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ONE MONTH ON

SUMAN NEPALI

Shristi Karki

Already trying to balance youth demands with legal provisions in the Constitution, Prime Minister Sushila Karki's interim government faced yet another challenge over Dasain: a receding monsoon dumped unseasonal rain unleashing floods and landslides that killed at least 60, mostly in eastern Nepal.

The government was rated positively for its early warning and the 'visibility' of its disaster response, with many comparing it to the inaction of the NC-UML coalition during last year's floods.

Government agencies and police proactively closed off hazardous sections of highways as Kathmandu was marooned from the rest of the country in the peak holiday season. Stranded passengers were taken care of, with police, army and local governments in llam coordinating rescue and relief efforts.

Many of the problems were structural and inherited from decades of neglect and corruption in highway contracts. Shoddy bridges and encroachment of

settlements along river banks have increased risk from more frequent extreme weather caused by climate breakdown.

With Dasain over, Tihar around the corner and the worst of the disaster behind, Karki administration is trying to balance the separate demands of GenZ movers and shakers who installed her in office with constitutional provisions.

It has not helped that the badly-mauled political parties are spoiling for a fight, and the three top leaders show little signs of stepping down.

"Nepal's movement did not happen in a democratic vacuum, so this government walks a very fine line in political legitimacy," says Bidushi Dhungel of the National Democratic Institute in Nepal. "In this fragile space, whatever the work done — or not done— by the interim government within its limited mandate, it may open up avenues for further dissent from old and new actors. They are caught between a rock and a hard place."

Civil society activists issued a statement on Wednesday calling on

the main political parties to heed the writing on the wall and reform themselves. Signed by professor Krishna Khanal and former ambassador Keshab Mathema, the statement said: "The main leaders of the main parties should say sorry, and voluntarily resign ... they must respect public sentiments and work to reform and transform their parties to be more accountable to the public, or risk being irrelevant."

Complicating matters further are the sometimes contradictory demands of various GenZ factions on punishing those responsible for the carnage and rampage of 8-9 September, Constitution and elections.

Karki faces calls to immediately detain former PM K P Oli and Home Minister Ramesh Lekhak for their involvement in the massacre outside Parliament. Under pressure from GenZ delegates, Home Minister Om Aryal fired off a letter to the police to arrest the two.

But later at a confrontational midnight meeting at the prime minister's residence in Baluwatar, all four security chiefs advised Karki that arresting the UML and

GROUND ZERO: The destroyed centre of Nepal's government with Singha Darbar (in green scaffolding), the Attorney General's Office, Supreme Court and in the distance Parliament building. Also seen are the nearly finished new Parliament Complex and the new Supreme Court buildings. Drone shot taken on Thursday morning.

NC ex-ministers could unleash violent confrontation on the streets.

The interim government is in a bind. It has formed a committee headed by Gauri Bahadur Karki to investigate the killings last month as well as the arson and vandalism that followed. The question is: should it wait for the committee to submit its report before punishing perpetrators, or let police arrest those who can easily be identified in social media posts setting fire to Singha Darbar, the Supreme Court and other sites.

The Prime Minister is caught in the crossfire between managing the expectations of a movement that appointed her, and working within the framework of her interim government's mandate and Constitution.

Discordant Democracy
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Discordant Democracy

Destroying was the easy part. But redesigning a cleaner, newer Nepal will be much more difficult.

Sonia Awale

The meeting called by Prime Minister Sushila Karki at Baluwatar on 4 October was supposed to be about completing the interim cabinet with GenZ representatives. But it ended with factions putting up rival demands.

It is ironic that a movement that voted for Karki on Discord is itself marred by discord. But such jostling was to be expected. This was an amorphous and leaderless group of young Nepalis that was suddenly elevated to fill a national power vacuum, and is now expected to redesign the country from scratch.

At least two camps have emerged within the youth groups. One is led by Sudan Gurung of Hami Nepal and the other by Rakshya Bam. Just like it was at Nepal Army Headquarters on 10 September, there is distrust and dissent within these disparate groups. For the sake of stability, and in memory of the 75 who lost their lives last month, Nepalis want these groups to be more united in their stances.

Prime Minister Karki did not attend the Baluwatar meeting last week, wanting the GenZs to first work out their differences. Home Minister Om Prakash Aryal and Finance Minister Rameshore Khanal were present, and entreated the young delegates to cooperate.

Sudan Gurung has demanded the resignation of the Chief Justice and the head of the anti-graft body, the CIAA. However, some even within Gurung's camp are said to want constitutional provisions to be respected, and do not agree with some of his eight demands. Rakshya Bam accuses Gurung of trying to do away with the Constitution and issuing arbitrary statements on governance.

The conflict between various GenZ groups has exposed the nature and limitations of street revolt, proving that it is always easier to destroy than to rebuild. A revolution can bring rapid and transformative change, but then comes the task of agreeing on new structures and processes — while dealing with the ego and ambition of the protagonists.

TIGHT-ROPE WALK

One year after a similar student-led uprising, Bangladesh is struggling to stabilise the system and preparing for elections while dealing with extremism and geopolitical fallout. Sri Lanka held elections and brought in a new youthful leader, but it has not been smooth sailing.

Prime Minister Karki's caretaker government is on a tight-rope walk. Moving too fast on arresting the previous prime minister and investigating others for corruption risks igniting renewed street violence, but delaying justice will anger the impatient youth.

The longer the uncertainty and instability lasts, the more likely it will be for radical forces to take advantage of the fluidity. The communal clashes in Birganj and Janakpur over Dasain, inspired by what is happening across the border, should be a wake-up call. Hate speech and ethnic slurs on social media could be incendiary if left unregulated.

The Prime Minister has said her foremost priority is to ensure free, fair and inclusive elections on 5 March — mindful that various

forces are out to sabotage it for their own interests. Amending the Constitution to meet GenZ demands may have to wait for polls next year, and real change that improves lives, creates jobs and makes the bureaucracy cleaner and more efficient will take longer.

But till then, the interim administration could deliver tangible benefits to people with do-able improvements like speeding up the driving license process, removing middlemen from all levels of the bureaucracy, expeditiously completing highway repairs, controlling food prices.

The youth want immediate course correction, given how the old political parties, politicians and bureaucracy had plundered the state for years. But idealism alone cannot make a state machinery function. Every decision during this sensitive transition must be taken without undermining previous gains.

Factional friction within the GenZ will allow the old leaders in the old parties to regroup and plot revenge. Despite being disgraced, K P Oli of UML, Sher Bahadur Deuba of the Nepali Congress and Pushpa Kamal Dahal of the Maoist Centre, are still not willing to retire. The tragic loss of life and the mayhem that followed does not seem to have

opened their eyes to the writing on the wall. They are intent on blaming everyone but themselves.

The Election Commission has already set a deadline for party registration by 16 November. Some in the GenZs want provisions to vote for a directly elected executive head of the country by even changing the Constitution.

There is a lot of confusion about what exactly the mandate of the interim government is, what it can and cannot do. With the dissolution of Parliament, the interim government cannot amend the Constitution, its only mandate is to conduct elections to form a new government that would then work on amendments. At most, it can pass ordinances but only for the peace and good governance of the country or when there is an immediate need to enact a law.

To make things murkier, Sudan Gurung in a widely-shared interview on Al Jazeera said that he would run for prime minister, and that he would not accept the old parties and their leaders even if they win the elections unless they completely reform their political stance. He is also willing to work with pro-monarchists if they are for the betterment of the country.

Dharan Mayor Harka Sampang has already registered a new party called Shram Sanskriti Party while the likes of Kathmandu Mayor Balen Shah, Energy Minister Kulman Ghising and RSP Sumana Shrestha are expected to follow another corporate backer for a new party.

All parties, including any new ones representing the youth, must learn from the failures of the newer alternatives such as Sajha, Bibeksheel and more recently RSP. Parties go nowhere without a clear ideology, organisation and a vision and pathway post-elections.

The interim government is made of most capable technocrats and a Prime Minister with zero tolerance for incompetence and who says she has no intention of continuing in the position a minute longer than necessary.

We now have to move beyond destruction to rebuilding, and not be distracted by discord.



AMIT MACHAMASI

Letters

ELECTIONS

Getting out-of-the-country voting ain't an easy job, they shouldn't be over enthusiastic...and face reality (March to 5 March', Shristi Karki, #1280). Best wishes and congratulations to the interim government for returning the country to peace.

Akku Chowdhury

Based on the number of Nepalis abroad; the necessity of confirming claims to sustained citizenship; orientation of the new minister to not only this issue but other responsibilities too, verification of requests to vote; passing related law; developing rules, guidelines; related orientation to all consular staff abroad; advisory notices to all eligible Nepalis abroad; the limited time within which to establish all these procedures and processes (max 5 months, taking into account Dasain & Tihar etc.) within a new, still incomplete gov't structure...this is an ambitious but unrealistically

optimistic gesture to appease under the current pressure.

Iván G. Somlai

Let us not also forget changing the rules so that people in the country don't have to travel back to their home districts to vote. That can be too costly and time-consuming.

Marty Logan

MONARCHY

The monarchy isn't a decisive force ('Why the monarchy still sways Nepal's republic', Sanjay Upadhyay, nepalitimes.com). It is a ghost that haunts the people. India believes in two pillars - one political party and another palace, they use to keep these two in balance.

Kripendra Amatya

It is true that Nepali monarchs never compromised with others on issues like sovereignty and national interests. Whereas, after 2007... all the political parties gambled national interest for the PM chair.

Bhupendra Prasad Giri

Monarchy is a smaller and smaller residual date expired medicine in the nostalgic memory bhandar of old ancient over privileged feudal overlords.

Forester

INTERNATIONAL COVERAGE

Yes, initial western media reports were that social media was shut off and GenZ Nepalis took to the streets ('International spotlight on Nepal', Sudiksha Tuladhar, #1280). Completely ignorant to the fact that corruption was the primary issue.

Shaun Sarvey

GenZ, salute to you. 8-9 September 2025 shocked all Nepalis. Many lost loved ones, children were injured, and property destroyed. Human losses caused lasting pain. Condolences to grieving families are essential.

RB Khadka

The emerging geopolitical equation is the reason why we are being covered by different media outlets for their own

political interest, otherwise we are non-existent.

Anoj Dhoj Joshi

DIRECTLY ELECTED PM

It is most likely that in a direct election, a demagogue may capture the premiership and keep the whole country hostage to his psychotic impulses ('Nepal's democracy keeps doubting itself', Ayusha Chalise, nepalitimes.com). So, it is not a better solution.

Rational Boy

The process is less relevant than the mindset and actions of the incumbent.

Marcus Cotton

REFORM

It is crucial that young cadres now challenge the old 'leadership' of the three main parties at federal-national, regional-provincial and local levels to bring about radical reform of these patriarchal and hierarchical structures ('Different Dasain', Kunda Dixit, #1280).

David Seddon

RAINS

Great photo job...condolences to

families who suffered loss of property and life. The Bagmati River basin should be clear of plastic debris. Hope it will remain clean.

Thomas Kelly

Good advice - if only to then reduce the traffic so as to lessen pile-ups at possible landslides.

Tony Jones

Good to hear that the government gives signals of caring for its population. Next step: short term intensive repairs of roads and bridges. And strong effective long term works on infrastructure.

Renate Schwarz

NEW KUMARI

Is it wise to separate a literal child from her parents? The child needs her parents to experience childhood.

Palsa_175

In our society, parents often make decisions based on prestige and what others will say. They don't always force us out of selfishness — many truly

believe they are doing what's best. But the truth is, more than 90% of Nepali people care more about social status than individual feelings. This creates pressure on young people to follow paths they didn't choose for themselves. It's time we start talking about this openly. Respecting culture doesn't mean we should lose our own identity or happiness.

Ujwola

CORRODED GODS

Chemical erosion also proves value, veneration of these gods/idols/ sculptures; they are the living proof of Nepal's bond with the universe of the gods; would it help if the offerings were made beside the structures, instead of on them ('Offerings corrode Kathmandu's gods', Anita Bhetwal, nepalitimes.com)?

Renate Schwarz

ROBERT REDFORD

OMG, Sundance Kid was in Nepal at the height of his career ('The Sundance kid in Nepal', Lisa Choegyall, #1280). Happy he took his time to visit Nepal.

Robby Ghimire



Online Package

The Nepal Government Railway (NGR) began service with locomotives given the auspicious names of Pashupati and Guhyeshwari, which later expanded to Goraknath Mahabir, Krishna, Sita-Ram, and Sri Bishnu. Once a vital link to India that was allowed to fail, the NGR's legacy carries to this day as Nepal plans new railways. Read the story on page 6-7 and watch our video on YouTube.



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Nepal GenZs inspired

Visuals of youth-led unrest in Kathmandu energised protesters in Manila last month

Kunda Dixit in Manila

One is an archipelago, the other is landlocked. But the Philippines and Nepal have a lot in common: both are disaster-prone, their economies dependent on overseas migrant workers, both went through Maoist insurrections that failed to replace a feudal order dominated by political dynasties. And both countries suffer from rampant corruption.

Twelve days after deadly protests toppled Nepal's government, tens of thousands of Filipinos, many of them youth, also poured out into the streets demanding transparency and better governa. Cars were set on fire, and more than 200 people were arrested, nearly half of them minors.

The 'Trillion Peso March Against Corruption' was fuelled by anger over embezzlement by politicians and their crony contractors estimated to top \$17 billion in flood control infrastructure that were either never completed, or non-existent.

"We learnt from Nepal and Indonesia how to deploy social media as a tool to spread information, we are digital natives and well connected within the country and across borders," said



Yuri Lemana of the Youth Alliance for Freedom of Information, and a part of the GenZ protests.

"The system has failed us, unemployment is on the rise, there are shrinking opportunities for youth, and we face environmental threats. There is a realisation that our future is at stake," Lemana added.

Online groups started

highlighting bribery and kickbacks in July after President Ferdinand (Bongbong) Marcos Jr himself brought up corruption in the infrastructure budget in his annual address to the nation, and launched a probe.

The protests gained traction after powerful visuals of rallies in Indonesia and Nepal circulated on digital platforms. Filipino

journalists also exposed the high-flying lifestyle of contractors involved in siphoning off the infrastructure budget.

As in Nepal, the youth protests were joined in by various radical groups. In Manila they reportedly included supporters of ex-president Rodrigo Duterte who is currently on trial at the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Hague for

extrajudicial killings during his 'war on drugs' 2011-2019. Duterte still has a lot of support, especially in the Filipino diaspora, for being tough on crime.

Duterte was allied with Marcos in the 2022 elections, and his daughter Sara Duterte is currently vice-president. But the two families had a massive falling out, and the Supreme Court annulled the Lower



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Turkish to Seville

Turkish Airlines has added daily flights to Seville, one of Spain's most prominent tourism hubs. This is the carrier's sixth destination in Spain after Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Malaga, and Bilbao. There are an estimated 30,000 Nepalis in Spain. Also, Turkish Airlines and Bahrain's flag carrier Gulf Air are partnering to foster mutual growth, through reciprocal loyalty



program benefits, shared ground handling services and more. "We believe this agreement will pave the way for long-term collaboration between Türkiye and Bahrain," said Turkish CEO Bilal Ekşi. "Thanks to this agreement, we will combine our flight networks and increase the number of connections to Bahrain, offering our passengers additional travel destinations," added Gulf Air Group CEO Jeffrey Goh.



Leapmotor B10 EV

Shangrila Motors has begun delivering the Leapmotor B10 EV, which was showcased at NADA. The model features 180mm ground clearance and a driving range of 600km. It is priced starting at Rs4.99 million.



Indian goods cheaper

India's latest revision to its GST took effect on October 6, leading to price reductions for many consumables, garments, and electronics. Nepali consumers will gain from cheaper imports, but domestic industries are concerned that increased imports, especially informal, could harm local production and employment.



Korala customs

The Nechung Customs Office at the Nepal-China border at Korala has stepped in because both the Kerung and Kodari crossings have been damaged by recent floods. This has been positive for Mustang locals, who have found employment driving EVs across the border, and moving cargo.

Indian bank loans

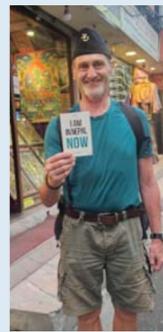
The Reserve Bank of India is permitting SBI, ICICI, HDFC, and Axis banks to provide Indian rupee loans to individuals and banks in Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka. Although this will assist Nepalis when domestic banks face cash shortages, experts warn that the policy might widen Nepal's trade deficit with India.

Vivo launches phone

Vivo has launched the Y21d smartphone. It includes water and dust resistance, a 6500 mAh battery with fast charging, options for 6GB or 8GB RAM paired with 128GB ROM, a 6.68-inch 90Hz display, and a 50MP rear camera. The two variants are priced at Rs21,499 and Rs23,499.

Tourism hit

Despite the protests, 78,711 tourists visited Nepal in September, including 15,556 from India, 5,237 from China, 9,679 from the US, 3,015 from Sri Lanka, and 2,230 from Bangladesh. This represents only a 18.3% decline from September 2024. Recent rainfall and travel warnings have impacted post-Dasain tourism in Pokhara, with hotel occupancy falling to 3% from the usual 80%.



Rain damage

Recent rains damaged 13 hydropower stations running or under construction mainly in eastern Nepal, interrupting 105.4MW of power supply. Irrigation projects nationwide have also been damaged amounting to Rs100 million.

MAW carnival

MAW Vriddhi is holding a Mega Exchange Carnival 10-12 October at Alice Receptions and at Deepal, Avatar, Nammi, and Seres showrooms across Nepal. Showcases, test drives for new models will be available. Customers can get their car valued, receiving upto Rs1.5 million. Other attractions include humanoid robots, racing simulators, a kid's zone, and food and drink.



Post protest austerity

The September protests resulted in Rs80 billion in damage to businesses and impacted 15,000 jobs directly. The government has announced recovery measures: Affected businesses can import furniture, machinery, and similar items at subsidised tax rates. Borrowers will get extensions on loan repayment. The budget will be reviewed, with many small-scale projects being cut. Delegations for conferences abroad will be limited to three people. Civil servants and political leaders will not be able to get extra vehicles or high-cost equipment and technology.

€41M from Germany

Nepal and Germany have an agreement worth 41 million euros to advance projects in energy, development and health, such as the Power Distribution Strengthening Programme in Pokhara, Butwal and Bharatpur. The projects will be implemented through the German agencies GIZ, KfW and PTB.

Filipinos



WHITE SHIRTS VS BLACK SHIRTS: Thousands of young Filipinos fed up with corruption in flood control projects rallied on 21 September at the shrine commemorating the 1986 EDSA Revolution that ousted strongman Ferdinand Marcos (far left). The protests in Manila were infiltrated by various other political groups opposed to the Philippine ruling party (left) who used the One Piece pirate flag seen in youth protests in Indonesia and Nepal.

House's attempt to impeach the vice-president.

Last week in Manila, a remarkably well-informed Grab driver replayed TikTok videos of Kathmandu's burning Parliament building to a passenger from Nepal. After his garment factory was driven out of business by cheap Chinese imports, he started driving a ride-hailing cab and was livid with successive governments not providing opportunities to ordinary people like him.

Traffic was gridlocked because of flooded streets, and the driver vented out his anger: "Look at this. The streets are always flooded because of corruption. We should have done here what you did in Nepal."

Even before the protests, Senate President Francis Escudero and

House Speaker Martin Romualdez had both resigned over the 'Floodgate Scandal'. Romualdez is Marcos' cousin and is now said to be in Madrid, where his every movement is being tracked by Filipino diaspora in social media posts. The Independent Commission for Infrastructure has issued subpoenas to probe corruption in flood control projects.

As in Nepal and Indonesia, much of the anger was over the offspring of politicians extravagantly flaunting their ill-gotten wealth on Instagram and TikTok. In the Philippines, the outrage is also over political clans passing on electoral seats to offspring.

The 21 September protests were centred around Rizal Park and the EDSA Intersection in Manila — both symbolic for previous people's movements against the Spanish colonialists and the 1986 uprising against the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos (father of the present president).

"People here had seen what happened in Nepal, and were asking why we weren't as angry as people there? Why not show our anger, too?" said one reporter who covered the protests. But, he added: "Let's not be naive. It may have started with youth anger, but there were also people who were paid to infiltrate and instigate. We were also wary that things should not get out of hand like in Nepal."

Seventy percent of Filipinos are Millennials and GenZ of voting

age, and they were impatient with a rigged electoral system. In a clear parallel to what happened in Kathmandu two weeks earlier, radical groups, political rivals, and the general public furious with the system all joined in the protests.

Catholic priests, people from all generations and professions had participated in the EDSA Uprising against Marcos in 1986. This time, it was the youth who took the lead.

Joseph Francisco Ortega of the Philippine National Youth Commission said he understands the frustration among the youth that fuelled the unrest. The discontent is also because despite there being young legislators, they are either party-affiliated or scions of political dynasties.

"If we can convince young politicians to do the right thing, then we have won half the battle," Ortega said. "If we want to rebuild quickly and for the long term, we have to change the system from within. There is a constructive way to do this, while exercising the right to non-violent protest."

CROSS-POLLINATION

The violence in Manila streets on 21 September was nowhere near the scale of what happened in Kathmandu on 8-9 September, but both transcended GenZ to be an outlet for pan-generational rage much like 1986 in the Philippines.

"With due respect to the youth, it is not about age but about technology," explained journalist Malou Mangahas of the Right To

Know, Right Now Coalition who participated in the 1986 uprising against Marcos. "We were all young and angry once. We are older, but still angry, and demanding good governance, transparency and accountability."

Just like in Nepal, young Filipinos rallying against corruption were also wary of infiltration, and it was clear from the anti-Marcos graffiti who the instigators of violence were. The GenZ were mainly wearing white while the pro-Duterte crowd are seen in videos in black.

The minors seem to have just joined in the melee from their street-side settlements. Rights groups have called for their release, accusing police of rough interrogation and 'red-tagging' as Communist provocateurs.

Much of the transboundary cross-pollination of anti-government protests across Asia last month used gaming characters, memes, and anime personas like the manga cartoon One Piece flag depicting a grinning skull in a straw hat which became an icon of youth protests.

Yuri Lemana adapted a saying of gaming character Archmagos Cortiko in Warhammer 40,000: "Prayer has its power, but fury also has its uses. If the government tries to hide things from us, we will find a way. Fury will find a way." 📌

Kunda Dixit is the Publisher of Nepali Times, and was a foreign correspondent based in Manila in the early 1990s.

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DEREK CROSS

Life and times of Nepal Government Railway

A vital link to India that was allowed to fail, but its legacy carries to this day as Nepal plans new railways

Dan Edwards

In the early 20th century, Prime Minister Chandra Shamsher Rana wanted to build a railway from the Indian border north towards Kathmandu to reduce the costs of transporting food and other supplies.

It would also facilitate travel of thousands of Hindu pilgrims from India, who had to walk up to five days to reach Kathmandu to celebrate Shivaratri and other religious festivals.

The plan was to bring a railway up to Dhursing, where a ropeway to Kathmandu had just been constructed. This would avoid the need to carry supplies on the

backs of porters from Birganj to Bhimphedi then over Chandragiri Pass to the Valley. However, the costs of building a railway to Dhursing were found excessive because of the steep grades trains would encounter north of Amlekhganj.

A Calcutta firm Martin & Company surveyed and built the Nepal Government Railway (NGR) in one year at a cost of approximately 1.1 million Indian rupees. The 30lb narrow-gauge rails, 2' 6" apart, extended 29 miles from Raxaul, India to Birganj, Parwanipur, Jitpur, Simara and Amlekhganj.

Prime Minister Chandra, his wife, other Rana officials, and King Tribhuvan attended the dedication

ceremony in Raxaul on 16 February 1927. It was only the second time in history a Nepal king had stepped foot on foreign soil.

The NGR began service with two steam locomotives, 4-6-0 tanks (indicating wheel arrangements) built in Leeds, England in 1926. They were given the auspicious names of Pashupati and Guhyeshwari. As traffic increased, the NGR later purchased Goraknath (in 1928), Mahabir, Krishna, Sita-Ram, and lastly Sri Bishnu (in 1949).

Railway engines embodied a religious-cultural significance besides their secular importance as mechanisms of transportation. These engines later ran on the Janakpur Railway as well.

A British citizen, W S Pedrick, was the NGR's chief officer from 1927 to 1941. Tek Jung Thapa then became NGR general manager until 1959, when Kulbir Singh KC replaced him. Devendra Singh KC took over in 1963. A Bengali, Radha Charan Bhattacharya, lived in Birganj and worked as an accountant and auditor for the NGR for 25 years.

The opening of the Tribhuvan Rajpath and the advent of air cargo services in the late 1950s took traffic away from the NGR. During 1956-57, the NGR carried 255,000 passengers and 60,000 tons of freight and made an estimated profit of 800,000 Indian rupees. By 1963-64, the railway transported only 66,450 passengers, 30,070 tons

of goods and for the first time in its history operated at a loss of 151,000 rupees.

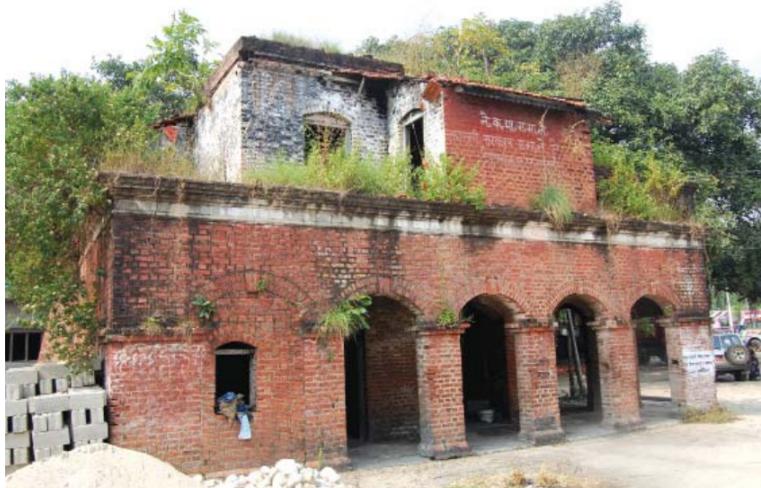
Passenger service ended in June 1965, and all freight trains were suspended on 13 April 1968. A sporadic 5km 'freight shuttle service' between Birganj and Raxaul continued until the late 1980s.

The NGR played an important role in Nepal's commercial life. During 1937-38, the top four products imported into Nepal by value were cloth, iron, yarn, and cigarettes. Since Kathmandu was the largest market for imports, many of those and other products were loaded on NGR freight cars at Raxaul and transported to Amlekhganj, then by lorry to Dhursing, finally by ropeway to Kathmandu.

Passenger traffic also was impressive. During World War II, the NGR did a booming business transporting Nepal Army troops to India for garrison duty and services abroad. For example, 6,000 soldiers from two Nepali brigades rode the NGR during March 1940. At the end of the war, Maharaja Juddha Shamsher stated that Nepal had sent 148,500 troops to India at British request. Many of those men rode the NGR on their return to Nepal in 1945.

A 1936 document in Nepal's National Archives shows the NGR had nearly 170 employees that year. Annual salaries for those in the General Department ranged from 1,200 Indian rupees (a medical officer) to nine sweepers at 102 rupees. In the Traffic Department, five station managers each received 384 rupees, while four trolley men got 132 rupees. The Engineering Department supervisor's salary was 1,800 rupees, while eight guards were paid 120 rupees each. Locomotive drivers took home 300 rupees, firemen 204 rupees.

The Ranas had outlawed unions, but with regime change



The former NGR station at Amlekhganj in 2017.

DAN EDWARD



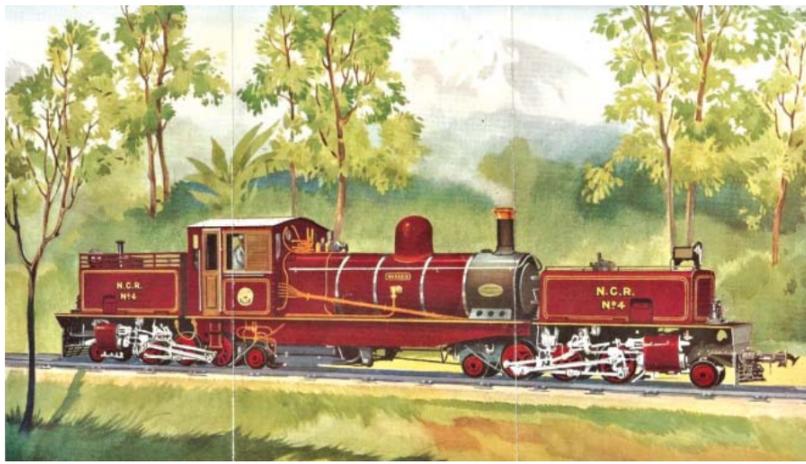
Sita-Ram at Amlekhganj in 1958.

DEREK CROSS



Sri Bishnu under repair at Birjanga.

JOHN BENSON



Mahabir, a unique Garratt locomotive, built in Manchester, England in 1932.

COLLECTION: RICHARD PELHAM



ANIL JUNG THAPA

Sardar Tek Jung Thapa, the NGR general manager for many years.

in 1951, railway workers went on strike and submitted a list of demands to the government for higher salaries, more sick leave, free housing, and establishment of a provident fund. Nepali Congress Minister Bhadra Kali Mishra met with railway representatives and made promises, but workers were not satisfied and continued their protests throughout the 1950s, actions that Nepal's Communist Party enthusiastically endorsed.

In his book *Prachin Sansmaran*, Ram Mani Dixit tells how he and a party of Nepali officials and soldiers were entrusted with 1,530 boxes of Indian currency worth nine million rupees to deliver to the Calcutta mint in 1939.

A special NGR train left Amlekhganj with the treasure, but being heavily overloaded, the train rapidly gained speed, and Dixit and the party became alarmed and began crying "Narayan, Narayan" in fear. The driver lost control, the train derailed, soldiers were thrown from the wagons, and silver coins were scattered in the jungle. Dixit and his colleagues managed to escape through the coach windows with only bumps and bruises.

The NGR repeatedly faced several problems in operating its

trains. Its engines could run on wood, but coal was the preferred fuel, and coal supplies from India sometimes were interrupted.

EVENTUAL DECLINE

By the 1940s, spare parts for its locomotives were hard to obtain from England, and its 30lb rails could not support heavier equipment that would allow more efficient and less costly operations. While mechanics with only on-the-job training performed heroically to keep broken-down equipment repaired and in service, regular maintenance was neglected, and the Ranis took no steps to invest the amounts needed to modernise the railway.

Nor did matters improve with the advent of democracy in 1951. Nepal's First Five-Year Plan (1956-1961) for the transportation sector focused its attention and provided funds for building roads and airports. In Nepal's transportation family, railways were the *sano bhai*, even the *sautini bhai*. However, the NGR was not forgotten, and several studies were conducted from 1952 to 1971 to consider what should and could be done with the NGR.

A report by Indian railway officials in 1952 described the

alternatives: rehabilitate the NGR at minimal cost; rehabilitate it as a permanent measure; convert the line to a metre-gauge railway, extend the existing narrow-gauge line from Amlekhganj to Hetauda after rehabilitating the entire system; or construct a new metre-gauge line to Hetauda. Nepal adopted the last and most expensive alternative, but all that was accomplished was a survey of a new line to Hetauda. There were no efforts to implement the ambitious project or to secure the necessary funding.

As the NGR rapidly deteriorated after 1956, newspaper stories and editorials rallied to support the railway and criticised government inaction. A 1959 article claimed that 'ill-feeling and disunity are prevalent among railway employees, and this has resulted in inefficient service causing anxiety and inconveniences for passengers. Local people who know the inside stories of the Railway are afraid to make a journey even up to one station.'

In 1964, another paper wrote: 'The Nepal Government Railway is no more than a heap of scrap iron. The number of passengers is negligible. The Government has become completely indifferent towards the condition of the railway.'

Another article charged: 'The NGR has reached a stage of total ruin... Employees never receive their salaries in time... The train starts with ticketless passengers. No government authority ever inspects this wretched transport [system]... It is painful to note that we cannot improve the condition of such a small railway. We appeal to the Government...to improve the condition of this railway.'

A 1965 World Bank study of Nepal's transportation needs provided the coup de grace. It recommended the NGR be abandoned, as the cost of rehabilitation was excessive and did not solve the problem of incompatible track gauges at Raxaul, which necessitated transferring by hand freight from India Railway's metre-gauge wagons to NGR's narrow-gauge wagons.

Nevertheless, Indian technicians completed surveys and submitted reports to Nepal in 1967 for rehabilitating the NGR, but by then the situation was hopeless: the railway was losing 300,000 rupees a year. Yet a few government officials continued to advocate for broad gauging the then-defunct NGR and extending it to Hetauda.

Again, Indian engineers

conducted a survey for such a 52-mile broad-gauge, electric line in 1971 and submitted a report to the government. They estimated the project would cost at least \$200 million plus \$60 million more for rolling stock. India's Railway Ministry promptly concluded it was not a viable project, and the report died in Nepal's byzantine bureaucracy.

It seems some dreams never die, and hope springs eternal. In April 2018, the prime ministers of India and Nepal met in New Delhi and agreed to build an electric rail line from Raxaul to Kathmandu and that India would conduct the studies and pay the full costs of construction.

That was seven years ago. No rails have yet been laid. Costs continue to escalate, and no guaranteed funding has been secured. Will we ever see electric broad-gauge trains arriving in Kathmandu? Certainly not in this author's lifetime, but then he is no longer a young man. 🇳🇵

Dan Edwards was a Peace Corps volunteer in 1966 and is the author of several books on Nepal. This is the second instalment in a new limited series in Nepali Times on the historic transportation infrastructures of Nepal.



SUBARU

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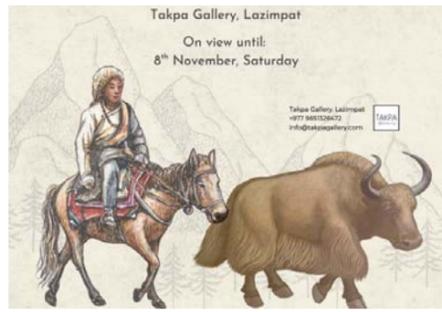
FORESTER

CROSSTREK
HEV

OUTBACK



Events



Echoes of the Highland

A visual meditation on the enduring bond between people, nature, and culture in highland communities. Check out this exhibition featuring the works of artists Pasang Dolpo and Wang Lama.

11 October – 8 November, Takpa Gallery, Lazimpat

Photowalk

Meet new people, make friends and explore the city through photography. Bring your phone or camera – beginners and professionals are all welcome. Online registration is mandatory: blablacommunity.com/kathmandu

18 October, 10am-12pm, Rs300



Chrysanthemum Flora Expo

Tihar is just around the corner and here is Nepal's largest and most competitive platform for showcasing floriculture in its 18th edition.

15-19 October, 9am-6:30pm, Jawalakhel Football Ground

Meditation Retreat

Step away from the noise of daily life and discover the inner joy that lives within you. A week-long retreat to dive deep into meditation, laughter, peace, and happiness.

25-30 October (arrival 24 October afternoon), Osho Tapoban International Comune



KVR Summit Challenge

A monthly trail running event aimed at boosting local tourism via athletics, KVR Summit Challenge opens registration for 1.21km and 10km races for this Saturday. Details on trailmandu.com

11 October, 7:30am on wards, Pharping

Politics, Economy, Land

Fraser Sugden of the University of Birmingham and Suresh Dhakal and Janak Rai of Tribhuvan University will be speaking at Martin Chautari's book launch and discussion titled Mapping the Political Economy of Agrarian Transition in Nepal.

12 October, 3pm, Thapathali



Labim Bazaar

Support local businesses. Shop for fresh and baked goodies, agro products, thrift items, handicrafts.

Saturdays, 10am-4pm, Labim Mall, Pulchok



Music

Jazzmandu

Valley Jams

Friday, 10 October
7pm-9pm (gates open at 6:30pm)
Rs800
Simultaneously at Jazz Upstairs, Lazimpat / Electric Pagoda, Thamel / The Baha, Sanepa

Jazz Bazaar

Saturday, 11 October
3pm-9pm (gates open at 2:30pm, close at 7pm)
Rs1,500
Gokarna Forest Resort (free shuttle bus to Gokarna available)



Sounds of Acid Jazz

Monday, 13 October
7pm-9pm (gates open at 6:30pm, close at 8pm)
Rs1,500
Eden, Jhamsikhel

Jazz at Patan

Tuesday, 14 October
7pm-9pm, (gates open at 6:30pm, close at 8pm, to be seated by 6:45pm)
Rs2,000

Yalamaya Kendra, Patan Dhoka

Jazzmandu Finale

Wednesday, 15 October
5:30pm-9pm (gates open at 5pm, close at 7pm)
Rs1,800
The Malla Hotel, Lekhnath, Marg, Lainchaur

Free Jazzmandu Workshops

Tuesday, October 14, Alliance Francaise, Jhamsikhel

Nu Jazz Workshop

Join Mohs from Switzerland for an exclusive workshop on the art of Nu Jazz, a genre that pushes boundaries by blending the improvisational spirit of jazz with the innovative rhythms of electronic music.

10-11am

R&B and Soul Jazz Workshop

Explore R&B grooves, Soul's passion, and Jazz's harmonies and improvisation in this workshop by vocalist and composer Leona Berlin from Germany.

11:30am-12:30pm

The essence of Brazilian Forro

Discover the vibrant world of Forró! Led by the wonderful Catia Werneck and her talented group, this workshop offers an immersive journey into the music from Northeast Brazil.

1pm-2pm



Getaway



The Pavilions

Luxury boutique eco resort with boutique villas, swimming pool, organic farm, restaurant lounge and bar. For refreshing morning walks, therapeutic and relaxing day-ins, authentic gastronomical experience and quiet nights.

Chisapani, Pokhara (061) 694379

Gokarna Forest Resort

The resort is a paradise, thick with century old trees rustling out natural tunes and great restaurants for fine dining. Golf anyone?

Gokarna (01) 4450002



Jagatpur Lodge

The lodge nestles in 8 acres of jungle grassland. Choose to stay in special tents which are no less than 5-star rooms and each consist of a private viewing deck to relish the breathtaking natural beauty.

Jagatpur, Chitwan (01) 4221711

Dom Himalaya

Dom Himalaya Hotel offers a space for visitors to indulge in traditional Nepali cuisine, relax with Tibetan singing bowls and bask in the vibrant chaos of Thamel.

Thamel (01) 5316813

Mystic Mountain

Situated amid the forest of Nagarkot, the resort is exquisitely built using ultra modern designs and world-class comfort.

Nagarkot (01) 5913205



Dining

Vino Bistro

Touted as the hub of French cheeses and imported wines in Nepal, Vino offers cheese platters, charcuterie, pastas and some of the best bruschetta, all paired with the perfect wine.

Lazimpat (01) 4435982

Genesis Cafe

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

Panipokhari (01) 4002788



4Stories

At 4Stories, instagrammable aesthetics meet impeccable food. Sexy chicken dumplings, Bang bang Shrimp and Satay Chicken 450 are a must-have.

Thamel, 9808790813

Raithaane

Eat your way through Nepal at Raithaane, a restaurant that is committed to using locally sourced foods. Each dish on the menu is connected to the different communities of the nation, so you can eat everything from east to west.

Patan Darbar Square, 9801002971



Urutora Restaurant

Experience authentic Japanese food with a Nepali taste. Browse the menu on Foodmandu to order sushi, sashimi, seafood and more.

Imadol (01) 5908065

Weekend Weather



Day	Temperature
FRIDAY	27° / 13°
SATURDAY	27° / 13°
SUNDAY	26° / 13°
MONDAY	26° / 13°
TUESDAY	27° / 13°

Monsoon Exit

Kathmandu got 140mm in 30 hours of continuous rain, although unseasonal, it was not as heavy as last year. But Ilam got badly hit by cloud bursts. It was the result of a head-on collision of a late monsoon trough with an advancing moisture-bearing westerly. The monsoon has now officially ended, and we have crisp sunny days ahead with the minimum temperature in Kathmandu falling to the mid-teens. Sparse cloud forecast for Saturday evening (pictured).

Our Pick



The British-Irish historical drama created by Steven Knight of Peaky Blinders fame follows the family behind the Guinness brewing company in 19th century Ireland and New York. Family patriarch and brewery mogul Benjamin Guinness is dead and it is now up to his four children Arthur, Edward, Anne, and Ben to expand the business but each has dark secrets to hide. The series premiered on Netflix in September to much acclaim and has Anthony Boyle, Louis Partridge, Emily Fairn, Fionn O'Shea and James Norton in pivotal roles.

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 चिड्डा 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

Revolution song

English translation of Chuden Kabimo's novel tells the story of Darjeeling's Gorkhaland Movement

Vishad Raj Onta

Chuden Kabimo is in Kathmandu to receive this year's Madan Puraskar prize for his novel, *उरमाल* that is set among the tea plantations and their workers in northeast India's Dooar plains.

The award ceremony was postponed due to Nepal's violent GenZ protests, and his trip had to overcome highways and bridges destroyed by this week's heavy rains in Darjeeling, across the border from Nepal.

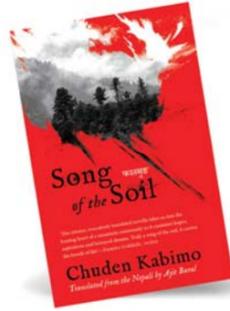
Kabimo's previous work, *फातसुङ* was the story of the Gorkhaland Movement in Darjeeling 30 years ago told through fictionalised characters and their friendships, their love for the land, and revolution. *Song of the Soil* is its English translation by Ajit Baral

published in 2021, and there are also Hindi and Bengali translations.

The Gorkhaland Movement sought to create a separate state for Nepali-speaking Indians of West Bengal. There is plenty of violence, arson, and young death in the book, and a poignant contemplation on the 8-9 September GenZ protests in Nepal. The plot is structured as a story, inside of a story, inside of a story, and starts off as the narrator gets the bad news that his childhood friend Ripden was killed in a landslide. He heads back to the site, Malbug, where he was born.

He reminisces about his days in school with the rebellious Ripden, who encouraged the narrator to skip school and led him on adventures instead. He remembers villagers who sold their farms for alcohol, and dedicated teachers who helped them dream of better lives.

Ripden lives with his uncle.



Song of the Soil by Chuden Kabimo translated by Ajit Baral
FinePrint Books, 2021
196 pages
Rs475

His mother died when he was four, and his father disappeared in the Movement. One day he hears that his father is in fact dead as well, and decides to run away to a village called Lolay. There the pair meet Nasim, who is involved in the Gorkhaland Movement as a child soldier.

Chuden Kabimo is of the Lepcha community, a people fiercely proud of their identity, homeland, history,

and myths. He weaves together the stories of the characters, detailing their motivation to rebel.

It is the story of all revolutions where young idealistic people join with the best of intentions, but things betray their initial hopes. The spirit of the revolution can get everyone to protest, even those who do not want to be so involved, but they get killed anyway. Much like what happened outside Parliament last month in Kathmandu.

Others think of personal success through the movement, and dream of a day where even the pigs can eat rice and every house has a swimming pool. Some keep themselves going through with alcohol and remembering past, present, or potential lovers.

Ajit Baral's translation has short, crisp sentences that make the 200 pages move along at a fast clip. The sparse language allows the writer to recede to the background

as the story unfolds by itself.

Kabimo condenses love stories into a chapter or sometimes just a few paragraphs. This works because the story of the revolution must be at the centre, and all else is tangential. Characters are sometimes introduced only to be killed off quickly.

Like in all revolutions, there are factions and they are fighting among themselves, against Communists, or against the police. Readers not familiar with Gorkhaland may find it difficult to keep track, but this also parallels the real confusion of a society in turmoil. Kabimo also tends to start his chapters with statements like 'history is written by those who stumble in life' which sounds better in Nepali, and something is lost in translation.

Read with the recent Nepal protests in mind, there is almost a sense of relief that the fires that spread here burnt themselves out so quickly. But in *Song of the Soil*, the revolution is never-ending with villages and families living in terror and deprivation. It seems that the longer insurrections last, the more people die, and groups become divided, making it easier to subvert the original goal of a revolution.

"I make sure I am always connected to the story"

Chuden Kabimo, the winner of this year's Madan Puraskar literary prize for the book *Urmaal*

Nepali Times: Your journalism about the Gorkhaland Movement inspired your earlier novel, *Faatsung*. What was your process in learning about tea plantation workers for *Urmaal*?

Chuden Kabimo: For *Urmaal*, I lived with the tea plantation community. I started work six months after *Faatsung* was published, heading to the Dooars and exploring it. I had gone with the intention of writing a story about child marriage in a community there.

I talked to the locals and the workers, and the need to write *Urmaal* started pulling me. I would often think that I had enough material for my story, but then I would want to add certain elements, which kept me going back over the five years it took to write the book.

How does all that information you gather develop into a storyline and characters?

When I start the book I don't know how the plot will start and end. I talk to many people from different backgrounds. Each person tends to introduce me to other people that I should speak to.

I listen to their stories. As the stories start to fit together, I get a sense of the plot and that is where my characters come from. For a single character I need to bring together the stories of many people, maybe ten or twelve.



I start where I want to, and as I keep writing the story slowly takes shape. I wrote what ended up becoming the last chapter for *Urmaal*, first.

What about your actual writing process?

I wake up early in the morning, then I either go cycling or play football. Then I get back and sit at my computer for sometimes two hours. I sometimes write only two lines in the two hours, sometimes I can write five hundred words. I don't set a word count for

myself. I cannot write a lot at once, I am a slow writer, but I strongly believe that you have to write daily. When you do not write daily, especially for a novel, you tend to lose the connection to the story. I just make sure that I am always connected to the story, which helps me always think about it even when I am on the bus or something.

What does winning the Madan Puraskar mean to you?

I feel that the Madan Puraskar is the biggest prize in Nepali literature, so it is a source of great pride for me. When I wrote my first book, I hadn't thought of winning any prizes. When I wrote *Faatsung* I was thinking much more of Kalimpong and Darjeeling. What *Faatsung* did for me was make me recognised. A lot of people in Nepal liked it too. How to outdo *Faatsung* was a challenge for me when I wrote *Urmaal*.

After the book was published, it was getting some good reviews but I didn't expect it to win the Madan Puraskar. I was at home reading in Siliguri when I got the news.

For other awards, like the JCB, they had contacted me to tell me that I had been shortlisted or that I won, but to not reveal it to anyone. It was the opposite with the Madan Puraskar. I was notified via Facebook!

It was a unique type of happiness. It is also great motivation for me to work on my third novel. Perhaps I will do something about Sikkim, moving away from Gorkhaland.

How does it feel being recognised in Nepal?

Six years ago, readers in Nepal did not know who I was. I was new to Nepal and Nepal was new to me. I grew up in rural Kalimpong, and we only had a radio for entertainment. On the radio, we used to listen to Nepali programs, which developed an emotional attachment to the country.

I came to Kathmandu for the first time for *Faatsung*, and it was a lot of fun seeing the places that I had heard about on the radio. The journey after that, the love the readers have shown for the book, and now the prize, has been very meaningful.



Urmaal by Chuden Kabimo
FinePrint Books, 2025
378 pages
Rs698



शुभ बहारा

उपहारै उपहार, बम्पश्मा हिराको हार



SAMSUNG TV 65"



DIAMOND NECKLACE



IPHONE 16



साथै अन्य थुप्रै उपहारहरु

बर्जर पेन्टले घर रंगाउनुहोस्, लक्की इ मार्फत आकर्षक पुरस्कारहरु जित्नुका साथै बम्पर पुरस्कारमा हिराको हार जित्नुहोस् ।



थप जानकारीको लागि: www.bergernepal.com



National interest vs community needs

The interim government has a chance to redefine what development means for ordinary Nepalis



DEVELOPMENT FOR THE PEOPLE: Alignment of the Nagdhunga tunnel (below). Anjan Khatri displaced by the project living with his family in rented house (right).

PHOTOS: SABINA DEVKOTA



Sabina Devkota in Rasuwa

Balancing the public good with the interest of local communities has always been the source of dispute over development infrastructure. As Nepal tries to catch up with energy and connectivity projects, it has not always got the balance right.

With a new post-uprising government and fresh elections, there is hope that equity, sustainability and accountability will be prioritised in future hydropower, highway, and natural resource extraction plans.

In 1999, Nobel laureate and economist Amartya Sen argued in his book *Development as Freedom* that development is not just about chasing GNP growth, but expanding the choices people have to ensure their social, political and economic rights.

Twenty-six years later, the same question can be posed about Nepal's development projects. Where does the national interest and public good intersect? What price are Nepalis paying for development? The best place to ask these questions is at the frontlines of such projects.

For example, families in the villages of Tiru and Gogane of Rasuwa district were displaced by the earthquake, but now face a different kind of aftershock — damage to their new homes from the relentless drilling and blasting for the 9.5km headrace tunnel of the 216MW Upper Trishuli-1 (UT-1) project.

Financed by the Korean firm Doosan and built by a Chinese contractor, UT-1 tunnel drilling has disturbed the slopes along the Bhote Kosi river. Since the young men have migrated for work, it is mostly the elderly who live in the damaged homes.

"Ten years ago it was the earthquake that drove us away from our homes, now it is the dynamite," says Tarshya Tamang, 70, who has a widening crack that runs through the rooms in her house. "This is as scary as the earthquake."

Many other houses in the settlement, old and new, mud or cement, have developed cracks.

Narsingh Tamang from Mailung was jailed for 35 days with his entire family on charges of public offence after locking the tunnel gate in protest over the project's resettlement program.

His 17-year-old daughter relates what happened: "I was returning

from hospital when I saw that the police had taken my father and brother. When I went to see him, they detained me too and I spent four days in custody."

Rasuwa's Assistant chief district officer Dhruv Adhikari confirmed public offence charges but denied knowledge of minors being detained.

The Nepal Water and Energy Development Company which runs the UT-1 project, said it has commissioned a third-party assessment to determine whether the cracks are linked to the tunnel drilling.

UT-1 is a hydropower tunnel, but near Kathmandu, construction of the Japanese-supported Nagdhunga tunnel has also put a community at risk. This is Nepal's first highway tunnel, a 3km shortcut on the Prithvi Highway that will slash journey time through this crowded stretch by at least half an hour.

Tika Khatri's house lies 100 metres from the eastern entrance of the tunnel. It has developed cracks and its ground floor has subsided. Then during last September's floods, a 10m deep sinkhole suddenly opened nearby, in the middle of the village.

The Rs15.2 billion Nagdhunga

Tunnel Construction Project is being built under a concessional loan from JICA, and it dispatched a geologist to Khatri's neighbourhood. They declared the site 'dangerous' and 11 households were relocated to rented rooms, but the project stopped paying rent nine months ago.

Despite the risk, Gayatri Khatri returned to her house after two months of unpaid rent. "I will live in this house no matter what," she said. "If I die, this government will be responsible."

The Project said funds had been withheld after allegations that rent money was being misused. Eighteen households were compensated, but five refused because it was too little money.

The project gave out half the money for dismantling their houses, and the rest was to be provided after reconstruction began, but some locals are unconvinced.

"How can we rebuild the house with so little money? asks Anjan Khatri. "The project wants to make us homeless."

For farmers, losses go beyond housing. Poultry and cattle farms have been affected as nearby springs have gone dry because the tunnel has disturbed the aquifer. Commercial farmers Anjan Khatri,

Bikash Kandel and Ganga Devi Saud had taken loans from a cooperative to start poultry and dairy businesses. Now they have no income, are heavily indebted and say the government's compensation of Rs800,000 is a joke. "The compensation doesn't even cover five years of losses," says Anjan Khatri who used to own 1,500 chickens. He does not want to return to his damaged house and risk losing his life.

In April police dragged local protesters to the Thankot station. One of them was Kamala Maharjan, who says: "They treated us like criminals and locked us up all day."

POWERLESS PEOPLE

When residents of Sankharapur opposed the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) project to build transmission lines above their property, local women were hauled off to court. The \$500 million US government grant aims to connect Nepal's grid to an east-west transmission line, and upgrade highways in central Nepal.

"It has been five months and we have to honour the court summons to attend hearings," says 41-year-old Sharmila Tamang, who, along with seven other women, was detained for nine days. When the windshield of a bulldozer was broken, the protestors were ordered to either find the culprits or pay Rs200,000. "This is ridiculous. It is not our job to take responsibility for something we did not do."

Indra Kumari Tamang, 60, was also charged with a public offence. "Yes, I don't want the transmission lines over my village, but I was not in the demonstration, and definitely did not throw stones at the dozer. I was just returning from a wedding."

The clash is not only about safety but also land rights. Krishna Bahadur BK said the power pylons are being erected on his property without his consent: "Only two people in the area agreed to sell and receive compensation. But my land was undervalued and I never agreed to sell it."

Police took away Tiuri Waiba, 57, and her 17-year-old daughter during a protest at a pylon site located on her family's property. "We have not received a single paisa, but the construction goes on under armed guard."

Under the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 169, development projects must secure Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) from local and indigenous communities.

The UT-1 was the first project in Nepal to formally obtain FPIC. However, it did so after land acquisition had already begun, turning the principle of 'prior consent' on its head. Rajman Syanbo says the MCC provided information selectively only to landowners and not to the wider community that would be affected. In Sankharapura, one of the pylon sites is actually on Chihan Danda, an ancestral burial site of the indigenous Tamang community.

Villagers were horrified to discover red survey markings on sacred trees where transmission poles were planned. Says Samar Lama of the local community forest user group: "We are not against the MCC, but destroying the cemetery where our ancestors are buried means obliterating our history, culture and traditions."

Instead of consent, villagers say they were coerced. Indra Kumari recalled how middlemen held

clandestine meetings in the forest, pressuring owners to surrender land for the Upper Tamakosi substation funded by the Asian Development Bank. She was warned that her land would be seized if she refused.

For Buddhimaya Tamang, 60, the consequences have been devastating. With her compensation money she had bought a small plot near the substation. But the land was buried in debris from the construction, and now three massive transformers loom over her small shed.

Since 2023, women have staged daily protests outside the substation gates demanding accountability. Farmers are also waging a quiet battle to save their fields. In July we found a farmer stacking sandbags in a desperate attempt to stop his paddy field from being buried by sand from the substation construction.

SAME OLD STORY

Across Nepal, the same pattern repeats over and over — consent is bypassed, and public audits are absent. There is no accountability from project offices or local governments. Every project begins with glossy documents prepared by expensive consultants, all pledging sustainability, community benefit and transparency.

In practice, however, politicians and their crony middlemen milk projects dry while locals are left to bear the cost.

A third-party assessment report for the Nagdhunga Tunnel Construction Project highlighted some major oversights: the DPR failed to account for 'potential ground vibration from blasting and subsidence from groundwater drawdown'. It noted ongoing risks, especially during heavy downpours, of the slopes not being stable enough.

The report recommended 'continuous monitoring of ground

subsidence cracks, especially during monsoon for at least two years, installing earth anchors and building retaining walls'. Local communities are now insisting that the government purchase their land outright. The assessment also revealed that the eastern excavation pit was dug before monsoon season. Covid-19 lockdowns delayed work, leaving exposed soil vulnerable to collapse, a predictable consequence that could have been mitigated had the tunnel alignment been shifted by 15-20m.

Madhukar Upadhya, watershed expert, recalls similar failures in foreign-funded projects despite seemingly noble intentions. Visiting a watershed project in Nepal's Far-West in 2016, he found little tangible impact from a Rs40 million scheme launched in 2013 by the ADB. "The project was strikingly detached from the everyday struggle of bringing water to people's homes," he says.

Long-standing gaps in accountability are also evident in high-profile projects like Melamchi, Tarai Fast Track, river diversion irrigation schemes on the Babai and Sun Kosi due to bureaucratic inefficiency.

The Kalanki-Mahariganj-Dhobikhola section of the Kathmandu Ring Road, scheduled for completion within two years, remains stalled more than six years later despite a 2018 MoU with China. Donor agencies often distance themselves from sensitive social issues like land acquisition, insisting that local governments resolve conflicts first.

Which is why the question of accountability often ends up being projected back to the government. Says former staff of the Attorney General's office Ganesh Poudel: "Donor hegemony shapes projects while offloading risk onto the most vulnerable."

Cost overruns and time delays are other recurring features of foreign funded projects in Nepal. The 14.2MW Khulekhani III hydropower power, for instance, took 14 years to complete, and the 456MW Upper Tamakosi project costs rose by 75% because of delays and dollar appreciation. The 220kV Khimti-Dhalkebar transmission line project funded by the World Bank, faced a decade-long hold as local communities demanded compensation sometimes up to 50 times more than what was deemed reasonable for land acquisition.

There is a corrupted psyche behind it, argued Rameshore Khanal, former finance secretary when he spoke to us before being appointed finance Minister in the interim government. "Locals perceive foreign funded projects as cash-rich, leading to exaggerated compensation claims, protests, and delays," he says. Every day work is stopped leads to significant financial losses, from idle equipment and labour to price escalation.

Khanal recounted the ADB-funded Melamchi Water Supply Project, originally slated for completion in 2006, which faced repeated delays and cost overruns. It remains to be seen how Khanal can address some of these structural issues in the five months he has as caretaker finance minister before the elections.

Upper Trishuli-1 also faced over 90 days of stoppages since 2022 due to local protests. According to NWEDC engineer Giriraj Adhikari, each day of delay cost Rs30 million. Over its 30-year lifespan, UT-1 is expected to generate Rs84 billion in royalty, 25% of it allocated directly to the local municipality.

Ramesh Koirala, consultant engineer at the Nagdhunga Tunnel Construction Project, quantifies

losses from a single month-long shutdown at Rs450 million noting that contractors often claim additional compensation for delays.

Khanal suggested 'pay-for-results' — a funding system in which the government completes work first and is reimbursed by donors only for verified results. "This removes the expectation of donor money during execution and allows smoother implementation," he says.

Unstable project management, frequent staff turnover, and interference by political parties, contractors, and local power brokers further exacerbate delays and cost overruns.

None of this is new, of course. Writing as far back as 1962 in Administrative Science Quarterly, Aaron B Wildavsky identified reasons why development plans in Nepal failed so often — conflicting priorities between government and donors, mismatch between finance and planning and a rent-seeking bureaucracy.

More than six decades on, not much has changed. Which is why the change in government and the possibility of a new clean start hold so much promise for Nepal. The struggle, locals insist, is not against development, but against how it is imposed. "We are not anti-development, as they label us," says Kamala Maharjan of Nagdhunga near the highway tunnel. "We just want it to be mindful of our needs."

While politicians and planners hail foreign-projects as symbols of national pride, communities on the ground often are found to bear the cost of dislocation, environmental risk, and promises that remain unfulfilled side by side.

Suresh Dhakal, anthropologist and Associate Professor at Tribhuvan University, says large development projects in Nepal inherently have become fields for political contestation.

This means issues like relocation, compensation, cultural and social friction erupt. He calls for a responsible, transparent, holistic and people-centric approach to development.

Yet, experience shows that physical construction alone is not enough, even though that can be most attractive for politicians and bureaucrats because of kickbacks from contractors. Development should instil a sense of ownership and responsibility among beneficiaries.

A 2023 study on foreign aid effectiveness concluded that Nepal is heavily dependent on foreign aid, and this often undermines its national agenda with stringent donor conditions driving high social costs and limiting growth, employment and poverty reduction: 'Foreign aid is often driven by donor interests rather than purely developmental or humanitarian motives.'

There are currently 33 ongoing foreign aided projects in Nepal. And despite foreign loans often being taken at concessional rates, the interest expenses on that debt is increasing more than those on domestic loans due to exchange rate fluctuations. This increases the financial burden on the government from external debt.

The overall public debt interest payment has increased by 13%. There has been a significant shift from grants to loans. Loans account for 66.5% of foreign aid disbursement while grants make up 19.8%, with technical assistance being 13.6%.

Yet, on the ground, all this is moot and skepticism remains about big projects trampling over the rights of those affected. "Even if they call us anti-development, we will continue to protest and demand what is just," says Anjan Khatri. 🇳🇵

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The lack of clear consensus among youth factions and their outspoken collectives is also surfacing.

"This has been a leaderless and decentralised movement, and the traditional variables typically seen in a political revolt seem missing here," notes political scientist Sucheta Pyakuryal. "There is no organised structure, nor any ideological pull factor, and therefore a big question is how much bargaining power does a movement like this have, and how sustainable will it be."

GenZ leaders seem to be in two main camps. Demands like the one for a directly elected prime minister, and the constitutional processes that can make for such an outcome, have emerged as a major point dividing the movement.

Nepalis both within and outside the youth movement are watching Hami Nepal's Sudan Gurung closely — especially after his recent interview with Al Jazeera during which he expressed his interest to run for Prime Minister and seemed to not accept a win by political parties in the March elections (Editorial, page 2).

Says Dhungel: "There seems to be very little stocktaking of what's happened in the past, and what's happened in other countries to try identify where lapses could be before they occur."

In the absence of unified positions and level-headed leadership, the youth who spearheaded post-protest negotiations, as well as the GenZ movement in general, risk losing public goodwill already dented by the destruction of state property on 9 September.

This also leaves an opening for political parties which are on the defensive and licking their wounds to capitalise on youth discord.

Says Pyakuryal: "Post

revolution, the political landscape becomes extremely unpredictable and therefore there is a risk of co-optation from several Machiavellian political actors including political parties, monarchists, as well as other forces, and that is concerning."

The immediate and visible transformation that Nepal's youth expect will not manifest right away, and while there is a need for long-term political planning, the caretaker government must also undertake measures that have a palpable impact on the daily life of citizens.

EYES ON THE POLLS

Many, including the youth themselves, now see the need for GenZ to have a more united stance and to move beyond making demands that the interim government cannot fulfil and start mobilising for elections — even by forming its own party.

A strong showing in elections can enable them to enact the changes they want to strengthen Nepal's democracy, and make future governments more accountable.

This week, the Election Commission announced 16 November as the deadline to register new parties for the 5 March polls.

Youth representatives have said that they want to be active participants in the political process, particularly in national-level politics.

If young Nepalis are to contest the election outside the banner of mainstream parties, this leaves electoral aspirants little more than a month to decide whether to form a loose coalition with existing parties, a separate political party, or to contest elections independently.

Says Pyakuryal. "I don't know if 'anti-corruption' or 'political

reform' have a strong enough ideological pull to band people together in the long run."

Indeed, the RSP was formed only four months before the 2022 elections and cashed in on anti-incumbent and anti-corruption sentiments of voters — mainly driven by social media. But controversy and strife within their party mean it has largely lost its public trust.

Nepal's September Uprising and its aftermath have shown that a majority of young people are entirely disillusioned with establishment parties and politicians, even using 'ex-political parties' as a phrase of reference. Any new young political figures that emerge from this movement and this election will have to work with mainstream parties in a multiparty democracy.

"The reality of politics is that change is not possible without engaging with existing political institutions and actors," says Dhungel. "To say that they do not want to engage, negotiate, or identify allies or proactively seek out input from at least the reform-minded individuals within each of those outfits is political naivety, and may lead to a lack of institutionalised reform."

However, Dhungel notes that the youth leadership would have more agency if they are clear not just on what they want to change, but about whether they are interested in active politics or civic engagement.

"The window of opportunity that is fast closing is to really negotiate hard and push for internal reforms within political parties and across the electoral system," she adds.

Pyakurel also adds: "GenZ are smart and politically mature, I hope they see these loopholes. I am optimistic about the direction they take." 🇳🇵

Caretaker government struggles to balance Constitution, election and youth demands



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