland within a decade. We will be lucky if Nepal could even attain the per capita GDP of Swaziland.

Becoming another Switzerland or Singapore is the boastful fantasy of incompetent serial politicians who keep getting themselves elected again and again.

So, what has to change?

It has to be through elections, but there is spreading distrust of the democratic system bordering on nihilism among Nepalis. The three main parties must have sensed by now that they are doomed if they do not get their act together and inject new untainted blood into tickets in 2027.

One election will not clean up the muck that has accumulated over the past 35 years,



but we have to start with the next one. Politics cannot be business as usual any more, voters are fed up with what is on offer.

Over one-third of young Nepalis are not even in Nepal, and they are not allowed to cast their ballots. But we saw in 2022 that the diaspora can have an impact on how their folks vote back home, and this trend is bound to increase in 2027. It would finally break the vote banks on which the established parties have relied on to perpetuate misrule.

Nepal needs solutions urgently to address snowballing crises on multiple fronts: social inequity, joblessness and low purchasing power, failing agriculture, breakdown of services, a pandemic of corruption feeding mal-development, low capital formation, environmental woes, and to top it all off

— a runaway climate emergency.

Yet, there are bright spots, many of which happened despite political instability: falling poverty rate, improved health and education status, increase in forest cover, conservation successes, growth in hydropower.

Just imagine how much further ahead Nepal would be if it was not plagued with chronic mismanagement, corruption and conflict.

It is because of these modest gains that Nepal will graduate from a 'least-developed' to a 'developing country' in November 2026, and transition to middle-income status by 2030 — even though it still

has an annual per capita income below the \$1,306 threshold.

The driving force for this growth comes almost entirely from remittances which make up 26% of the GDP — the third highest in the world. Inflows officially hit \$12.54 billion last year, and nearly 65% of households depend on money family members send home, spending most of it on basic needs.

A recent discussion at the Institute for Integrated Development Studies (IIDS) titled Diaspora Dialogue: Innovation, Identity and Global Influence looked at leveraging the 4 million Nepalis who live and work abroad to spur investment and growth.

IIDS has been involved since 1979 in policy advocacy to propose sustainable

solutions to governments under at least four different political systems. The fact that we are in the state we are in now must mean that not many of the policy priorities the IIDS put forward in the past 40 years have been properly implemented.

For decades, we've heard that Nepal's path to economic growth lies in hydropower and tourism, but that narrative has to change, noted IIDS Executive Director Biswash Gauchan.

"Forget falling water, forest and forex," he said. "Nepal has to move to a knowledge economy, boost investment and look beyond our neighbours to the diaspora."

There is an artificial bubble in real estate and banking due to remittances. Even if Nepal gets 3 million tourists a year and exports most its hydropower it will not be enough to take the annual per capita income to \$6,000 by 2050.

A knowledge economy means thinking beyond enrolment rates and basic literacy to quality education relevant to the human resources the country needs. This will ensure jobs at home in import-substitution agriculture, value-added manufacturing and export of services.

And that is where global Nepalis come in. Connectivity means the end of geography, and diaspora talent and capital can be harnessed for investment and involvement in innovation to take Nepal into a digital future.

This needs a paradigm shift away from a rent-seeking state to a 'whole-of-government' strategy that can only come from a new crop of competent technocrats with integrity and vision to seize the moment. They have to see migration not as 'brain drain' but as 'brain circulation'.

Those Nepalis exist. In Nepal and all over the world. Swaziland's annual per capita income is \$4,000 — think we can do it by 2050?

Trending Online



Fighting tooth and nail

by Vishad Raj Onta

Rabindra Dhant stunned audiences in Delhi, knocking out India's Chungren Koren to win the Matrix Fight Night bantamweight title, and become Nepal's newest MMA champion. Visit nepalitimes.com for more on Dhant and the evolution of the sport in the country.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

When Xi meets Modi and Oli

by Kanak Mani Dixit

At the upcoming summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, PM Oli must remind both his host President Xi and fellow guest PM Modi that China-India relationship as it blows hot and cold, cannot be at the cost of Nepal. Follow us for the latest developments.

Most popular on X



The cost of preserving the past

by Manju Bajracharya von Rospatt

The village of Shivgarh is vanishing as families are displaced due to excavations in nearby Tilaurakot, the archaeological site believed to be the ancient Shakya kingdom into which Buddha was born. Read the story on our website.

Most commented

Rain bombs

by Sonia Awale

An analysis of recent Himalayan calamities shows a common thread -- all the disasters were a cascade of hazards caused by record-breaking rainfall on fragile slopes destabilised by melting glaciers and permafrost, seismicity and poor engineering. Details online.

Most visited online page

Letters

WATER DISASTERS

The causes in the case of 'natural' disasters are always complex ('Rain bombs', Sonia Awale #1275), but economic and social factors are at least susceptible to intervention, and so are some geographical factors. Early warning systems, action plans, and other forms of preparedness must be developed at local, provincial and national levels, and where applicable must be implemented effectively.

David Seddon

OLD RAILWAYS

It is amazing how history can be erased by time ('Nepal's five little railways', Daniel Edwards, #1275).

Iván G. Somlai

ECONOMY

Investing in human capital is the best ingredient for sustainable and equitable economic growth



('Investing in people', David Sisen, #1274). Identifying the right people for the right job is another element for government effectiveness and efficiency.

Shambhu Acharya

TILAUURAKOT

The archaeological community and the Nepali government should help this family. This is a matter of human rights and justice ('The cost of preserving Nepal's past', Manju Bajracharya von Rospatt, #1275).

Krishna Sanjay

This is a great feature story, one that explores the community history and ancient remains of Tilaurakot.

Govinda Dhawal

INDIA-NEPAL-CHINA

When it comes to matters of national interest, there are no principles, values and friends ('When Xi meets Modi and Oli' Kanak Mani Dixit, #1275). Good governance and ethical leaders are the bedrock which gives nations the strength to stand tall.

Vickram Chhetri

Nepal's foreign policy clout is inversely proportional to India China bonhomie

Forester

If India can claim Nepali territory, then Nepal can claim territories ceded to the British. ('Lipulek dispute explainer' Prabhakar Sharma, nepalitimes.com) No more Sugauli Sandhi.

Bizu Shrestha

Quotes



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

At the upcoming summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, PM Oli must remind both his host President Xi and fellow guest PM Modi that China-India relationship even as it blows hot and cold can never be at the cost of Nepal, writes @KanakManiDixit.



HARJYAL हेमन्त अर्ज्याल @HARJYAL

As regards BWA I had also believed that they had objections about ILS there. But as I hear, their basic objection was that under NO CIRCUMSTANCE should Indian airspace be used, as was necessary in some rare/remote scenarios. Those better informed can help clarify.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Nepal's new draft counter-intelligence Bill allows authorities to monitor, surveil, or record communications. But experts say such a provision could be misused as has happened in the recent past when such unchecked authority falls into the wrong hands.



Gus Ferguson @xander_fero

'National Security': anything that threatens Khas Arya supremacy.

Online Package



MAKING OF DAURA SURUWAL

Dasain is a month away, have you sewn your daura suruwal yet? Nepal's national dress is back in fashion. Senior politicians and bureaucrats wear it to work while the dress is a go-to fit for marriages and social gatherings. Watch the video, see how it is tailored.



OLD NEPAL TOKYO

Ryo Honda is a Japanese chef who specialises in authentic yet innovative Nepali cuisine using ingredients and spices that he has explored in Nepal. Subscribe to our YouTube channel for more videos.

1,000 Words



MOFA NEPAL

WOMEN AT THE TOP: Minister for Foreign Affairs Arzu Rana Deuba in a meeting with the Vice President of Vietnam Vo Thi Anh Xuan in Kathmandu where the two talked about air connectivity and tourism cooperation, among others.



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Warning: breathing is hazardous to health

New report says Nepalis could live 3.3 years longer if air pollution is cleaned up

An average Nepali could live 3.3 years longer if air pollution is reduced to meet the World Health Organization (WHO) guideline, according to the annual Air Quality Life Index 2025 published this week.

The annual average concentration of tiny suspended particles in the air (PM2.5) in Nepal in 2023 was 38.3 µg/m³, nearly eight times the WHO standard, and 10% higher than 2022. Thirty years ago, air pollution in Nepal was half the current levels. WHO says particulate concentration above 5 µg/m³ is hazardous to health.

The most polluted parts of Nepal are along the Indian border in Rutehat, Mahottari, Dhanusha, Parsa and Bara districts in Madhes Province where average life expectancy is reduced by as much as 5.3 years.

People in Sarlahi, Siraha, Saptari, Morang, Sunsari, Rupandehi and Jhapa are also dying at least 4 years earlier. The Air Quality Index (AQLI) 2025 report which is published annually by the Energy Policy Institute at the University of Chicago, says the figure is relatively lower for Kathmandu and Lalitpur at 2.6 and 2.4 years.

After the Madhes, Kosi and Lumbini Provinces are the most polluted — especially in towns along industrial corridors and near the border. Karnali Province was by far the cleanest, followed by Sudurpaschim.

Air pollution is now the leading external threat to life expectancy in Nepal, exceeding both tobacco and diet-related risks, which reduced average lifespans of Nepalis by 1.9



years and 1.3 years respectively.

The Air Quality Management Action Plan for Kathmandu Valley introduced in 2017 had identified vehicular emissions, brick kilns, and construction as the most polluting. It adopted measures to strengthen air quality monitoring, develop emissions inventory, and conduct impact assessments. Other major sources of emissions in Nepal include forest fires, crop residue and garbage burning as well as transboundary pollution from India and Pakistan.

The report says India is the

world's most polluted country with the particulate concentration in 2023 at 41 µg/m³, an average resident in India could live 3.5 years longer if pollution levels were brought down to meet the WHO guideline. Residents of New Delhi on average would live 8.2 years longer if they breathed clean air.

South Asia has some of the world's most polluted cities. On some winter days, Kathmandu records the worst air quality in the world. In 2023, PM2.5 concentrations in South Asia declined by 9.6% between 2021 and

2022 due to lockdowns during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

'After a dip in 2022, particulate pollution in South Asia increased by 2.8% in 2023 — though it remained 7% lower than in 2021,' states the report. 'In the region's most polluted countries, particulate pollution's impact on life expectancy is nearly twice that of childhood and maternal malnutrition, and more than five times that of unsafe water, sanitation and handwashing.'

Elsewhere, unprecedented wildfires caused particulate

concentrations to rise to levels not seen since 2011 in the United States and since 1998 in Canada. China also registered a decline in air quality, an increase of 2.8% in particulate pollution in 2023 relative to 2022, the first in a decade since the start of its 'War on Pollution' in 2014.

Globally, the PM2.5 concentration in 2023 was 1.5% higher than in 2022, and nearly 5 times the WHO guideline. If global particulate pollution were permanently reduced to meet this guideline, an average person around the world would gain 1.9 years of life, adding 15.1 billion total life years to the global population, the report adds.

'Particulate pollution remained the greatest external threat to human life expectancy in 2023, with its impact comparable to smoking and surpassing other major health risks,' the report says. 'Its toll on life expectancy is more than 4 times that of alcohol use, 5 times that of transport injuries or unsafe water, sanitation, and handwashing, and more than 6 times that of HIV/AIDS.'

The report also highlights the need for open data, and says that accessible air quality information has translated into reduced particulate concentrations and gains in life expectancy in the United States, China, and Poland.

Besides data, the report says, investment in monitoring and other air quality management infrastructure must be matched by political will, ambitious policies, capacity building, and sustained enforcement. 🇳🇵

NMB BANK एनएमबी बैंक



Turkish for Volleyball

Turkish Airlines is sponsoring the second edition of the Vatsalya Everest Women's Volleyball League (EWVL) as Official Airline Partner. Scheduled for 5-13 September, it will take place in Pokhara and feature 18 international players alongside Nepal's volleyball talent. "With this association we aim to support women role models in sports," said Serkan Basar, Turkish Airlines General Manager who signed an agreement with Sney Chapagain of EWV.

"We are delighted to welcome Turkish Airlines as our Official Airline Partner," said Chapagain. "Their global presence and commitment to quality resonate with our vision of elevating women's volleyball in Nepal while connecting it to the world."

Various Nepali teams, including defending champions Karnali Yashvis, have inducted foreign players from Thailand, the Netherlands, Russia, Brazil, Kyrgyzstan, Bulgaria, the United States, Kazakhstan, Croatia Serbia.

Besides Karnali Yashvis, they will be playing other teams including Lalitpur Queens, Pokhara Ninjas, Lumbini Lavaz, Kathmandu Spikers, Madhes United.

Petroleum imports up

Despite the spread of EVs in Nepal, petroleum imports are up. Diesel, petrol and LPG worth Rs1.501 billion were imported through Kakarvitta in the first month of FY 25/26 — a 3.6% increase worth Rs52.2 million. This has caused revenue from the tax on petroleum products to rise by 11.8% to Rs 79.2 million.

Samsung coding

Fifty-six students at the TU Institute of Engineering Pulchowk Campus earned certificates for completing the third batch of Samsung's Coding & Programming course which trained students in high-demand digital skills such as AI, Big Data, and Internet of Things.



BYD treasure hunt

BYD is working with Gallery MCube on 'Kathmandu Chronicles,' a treasure hunt through Kathmandu Durbar Square, Patan Durbar Square, and Swayambhunath. Participants divided into teams will travel in BYD cars, solving riddles and completing tasks at each location, proving that business and culture can be combined.



Hyundai bumper prize

Official Hyundai dealer Laxmi Intercontinental handed over the bumper prize from the Hyundai Festive Delight 2081 campaign. The winner, Kubera Construction, received a new Hyundai 1.2 SUV.



Tata e-taxis

At the recently concluded NADA Auto Show, Tata distributor Sipradi recognised partners that use its Xpres-T EV e-taxi model in their fleets. Being electric, the model has low operating costs and encourages drivers to own their own vehicles. Key attractions at the auto show included new EVs, a flying car model, canine and humanoid robots. Daily seminars covered auto trade, EVs in Nepal, credit schemes, roads. MBML Auto was awarded the best four-wheelers stall, and Royal Enfield Alpha won the best two-wheelers stall.

Honda Dasain offer

Official Honda distributor Syakar Trading launched 'Changa Udchha Farara, Honda Carma Sarara' Dasain campaign, under which customers can get discounts of up to Rs400,000, free servicing for 5 years, exchange bonuses, and free accessories. The scheme will be applicable for the Honda City, City e:HEV, Elevate, Amaze, and City 5th Gen models.



Digital transactions up

Nepal carried out electronic transactions worth over Rs98.43 trillion last fiscal year, 71% more than FY 2023/24. According to NRB, more than Rs5 trillion transferred via mobile banking, Rs2.9 trillion through Connect IPS, Rs2.9 trillion through debit cards and over Rs1 trillion through ATMs. QR payments recorded Rs956 billion, and payments through e-commerce systems reached Rs266 billion.

Meanwhile, NRB has ordered Laxmi Sunrise Bank's digital-only banking service OrangenXT to shut down. The service had been in use for over a year and a half, allowing users to open accounts and carry out



transactions without visiting a physical bank. More than 65,000 accounts had been opened, and deposits had reached Rs170 million. NRB cited a lack of provisions for digital-only banks, and ordered the service suspended until further notice. Yet Nepal's annual budget and NRB's own monetary policy promised to launch and support such fully-digital institutions.

Embossed plates

The Department of Transport Management has rolled back its decision to make vehicle plates mandatory for vehicle registration, transfer and renewal starting 1 September. The decision followed protests about insufficient preparation, hassles and that the plates are not in Devnagari script. The department said Tuesday owners can install plates on their own time and there will be no immediate fines.



BIG BROTHER WATCH

small club of tech titans exerts growing influence over public life in pursuit of their private interests. Both systems would become similarly centralised – and dominant – at the expense of citizens. Countries like India and the Gulf states would head the same way, while Europe and Japan would face geopolitical irrelevance (or worse, internal instability) as they fall behind in the race for AI supremacy.

Dystopian scenarios such as those outlined here can be avoided, but only if decentralised open-source AI models end up on top. In Taiwan, engineers and activists are crowdsourcing an open-source model built on DeepSeek, hoping to keep advanced AI in civic, rather than corporate or state, hands. The paradox here is that DeepSeek was developed in authoritarian China.

Success for these Taiwanese developers could restore some of the decentralisation the early internet once promised. Though it could also lower the barrier for malicious actors to deploy harmful capabilities. For now, however, the momentum lies with closed models centralising power.

History offers at least a sliver of hope. Every previous technological revolution – from the printing press and railroads to broadcast media – destabilised politics and compelled the emergence of new norms and institutions that eventually restored balance between openness and stability.

The question is whether democracies can adapt once again, and in time, before AI writes them out of the script. 

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Ian Bremmer, Founder and President of Eurasia Group and GZERO Media, is a member of the Executive Committee of the UN High-level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence.

Can democracy survive AI?

If current trends in AI development and deployment continue, the openness that long gave democracies their edge might become the cause of their undoing

Ian Bremmer

Digital technology was supposed to disperse power. Early internet visionaries hoped that the revolution they were unleashing would empower individuals to free themselves from ignorance, poverty, and tyranny. And for a while, at least, it did.

But today, ever-smarter algorithms increasingly predict and shape our every choice, enabling unprecedentedly effective forms of centralised, unaccountable surveillance and control.

That means the coming AI revolution may render closed political systems more stable than open ones. In an age of rapid change, transparency, pluralism, checks and balances, and other key democratic features, could prove to be liabilities. Could the openness that long gave democracies their edge become the cause of their undoing?

Two decades ago, I sketched a “J-curve” to illustrate the link between a country’s openness and its stability. My argument, in a nutshell, was that while mature democracies are stable because they are open, and consolidated autocracies are stable because they are closed, countries stuck in the messy middle (the nadir of the

“J”) are more likely to crack under stress.

But this relationship is not static, it is shaped by technology. Back then, the world was riding a wave of decentralisation. Information and communications technologies (ICT) and the internet were connecting people everywhere, arming them with more information than they had ever had access to, and tipping the scales toward citizens and open political systems. From the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union to the colour revolutions in Eastern Europe and the Arab Spring in the Middle East, global liberalisation appeared inexorable.

That progress has since been thrown into reverse. The decentralising ICT revolution gave way to a centralising data revolution built on network effects, digital surveillance, and algorithmic nudging. Instead of diffusing power, this technology concentrated it, handing those who control the largest datasets – be they governments or big technology companies – the ability to shape what billions of people see, do, and believe.

As citizens were turned from principal agents into objects of technological filters and data collection, closed systems gained ground. The gains made by the colour revolutions and the Arab Spring were clawed back.

Hungary and Turkey muzzled their free press and politicised their judiciaries. The Communist Party of China (CPC), under Xi Jinping, has consolidated power and reversed two decades of economic opening. And most dramatically, the United States has gone from being the world’s leading exporter of democracy – however inconsistently and hypocritically – to the leading exporter of the tools that undermine it.

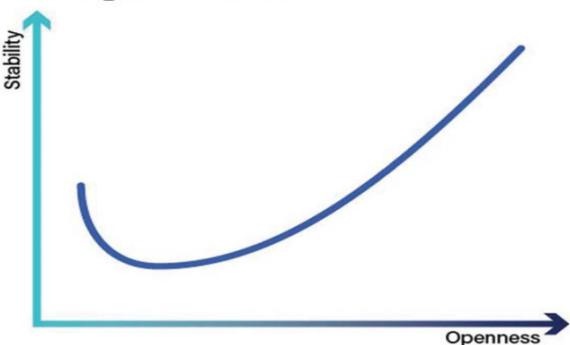
The diffusion of AI capabilities will supercharge these trends. Models trained on our private data will soon “know” us better than

we know ourselves, programming us faster than we can program them, and transferring even more power to the few who control the data and the algorithms.

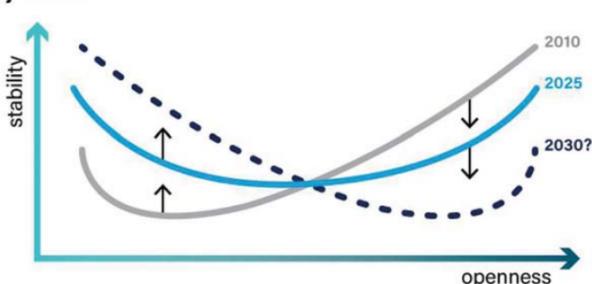
Here, the J-curve warps and comes to look more like a shallow “U.” As AI spreads, both tightly closed and hyper-open societies will become relatively more fragile than they were. But over time, as the technology improves and control over the most advanced models is consolidated, AI could harden autocracies and fray democracies, flipping the shape back toward an inverted J whose stable slope now favors closed systems.

In this world, the CPC would be able to convert its vast data troves, state control of the economy, and existing surveillance apparatus into an even more potent tool of repression. The US would drift toward a more top-down, kleptocratic system in which a

The original “J Curve”



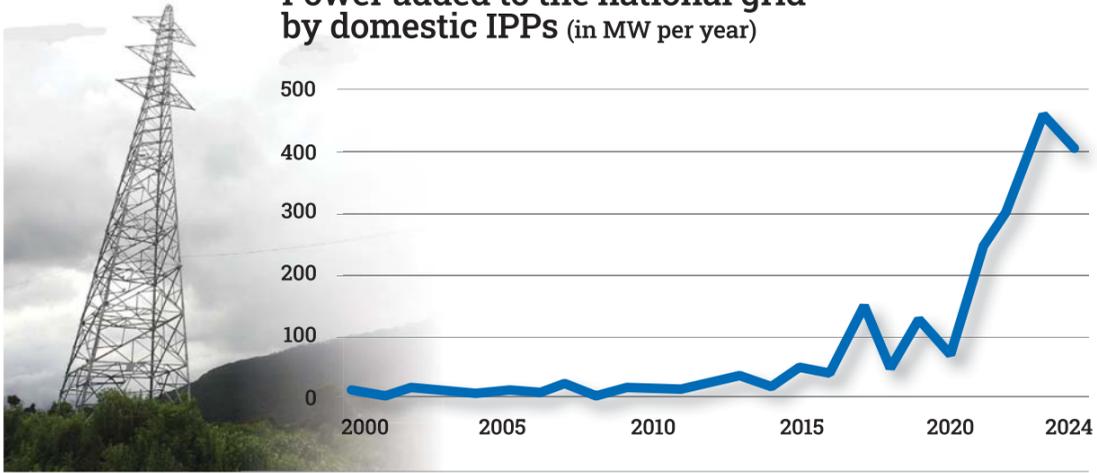
j-curve



30 YEARS AFTER

FROM BABY TO ADULT ARUNS

BA... AR... Nepal's power dramatically changed after the cancellation of Arun III in Au...



It was 30 years ago this month that investment into 'Baby Arun', the 201MW first phase of the run-of-river Arun III project, was brought to a screeching halt when the World Bank officially withdrew its support.

This brought about profound and fundamental changes in the way Nepal's power sector subsequently developed. Nepalis suffered debilitating power outages between 2008-2016 due to shortages attributable to the cancellation.

At the same time, the gap left by Baby Arun was filled by private sector investment in ways that were not obvious in 1995. It took 30 years, but in many ways Nepal's power sector is more healthy today than it has ever been, and likely better than if the project was built as planned.

At a projected budget of \$1.08 billion, Baby Arun would have cost the equivalent of Nepal's entire annual government expenditure in 1995. It was to be funded by concessional grants and loans from multilateral and bilateral funders, including the World Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB), KfW, and investment by the government itself.

At the time, Nepal's total electricity generation capacity was only 230MW, and the trajectory of the power sector changed dramatically following the cancellation. In the past 30 years, \$5.4 billion has been invested in the power sector led by private investors, and much of it from domestic banks and pension funds (table, right).

Nearly 70% of the new megawatts generated were by private independent power producers (IPP) in the past 30 years, while the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) and its subsidiary companies added 30% of new capacity. Almost 80% of total debt financing came from domestic banks and employee retirement funds.

International assistance for power generation dropped dramatically over this time, accounting for only about 15% of investment. Before 1995 new power projects used to be entirely dependent on foreign aid. Since 1995, 63% of new generation came from 171 small hydropower projects with an average capacity of 12MW, while 4% was from 21 solar photovoltaic and biomass projects developed by local IPPs.

Over three decades, investment in Nepal's power supply came primarily from new actors that had never before been involved in this sector. The rate of electrification rose from 10% to close to 100% -- sufficient to meet domestic needs during most of the year, and in 2024 made Nepal a net exporter of power to India for the first time in its history.

As practically all the new investment in this period went into run-of-river hydro and solar projects, rather than into hydropower reservoirs with seasonal storage, Nepal continues to rely on imports from India during the dry winter months. Surplus electricity generation for export during the monsoon is slated to grow rapidly as another 200 solar and hydro projects are nearing completion of construction, with over 5,000MW of power capacity.

PRIVATE POWER
The cancellation of Baby Arun inadvertently accelerated the entry of the private sector into Nepal's power generation. The government enacted the Electricity Act in 1992 to attract private IPPs and diversify away from total dependence from international aid, but had been struggling for several years to conclude the first agreement with the 60MW Khimti Project.

There remained a large gap between the tariff that the government thought was reasonable versus what was demanded by the Norwegian investor Statkraft, and the private sector arms of the World Bank and ADB that were financing the project.

The shock of World Bank withdrawal from Baby Arun put tremendous pressure on the government, then led by the UML as it is now. The Bank's decision to terminate its involvement was ostensibly, at least partially, taken

in response to a letter critiquing the project sent by the UML while it was in the opposition.

The government was forced to soften its position and agree to the investors' terms following the cancellation of Baby Arun. It directed NEA to sign a power purchase agreement (PPA) with Khimti. It was concluded in January 1996, and this was followed by a second PPA in July 1996 with Panda Energy, the American developer of the 45MW Upper Bhotekosi project.

The expensive USD-denominated agreements to buy power from two international private producers, with price escalation clauses tied to the New York Consumer Price Index, sent alarm bells ringing. There was worry that the country was heading towards unaffordable tariff rates for the consumer and potential bankruptcy for NEA as a result of inevitable future weakening of the Nepali Rupee.

The government had strong-armed NEA into signing these agreements, and realised that concessionary financing terms that Nepal was used to receiving for public sector projects such as Baby Arun and Kali Gandaki A, that included below-market interest rates and 40 years repayment period with a 10 year grace period before starting repayment, were not the norm for private sector investors.

Nepal's status as a less than attractive destination for foreign

investment meant that the country had few options but to accept expensive dollar PPAs from international developers with the high commercial interest rates and short repayment periods imposed by their banks because of high investment risks.

In the end, the government ended up having to additionally provide a sovereign guarantee in order to close the deal at the insistence of the lenders -- committing it to repayment in case NEA defaulted on paying the IPPs. It is reasonable to assume that the

Investment into new power generation from 1995-2025

Project Developers	Number of projects	Total MW	Sources of debt financing
Domestic IPPs (hydro)	171	2,035.4 (62.7%)	Domestic banks, domestic retirement funds
Domestic IPPs (solar + bagasse)	21	122.3 (3.8%)	Domestic banks
NEA subsidiaries (Chilime, Upper Tamakosi, Rasuwagadi, Sanjen, domestic banks)	5	646.4 (19.9%)	Domestic retirement funds, and Upper Sanjen.
NEA (Kali Gandaki A, Mid-Marsyangdi, Upper Trisuli 3A, Chameliya, Kulekhani III, Modi, Puwa)	7	339 (10.4%)	ADB, Government of Korea, KfW, NEA, GoN
International IPPs (Khimti, Upper Bhotekosi)	2	105 (3.2%)	ADB, DEG Germany, IFC/WB

The collage features three main newspaper clippings:

- Left:** A Nepali newspaper clipping titled 'अरुण तेस्रो : ऋण स्वीकृत नहुँदै टेण्डर आह्वान' (Arun III: Loan approval not granted, tender call). It discusses the tender process and the lack of loan approval.
- Center:** A Nepali newspaper clipping titled 'अरुण तेस्रो वातावरण प्रतिवेदन अर्भै गोप्य' (Arun III environmental assessment report remains secret). It reports on the secrecy surrounding the environmental impact study.
- Right:** An English newspaper clipping titled 'Baby Arun Is Aborted' from 'WATER RESOURCES'. It states: 'Ten years after it was conceived, Nepal's most ambitious hydro power project ever is given a kiss of death. Opinions differed on who engineered the death of the 1.82 billion dollar 201 MW Baby Arun, but not on the harsh reality that the country has lost face in the international community.'

BAD NEWS: Newspaper clippings from the early 90s on tender announcement ahead of loan approval (left) and secrecy surrounding environmental assessment (centre) of Arun III before its eventual cancellation in August 1995.

30 YEARS AFTER

THE CANCELLATION OF 'BABY ARUN'

power sector
changed direction
cancellation of
August 1995

extraordinarily high political cost of agreeing to the PPA terms would have meant that no government would have willingly agreed to them in 1995 had it not suffered the trauma of the loss of concessionary-financed public sector projects as large as the Baby Arun.

It has taken NEA 25 years to consider offering dollar-denominated PPAs again: to cover the foreign exchange portion of the investment in the 216MW Upper Trisuli-1 and 120MW Rasuwa-Bhotekosi Hydropower projects. It seemed unlikely at the time, but it turned out that the dire situation Nepal found itself in 1995 planted the seed to mobilise investment for affordable power from within the country.

DOUBLE WHAMMY

After the dual shock of first losing investment in Baby Arun and having to sign expensive power purchase agreements with international IPPs, the first proposal for an alternative strategy to mitigate the risk of foreign currency investment into hydropower projects came from a group of engineers within the Arun III team at NEA.

Led by Deputy Director Damber Bahadur Nepali, engineers convinced the leadership that NEA needed to invest in a subsidiary company to build a series of locally-designed and domestically-financed projects that would have lower cost with rupee-denominated PPAs.

They registered the Chilime Hydropower Company Limited (CHCL) in October 1995 with 51% shares from NEA, 25% from its employees, and 24% available for the general public, 10% of which was prioritised for local residents at the project site.



UAHEL

DAMNED: The \$700 million 456MW Upper Tamakosi built entirely with domestic funds before it was destroyed by the September floods last year.

The 22.1MW project is in Rasuwa on a tributary of the Trisuli, and mobilised debt financing from the Employee Provident Fund, which manages retirement savings for employees of the government, public enterprises, and private sector institutions.

CHCL's experience showed that NEA employees themselves believed that individual hydropower projects with operational independence from NEA could be developed profitably in Nepal by its own engineers -- and they were willing to put their own money on the line. Chilime also demonstrated that there was money in the country, particularly with retirement funds, looking for opportunities for long-term investments.

Following completion of Chilime in 2003, CHCL led the formation of three other NEA subsidiary companies that completed construction in 2023 and 2024, producing 168.3MW using fully rupee-tied investment. NEA's largest subsidiary, the Upper Tamakosi Hydropower Limited, completed construction of its 456MW plant in 2021.

There were some delays and cost overruns on this run-of-river project, the largest in the country with a final cost of over \$700 million -- all of it sourced domestically. The five subsidiary companies launched by NEA have produced almost two times as much new power as NEA has over the past 30 years.

Seven other NEA subsidiaries are currently constructing projects to add another 474MW to the national grid. But even more important than NEA subsidiaries have been local IPPs: Nepali companies which have over the past three decades enthusiastically entered the hydropower sector.

From a regulatory perspective, the credit for mobilising domestic private investment to engage in power generation goes to Minister of Water Resources Shailaja Acharya, who in 1998 offered a flat feed-in-tariff of Rs4/kWh for hydropower projects under 10MW.

This upfront offer removed a major barrier that early developers had faced of having to spend

money to carry out a detailed feasibility study before they could even start tariff negotiations with NEA. She had laid the foundation stone of the Chilime project, and proved to be the champion of opening up the sector for domestic IPPs.

The guarantee of a PPA with a fixed tariff, irrespective of project specifications, gave small power developers the confidence to apply for survey licenses and invest in feasibility studies so they could directly approach commercial banks and make a case for their project producing required revenue to repay loans.

Domestic IPPs started adding power to the national grid in 2002. Their contribution was initially modest, and first projects were small and commercial lenders who took time to be confident about providing debt financing to a sector which had previously not been considered suitable for private sector investment.

While the first 10 years were slow, with less than 10MW being added to the grid each year, this increased twenty fold over the following ten years, resulting in the equivalent of a Baby Arun being added by Nepali IPPs to the grid each year. A total of 84 IPPs added 232MW, 328 MW, 454MW, and 400MW of new generation to the grid in 2021-2024 (graph). There was explosive, exponential growth as domestic developers have surged ahead to account for 76% of the new megawatts added to the grid since 2020, compared to 24% by NEA and its subsidiary companies.

The megawatts that IPPs are adding have followed the classic 'hockey stick curve' with the 'breakout point', signaling the rapid growth phase in 2020. Private producers are expected to accelerate new generation in the coming years with 300 solar and hydropower projects adding 11,000MW. Another 166 hydropower and 96 solar projects are currently in the survey stage, and are in line to add another 11,000MW to the construction pipeline.

One major challenge is finding financing required for the projects. Domestic investment will no

longer be sufficient to finance this ambitious pipeline of renewable energy projects. Project developers as well as NEA and the Electricity Regulatory Commission will have to leverage their substantial experience accumulated through the construction of over 200 projects to attract regional and international investment and hedge the risks of dollar-denominated PPAs.

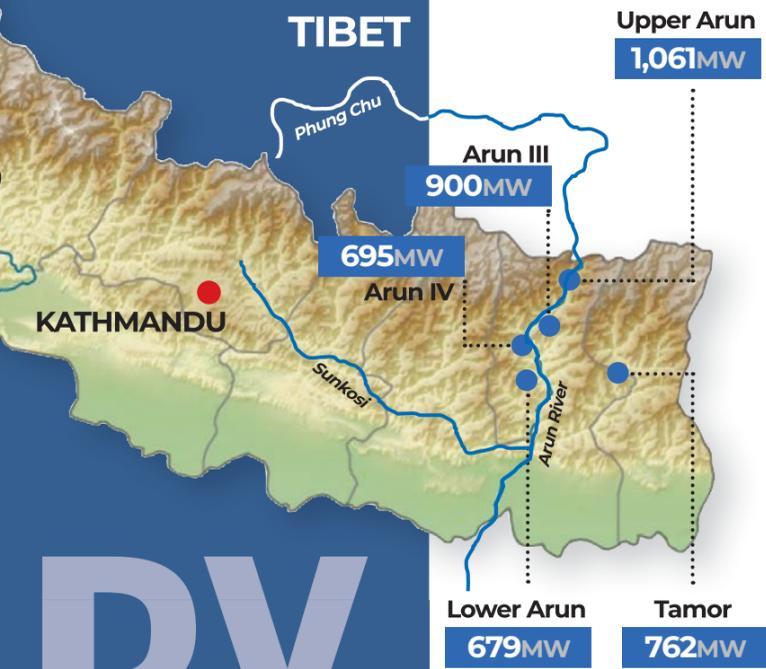
Following the cancellation of Baby Arun, Nepal developed a highly distributed power sector. The national electricity grid is currently supplied with power from a remarkably decentralised array of hundreds of hydropower and solar photovoltaic projects spread across 43 districts and all seven provinces.

This presents a sharp contrast to the pathway of a few large public sector hydropower projects with a sprinkling of private sector projects that was envisioned as part of NEA's investment planning when Baby Arun was being considered the front runner for investment. The strategy then was to allow public sector investment in a few large hydropower projects with thermal plants to fill the gap. Knowing what we know now about acceleration of climate change impacts and increased extreme weather events, following this path would have made Nepal's power sector highly vulnerable.

Decentralised generation greatly improves the resilience of Nepal's power supply as damage to power plants in one part of the country need not affect other areas that have their own generation. Following the investment plan where over two thirds of the country's power supply would have come from power plants on the Arun River, would have greatly imperiled Nepal's energy security.

All rivers in Nepal are susceptible to flooding from cloudbursts made more frequent by climate change. The Arun River which is fed by glaciers in Tibet is also at risk to glacial lake outburst floods. 🇳🇵

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



Thirty years after 201MW 'Baby Arun' was cancelled by the World Bank, four new hydropower plants, three of them India-built, are coming up on the Arun (Phung Chu in Tibetan) Basin.

DECENTRALISED AND DIVERSIFIED

In the 30 years since the cancellation of 'Baby Arun':

- Hydropower projects constructed cover capacities ranging from less than 1MW to 456MW and developed by IPPs from across the country with strong local involvement in purchasing equity shares.

- Renewable energy sources contributed to the generation mix through solar IPPs that further contribute to climate resilience, and cover shortfalls during low rainfall. The government is committed to solar contributing 10% of the power on the grid. Increasing solar beyond this target and providing incentives to project developers to invest in utility-scale battery storage would further improve resilience.



SAPDC

BIG ARUN

The 900MW Arun III project under construction since 2018 at Num in Sankhuwasabha (pictured, left) is a separate initiative by a different project developer using a different financing modality. The 'Baby Arun' version of Arun III was cancelled in 1995.



Events



Art and Culture Fest

The annual Nepal Art & Culture Festival celebrates the country's heritage through food, craft, music, and rituals across Kathmandu Valley. Savour Newari delicacies, watch master artisans at work, and be part of keeping Nepal's cultural spirit alive.

5-24 September (01) 5320735

Land and Soil

FIG Nepal's exhibition We are of the Land and Soil is showcasing photos, videos, writings and zines to highlight the struggles of indigenous communities in Bojheni.

Till 30 August, 10:30am-6pm, Outside Studio, Dhobighat

Burned and Being

Aishworya Shakya's ceramic sculptures delve into intangible experiences and private meditations about life through clay and fire (review on page 12).

Till 30 September, 11am-7pm, Dalai-la Art Space, Thamel



Charcuterie & Conversations

A networking event to bring together startups, professionals, and consultants to build partnerships and businesses for breakthroughs in the market.

29 August, 5:30pm onwards, Fee: Rs500, The 100 Spaces

Comedy Show

A laugh-packed evening awaits with The Funtastic 4 group of stand-up comics Aayush Shrestha, Sajjan Shrestha, Utsav Sapkota, and Yojana Magar.

6 September, 5pm onwards, Ticket: Rs800, Actors' Studio, Pingalastan



Music

The Elements

Head over to Taragaon, where the The Elements will be live at the Serenade Sessions this Friday.

29 August, Ticket: Rs1000, Taragaon Next

Vek

Vek is set to bring his signature sound to life at an intimate live performance at Take 1.

29 August, 3pm onwards, Ticket: Rs1000, Eden, Sanepa



Ghazal Night

Gather family and friends and unwind during the midweek with Ghazals to accompany you.

3 September (Wednesdays), 7pm onwards, Cafe Musicology



Geography of the Moon

Praised for their immersive live performances, Geography of the Moon stands out for their nomadic approach to music and unique sound mixed with elements of dreamy shoegaze and postpunk. Grab tickets.

4 September, 8pm onwards, Ticket: Rs500, Jazz upstairs



Frotz

Frotz is bringing his flair at XO all the way from Mumbai with Desi garage, heavy bass, and immaculate vibes. Get tickets through Loco Events.

29 August, 10pm onwards, XO Club



Getaway



Staycation @ Aloft

A stylish city getaway package for two awaits visitors at Aloft, which offers a one-night stay in a Loft Room, breakfast and dinner at Nook, four complimentary cocktails at Nylgiri rooftop, 20% off spa treatments at RE:VIVE, full-day access to the rooftop pool, and flexible check-in and check-out.

Price: Rs14,999 (for two), Aloft Kathmandu Thamel, 9801976065

Shaligram Hotel & Spa

Mantra Spa and Wellness in Shaligram allows visitors to relax and recharge with soothing treatments and a tranquil garden perfect to unwind in.

Jawlakhel, 9802073899

Sunshine Resort Pokhara

Escape to this boutique resort for a tranquil retreat offering luxurious accommodations with breathtaking mountain views. Easy access to local attractions like Phewa Lake and World Peace Pagoda.

Phedi Patan, 9801181115



Nana Jungle Resort

Nana offers a premium escape where nature and luxury go hand in hand. Whether you're seeking peace, adventure, or a bit of both, this resort will provide the perfect experience with eco-conscious hospitality and serene wilderness.

Chitwan National Park, 9802000916

Grand Norling

Enjoy a relaxing stay at Norling with their spacious bedrooms, and large balconies with sights of the golf course and the expansive garden.

Gokarna (01) 4910296



Dining

Dine @ Aloft

Indulge in refined flavors and skyline views with an exclusive midweek and weekend offer at Aloft, which includes 50% off on all food and beverages for men on Sundays and women on Wednesdays.

Valid August and September, 9705568643

4stories

Step into this vibrant eatery offering a diverse menu from hearty breakfasts to indulgent dinners. Try their creamy almond-milk cappuccino and don't forget to get an Instagram-worthy shot.

Thamel, 9808790813



Octave

Pair your meal with live music and breathtaking views at Octave. Explore a delightful mix of Japanese and intercontinental cuisine with specialties like the fresh Salmon Sushi.

Durbar Marg (01) 4220569



Tamarind

Explore authentic Thai seafood flavours at Tamarind: try the Sea Bass Fillet, Pad Thai Kai or Pad Thai Koong. Also check out their superb selection of Sushi.

Jhamsikhel (01) 5422626

Wok n Roll

Customise your noodles as you like with fresh veggies, protein or any go-to sauce: you can't go wrong with the Spicy Kung Pao version.

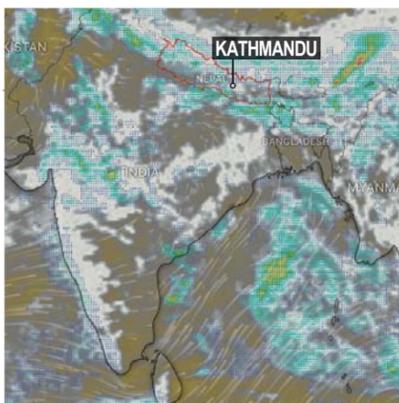
Patan, 9801913080

Miss Moti Escapes

Kripa Joshi



Weekend Weather



Monsoon Wave

We are in the last phase of the rainy season, and another monsoonal wave is upon us. It will bring copious precipitation to eastern and central Nepal till Sunday, some of the showers may be accompanied by thunder and quite heavy. The top soil in the mountains is saturated, so be alert on highways. The minimum temp is now dropping below 20 in Kathmandu Valley and the maximum will hover in the mid-20s.



Our Pick



Zach Cregger brings a thrilling blend of horror and mystery in Weapons where 17 children from the same classroom collectively disappear one night. The only student left behind is Alex Lilly. The quest to find the rest unfolds in a series of plot twists with school teacher Justine, her ex-partner and police officer Paul Morgan and Alex's family on the frontlines. Starts Julia Garner, Josh Brolin and Alden Ehrenreich. In cinemas near you.

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 ।



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**DIASPORA
DIARIES 72**

This is the 72nd episode of *Diaspora Diaries*, a *Nepali Times* series in collaboration with Migration Lab providing a platform to share experiences of living, working and studying abroad.

Ishwar Banamala

My father ran a store and that is where I spent all my time till Grade 6. Doing my homework. Serving customers. I then moved to my maternal grandparents' house because I used to get along with my cousin who was a year older than me. We did everything together, and were best friends. We took turns studying; I was a night owl, and he was an early riser. Before I went to bed after studying all night, I woke him up.

My mother was 44 when I was born, the same year my eldest brother got married. My sister-in-law becoming a part of our family was how my mother referenced my age.

I liked making money, and was always a hustler. In Grade 7, I learnt to handle a tractor and helped my brother-in-law to plough, earning Rs10 a day. As I got better, he paid me more. By Grade 9, I was already making Rs500 per day, but had to slow down to prepare for my exams.

From an early age I knew I did not want a 9-5 job. There just wasn't enough money in it. I wanted to get into business, and compared my brother who worked in the post office and what businessmen made. It did not help that my brother was honest, and never took bribes.

A friend and I made money selling cheap Chinese phones at a premium to our friends. We blasted music on the phones and pretended that we were giving them a discount.

After SLC, I started teaching math and other subjects. I was soon a shareholder in the same school and in the evening I was involved in our family's floriculture business, growing amaranth and marigold for garlands.

It was then that a friend suggested we learn the Korean language. We could be earning significantly higher in Korea for similar efforts. I had no plans to go abroad but he convinced me. I did not know anything about Korea, and was scolded at the language institute when I asked someone to point Korea on the map.

It was only there that I learnt you had to pass an exam for the Korean Employment Permit System (EPS), and pay for language classes. After a week, I decided it was not for me and dropped out. But my friend convinced me to give it one more try. I did not prepare much for the exam, and it was no surprise that I failed.

But it was just by one mark, and people would pity me for failing "just by one mark". It was a brand of failure. It hurt my ego. I had to turn things around by taking the exams seriously, and locked myself up to study hard.

Even when we had visitors, my wife told them I was not home. If I was not in my room learning Korean, I would be with a group of ten of us test-takers comparing

Helping migrant returnees to pivot

Training and mentorship can tangibly help Nepalis in their journeys back home



Labour Mobility
Upasana Khadka

When Gagan Singh Lama returned to Nepal after five and a half years in Qatar, he felt lost. He tried to find a footing in Nepal, grappling with questions like "Who am I? What is my identity?"

Despite the earnings, portage did not give him a sense of professional identity. Back in Nepal, he has been managing his cousin's car wash, and recently completed a government-funded automobile mechanic training course, something he had a knack for since childhood. He plans to add services and expand the car wash.

Studies have found that remittances can be an important source of capital for previously credit-constrained workers to start their businesses. The most favourable outcome is when skills learnt overseas are transferable or relevant back home.

Some workers even return with suitcases full of equipment or recipe books from their overseas work that are relevant for planned ventures back home. But that is not always the case: technical skills gained overseas do not always transfer in Nepal.

For migrant returnees a recurring theme is the need and ability to pivot by switching jobs, acquiring new skills through training programs in countries where they work, or as in the case of Gagan, skilling after they return.

Prabin Shrestha and Shahadev Gurung returned to Nepal, but remigrated after realising that the plastic manufacturing venture they had in mind was not going to work in Nepal. Back in Korea, they switched jobs to a meat shop.

Learning the trade inside out paid off when they came back to Nepal for good, and they now run a successful meat business. Such pivots are not always feasible overseas as visa sponsorship schemes are not designed to allow job mobility, especially in the Gulf.

An alternate workaround is to use off-hours or days off to take



technical skills or entrepreneurship classes. There are some small-scaled initiatives targeting potential returnees at destination countries that are creating the space for workers to pivot and prepare.

Ishwar Banamala (above) explored entrepreneurship ideas through classes in Korea that were unrelated to his manufacturing job there.

Sungyoul Seo, who manages the KOICA Reintegration (K-HaMi) in Kathmandu, says the Korean government provides legally employed migrant workers free vocational training as part of its Employment Insurance benefits, but there are also pilot training designed specifically for Nepalis. One program provides training in Korean food, motorcycle maintenance, and trade after a survey of over 1,400 Nepalis showed a preference for these fields for their post-return plans.

Taking classes overseas can be challenging given busy schedules with overtime work and logistical challenges. But there are options for similar training back home for returnees. At a recent program in Kathmandu under the K-HaMi project, for example, two Korean chefs trained returnees who hoped to start K-food restaurants, either individually or in groups. Others with existing eateries wanted to expand their menu offerings.

Even though the workers had mostly been employed in manufacturing or agriculture in Korea, the entrepreneurship drive, cultural affinity and transferable soft skills made the training initiative an appealing pivot.

There are technical and entrepreneurship programs

in Nepal open to all, not just returnees. Awareness programs are important to spread the word. Workers can attest to the importance of less visible but important traits like time management, hard work, communications and working in diverse settings that they gained overseas.

Jinsol Hwang, who runs the Returnee Innovator for Nepal (RIN) program, says it is important to help people tap into their entrepreneurial mindset. Exposure to how things work overseas can spark ideas back home if they are observant and enterprising.

Jinsol works with potential returnee entrepreneurs who carry "entrepreneurial DNA" while still in Korea and post-return. They are offered training and network support including connecting Nepali workers with mentors in Korea to learn about businesses that can eventually lead to commercial partnerships.

Madushika Lansakara who heads the Reintegration of Returnee Migrant Workers (ReMi) agrees that industrious returnees have soft skills and experiences that allow them to pivot even when the technical expertise may not directly apply. The ability of returnees to switch depends on factors such as personal networks and location, with urban centres offering more opportunities. Lansakara emphasises the importance of building migrant networks in both the destination country and back home at local levels.

Such networks can help address challenges like weaker social networks after being away

for long periods, create a sense of community and belonging and open up two-way communication channels with the government.

Korea returnee Santosh Dahal is one of the ten returnees who started Rasilo Agriculture Nepal, an idea that was born while they were in Korea. They collect produce from farmers across 60 districts, process, market and sell them. "We are creating jobs for 60 others while also being employees and investors ourselves," says Dahal. "Without this collective effort, we could not have operated at this scale or capitalised on our individual strengths and interests. On our own, none of us had everything it takes to run such businesses."

Rasilo won last year's RIN business pitch competition, setting an example for fellow returnees. Highlighting such stories of reintegration matters so others who want to come back can learn about possibilities and pitfalls in Nepal.

Remigration can also be a choice for many, and not everyone goes back just because nothing worked in Nepal. For many workers, the cycle of return and remigration is driven by ever-changing household needs, school fees, buying land or house, daughter's wedding or parents' health fees.

In this race to become better providers, personal dreams and post-return plans can take a backseat. As one worker put it: "Ours is a generation of sacrifices."

But once they come home, many can be cast adrift. Lansakara says economic reintegration is especially difficult when households do not have multiple sources of income, or if they have outstanding debt.

The financial and social remittances that returnees bring need to be valued and mobilised. But once we dig a little deeper and start questioning how, it gets more complicated.

What practical interventions can tangibly help returnees in their journeys back home?

Demonstration projects back in Nepal are tackling this on a small scale so returnees feel more prepared and less lost when they step out of the arrival section of the airport. 

Upasana Khadka heads Migration Lab, a social enterprise aimed at making migration outcomes better for workers and their families. Labour Mobility is a regular column in Nepali Times.



notes and practicing late into the night. The exam was difficult, but this time I passed, the only one in my group who did.

As someone who never liked the idea of doing a job, I still had my doubts about going to Korea. It did not help that one of my acquaintances had returned a month after he had left, and he discouraged me from migrating given that I was already making good money in Nepal.

But my wife suggested that I give it a shot since I had worked so hard for it. And if it really turned out not to be my cup of tea, I could always return. What did I have to lose, I thought, at least I would get to visit Korea.

My job there was in an electrical company that made circuit boards. I worked all day, earned good money. In the evenings, I kept myself busy with my real estate business back in Nepal. I had learnt the tricks of the trade from fellow real estate agents



The flower guy

A Nepali returns from Korea to expand family's horticulture business

back home, but at the time did not have the capital to invest.

In Korea, it helped that I had salary records that allowed me to get loans from financial institutions both in Korea and in Nepal. Ultimately, I started earning more from my real estate deals in Nepal than from my job in Korea. This was all thanks to my ability to take loans because of the EPS scheme. My wife has been managing the flower business while I was away.

My finances grew stronger over the eight years I was in Korea. I paid off the loans that I had borrowed to buy land. But real estate did not satisfy me entirely. I wondered: what is my brand? What will I be known for? What is my contribution to society?

Real estate is for wealth, but that is about it. I needed to sell one piece of land and use the revenue to start a venture. I took classes in business, and returned to Nepal six months ago and got back to my family's ancestral roots in floriculture.

In Nepal too, I am continuing the entrepreneurship training I had started in Korea with the Bridge International. Such exposure helps us reflect on our business such as our branding, vision, and proactive aspects like the importance of strong recordkeeping.

I am now working to upgrade and expand my floriculture business. With a friend who is still in Korea I am building a

cooling room to increase the shelf-life of flowers and other produce and set up a market in my village where others can sell their produce. Floriculture is our primary business, but it is seasonal and earns good money only during festivals like Tihar.

So, I grow tomatoes to ensure year-round earnings. I also am engaged in other businesses like real estate and online shopping. I work round the clock in Nepal — a strong work ethic is something I picked up in Korea.

My Korean bosses would work alongside us, that motivated us. I work just as hard in Nepal as I did in Korea. People here often ask me why I am pushing myself so hard.

But making garlands comes easy to me, it is work my forebears were involved in. My childhood memories are about plucking flowers with my sister.

I have a comparative advantage in this work. It comes naturally to me, it is easy and I enjoy it. And sometimes, if there are too many garlands to make, I can multitask while holding meetings. My fingers just fly. I am good at this job, but my wife is even better and faster.

When there is too much load, we can also outsource the work. To be known as the flower guy would be great personal branding. The मखमली guy. Or the सयपत्री guy. I decided to come home for just this with a one-way ticket.

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Firing her imagination

An emerging Nepali artist plays with fire to unlock the creative potential of clay sculptures

Sangya Lamsal

A cosy art space in Thamel comes alive this month with soft light filtering through glass windows and settling gently on ceramic works that radiate both silence and strength.

Much like specks of dust shimmering in a sunbeam, fragments of uneven mirrors scattered at the centre of the exhibition catch fleeting reflections of passersby that force visitors to reflect on life and society.

From a distance, the mirrors resemble playful, anime-style sunny side ups in bright shades.

It may look random, but on closer inspection the meticulous craftsmanship reveals itself in every curve, giving more permanent shape and form to the artist's fingers on the original clay.

Alongside are cups, vases, and plates adorned with delicate sketches of animals, houses, and trees. Some have inscriptions drifting across surfaces like floating letters. The vases rise in varying heights, dressed in muted greens, while some are blended with soft browns and yellows.

"Ceramics have taught me patience in unpredictability," says artist Aishworya Shakya, 26, whose work is currently on display at

Dalai-la gallery in Thamel.

Shakya began with simple drawings, but as she delved deeper into her studies of fine arts, she began exploring new concepts and methods of idea formation. She found herself increasingly drawn to the expressive potential of ceramics.

"Clay is flexible and transformative, and the process of turning it into a hardened form is cathartic," she explains. "For me, it's about free forms, feelings, and the intangible, which often take shape in abstract ways through ceramics."

The writings on her finished ceramics are deeply rooted in her academic explorations of personal



DALAI-LA ART SPACE

history. Shakya contemplated family relationships, and transformed them into patterns and inscriptions on clay — giving her private meditations an extension on life and lessons.

"It is never fixed what I want to make when I begin," says Shakya. "There might be a frame, but never anything too specific. My forms come through an intuitive process. If I try to meticulously plan everything, it never works out, so I just let it flow."

What begins as an imagined idea often transforms through the process, shaped by the unpredictability of clay and fire, keeping her grounded and open-minded.

Shakya's works usually undergo three rounds in the furnace: beginning with bisque firing, followed by layers of engobe underglaze mixed with pigments, which she applies in three coats before the second firing. Finally, she adds the glaze before the final firing. The most demanding part is actually in preparing and mixing the clay, removing bubbles, and refining it so the final product has at least some predictability, she says.

The title *Burned and Being* comes from the ceramic-making process itself. "But more than just the process, it is an embodiment of my existence. As a person learning to take up space, I am filling my surroundings with things that inspire and align with me to create a sense of being and take a stand for myself," Shakya explains.

The artist is now looking ahead to expand her art beyond vases and mirrors to explore more sculptural forms. 🇳🇵

Burned and Being

Till 30 September

11am to 7pm

Dalai-la Art Space, Thamel



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