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## Establishmentarianism

Sonia Awale

The chaos, mismanaged voting process, and campaign leaflets littering the streets outside the venue of the UML general convention at Bhrikuti Mandap this week was a fitting metaphor for the state of Nepal's politics 100 days after the September upheaval.

The interim government of Prime Minister Sushila Karki wants to focus exclusively on holding credible elections on 5 March. But with less than three months to go, her attention is being constantly diverted by clamour from youth activists on the one hand, and recalcitrant legacy parties on the other.

Leaders of the UML-NC coalition that was in power on 8 September have not yet said sorry like they meant it – not just for the massacre of young protesters but also for decades of misuse, nepotism and corruption.

The UML, NC and their leaders have kept both options open: elections and Parliament reinstatement. The re-election

of K P Oli as the UML chair on Thursday is not just a reflection of how delusional he is, but also loyalists who think September never was a conspiracy.

Things are not much better in the NC camp, where the party secretariat messed up registration documents for its own convention in January. Its leader Sher Bahadur Deuba still shows no signs of trying to even give the impression that he wants to pass the baton to capable younger figures in his party.

Some new parties are hoping for a postponement of elections so they can organise better. The former Maoists in the NCP are already at the hustings, and the UML and NC are using their conventions as campaign rallies, even as they agitate for restoration of Parliament.

Even if Oli's main challenger for UML leadership, 71-year-old Ishwar Pokhrel, had won, the party would not have a fresh new face. Oli sidelined respectable colleagues like former foreign minister Pradeep Gyawali, and to show that its rally in Bhaktapur was bigger than it was, UML propagandists used AI to clumsily

exaggerate crowd size.

There are younger cadre within both parties who are speaking up, but their voices are too feeble for the establishmentarians to pay heed. The UML, NC and NCP are all falling back on traditional vote banks among rural seniors with ancestral party loyalty. They are also hoping that new populist parties will cancel each other's youth votes in urban areas.

But they forget there are 800,000 new voters, and underestimate diaspora influence on political preference. All three mainstream parties are fielding older, tainted candidates, and they may find that just like the Kathmandu mayoral constituency in 2022, they will be swept away by the youth tide.

After the UML's turn, it will be the NC's special convention next month, and the gerontocrats are still reluctant to hand over to young turks like Gagan Thapa, who himself will be 50 next year.

The third in the triumvirate, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, may have thought shedding the 'Maoist' suffix from his Nepali Community Party would make him more

popular, but he is too tainted to breathe new life into the party.

Ujyalo Party Nepal of Energy Minister Kulman Ghising has good prospects with widespread support on social media, just like the RSP's jailed leader Rabi Lamichhane. But there are doubts about integrity with both. Birendra Basnet is trying to do with his new GLP what he achieved with Buddha Air, but he may find politics is a much more turbulent affair.

### ABOVE THE NOISE

The GenZ are the voice for reform, but internal rifts and clashing egos have diminished their clout. If they are not to repeat the same mistakes of the 'alternative' parties before them like the RSP, Sajha and Bibeksheel, youth activists must rise above the noise and play a check-and-balance watchdog role.

As journalist and political commentator CK Lal wrote in Kantipur op-ed this week, the youth are 'impatient, but directionless'. Regimes can be toppled, but how can the political culture be changed? Alas, ever since 1950, it seems Nepal's revolutions never complete a full revolution. 🇳🇵



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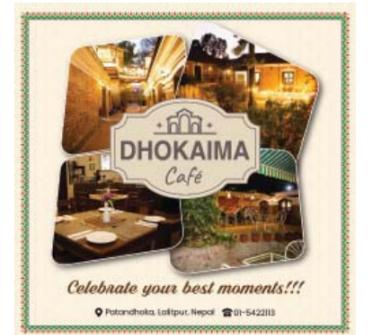
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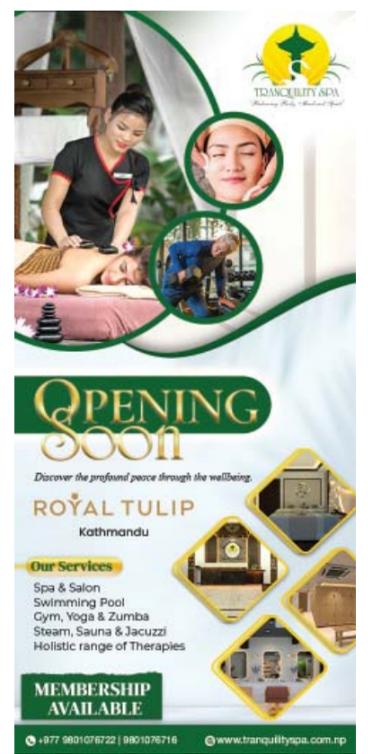
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# When maps move

The Subcontinent's civilisational past, colonial cartography and new national borders



**GUEST EDITORIAL**

Shyam Tekwani

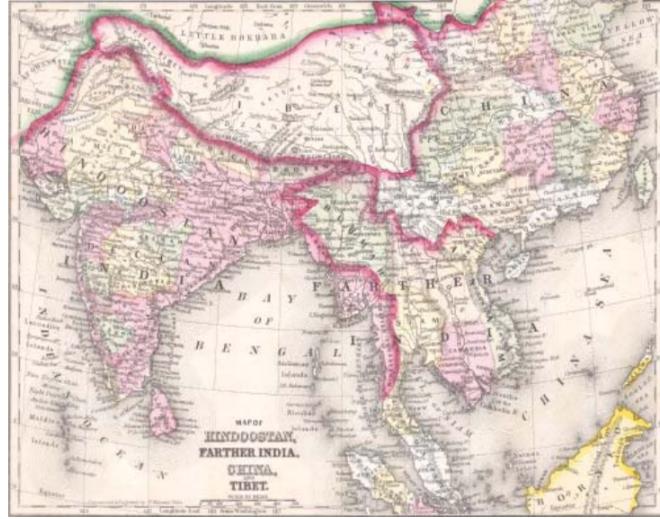
Three incidents in one week: a detained traveller in Shanghai, a revived claim on Sindh, and a currency note from Kathmandu. At Shanghai airport, a young woman from India's Arunachal Pradesh was interrogated by Chinese officials. Her identity was disputed not because of who she was, but because of the lines on someone else's map.

Then India's Defence Minister said "Sindh may return to India one day" with the offhand confidence of a politician who knows mythic geography plays well at home. In Pakistan, the words landed not as rhetoric but as portent.

Then Nepal, with its quiet talent for announcing its displeasures through objects rather than declarations, unveiled its new currency notes: each one bearing the imprint of its 2020 political map.

Lipulekh, Limpiyadhura are ritual incantations in Himalayan disputes, contested frontiers now printed in currency. The release was explained as routine. Nothing in this region is ever routine. The moment a boundary is drawn on money, it becomes more than a border. It becomes an assertion.

Three events, none catastrophic, none decisive, yet each carrying the faint odour of things unresolved and forgotten until the



moment they are not.

The Subcontinent has slipped into an era where symbols, not armies, do the fighting. Maps, murals, visas, banknotes, toponyms: each carries the weight that artillery once did.

China understands this vulnerability better than anyone, its refusal to accept an Arunachal Pradesh passport is not clerical fussiness, it is a demonstration of a worldview. It is sovereignty-by-bureaucracy. The frontier is now the immigration cubicle, not just the mountain pass.

Nepal's cartographic gesture is its own form of resistance. It asserts that small states, too, possess symbolic weapons. A currency note bearing a disputed frontier is not merely a piece of paper, it is a refusal.

These gestures resonate so forcefully, because of the deeper architecture on which they fall. The Subcontinent carries not one historical geography but three. There is the civilisational past: epics, empires, pilgrimage routes, whose outlines stretch far beyond the borders of modern sovereignty.

There is the colonial cartography, drawn hurriedly and indifferently by men who never intended to inhabit the lands they demarcated. And there is the postcolonial state,

fragile in identity and jealous of territory, inheriting maps it never drew and histories it cannot fully escape.

## GEOGRAPHIES COLLIDE

Where these three geographies collide, symbols expand. A remark becomes a blueprint. A detention becomes a claim. A banknote becomes an argument.

All this might have been manageable had the region built institutions strong enough to absorb the shocks. But South Asia built almost none. SAARC remains an empty frame.

The Akhand Bharat mural in India's new Parliament building invokes a civilisational geography stretching across today's neighbouring sovereign states. Imagined

maps, however metaphorical, cast real shadows.

Nepal hardened its cartography. As a smaller state with a long history of negotiating Indian influence, Kathmandu often has to turn to symbolic gestures to assert its autonomy. The idea of 'Greater Nepal' of the pre-Sugauli Treaty boundaries, surfaces periodically, not necessarily because the government seeks territorial revision, but because symbols offer a way to resist the gravitational pull of an imperious neighbour.

China, perceptive and opportunistic, seizes on the atmosphere to escalate its own symbolic manoeuvres. It is a strategy of perpetual, low-grade friction, one mirrored in different forms by nearly every state in the region. In such an ecosystem, symbols do not travel alone. They accumulate, accrete and attach themselves to older injuries. They become the whisper that prefaces the quarrel.

The danger is not a conventional war, but symbolic escalation without restraint, without vocabulary, without exit. What begins as an irritant becomes orthodoxy.

A map becomes an accusation. A mural becomes a warning. A passport becomes a verdict. A remark becomes prophecy. The politics of small hurts calcifies into the politics of large anxieties.

The crisis is the map that cannot decide whether its borders are memories or mandates. Until the Subcontinent learns to treat symbols with discipline rather than indulgence, it will remain at war with itself. 🇳🇵

*Shyam Tekwani is a professor and columnist specialising in security affairs. This is an abridged version of an article in The Wire.*

## Trending Online



### Kangchenjunga in winter

by Norbu Lama

Kangchenjunga is one of the last pure wilderness areas in Nepal, traversing sparsely populated valleys that are rich in biodiversity. For non-mountaineers, the Kangchenjunga trek can be arduous, especially in winter. Read the story at nepalitimes.com

**f** Most reached and shared on Facebook

### Lumbini gets the lion's share

by Vishad Raj Onta

Nepal's month-long cricket carnival ended last weekend in Kathmandu with a final game in which the Lumbini Lions dominated the Sudurpaschim Royals with both bat and ball. Read the round-up online.

**X** Most popular on X

### The Himalaya is not fragile

by Ngamindra Dahal

Mountain communities are often told to respect nature and avoid linear infrastructure. But the truth is that safe and eco-friendly development in the mountains is simply too expensive. The real fragility of Nepal's mountains is of economics and governance, not geology. Details on our website.

**💬** Most commented

### The war between people

by Sangya Lamsal

The Paths We Choose by Monica Rana is a carefully curated perspective of ordinary people caught up in it. It is a glimpse into how the war altered or defined their paths. Go online to read the review.

**🔍** Most visited online page

## Letters

### WINTER TREKKING

I did the Kangchenjunga trek in 2000 ('Kangchenjunga in winter'). They called it "The most beautiful trek in the world"! We saw almost nobody on the way to base camps at the south or north side.

Fred van der Steen

■ I have done the Kangchenjunga trek five times. First was in 1988 when a mate and me did 35 treks across eastern Nepal. It is a special area.

Steve Razzetti

■ Mount Jannu in this story is magnificent. I would like to visit Sikkim to see Kangchenjunga at its most majestic.

Jan Kolar

■ I trekked Kangchenjunga in

April 2024. I can't imagine doing the same in winter

Ruta Mikulenaite

■ Everyone is welcome to Lumsa, it is known for its Sherpa, Tamang and Magar culture and practices ('Going offtrek in Solu', Aditya Khare, #1289).

Ang Furi Lama Sherpa

■ Pikey Peak is my favourite trek in Nepal. It is stunningly beautiful and unspoilt.

Marianne Heredge

■ I trekked Kangchenjunga in 1993, and camped all the way, no lodges. There were no foreigners except us.

Javier Ballester

■ When I was travelling solo a few years ago, I ventured to Namu Buddha in an old local taxi from Kathmandu. Nepalis were making a pilgrimage, I felt truly

privileged to be among the local people at such a spiritual event. I will never forget that beautiful experience, one of many over the years of travelling in the Himalaya.

Julie Jenkins

Amazing article, looking forward to trekking Kangchenjunga if time permits.

Prabesh man Shrestha

### HIMALAYA MELT

An excellent and intelligent piece of writing, and sadly only too true ('The Himalaya is not fragile', Ngamindra Dahal, #1289). Having witnessed the shambolic and uneducated destruction in various parts of the country in the name of 'providing road access', my heart aches for the communities which will suffer the consequences.

Judi Forsyth

■ Great article. Every monsoon cheap roads are buried and need to be rebuilt. Road projects are poorly

conducted and take twice as long to build due to graft and corruption. I hope the new elections coming up elect honorable politicians. Do not vote for the same parties and politicians as before.

Kevin Young

■ Thank you for this informative article. Stopping endemic corruption is almost impossible, it is well embedded and waves over the fragile framework of Nepal, the mountains and its people. However, articles like yours give us hope.

Gill Porteous

■ The role of Nepalese women in natural resource management and conservation remains largely undocumented, under-recognised, and insufficiently learned from, despite its long-standing and practical significance.

Bikash Ghimire

## Online Package



### OUR GREAT STORIES

On the International Migrants Day, we revisit some of the 75 Diaspora Diaries we covered in the last few years. Watch the video online and read the stories on page 10-11.



### THE RIVER OF LIFE

The Karnali is one of the last great free-flowing rivers in the Himalaya, and sustains much of western Nepal. Read the story on page 6-7 and watch the video on our YouTube channel.

## 1,000 Words



**VISIT VISA WAIVER:** The Nepal government gifted two elephants, Rudrakali and Khagendraprasad, to Qatar this week. They were flown from Bhairawa airport to Doha on Wednesday evening, and will be housed inside Al Khor Park Zoo. The move drew some criticism for Nepal's wildlife diplomany.

RSS

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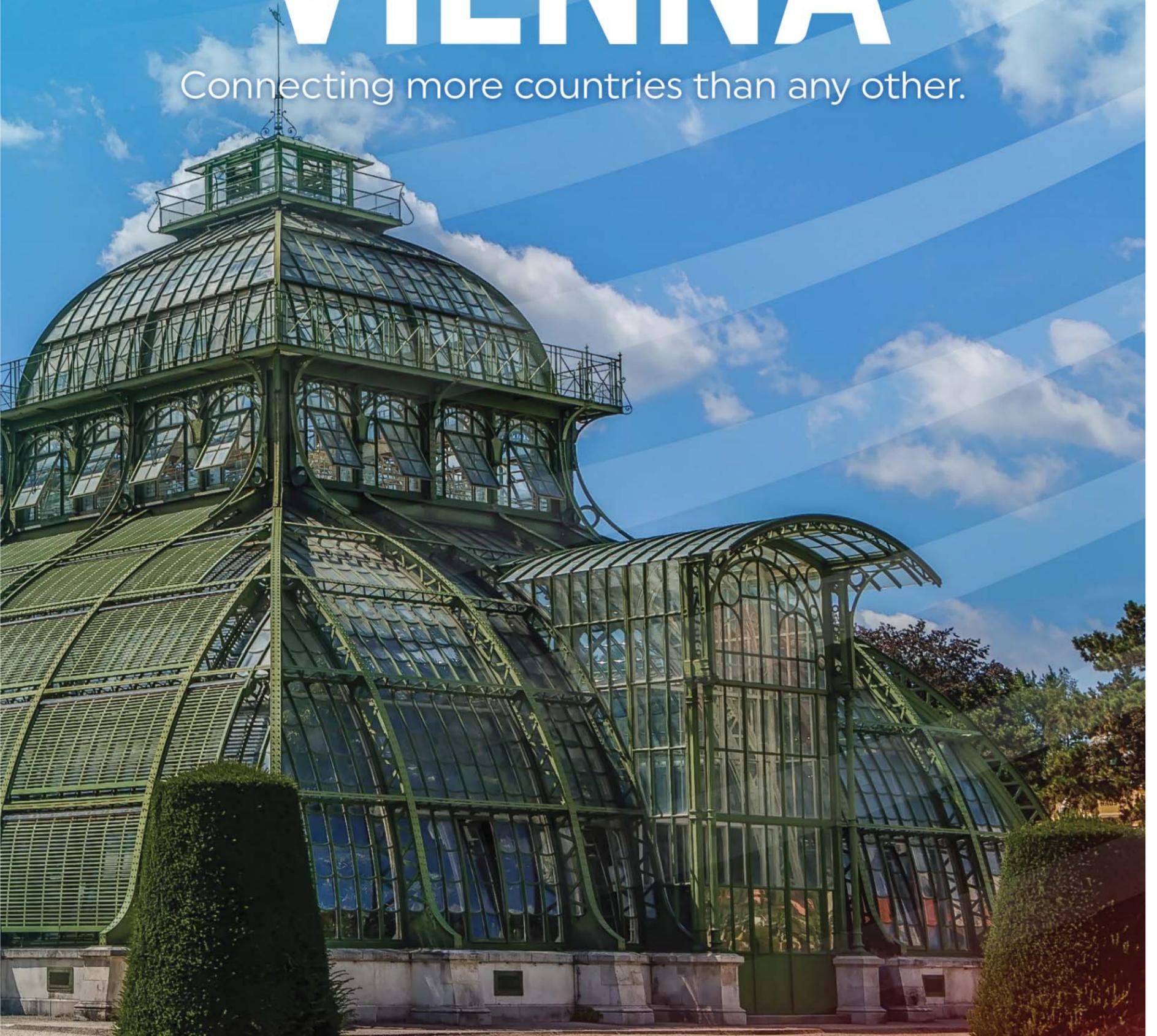
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# Some chicken, some neck

New book explores strategic importance of the narrow corridor that joins India to its northeast

Sudiksha Tuladhar

When Winston Churchill addressed the Canadian Parliament in December 1941, he recalled that generals of Nazi-occupied France had said that England would “have her neck wrung like a chicken”.

Churchill went on to quip: “Some chicken.” As the laughter and applause subsided, he added: “Some neck.” (Even longer laughter and applause)

We do not know who first started calling the narrow corridor that joins India to its northeastern states a ‘Chicken’s Neck’, but there also was the hint of a Churchillian connotation.

Akhilesh Upadhyay in his new book *In the Margins of Empires: A History of the Chicken’s Neck*, uses this strip as an entry point to explore a region adjoining Nepal, Bhutan, China, Sikkim, Darjeeling, India’s northeast and the tectonics that shaped its geo-strategic terrain.

Upadhyay’s *Chicken Neck* is an organic whole, connected through centuries by transboundary traders, travellers, monks, spies, missionaries, mountaineers, and more. And as infrastructure and connectivity improves, smaller countries like Nepal and Bhutan (and earlier Sikkim) are caught up in the region’s rivalries.

The tri-junction of the Chicken’s Neck is a potential flashpoint that has obsessed India’s military strategists ever since Partition in 1947 and the formation of East Pakistan, and the Chinese



annexation of Tibet.

India found itself squeezed between Chumbi Valley in China to the north and Pakistan to the south. So, when Sikkim started acting too independent for its own good 50 years ago, India engineered its annexation and turned it into its 22<sup>nd</sup> state.

The 1962 Sino-Indian war elevated its strategic importance even more. Alarm bells ring in New Delhi each time there is trouble around the Chicken’s Neck: the Naxalite uprising had to be swiftly crushed, the Indian military moved in to liberate Bangladesh, Gorkhaland and ULFA activities were dangerously nearby, Bhutan had to be appeased. Every once in a while things would flare up between India and China, as in the 2017 Doklam standoff.

And last year’s regime change in Bangladesh has rattled New Delhi enough to deploy its Rafael fighters and BrahMos

cruise missiles in the Chicken’s Neck. It is now the most densely militarised strip of real estate in this part of the world.

As a journalist and former editor of Kathmandu Post, Upadhyay also peers at the Chicken’s Neck through Nepal’s perspective. After all, Jhapa (where the author is originally from) sits right there astride India’s strategic lifeline.

Geopolitics is at the front and centre of the book that takes readers back to the time Nepal was a closed Himalayan kingdom.

Nepal may be a yam between two boulders, but it may just as well be a thicker Chicken’s Neck as far as New Delhi and Beijing are concerned. Nepal’s rulers have always had to walk the tightrope between China and India. Khampa guerrillas, covertly helped by American and Indian intelligence, raided Chinese military convoys from bases in Nepal, and King Mahendra had to do some intricate diplomatic footwork.

India is often described as Nepal’s closest friend, but our relations with China go back as long in terms of the Lhasa trade, Bhrikuti and Arniko, religious exchanges and people-to-people relations.

While Nepali researchers are wary of touching on Chinese, Indian or American sensitivities, Upadhyay’s journalistic background means he has no qualms about tackling the subject head-on, and objectively. He spent more than a year

researching the book, sniffing around Siliguri, Bagdogra, Naxalbari, Darjeeling and the villages on the Jhapa side. Then he travelled to Olangchung Gola to listen to ordinary people of the Himalayan rimlands.

Despite the perception about rigid frontiers between nation states, the book hints at how absurd the notion is. The Chicken’s Neck is also a wild elephant migration corridor, disturbed by the India-Bangladesh border fence, new expressway embankments, airport runways, and expanding cities.

Similarly, the people on the Nepal-tibet border used to cross over to graze yaks — this expanded the gene pools of not just the yaks but also the nomadic humans who moved with the herds.

Despite the hard borders, trade flourishes. Upadhyay marvels that a shop in Phungling in Taplejung has embroidered saris from Siliguri and fluffy jackets from China. He finds that residents in the northeastern and southeastern

tips of Nepal have more in common with kin across the border in Tibet or India than with someone from Kathmandu.

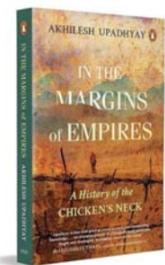
Nepal was once one of the biggest trade hubs in ancient times, and our products were treated as equals in Indian border cities. People too, could move freely, especially if they were and are from bordering Tarai cities.

Nepal’s rich history and culture was shaped by the proximity to neighbours, and despite borders it is still cemented by marriages and trade — especially in the Nepali-speaking lands to the east. Its geographical positioning makes Nepal not landlocked but land-linked, adjacent to the largest emerging economies of the world. Nepal needs to deploy its soft power with effective diplomacy to take advantage of these two empires, and not be choked by their rivalry.

The book was going to press when the GenZ protests ignited in September, but Upadhyay nevertheless managed to insert the current political transition into the pages with deft editing.

The final section of the book examines at least three possible scenarios that may unfold as South Asia continues to be shaped by great power rivalries and imperial contests that have weakened the unilateral influence of the west.

Akhilesh Upadhyay extrapolates from the Chicken’s Neck, zooming out for a wider perspective on the Subcontinent. 📖



*In the Margins of Empires: A History of the Chicken's Neck*  
Akhilesh Upadhyay  
Penguin Random House,  
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## NMB BANK एनएमबि बैंक

### Turkish in Edinburgh

Turkish Airlines has opened its first-ever European lounge at Edinburgh Airport, aside from eight others including the one at its Istanbul hub offering premium travel while reinforcing the airport’s growing role as an international gateway.

Türkiye’s flag carrier hosted a celebratory event at Edinburgh airport on 10 December to mark the opening of its eighth lounge outside of Türkiye.



Turkish Airlines Chief Operations Officer M. Akif Konar said: “This investment demonstrates our deep commitment to our European operations where we already possess a strong presence as the best airline.” Turkish Airlines operates 10 weekly flights between Edinburgh and Istanbul allowing travellers from Scotland to connect via Turkish Airlines’ global network to 356 destinations in 132 countries.

### Election observers

Twenty-seven national and four international organisations including The Carter Center, ANFREL, and the International Republican Institute, will be observing the 5 March elections. They were selected from a pool of 49 applicants.

### Remittances surge

Remittances rose 31.4% to Rs687.13 billion in the first four months of FY 2025/26, leading to reserves of Rs3,055 billion, enough for 17 months of imports. Inflation has cooled to 1.11%.

### Aloft partners

Aloft Kathmandu Thamel hosted its inaugural partner appreciation event themed ‘Cheers to 2025 — Let’s Kickstart 2026!’ GM Vikram Singh highlighted partnerships as key to the hotel’s success and pledged future stakeholder gatherings.

### Red Panda marathon

The Red Panda Marathon 2025 took runners into the habitats of the endangered animal in eastern Nepal along a 44.2km trail from Ilam Bazar to Sandakpur Summit, with an altitude gain of 2,390m. The marathon was supported by Play for Nature, and local partners, law enforcement, and volunteers.

### Artifacts returned

Nepal’s Department of Archaeology has repatriated 198 stolen artifacts including carvings and statues by working with diaspora, activists, and international organisations in the USA and Europe. Some statues have been reinstated to where they were stolen from.



### Tiago EV art contest

Authorised Tata dealers Siprodi Trading are offering medical professionals a Littmann stethoscope, discounts, free DC fast charging, one-year vehicle tax, and home charger installation on booking the Tiago EV. Also, over 377 students from 16 schools competed in The Tiago EV Carnival Inter-School Painting Program, co-organised by Siprodiyan Sahayata Sanstha and Budhanilkantha School. First-place winners Ashim Sundas and Samya Thapa received PlayStation 5 consoles.

### Elephants to Qatar

Chitwan National Park bid farewell to elephants Khagendraprasad, 7, and Rudrakali, 6, as they head to Qatar’s Al Khor Zoo. They were gifted to the Qatari Amir in 2024 and will be accompanied by their mahouts and a veterinarian. The elephant pair were flown out in a special aircraft from Bhairawa on Thursday.

### Kumari Green Loan

Kumari Bank launched its ‘Green Hire Purchase Loan’ for public transport operators to finance electric mini and microbuses. Partnering with the SET4NPL project supported by GIZ and GGGI, it provides upfront equity grants, and subsidies on accessories.



### StanChart AGM

Standard Chartered Bank Nepal held its 39<sup>th</sup> AGM on 15 December where it presented its FY 2024/25 results: Rs3 billion post-tax profit, and 14.3% ROE. A 19% cash dividend was approved. CEO Gorakh Rana and Chair Venugopal Ranganathan were present.

### Moxy KTM

Moxy Hotels, under Marriott Bonvoy, debuted in Nepal on 12 December with Moxy Kathmandu in Darbar Marg. The 101-room hotel has a bar, complimentary check-in cocktails, and Latin dining at LA HACIENDA and CARIÑO. This is Moxy’s third location in South Asia.

### Nabil Pokhara

Nabil Bank opened a Priority Banking Lounge in Pokhara, its sixth such and the first outside Kathmandu Valley for premium customers offering faster services and investment advice.



### Ncell gifts 2,428 kits

Ncell Foundation will distribute 2,428 educational kits to needy students for the 607 fours hit in the recently concluded Nepal Premier League. The kits contain schoolbags, notebooks, and stationery. Top 4-scorer Adam Rossington of the Pokhara Avengers contributed 124 kits and won Rs200,000.

### NMB Loan Tracker

NMB Bank introduced a digital tool for real-time tracking of retail and MSME loan applications via its website. The tool hopes to increase transparency and save time by reducing the number of times a customer has to visit a branch physically.

### Soaltee AGM

Soaltee Hotel held its 51<sup>st</sup> AGM on 14 December, approving a 16.58% cash dividend, and 15% bonus shares. A new nine-member Board was formed, including institutional and public nominees, and Dinesh Bahadur Bist was appointed Executive Chair.

### Nagdhunga tunnel

The opening of the Nagdhunga Tunnel has been delayed to April due to pending toll system, landside measures, jet fans, and service provider selection. Nepal’s first tunnel will cut travel time on the Prithvi Highway by 30 minutes and distance by 2.5 km.

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# THE RIVER OF LIFE

Saving the Karnali, Nepal's last free-flowing river, and the ecosystem and livelihoods it sustains

Photos and Text by **Thomas Kelly**

From its headwaters near Mansarovar on the Tibetan Plateau to its confluence with the Ganga in India, the Karnali remains one of the last great free-flowing rivers in the Himalaya.

At a time when most major Asian rivers have been dammed by concrete, the Karnali still surges, migrates, floods and recedes according to its own natural rhythms. This sustains an entire living system -- wildlife, communities and cultures — that cannot be replicated once a river is turned into a staircase of reservoirs.

The Karnali is a natural artery for western Nepal. It nourishes fertile floodplains, recharges aquifers, supports fisheries and connects remote communities.

Bardia National Park and its rich biodiversity, including the tiger and fresh water dolphins, depend on the river and its seasonal interaction with the floodplain and wetlands. Riverine birds, crocodilians, endemic fish, all depend on the river. Millions of people in Nepal and India rely on the Karnali (called Ghaghara in India) for household use, irrigation and livelihoods.

This living river now faces a cascade of proposed hydropower projects. So far, the Upper Karnali (900MW) and the massive Karnali-Chisapani (10,800MW) have been purposed. Both have been mired in controversy and have been delayed. Construction of smaller projects like the Bheri-Babai Diversion are already underway.

The Upper Karnali is a Rs146 billion project first purposed in 2006. It started construction earlier this year with the Indian conglomerate GMR leading the task. Even so it faces a setback as

Bangladesh cancelled the power purchase deal of 500MW.

The project is located on the stupendous Karnali Bend where the water can be pushed through a 2.5km tunnel over a drop of 130m, creating a huge generation capacity. But Nepal's move towards big dams comes at a time when scientists warn of more extreme weather events like floods and landslides in the already fragile Himalayan landscape.

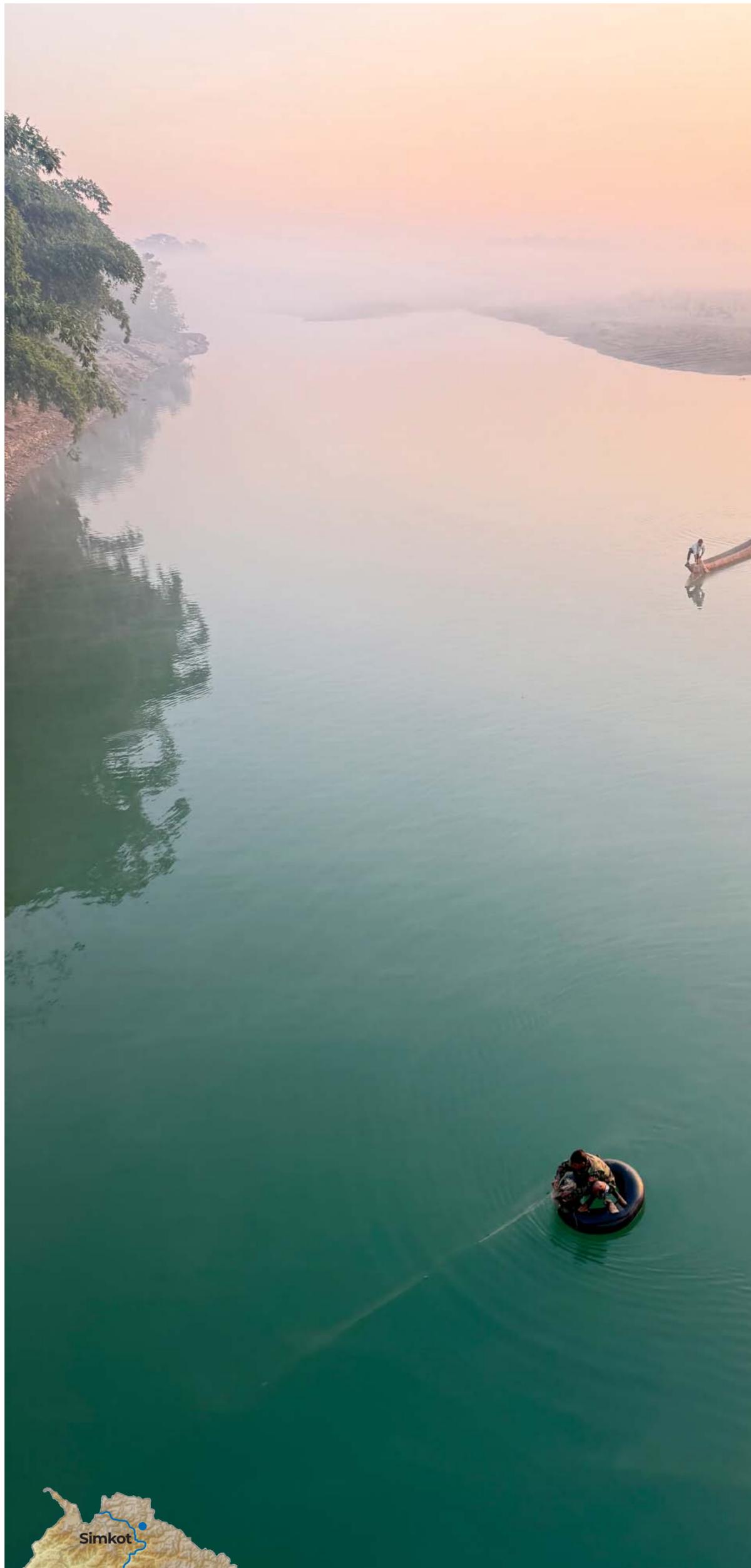
Nepal now needs investment in storage projects as most hydropower plants are of the run-of-river type, which means power generation drops in the dry season. But a piecemeal dam-by-dam approach risks destroying a unique resource for benefits that could be achieved elsewhere with far less ecological cost.

Once a free-flowing river is fragmented, its sediment delivery is choked, fish migrations are cut off, floodplains dry out and local cultures that revolve around seasonal flows begin to unravel. These changes are effectively permanent.

"The Karnali is the last and most pristine Himalayan River left, most others are already exploited. It should be protected as a wild, scenic, free flowing river as a gift to future generations," says activist Megh Ale, who wants the river to be developed as an eco-tourism corridor on the pilgrim trail to Mt Kailash and Mansarovar.

"We have many big tributaries to the Karnali," Ale adds. "We can keep the main stream of the river as free flowing, and develop hydro projects on the tributaries. More than 6,000MW can be produced without touching the main river stem."

Nepal has abundant alternatives to hydropower: solar energy has





**SA KARNALI:** (Clockwise from top) Karnali sustains human livelihoods as well biodiversity in the Bardia National Park.

Rafters say Karnali is one of the best places for white water rafting in the world.

Panning for gold on the banks of the Karnali. She makes Rs200,000 per year.

Local children play indigenous musical instrument.

Tharu women repair a channel fed by the Karnali, which is a life line for their farms.

been hardly tapped, and integrating them with pump storage systems are cheap, quick to build and are low impact. Smarter siting and design, modern transmission links and regional power trading can deliver reliable energy without sacrificing the country's last pristine river.

Preserving the Karnali would also pay dividends in climate resilience: free-flowing rivers buffer extreme floods and droughts, carry sediment that builds deltas and replenishes nutrients on farmland, and provide insurance against glacial and monsoon variability.

The Karnali is also a cultural and economic asset in its own right. As a rare, undammed Himalayan river, it underpins nature-based tourism, scientific research, and a way of life for Indigenous and local communities.

Kalashtham Tharu, 32, is an elephant mahout in Bardia, and says the Karnali is an important source of water for animals and farming. Diversion for irrigation near Chisapani has meant that a channel going into Bardia National Park has gone dry, affecting biodiversity and nearby farms.

Similarly, the Sonahar community in Bardia relies on the river to pan for gold, their sole source of income. Anita, 40, says there is much less water in the Karnali this year. On an average, she makes Rs200,000 from middlemen for the gold she pans during non-monsoon months.

#### **WILD RIVERS**

Around the world, countries are beginning to recognise the value of keeping a few great rivers wild. Protecting the Karnali would place Nepal at the forefront of that movement and strengthen efforts to seek international recognition for the river's outstanding natural heritage.

Any decision should be grounded in a transparent, basin-wide assessment that weighs the full social, ecological and economic costs—not just the megawatts on a project spreadsheet.

That means evaluating alternatives, safeguarding critical habitats and migration routes, and recognising the rights and knowledge of the people who live along the river. It also means asking a simple question: If Nepal can meet its energy goals without damming the Karnali's main stem, why wouldn't it?

Advocates have petitioned Nepal's Supreme Court to protect the Karnali, with a hearing scheduled in Kathmandu on 22 December. International lenders and investors should take note: Financing high-impact dams on the Karnali would run counter to emerging global standards on biodiversity, climate resilience and free-flowing river protection. Funding clean energy in Nepal should not require sacrificing the country's most pristine river.

For three decades, I have documented the Karnali from its source in Tibet to its entry into India, capturing the river's seasons and the lives it sustains. The images I have captured and the voices of people who depend on the river, tell a simple truth: a free-flowing Karnali is irreplaceable. Once the concrete is poured, there is no going back.

Nepal has many options for generating power. It has only one Karnali. Keeping this river wild would be a gift to the living Earth and to future generations — a legacy measured not in megawatts, but in life.

Says Megh Ale: "We are very rich in natural resources but manage them very poorly. We want instant solutions but do not have a long-term vision. We are not against development but there needs to be a good balance with nature." 🇳🇵



## Events



### Ravi Gupta stand-up

A night of sharp desi humour and unmistakable delivery await as Ravi Gupta brings his crowd-favourite set to Kathmandu.

20 December, 4pm and 7pm, Tickets: Rs899-Rs3,699, Nepal Academy Hall

### ThriftKo Bazar

ThriftKo returns with live music, DJ sessions, pop-up stalls, and exclusive discounts, plus a donation drive for warm clothes.

20 December, 11am onwards, Le Sherpa, Maharajganj

### Doodling @ Taragaon

On Christmas Day, Taragaon Museum invites everyone to fill the space with their doodles. Participation is free with museum entry.

25 December, 10am onwards, Taragaon Museum



### Cities 4 Women

The Cities 4 Women photography exhibition highlights the presence, movement, and everyday stories of women in urban spaces.

20 December, 10am-7pm, Gallery Mcube

### Field of Light

Licchavi House's exhibition Field of Light will showcase photography, poetry, and films by young Buddhist monks and nuns, offering a window into their creative world.

20-27 December, 10am-5pm, Jan Kath Rug & Art Space, Boudha



### Otaku Jatra 2025

Cosplay, games, and a celebration of pop culture await at the 2025 Otaku Jatra. Step into the Jatra Multiverse.

27 December, 11am-10pm, The Plaza Lalitpur, Jhamsikhel

### RT100 Women's Run

A 5K night run, followed by socialising and seasonal treats. Open to all who identify as women, all paces are welcome. Register through the link in their Instagram bio.

@rt100.runclub  
20 December, 5:30pm, Deli Akuj, Patan



## Music

### Jingle Bell Rock Fest

Join the high-energy Christmas Eve party with friends and bring some festive cheer to the dancefloor.

24 December, 9pm onwards, Tickets: Rs1,000-Rs2,000, XO Club

### Diwas Gurung

Spend Christmas evening listening to the soulful sounds of Diwas Gurung and his guitar.

25 December, 6pm-8pm, Rs800, EDEN Sanepa



### Bartika Eam Rai

Bartika Eam Rai will perform with a full band set at Club Nova for her first and last live show of 2025 in Kathmandu. Book tickets through k garira?.

26 December, Tickets: Rs1,499-Rs1,999, Club Nova

### Yadakada

Experience a blend of literature and music as renowned writer and poet Kumar Nagarkoti brings his surrealistic style to life through an intimate evening of storytelling.

25 December, 5pm-7:30pm, Tickets: Rs2,000 per person, Rastriya Sabha Griha



### Sanju Rathod Live

The artist behind viral hits Gulabi Sadi and Shaky brings his signature folk-fusion sound to Nepal.

20 December, 7pm onwards, Tickets: Rs1,000-Rs1,500, Lord of Drinks



## Getaway



### Himalayan Front Hotel

Sarangkot's Himalayan Front Hotel is located atop Sarangkot, overlooking the Annapurna range and Phewa Lake. With luxury rooms, breathtaking sunset views and one of the best restaurants in Pokhara- The Summit Restaurant- is the ideal place to unwind.

Sarangkot, Pokhara, 9801166350

### Festive season @ Aloft

Have a joyful, cosy, and relaxing staycation at Aloft Kathmandu Thamel this holiday season. Check out discounts and other perks under the exclusive offer.

Till 15 January, Rs11,000 (Single occupancy) / Rs12,000 (Double occupancy), Aloft Kathmandu Thamel (01) 5252000



### Heranya Yala

Get a genuine feel of authentic Newari heritage by living right in the middle of Maha Boudha and the Hiranya monastery. The hotel provides a complete tour package to immerse in the rich cultural heritage of Patan.

Gujibahal, Patan, 9745967569

### Soaltee Westend Premier

Located in the green plains of Nepalganj, this expansive resort is one of Nepal's more energy efficient and eco-friendly getaways.

Nepalganj (081) 551145

### YMH Kongde

Looking to indulge in a champagne breakfast at 15,000m just a few passes away from the Himalaya? Then book a mountain fight to this Yeti Mountain Home in Kongde right away.

Kongde, Khumbu, 9801249331

## Weekend Weather



### Foggy Tarai

The minimum temperature in Kathmandu is at 6°C, but the maximum is still unseasonably warm at 21.5°C. This is likely to continue. There is a broad westerly front over Iran, but it is mostly going to fizzle out by the time it comes over. There may be some cloud cover early next week, but no rain or snow.

Winter fog over the western Tarai, will bring down daytime temperature and affect flights. Fog will continue to blanket the Trisuli, Marsyangdi and Narayani valleys till midday.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY
21° 6°	21° 6°	21° 6°	22° 7°	20° 6°

## Our Pick



Nani Sahra Walker's directorial debut feature Shakti follows Durga, a single mother raising her free-spirited nine-year-old daughter, Lila. Hoping some discipline would help her daughter, Durga enrolls her daughter in painting lessons in Kathmandu. But soon after Lila starts her classes, she develops a mysterious illness that stumps even the doctors. Durga then enlists the help of a local shaman to treat her daughter, all the while confronting the stigma surrounding her circumstance. The film has won several awards at festivals across the world, and was screened this week at the Nepal Human Rights International Film Festival (NHRIF).



## Dining

### Chez Caroline

Tucked away from the street noise and fumes, this is the place to visit for authentic French and continental cuisine in Nepal. Try their Profiteroles au Chocolat and Choux pastry filled with vanilla ice cream and hot chocolate sauce.

Baber Mahal Revisited (01) 5363070

### Bota Momo

Thinking about having a plate of hot momo on these winter afternoons? Head to Bota Momo and choose from their 50+ momo and 20+ aachaar options.

9801116402



### Aloft Christmas Eve

Celebrate Christmas Eve at Aloft Kathmandu's Nook with an evening of comfort, warmth, and togetherness. Enjoy a festive buffet dinner including a welcome drink. Complimentary dinner for children under 6.

24 December, 6:30pm-10:30pm, Rs3,200 (Rs1,600 for kids aged 6-11), Nook, Aloft Kathmandu Thamel

### Festive Eve @ Barahi

Celebrate the joy of the festive season at Hotel Barahi Kathmandu with special Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve dinners. Indulge in thoughtfully curated festive menus, warm hospitality, and an inviting ambience—perfect for sharing memorable moments with family and friends.

24 December and 31 December, Rs4,000 per person onwards, Hotel Barahi Kathmandu



### Anatolia

Anatolia's Indian and Turkish dishes are packed with spices and an unforgettable assortment of flavours. From the Mutton Kofta Curry to the Baklava, the dishes will keep one wanting more. All the food is halal.

Thamel (01) 5358757

## 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

# A dystopian motherland

Vishad Raj Onta

Samrat Upadhyay's newest novel *Darkmotherland* imagines a Kathmandu in political turmoil after a large earthquake. Home Minister Giridharilal Bhagirath Kumar stages a 'koo', convincing people he has all the answers.

'PM Papa' picks up dictatorial ways — propaganda, statue-making, history-revising, and a gang of Shiva-worshipping 'Fundys'.

We are introduced to two protagonists. Kranti is a fetching young woman and 'Madam Mao', her Communist professor mother. Kranti hates her mother, and the Communist group which congregates at her home to plot against PM Papa, although they take forever to get anything done.

Kranti has a complicated relationship with the handsome Bhaskar, the middle son of the Ghimirey oligarchy that is aligned with the dictator. She loves him, but as Bhaskar gets more and more involved with her mother's Communist group, finds herself heading out to the 'Bhurey' (Bhukampa Rey-fugee) tents, to spend time with poet Kabiraj.

Kranti is also given to paranoia convinced that Bhaskar's family is spying on her. Despite mental issues, she marries Bhaskar and into the Ghimirey clan's nexus between business and politics.

The second character is Rozy, initially the genderqueer lover of PM Papa, and is described as a 'gorgeous homosexual'. She turns heads, and gets more politically powerful as the story moves along.

Unlike the realism in Upadhyay's previous novels, this one drifts off into magical realism.

His narrative blends the ever-present risk of a big earthquake and the actuality of political tremors. The speed of political upheaval seems a little unrealistic for anyone who lived through the 2015 earthquake, although the GenZ protests showed just how quickly a regime can be reduced to a heap of rubble. But the age-old question persists: oppression can be overcome, but what comes after?

The PM Papa is a Gyanendra-Oli-Deuba-Prachanda-Modi-Trump-Papa Doc composite who is good friends with the not even thinly veiled President Corn Hair.

Through the character of Kranti, Upadhyay conveys the dynamic between a parent and a child who is now a full adult, on relationships in Kathmandu as marriage looms, on pervasive corruption which one might denounce but have to take advantage of to get things done.

Through Rozy, Upadhyay brings attention to the non-binary identity, one that has existed forever in Nepal, and although is discussed a lot in the West lately but not so much here.

Storytelling in the early parts of the book oscillates between the real and absurd fantasy amidst the physical and political backdrop that does not have to be Nepal -- it could be Modi's India or Trump's America. The reader sees the world through Kranti's psychosis, or PM Papa's displays of power.

These elements coagulate in the novel, and Upadhyay has all the pages at his disposal to prod and push them against one another to see what happens. The novel is still at its best and most engaging when describing vulnerable scenes, of Kranti and her mister, or of Rozy's messed-up childhood.



Nepali-american author Samrat Upadhyay's previous novels and short story collections were *Arresting God in Kathmandu*, *The City Son*, *Mad Country*, and *Buddha's Orphans*. Recently in Kathmandu, he spoke to *Nepali Times* about writing, teaching, and his newest novel, *Darkmotherland*.

**Nepali Times:** *Darkmotherland* is 732 pages long. What was it like writing a much longer book?

**Samrat Upadhyay:** Torturous Ha ha ha. Around 2014 I started a story. I knew it was going to be a novel. It was about this woman who is accused of being a Mangalik. Then the big earthquake happened in 2015. I was in the US but my parents were still here, they were living in tents. Then I started thinking, what would happen if a dictator came to power. That's how PM Papa was born, mostly because of his character the novel exploded.

The initial draft was 1,700 pages. I whittled it down, and by the time I sent it to my agent it was 1,100 pages. He was able to sell it to Soho Press. The editing part was even harder than the initial writing, because by that time I was tired of looking at the novel.

**What is your inspiration behind the gender-queer character, Rozy?**

I've always been a strong supporter of LGBT. I would say that at this point half of my students are non-binary or on the gender spectrum. Some of them are going through transitions. In some ways Nepal

has become more accepting, but in other ways not.

**How much do you draw from Nepali politics? Do you form characters off people you know?**

I grew up in the Panchayat System, and lived in Lainchaur near the palace. I wasn't here when the pro-democracy movement happened. In some ways it felt like things had changed, but were the same in other ways. I do draw upon people. I think my father makes an appearance in my work.

**You teach creative writing, how is literature changing?**

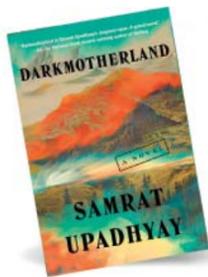
When I was growing up in the classroom we were reading a lot of white male authors, but in my own life I was reading Salman Rushdie, African, South African friends and writers. My students have a lot more interest in fantasy, many are writing dystopian. Writing that is a lot more insightful. The calibre of discussion in my graduate-level novel writing classes is mind-boggling, and makes me want to keep on teaching.

**What of Nepali writers in English?**

For a long time I felt I was supposed to be the representative of every Nepali. I always felt like this was wrong. I mean, people have to write what they want to write and if it resonates with readers, that's great. If it doesn't, that's fine too. I find it refreshing now that the writing isn't all about Nepal. The best stories are quite varied.

Any Nepali reading his weighty novel can recognise the allusions such as the Tourist Area: Thamel, Open Stage: Khula Manch, Tri-Moon: Tri-Chandra etc. But anyone not from these parts may have a tough time keeping track. Keeping a notebook handy may be useful.

Ultimately, the novel does work, it provokes and entertains. For best results, serialise the reading over 30 days, not like this reviewer. 🇳🇵



*Darkmotherland* by Samrat Upadhyay  
Soho Press, 2025  
FinePrint Books edition  
for South Asia  
768 pages \$22

[nepalitimes.com](https://nepalitimes.com)

Full interview online

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# Our great stories

On International Migrants Day, a look back at some of the 75 Diaspora Diaries



**Labour Mobility**  
Upasana Khadka

The Diaspora Diaries series in Nepali Times over the past four years has profiled people on the move, so it is fitting that the theme for this year's International Migrants Day on 18 December is My Great Story: Cultures and Development.

The past 75 episodes of Diaspora Diaries have featured inspiring stories of Nepalis -- their trials and tribulations, accomplishments and aspirations. The people and decisions they made, the talents they nurtured. The odds were stacked against them in Nepal, and moving offered a way out.

By sharing their stories, we became part of their journeys. And they, part of ours. The image marking 75 stories is symbolic: migrants holding the mic and sharing stories in their own words.

Stories have the power of influencing narratives, and this is particularly relevant in the migration discourse that is vulnerable to populism, misguided representations, and myths. Stories help broaden the understanding of the migration experience: not as reductive binaries of good or bad, or of heroes or victims.

We caught up with some of the people profiled in Diaspora Diaries to see how they are doing. Had they finally decided to come home? Were their children now migrants? How is their business back in Nepal faring? Will they stay, or will they leave again?

We know Bipin Joshi through fragments of memories from his friends. Nepal waited for his safe return, but heard that as a hostage he did not survive Israel's war on Gaza. Nischal Pandey, one of the Nepali students who survived the 7 October 2023 Hamas attack, is now working on his Master's in Nepal.

Also in Israel, Prabha Ghimire worked as a caregiver, and returned to Nepal after 19 years when her 101-year-old employer died.

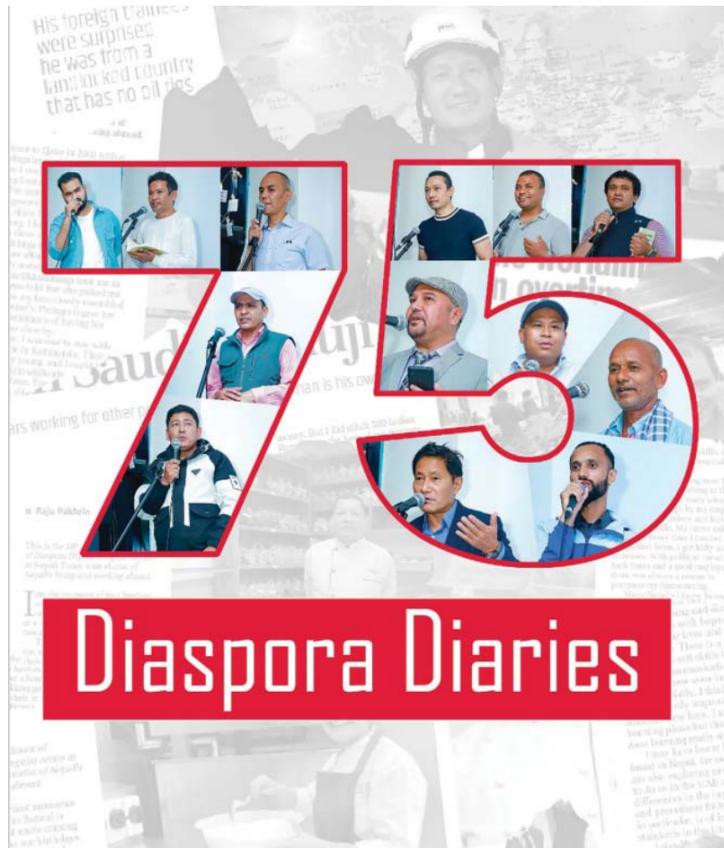
We call migration to the GCC and Malaysia 'temporary', but many of those profiled are still there after decades. Homnath Giri was featured in the very second Diaspora Diaries in 2022, and has been working in Kuwait for 21 years in companies where as manager he prioritises the recruitment of Nepalis.

We called up Ishwar Chaulagain who has country-hopped Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Seychelles. "Which country are you in now?" we asked him. He is in Kuwait, his house in Nepal is now built, and he has earned a dual diploma online.

Bhim Bishwakarma, the caregiver-cum-artist, has been in Bahrain for 18 years, and was back in Morang recently to get married. Coffee aficionado Laxmi Timilsina got promoted to assistant manager in Qatar, and said that his life feels complete after bringing his family to Doha and being blessed with a baby girl. UAE-based artist Jeevit Khadka is preparing to publish his collection of poetry *धामो* (Thread).

But how un-returnable has this country been made that people stay on for decades? Migrants tell us that there is always a reason to postpone returning.

There is also an increasing trend among Nepalis abroad to start their



own side businesses or use where they are as a launch pad for onward migration. Singer Ashik Shrestha started his own lounge with friends in the UAE where he performs. Aliza Basnet, who was working in the UAE when we interviewed her, has now taken her bakery skills to the UK.

Trailblazers continue to trail blaze. Shanti Bhandari, who drives a double-decker tourism bus in the UAE, has now obtained a truck license, always an interest to her. Turkey-based Shyam Kala Rai has not yet opened her Nepali restaurant given the economic climate. Since sharing her story in 2021 about her sacrifices for her children, her daughter has graduated as a nurse in Australia, and her son now works as a chef at QuickChina in Turkey.

Anil Shrestha was in Malta with his brother Ajay who died in a bike accident in 2022. Anil recently got married and has returned to Nepal, and is questioning the decision given poor employment prospects. The family still mourns Ajay's death and has not yet received accident compensation.

Sajita Lama, who was abused as a domestic worker in Lebanon, has still not recovered her unpaid wages of 10 years of work.

The importance of compensation after mishaps in foreign employment is evident in Antare Khatri's case. He continues to receive benefits from Malaysia's Social Security Organisation (SOCSO) after losing his hand in a workplace accident. Recently, one of his sons went to Malaysia and the other to what he refers as "दुलो देश", Greece.

UAE returnee Dalbir Singh Baraili has also passed the migration baton to his children who are now in the UK. While survival is manageable with earnings in Nepal, he says covering weddings, large expenses for festivals and illnesses puts a strain on finances.

Rudra Sapkota sold his vegetable shop in Nepal and is enjoying a retired life, watching

cricket, going on morning walks. "It's not that bad," he reckons. After spending 30 years in Saudi Arabia, his sons are now in Canada and Dubai.

Narratives like how remittances are not used productively are often part of public discourse in Nepal. But what is the measure of productive investment?

Without remittances, some families struggled to even eat or send children to a decent school. Migrants have used savings to retire parents to a concrete house, or save enough to pay for medical costs to save the lives of close relatives.

Migration needs to be viewed through a wider lens -- a continuum that stretches across generations. The rewards of today's investment may come much later in better human capital, health and migration outcomes of the descendants of migrant workers who can afford to go to university.

## UPS AND DOWNS

Some Diaspora Diaries stories are on returnee entrepreneurs, and the common sentiment is that Nepal's economy is not conducive to business.

Prakash Katuwal's Turkish restaurant in Kathmandu is doing well, he

is now a celebrity chef of sorts with wide engagement on social media, and he also is part of a cooking show. "I am still a simple man and do dishes till 1AM every night," he says.

Factory owner Krishna Timilsina has started the clothing store Looga Ghar, and has registered a tailoring and boutique branch in Japan.

Chiyaspot owner Gautam Guvaju has also started a new Chiyaspot branch, and has come out of his shell on social media where he shares his journey and inspires youth.

The trio of Korean returnees Shahadev Gurung, Prabin Shrestha and Dil Bahadur Tamang have expanded their meat shop, adding a new branch, and a small Korean restaurant. The nine returnees who set up Chef Burger have opened

their eighth burger outlet in Tinchuli.

Prabin Shrestha recently completed meat processing training in Korea, and his supplier and another returnee Sushil Lama received funds from the Nepal government to expand and upgrade their pig farm.

Sunil Bhujel came back from Qatar and UAE to expand his maintenance business to road construction. Qatar, Dubai and Seychelles returnee Shiva Sharan Khatri has added a resort in Chandragiri in addition to his facilities management business.

Business fluctuates, rent does not. This can spell trouble especially for small businesses. Babare Bomjon, who runs Akbare Momo, says shrinking demand has made him rethink his venture. He is looking to pivot to his own property-based business model because rent is unmanageable particularly when business goes up and down.

Burger Shack owner Rohit Shrestha is also facing upheavals, but has added bakery products, including bagels. After returning to Nepal from Qatar and Saudi Arabia, poet Mahendra Thulung Rai also feels the pressure of rent for his venture, Purbeli Restaurant. He is still writing poetry, but considers re-migrating because of the cost of living and doing business in Nepal.

Three years ago, when we spoke to Tilu Sharma, who has been in Qatar for 21 years, there was a debate about allowing overseas Nepalis to vote in the 2022 elections. He repeated what he told us three years ago: "Our notes work, our votes don't."

With elections due in March 2026, whether out-of-country voting is allowed or not, narratives around migration will matter even more than before. Candidates will use campaign slogans like "बिदे शको पसिना" and "बाध्यता" to portray migration as a result of state failure.

A recently released government report showed that the number of migrant workers returning via Kathmandu airport crossed half a million each year in the past two years. Why have they returned? What factors would make them remain and use their skills here?

Temporary migration should be alleviating concerns of both the migrant origin country like Nepal that can mobilise returnees who have added financial and social capital, and that of the host countries that fight increasing anti-immigrant sentiments.

The Diaspora Diaries network has also helped to improve migration. Rohit, Shiva, and Tilak lectured young Nepalis headed out to entry level roles in hospitality -- just as they had.

Discussing struggles, successful careers and post-return plans helps Nepalis make the most of this migrant experience.

Each Diaspora Diaries story ends abruptly, but the lives of those profiled carries on. Will the UK provide better special education services for Alpana's son? Will Sajita and Ashish finally get their owed dues?

We continue to search for the anonymous returnee from Malaysia and Qatar from the very first Diaspora Diary in January 2022, who inspired this series.

*Upasana Khadka heads Migration Lab, aimed at better migration outcomes for workers and their families. The past 75 episodes of Diaspora Diaries series can be found on nepalitimes.com.*



**DIASPORA  
DIARIES 76**

This is the 76<sup>th</sup> 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.

**Anil Gole**

We did not have a whole lot, but did not grow up in scarcity either. When I was in Grade 7, my father migrated to Malaysia but returned just after 18 days. He was heavily in debt. It is the interest and not the principal from loan sharks that ruins borrowers.

As we grew up, family expenses rose and my father migrated again to Qatar, determined to make it work this time. I used to watch him via IMO in buildings under construction eating rice out of plastic bags. There was no AC, no oven, no shade. Those images are etched into my memory.

After Grade 10, I was encouraged to take up computers in +2 as I was a bright student. I did not have access to a computer, and the 30 minutes we got weekly at the computer lab was just not enough. My parents could not afford to buy a computer, but a friend had both a desktop and laptop at home.

I did his homework in exchange for using his computer. When my father found out, he bought me a laptop. Today, a decade later, I am still using it. Maybe I valued the computer more because it was bought with my father's sweat. The laptop reminds me of how he toiled overseas. The money he sent home did help with household expenses. My mother did tailoring, although the income was not stable. After my father returned from Qatar, he bought a three-wheeler which he still uses in Makwanpur.

After completing Grade 12, I came to college in Kathmandu to study IT. I needed Rs20,000 a month in tuition, rent and food just to survive. I could not complete my bachelor's. Although my father kept saying, "Don't worry, I am here," he just did not have the money to pay for me. So, I took up a data entry job which helped cover living expenses.

The pandemic meant my father could not earn money from his auto-rickshaw. We had no savings and had outstanding loans. Migration was the only way to get us out of the rut. I told my father that both of us should go abroad to earn some money. He could return earlier and I would stay on.

My father agreed, and I visited recruiting agencies with both our passports. After reviewing our CVs, they said it was easy to find jobs for my father but not for me, given my educational background and my experience in software. "How can we send you for jobs as a cleaner or security guard?" they asked.

I finally found a job in Romania, and decided to have my father stay back because going to Europe would have doubled the cost. My mother and sister came to see me off at Kathmandu airport. It felt just like my father leaving for Qatar many years ago. Perhaps some day, my brother would also leave in a similar manner, I thought.

In Romania, I work in a factory making car seat belts. It is not physically demanding and it is indoors. Even though I did not share it with my family, the initial period was difficult as I had no experience standing and working for so many hours at a time.

# My father's son

A son follows in his dad's footsteps to become a migrant worker, goes viral with a poem dedicated to the sacrifices of his father



Surya Bahadur Dong (father, left) when he worked in Qatar, and Anil Gole (son, right) who now works in Romania.



Once, when I was tired at work, I wondered how my father managed in Qatar in a much more physically taxing job. Here, I was not carrying heavy loads, my work was not outdoors. I was so emotional, I wrote a ghazal in my head. The words "खाडीको तातो घाम" kept repeating in my head. After work, I jotted down the verse in my diary:

बुवा, तपाईं जस्तो बन्न म सक्दैनै  
Father, I cannot become like you  
कति गाह्रो छ, म भन्नै सक्दिनै  
I cannot imagine how hard it is  
म मान्छे हेर्दा मात्रै ठूलो  
I only look like a grown man

बानी अभै बच्चे छ  
But I am still childish  
किनकि जता त्यतै जान मन लाग्छ  
I feel like roaming around  
जे देख्यो त्यो खान मन लाग्छ  
Eat whatever I see.  
न पैसा बच्छ  
I cannot save.  
न खाएको कुरा सबै पच्छ  
The food doesn't agree with me  
कहिले काहीं त मलाई म्याकडोनाल्डको बर्गर पनि पच्छैन  
Not even a burger at McDonalds  
तर प्लास्टिकमा पोको परेको त्यो चिसो भात  
But how did my father eat that cold rice  
खाडीको त्यो तातो घाममा सेक्दै खाँदा मेरो बुवालाई कसरी पच्छ?  
Under the hot Gulf sun?  
मेरो पेटले यस्तो पचाउन सक्दैन  
I would not be able to eat that.  
बुवा, तपाईं जस्तो बन्न म सक्दैनै  
Father, I cannot become like you  
कति गाह्रो छ, म भन्नै सक्दिनै  
I cannot imagine how hard it is.

I posted it online, and it went viral. But more importantly, people found the words relatable and engaging. My sister first saw it on Tiktok and shared it with my mother. It moved them to tears while my father kept watching it on repeat, deep in thought. Even though my birth father decided to leave my mother when I was less than a year old, my step father never made me feel the absence of anything.

My friend from Grade 6 in Makwanpur, Sharan, introduced me to ghazal. He was six years older because he had to pause his studies during the Maoist conflict. He worked in a brick factory in Kathmandu, saved money, and returned to school. He was very talented and we became friends through the school children's club.

Sharan and I spent most of our time together, sharing meals to save money and even skipping classes. One day, in Grade 9 when our teacher was absent, he wrote a

ghazal on the spot and explained the form, the rhyme, the meter. I listened half-heartedly as it was not of interest. We left it at that.

Shortly after, Sharan was diagnosed with leukemia and he could not finish the exams. Because he was a sharp student, the teachers decided to not hold him back. He died just before Grade 10. I cried. I do not have any pictures of Sharan. He had small ears, and I used to tease him that people with small ears do not live long. That still haunts me.

At the school assembly at the start of the new year, we were asked to share a talent. I did not know what to do, but I wrote a ghazal just as Sharan had taught me and dedicated it to him. Halfway through, I started crying and the principal took me to his office and calmed me down.

I do not write much poetry except a few posts on social media here and there. But a video of me reciting went viral on TikTok and that encouraged me to write more. That made me feel validated, and I began writing more about real life experiences.

It has been three years in Romania. My brother will also be joining me soon. Things have improved for us financially, but we are not where we want to be. We will get there. When we do, I will resume my studies. I'm interested in programming, especially back-end development and working with databases. It is on hold right now.

I do not have big dreams, I just want to make sure my parents get what they deserve. It is okay if I get delayed if my parents are able to access what they had sacrificed for us when they were my age. For now, my family is my priority. 🇳🇵

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