



NEW VS NEW

Sonia Awale

In December we headlined an analysis in this paper that the election was going to be a fight between Old and New. With just a month to go for polls, it is now looking more like New vs New.

The symbolic Balendra Shah vs K P Oli struggle has now been replaced by a face-off between Shah and Gagan Thapa, the new leader of the Nepali Congress (NC).

The Tarai with its vast vote bank has become the battleground for this fight with Shah contesting against Oli in Jhapa and Thapa standing in Sarlahi. And social media is the arena for this epic

clash of personality cults.

Which means that instead of finding solutions to problems like health, education, jobs, inflation, and social welfare, it is all about optics and stunts.

“This is not democracy but morphed political consumerism where political men are selling their brand, and people are lapping that up,” says political scientist Sucheta Pyakuryal. “Democracy is a way of life, it is not one size fits all, it doesn’t bully opposing voices, it is civilised, personable, tolerant.”

To be sure, Shah and Rabi Lamichhane claim to represent GenZ aspirations for cleaner and more efficient government. But elections are expensive, and that is the root of corruption. Shah driving around Nepal in a flashy Defender SUV loaned by a noodle tycoon is proof to some that despite all the rhetoric of ‘new’, it is the same old crony-driven politics.

Author Mohan Mainali says party cadre used to mobilise voluntarily during campaigns, but Nepal’s elections have long stopped being about issues and ideology,

“Political parties lost their morality, and when their actions opposed their avowed principles, the spirit of elections was lost too,” Mainali says. “Cadre and crowds

have to be rented, making elections more expensive, and it looks much worse this time around.”

Parties both old and new have moved so far away from what they promise in their manifestos, that it makes little sense to have them.

PMS-IN-WAITING

And the voting decision is made on the basis of ‘who’ rather than ‘what’. Who wins in Jhapa-5, for example, will determine the future course of Nepal. The winner there will eliminate one prime ministerial candidate, and then set up the possibility of a contest with Thapa.

“Can the RSP and NC, which have already declared their prime ministerial candidates, muster majorities in Parliament?” Mainali muses. “In all likelihood, no. The PR vote is very important so people who are tempted to vote based on who will be the next prime minister are misguided.”

Madhes has over 3.6 million voters, and more than half of Nepal’s population is in the Tarai. That can make or break the election for candidates. In the past parties have canvassed in the polls only to ignore the region once in power.

It was only after the 2015 federal republican Constitution that Madhes saw some representation,

but it has been mostly sidelined in the GenZ protests. Indeed, it is ironic that the RSP that has been ambiguous on federalism, is now actively campaigning in the capital of federalism with Balendra Shah now capitalising on his plains ancestry — something he has not emphasised in the past.

“On one hand you say you want to remove provinces because it is too costly, but you are also assuring your supporters about federalism,” says Sucheta Pyakuryal. “You could forgo the ideology, but the lowest benchmark such as ethics, morality, honesty is not met. How will these candidates change the country for the better? We want representatives who look like us, sound like us, think like us, not saviours.”



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Fix what is broken

Karnali Province provides a model for real-time healthcare data and insurance settlement



GUEST EDITORIAL
Srijana Devkota

Inside the District Hospital in Mugu, one of Nepal's remotest and underserved regions, hospital staff enter details of an elderly female patient with a prolapsed uterus into a computer instead of writing them into a heavy ledger like they used to.

This may seem like a modest improvement, but it is transforming medical care in the most isolated parts of Nepal – proving that digital systems can help the country leapfrog in strengthening healthcare delivery even in the most challenging setting.

In the past year, Nepal's national health insurance information system experienced a major failure that exposed critical vulnerabilities. Months of insurance claims were inaccessible overnight, placing hospitals, particularly rural facilities, under critical financial strain.

Hospitals were unable to recover claims data in a timely manner, threatening continuity of patient care. But during this, Mehelkuna Hospital and others in Karnali Province demonstrated how digital health infrastructure can build system resilience.

Supported by an integrated electronic health record (EHR) system, this one hospital



POSSIBLE HEALTH

in Surkhet securely retrieved patient and claims data and resubmitted nearly 40,000 insurance claims within 15 days, safeguarding Rs8 million in revenue.

This was a crucial policy insight that digital health records are not an optional innovation, they represent core public health infrastructure.

The EHR initiative was launched at Bayalpata Hospital in Achham District by Nyaya Health Nepal (NHN) in 2016 and expanded to hospitals in Charikot, Aampipal and Aabu Khareni.

It has now also been scaled across eight districts of Karnali Province, helping track patients and aligning the

data with government reporting and insurance mechanisms.

ENSURING INSURANCE

NHN has embedded its EHR initiative within public hospitals. For example, in Karnali Province this means the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) in Surkhet has a Dashboard which aggregates realtime data across eight district hospitals.

Information on health outcomes of patients, service delivery, insurance utilisation are all available in real time and are at the fingertips of provincial officials. The Dashboard supports evidence-based decision-making, improves transparency in reporting, and strengthens the province's capacity to monitor trends and identify gaps in care.

Earlier paper-based reporting was slow, and could not be accessed or cross-referenced easily, hindering prompt planning and resource allocation.

But digital transformation in healthcare is not just about technology. It is about system consolidation, linking service delivery, health financing, governance, and accountability through reliable and real-time data. Integrated EHRs improve transparency in insurance

claims and enable evidence-based planning. Unaffordable medical care and out-of-pocket expenses for family members can push households into poverty. Many Nepalis migrating overseas say one push factor is the cost of care of close relatives.

This is what makes universal health insurance so vital, but it is in crisis. The Health Insurance Board (HIB) was formed in 2016, and has now spread across all 77 districts, covering 10 million Nepalis.

But HIB faces problems of sustainability and claims settlements. This week it asked the government to replenish Rs1 billion in funds, and the government's TUTH Hospital has stopped treating patients covered by the HIB citing delayed reimbursement of claims.

This underlines the need for stronger institutional autonomy, predictable financing, and enhanced operational capacity within the HIB. One way to streamline insurance and reduce risk is by embedding digital systems.

Universal Health Coverage depends on accurate, timely, and inter-operable data flows between service delivery points and national financing mechanisms.

Integrating EHRs with insurance platforms can significantly reduce claims backlogs, improve transparency and accountability, and enhance fiscal reliability for public hospitals.

The experience of NHN-EHR in Karnali hospitals with digital records and insurance provides a compelling model for the rest of the country. 🇳🇵

Srijana Devkota is Director of Program and Partnerships at Nyaya Health Nepal (NHN).

Trending Online



Driving Nepalis up the wall

by Vishad Raj Onta Kalpana Maharjan has climbed Mt Everest from both the Nepal and the China sides -- despite parental discouragement. But the Lalitpur native doesn't

just climb mountains for the sake of breaking records, she also does it for her activism against child marriage. Read about her work at nepalitimes.com

Most reached and shared on Facebook

Policing the police

by Prashanta Khanal What happened during the GenZ protests was a continuation of a culture of brutality by Nepal's security forces. The lack of accountability means the Nepali state has normalised killings by its security apparatus. Read guest editorial online.

Most popular on X

Moonie money in politics

by Seulki Lee Leaked letters from Korea's Unification Church have revealed its extensive involvement in buying political and media influence worldwide, including links to Nepal's parties and politicians. Investigative report by Nepali Times, Dunia, and Newstapa on our website.

Most commented



Hotter Himalaya melts glaciers

by Durga Rana Magar Manang's Thulagi Glacial Lake is classified as one of the most dangerous lakes in the Himalaya due to climate heating. A GLOF from Thulagi poses big risks to settlements downstream and hydropower projects on the Marsyangdi. Read the field report online.

Most visited online page

Letters

MOONIE MONEY

Global involvement in Nepal's politics has been going on for a quite some time now ('Moonie money in Nepal's politics', Seulki Lee, #1295).

Bodhi Bimal

■ This is a very alarming report and it is betrayal by these corrupt politicians towards the nation and citizens.

Bijendra Gautam

■ These foreign agents should be ashamed to have the audacity to point fingers and accuse others of being in the payroll of outsiders.

Ram Shrestha

■ It looks as though every accusation these leaders make is a confession.

Swornim Bajracharya

■ When will reports like this gain accountable legal action?

Charu Chadha

■ The unification church is considered a cult even by mainstream Christianity.

Sigmund Stengel

■ Is this really a surprise? These clowns preaching Christianity, whatever their background, only want to cause further divide and division among people.

Mike Smith

POLICE IMPUNITY

Many important points in this piece ('Policing the police', Prashanta Khanal, #1295). In a normal democracy, addressing the brutality of state forces, making them more accountable, respected, and admired by the public yet

needed less would be a priority issue during these elections.

Anup Subedee

■ I agree that the APF enjoys too much power and must be dismantled. It needs to be investigated for what happened on 8 September, and the killers must be arrested.

Nepaliwoman

■ Nearly four months since the protests last September -- when will the 'investigation' into the shootings make public its findings?

David Seddon

■ The real questions to ask are: Is Nepal a Police State? Who are the AFP answerable to? Is the PM the head of state? If not, why not? When the head of state denies responsibility for the actions of state police -- who also appear to be above the law

-- there is only one obvious conclusion.

Gus Ferguson

■ Stories like these do not get much attention. People want a scapegoat.

Arun Upreti

■ Isn't it time to hold a national referendum for restoring the constitutional monarchy to end political deadlock?

Bigyan Niva

THULAGI GLOF

Villages have been destroyed by floods before, including Taal, and people keep moving there and building more lodges just 2 metres above the river ('Hotter Himalaya melts glaciers', Durga Rana Magar, #1295). A potential flood would surge 15 metres high. They never learn, do they?

Tapio Portimo

Online Package



THULAGI WARNING BELL

In Manang, communities live below the Thulagi glacial lake, one of the most dangerous lakes to appear in the Himalaya due to the climate crisis. Watch the video on our YouTube channel.



WHO BUILDS KATHMANDU

The foundation of Kathmandu sits atop the blood, sweat and tears of construction workers in the informal economy. Watch video on YouTube and subscribe for multimedia content.

1,000 Words



BALEN SHAH / SOCIAL MEDIA

SNOW MAN: Former Kathmandu mayor and RSP candidate for prime minister Balendra Shah is not just campaigning in Jhapa-5 where he is contesting against former prime minister K P Oli.

This week he has been on a whirlwind campaign tour of Sudurpaschim Province, stopping on the snowbound Dhangadi-Dadeldhura Highway on Wednesday (left). Large cheering crowds and paparazzi greeted Shah at every stop.

Times

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The slow grammar of democracy

Nepal's federalism is a mirror, reflecting the dilemma of democratic deepening in unequal societies

Aftab Husain

The slow, arduous labour of democracy rarely announces itself with the fanfare of constitutional moments. It proceeds instead through committee rooms, ward meetings, half-attended assemblies, the awkward choreography of speech and silence, and the everyday compromises between aspiration and constraint.

The book *Nepal's Federalism and the Pursuit of Deliberative Democracy* attends precisely to this unglamorous terrain. In it, Vishnu Kumari Tandon does not ask whether democracy is desirable — an already settled question — but whether it can be made to think, to listen, and to endure under conditions of inequality, historical fracture, and institutional novelty.

Her wager is modest: that federalism, when tethered to participation and deliberative forms, might recalibrate the relationship between state and citizen without promising redemption.

Tandon's Nepal is neither a site of democratic salvation nor a study in failure. It is a space of trial, where ideas migrate from constitutional text to municipal practice, altered by context, power, and expectation.

The book's quiet achievement lies in redirecting debates on deliberative democracy away from abstract normativity and toward the ethical friction of lived institutions.

Tandon, who is a governance

consultant at the World Bank, situates the 2015 Constitution within this unsettled genealogy, treating federalism less as an administrative innovation than as a moral response to longstanding claims of marginalisation.

The constitutional recognition of local autonomy is thus freighted with ethical expectation. Yet the book refuses to equate decentralisation with empowerment. Federalism, Tandon insists, redistributes power without dissolving hierarchy.

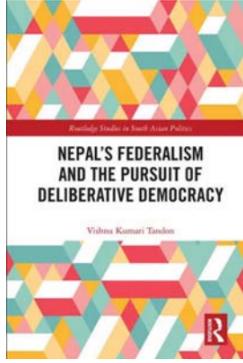
Domination may simply reappear closer to home. Federalism emerges not as a stable structure but as a field of tension—between autonomy and dependence, inclusion and capture, aspiration and capacity. It is within this unstable terrain that the democratic experiment unfolds.

UNEQUAL SKIES

Participation, one of democracy's most invoked terms, often risks conceptual exhaustion. Tandon restores its weight by treating it as labour rather than ritual. Drawing on fieldwork in Buddhabhumi and Dhanushadham municipalities, she reconstructs the choreography of local planning.

Participation here is unevenly distributed. It is shaped by gendered expectations, caste hierarchies, economic precarity, and anticipations of return. Attendance becomes a calculation rather than a civic reflex. This analytical attention to motivation marks one of the book's strengths.

Citizens participate not out



Nepal's Federalism and the Pursuit of Deliberative Democracy
Vishnu Kumari Tandon
Routledge, New York, 2026
€152.00

of abstract virtue but through pragmatic reasoning, moral obligation, and strategic interest. Participation thus appears neither ennobling nor cynical, but politically intelligible.

Tandon's engagement with deliberative democratic theory is respectful yet revisionist. Habermasian ideals of reasoned consensus are treated as aspirational rather than portable, strained by structural inequality.

In municipal assemblies, deliberation is patterned by authority: who speaks first, who commands attention, whose claims are legitimised. Marginalised citizens may be present without influence, audible without consequence. Deliberation risks becoming procedural affirmation

rather than substantive redistribution of voice.

Yet Tandon does not abandon deliberation as a democratic practice. Drawing on second-generation deliberative theory, she legitimises emotion, self-interest, and strategic speech as components of democratic reasoning.

One of the book's most original contributions lies in its treatment of fiscal decentralisation. The devolution of budgetary authority transforms deliberation into distributive politics.

Citizens attend assemblies not simply to speak but to secure roads, water systems, clinics, schools. Voice is tethered to material expectation. This intensifies engagement while sharpening conflict. Fiscal autonomy thus amplifies the stakes of deliberation without guaranteeing its equity.

Local representatives emerge as paradoxical figures: empowered yet constrained, accountable yet insulated. Tandon resists binary judgments, showing instead how fiscal decentralisation deepens democratic possibility while exposing institutional fragility.

Threaded through the book is a sustained interrogation of the 'common good'. Revered in theory and suspect in practice, the concept is neither discarded nor sanctified. In unequal societies, appeals to the common good can obscure asymmetries of sacrifice.

Empirically, deliberation proceeds through articulated self-interests: neighbourhood demands, caste claims, gendered priorities. Far from undermining democracy,

these claims animate it. Self-interest becomes deliberation's motor rather than its negation.

The book thus advances a quiet ethical argument: democracy does not require the transcendence of interest, but its articulation under conditions of mutual visibility.

Institutions, for Tandon, are moral technologies. Laws mandate participation, but they cannot generate trust, courage, or equality. Deliberative democracy appears less as consensus than as disagreement without rupture. Federalism is less a solution than a condition: it opens space for democratic learning without securing its outcome.

Firmly grounded in Nepal's political history, the book resists parochialism. Nepal functions as a mirror, reflecting broader dilemmas of democratic deepening across unequal societies. It is neither an exemplar nor an exception. It is a site where democracy reveals its ordinary difficulties.

In an age of democratic impatience, Tandon offers a quieter ethic. Democracy must be allowed to think slowly, to falter, and to learn. This book stands as a thoughtful companion to that discipline, reminding us that democratic transformation often occurs far from the centre, in places where speaking itself remains an achievement. 

Aftab Husain is a Pakistan-born poet and literary and cultural critic. He teaches South Asian literature and culture at the University of Vienna. A longer version of this review is on www.nepalimes.com

NMB BANK एनएमबी बैंक



Turkish + Montenegro

Turkish Airlines has signed a codeshare partnership with Air Montenegro which will see the carrier on Air Montenegro-operated services between Istanbul to Tivat and Podgorica. The partnership also allows Air Montenegro to place its flight code on Turkish Airlines' services to Dubai and Baku. Says Turkish Airlines CEO Bilal Ekşi, "Our cooperation with Air Montenegro will not only add new momentum to traffic between Türkiye and Montenegro, but also will generate synergy for tourism and trade."

Chaite paddy

The Ministry of Agriculture has set aside Rs330 million to encourage spring paddy cultivation, trying to keep pace with demands and achieve self-sufficiency in the staple grain. The money will mainly go towards building irrigation infrastructure in the Tarai.

Ather cross-country

Two riders completed a 6,000km cross-country journey from Goa to Kathmandu on Ather 450s, aimed at showcasing the reliability of the e-scooter over diverse terrains, and the feasibility of Ather charging networks on cross-border trips. The Ather 450 has a range of 160km, and starts at Rs325,000.

Terraces

The Terraces Resort, located south-east of Kathmandu has won the Best All Suite Resort, Best Mountain Resort, Best Resort Hotel, and Best Scenic View in Asia at the 2025 Haute Grandeur Awards. It also won Best Luxury Wellness Resort in South West Asia at the South Asian Travel Awards 2025.

IME Account

Global IME Bank customers can now open accounts through kiosk machines at the bank's Kamaladi office. Customers will instantly get an account number after entering details and submitting the necessary documents. The bank plans to expand the service to other locations.

Chocolate import

Between mid-July and mid-January, Nepalis consumed 31.67 million kgs of imported chocolates, worth Rs1.55 billion. About 90% came from India and China, and the rest from Australia, Vietnam, France, Italy, Israel, etc. Nepal also exports about 20,000kg of chocolate, worth Rs5.7 million.



Ncell Tiger Cup

Ncell is the title sponsor of the 6th Tiger Cup Volleyball Tournament, being held in Pokhara 23-31 January. There are male and female categories and 11 teams including from Thailand and The Maldives. The winning team in both categories will receive Rs666,666 each.

Dongfeng factory

Dongfeng's new factory in Wuhan will make die-cast battery casings, which will improve battery safety, reduce vehicle weight, and increase range on their EVs. The 1 billion yuan facility aims to produce 600,000 units annually. Currently, MAW Vriddhi imports Dongfeng EVs into Nepal, including the Nammi 01 hatchback and the Nami Vigo SUV.



Bajaj Exchange

The Bajaj Next Gen Maha-Exchange Carnival at Bhrikutimandap till 31 January offers bike loans, financing, and higher-than-market valuations for exchange. The new Bajaj Pulsar 220F has a full digital console, fuel injection, ABS, new graphics, and starts at Rs439,900 and will also be launched at the event.

Surya Golf

The third event of the Surya Nepal Golf Tour 25/26 teed off on 27 January at the Mithila Nagari Army Golf Club in Bardibas. The championship will be played over 54 holes across three days and has a total prize purse of Rs1,050,000, with the winner receiving Rs170,000. 31 pros and six amateurs are competing.

Cash Cap

Business leaders have called for a revision of the Rs500,000 unofficial cash transaction ceiling through informal channels put in place on 15 January, citing operational difficulties. The cap was introduced by the government due to concerns about money laundering, which had put Nepal on the FATF grey list.

Repairing Bhaisepati

The government will need Rs110 million to rebuild the minister quarters in Bhaisepati, burned and damaged in the GenZ protests. The quarters were built at a cost of Rs3 billion. Work is expected to begin in mid-February. The complex contains 27 residential blocks for ministers, a health club, a swimming pool, and security quarters.

Carpet exports

Nepal exported Rs5.69 billion of carpets in the first six months of this fiscal year, a majority of which went to the US and the rest to 50 countries. Production centers include Kathmandu and surrounding districts, employing around 200,000. Carpets are made of Himalayan sheep wool, allo, sisnu, and imported synthetic yarn.

Kathmandu-Lhasa bus

Nepal-China joint meeting of commerce secretaries has decided to restart the Kathmandu-Lhasa 1,000km trans-Himalayan bus after 20 years. Buses departing are expected to reach Lhasa in 20 hours, via Tatopani. Trading efficiency, road construction, easing the visa process was also discussed at the meeting.



Aussie Embassy Open

UNICEF came first, China second and Nepali Times third in a tennis tournament at the Australian Embassy in Kathmandu on 25 January. Twelve teams participated, including the Australian, Indian, American, British and Bangladeshi embassy, C] Nepal, Peace Corps and Glocal.

Petrol imports up

Petrol imports through Birganj in the first six months of the fiscal year rose to Rs90.06 billion, marking an increase of Rs2.75 billion. This is despite the increase in the number of battery-powered vehicles because of the expansion of the road network.



Bye-bye range anxiety

Long-distance EV travel has come a long way in Nepal in the last few years



DRIVE LINE

Arnab Upadhyay

The car's trunk was crammed with boxes and suitcases, almost to the roof, and I was just waiting for the inevitable heart-wrenching screech or thud from underneath as I feathered on the accelerator, trying to cross through the infamous Daunne uphill section of the East-West Highway in an MPV.

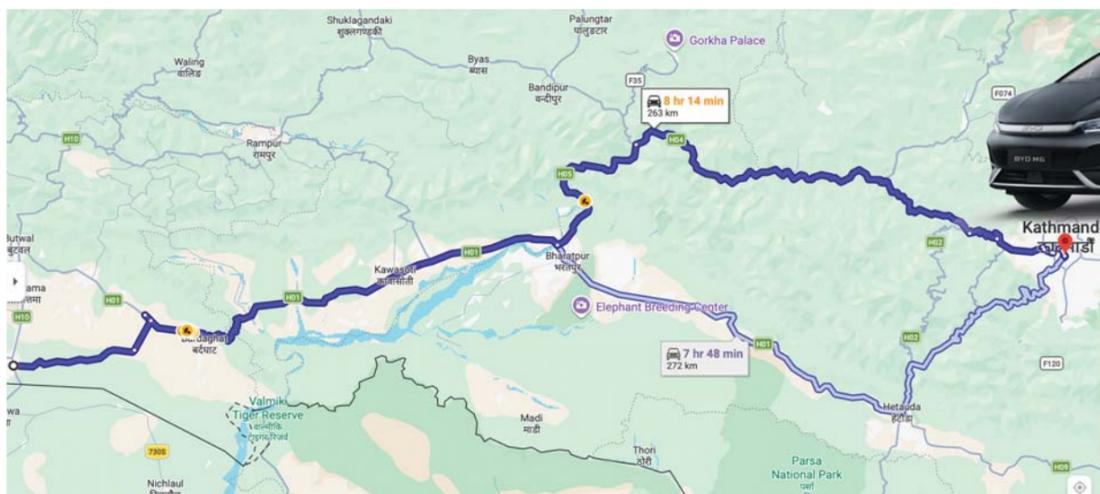
But to my surprise, the ground clearance of 170mm did not fail. Daunne, roughly 15km long, is the landslide prone ridge between Narayanghat and Butwal section, which is perennially affected by traffic jams, thanks to ongoing (and never ending) road expansion. Traffic jams here can be tens of kilometres long.

On a November 2025 trip to Bhairawa it was dry enough to wade through the dreaded Daunne where the choice on the 'road' is either mud or dust (or both).

The BYD M6 MPV EV borrowed for the journey claimed a range of 440km and 580L of space at the back in an almost 4.7m long form factor.

On board were two family members and my five-year-old dog, Kulfi (pictured) who needed frequent stretch breaks for his paws. Stopping to charge the car was most certainly not on my to-do list.

Within the first 20km from Koteswor, there were already multiple DC chargers along the roadside. They were fast chargers usually between 30 to 60kW capacities, meaning a charge to 80% would take on average less than an hour. Nepal now boasts over 1,200 charging stations, each station



is often equipped with multiple charging guns.

This was a stark contrast to the harsh reality of charger anxiety I faced a couple of years in our family car, the Hyundai Kona. Back then, on the way back from Pokhara there was only a single charging gun at River Side Resort in Kurintar.

These were only fast AC chargers of speeds up to 6kW, unlike today's much faster DC chargers. This meant the car would take multiple hours to hit the 80%

mark -- and the charger would sometimes (shockingly, and without explanation) be out of operation. No one to ask questions, and no one to answer either.

While I never needed to charge my EV on the way to Pokhara from Kathmandu, my precautionary nature never allowed me to climb into the Valley via Naubise without a charge. One bad accident, some sort of natural disaster, and you knew the roads would be clogged with traffic and shut down for at least a couple of hours.

Fast forward to the present. My mind was at ease. Even if one of the charging stations was crowded, there was conveniently another one 15 minutes away. But the BYD M6 did not require any of that anyway.

Not only did it traverse the rough highway from Kathmandu to Mugling, and then onward over the Daunne pass with ease but because the car was heavy and low, it handled high speeds and corners like a champ.

Foot down on the accelerator and it climbed to triple digit speeds without breaking a sweat. Put your foot relatively harder on the brakes and it would equally shed its momentum, all the while being economical.

After multiple quick stretch stops for Kulfi, and a proper one hour lunch break, I had arrived at Bhairawa before nightfall, still with around 100km of range left in the car and most importantly, with all the luggage intact.

ROUNDTRIP

A week later, my return trip to Kathmandu saw an additional passenger and even more luggage -- but once again, I arrived back in Kathmandu with ease: both the M6

and Nepal's charger infrastructure had exceeded my expectations and needs.

This 600km drive to and from Bhairawa from the mountains around Kathmandu to the Tarai plains, with not-so-smooth hilly terrain in between, highlighted not only how far electric vehicles have evolved but also showed how far the charging infrastructure (once a major irritant during the Covid years) had come.

EVs in Nepal are no longer niche products; they are available across budgets and segments, ranging in form factor from micro city commuters and family hatchbacks to compact SUVs, pickups, and even full-size MPVs.

One noticeable improvement on the highways is that the charging infrastructure has grown from a scattered and company-installed. NEA units along major routes have now converted into full-fledged, round-the-clock networks that allow flexibility and convenience to those of us who like to enjoy our times on the road.

What once felt like a gamble, now feels like momentum -- and the road ahead for electric mobility in Nepal looks smoother. 🇳🇵

Arnab Upadhyay reviews automobiles and promotes road safety under the handle Casually Annoyed Driver on Youtube, Tiktok and IG and this monthly column Drive Line in Nepali Times.

nepalitime.com
Go online to watch videos.



Political Rap

A peek at past protest songs of prime ministerial hopeful Balendra Shah

ILLUSTRATION: FREDDIE RAJ FLOYD

Aditya Khare

Balendra (Balen) Shah's first Facebook post in 2012 was a rap song about his school days. In many other YouTube videos, a younger beardless Shah raps in expletive-ridden X-rated performances.

Fourteen years later, Shah was elected mayor of Kathmandu, resigned, and is now challenging a former prime minister in K P Oli's home turf of Jhapa-5. This battle is not just about one constituency, but Nepal's future political trajectory post-September.

But who is this man? Shah rapped about social issues and injustices ridiculing the establishment with profane lyrics. He crossed all boundaries, emerging as an iconoclast who has gone from critiquing the government to governance.

After announcing his candidacy for mayor of Kathmandu in 2022, people began digging into his only rap battle against Lil' Grizl on YouTube called Raw Barz, pioneered by the legendary rappers Yama Buddha and Kolin Rana.

Started in 2010, in its five-year run, Raw Barz worked to give underground voices a stage to turn wordplay into reputation and rhythm into recognition. Sacar and Uniq Poet were the first to partake in the rap battle.

Stinging lyrics and verses fired like friendly warnings were the ingredients that gave early Raw Barz its restless energy. Every line felt like a challenge, every performance like a small arena, where lyrics and delivery decided who held the floor. The crowd was lively and responsive.

"When I saw Balen, it was love at first sight," recalls Girish Khatiwada, one half of the duo Girish Pranil (GP) who is regarded as Nepal's first rapper. "Balen is lyrically versatile, with a sharp ear for language and a strong command of the technical elements of rap."

Girish used to judge alongside Shah and Lay Zy on Nepal's first rap reality show, Nephop ko Shreepech. The mentors for the show were Mr D, Easi 12, Kavi G,

Dayjen and Vyoma, all rooted in Raw Barz.

This legacy was shaped by Yama Buddha in the 2010s, of a space that nurtured Nephop as an emancipatory culture, allowing young voices to break free from social silence, rigid norms, and limited platforms for expression.

Shah's debut single, Sadak Balak, released in 2012, became a foundational underground track on his official YouTube channel. In it he sings about the system that neglects a street kid facing social adversity, and demonstrates his knack for seamlessly combining music and art with social commentary.

The same year, he released Tathya, about media manipulation, corruption, and representation. In another Facebook post in 2013, he wrote a rap-like verse:

*"Balen mero nam, kaapi kalam le ladchhu mah,
Hatiyar ko kaam, sahitya le nai garchhu mah,
hamro desh ko shaan, ghatara achama parchu ma,
aam Nepali bavana ko pratinidhitwa garchu mah."*

Rough translation: I fight with pen and paper, weaponise literature and art to glorify Nepal, representing the aspirations of the

Nepali people.

Also in 2013, Balen strove for political awareness and launched Prahari Pratihaar featuring Nibhaal, a 'lyrical protest' against police brutality. It was his response to a rule that forbade young men from letting their hair grow.

Balidan released in 2019 became a hit on its re-release on YouTube a year later with 12 million views. It was a call to truth, accountability, and a criticism of corruption.

CRITICAL LYRICS

Shah's socially critical lyrics took direct aim at an apathetic state and resonated with millennial youth at the time. Propelled by the social media reach of RONB, Balendra Shah was elected mayor of Kathmandu, beating candidates from powerful established parties. Nepal Haseko with 10 million views on YouTube became the anthem of the September GenZ protest, propelling 35-year-old Shah himself the torchbearer of youth aspirations.

"We used to hang out. It was around the time when Raw Barz came out," remembers Manish Sharma, a close friend of Shah. "We later worked together on the campaign 'We for Constitution,' which was about urging the government to issue the Constitution of Nepal."

He adds: "One might call him a rapper, but I prefer to call him a poet. His lyrics were a strong part of his art."

Rapping is built on a set of skills that closely resemble those required in politics: timing, improvisation, argumentation and rhetoric, audience awareness, and sarcasm. A rapper must know when to strike a line, how far to push an argument, how to read the mood of listeners, and how to frame words so they leave an impact.

Shah's first address in Maithili at Janakpur last week on his campaign trail for the March election had all of these skills combined.

This is not unlike New York City mayor Zohran Mamdani whose early life as a rapper under the name Young Cardamom helped shape his political instincts and debate performances.

Rap is not a bedtime story, it is a document of contemporary society. It is often debased for its foul language, something even Shah has been accused of in his older songs. But rap does not simply talk about violence or rage, but it is a reflection of our society and what exists within: conflict, corruption, ambition, survival.

"Shielding children from rap lyrics might protect innocence, but engaging with it critically can build awareness," says Girish Khatiwada. "Rap is simply an art form like any other."

The rap culture is getting stronger. ST MAN's Cinema featuring Somea is already closing in on the five-million-view mark on YouTube, while Purple's Bhatbhatay Ma featuring Gwala hit five million in a month.

If anything, Nepali hip-hop is not slowing down, it is accelerating, fully aware that people are tuning in, and Shah's legacy looms large in all this.

Shah was asked in an interview at the World Association of the Major Metropolises in Brazil last year on how he would want to be remembered as a mayor, to which he replied: "I would love to be remembered as an honest guy, rather than a musician or an engineer or a mayor." 🇳🇵

म नेपाल हासेको हेर्न चाहन्छु
नेपाली को मन नाचेको हेर्न चाहन्छु
म नेपाल हासेको हेर्न चाहन्छु
नेपाली खुसिले बाचेको हेर्न चाहन्छु

[Verse 1]

अत्याचार, आक्रमण, अपराध, असमझदारी
विकल्प बिहिन, विदेशी बैंक भन्छ भिखारी
शिकारी नेता, अभिनेता बन्छ क्रान्तिकारी
बिगारी कंटाकंटी, भोको पेट रेंट सिपाही
अविवाहित चेलीबेटी, बोकि पेट खेपी पिटाइ
बिताइ रात, कुटाइ घात खाएर शरीर बिकाइ
देशको माटो नै मिटाइ ठानी मैदान त्यो युद्ध को
गिद्ध थियो जो देशको लागि, भक्त भै प्रसिद्ध भो
निशब्द भो अवशेष बाकी, चोखो बोली जो सित थियो
सिरजपत्त भो देशब्यापी आत्मघाती जो पवित्र थियो
आफ्नो प्राण को आहुती, आफ्नै ज्यान को बिभूती
लाई हिडेका सहिद को केवल नामावली बिभूसित
कुण्ठित पिडामा दुबेकी आमालाई के काम बिदुसी
गरिब लाई दुई छाक नै खुसी, सरिफ लाई चाहिन्छ कुर्सी
आमा कै सारी बेचेर धनाढ्य संगै छ पुजी
गोजि भरी भार, भरो भरेर भारती को रोजि म

[Chorus]

म नेपाल हासेको हेर्न चाहन्छु...

[Verse 2]

देश एउटा सुन्दर बगैँचा होस, रिंगचंगी फुलहरु
हरेक लाई समान गलेचा होस, सादर हरेक मुलहरु
अनुकुल, प्रतिकूल हरु चिन्ता गर्ने भावना होस
सामुहिक खुसी बिनाको के फाइदा त्यो चाहना को
औचित्य के त्यो कामना को एउटा हासो फुट्न लाई
उद्देश्य लेउ, एक हो हरेक हात हरु जुट्न लाई
गरेर अब देखाउ, कालो अतीत लाई मेटाउ
पालो हाम्रो हो भेटाउ, कल्पना गर शान्ती को
सपना देख्ने के पूरा हुन्छ, जागृति नै क्रान्ति हो
विपना मा बाटो खुल्ला हुन्छ आकृति को सालिक को
नसोच्नु तिमी मालिक हो र मिहिनेत गर्ने नोकर हो
तिमिले ठोक्कर खानेछौ मानव मानवता बेगर को
एकपटक कारण बनी हेर अरुको सानो हासो को
उसको मुस्कान मा रमाइ हेर निस्वार्थ प्रेम साचो हो
यो खाचो हो मायाको, पूरा भए नेपाल हास्नेछ
एक आपस मर्म बुझिदिए हरेक क्षणमा बाच्नेछौ

[Chorus]

English translation:

I want to see Nepal smile.
I want to see the hearts of Nepalis dance.
I want to see Nepal smile.
I want to see Nepalis living happily.

[Verse 1]

Oppression, attacks, crime, and confusion,
No alternatives, foreign banks calling us beggars.
Predatory leaders turn into actors, posing as revolutionaries.
Corrupted children, hungry stomachs, wounded soldiers.
Unmarried daughters, carrying pain, beaten and burdened,
Nights spent enduring violence, bodies sold after suffering.
The nation's soil treated as sweet sacrifice, a battlefield of war,
Those who devoured the country were praised like saints.
Silence remains, truth buried, purity erased,
Suicide glorified, martyrdom commercialised.
Sacrifices reduced to lists of names,
What comfort is that to a mother drowning in grief?
For the poor, two meals are happiness; for the elite, power is the goal.
Selling a mother's sari to build wealth, Pockets full of Indian currency, living off others' labour.

[Chorus]

I want to see Nepal smile...

[Verse 2]

Let the country be a beautiful garden with colorful flowers,
Let there be equality, respect for every face.

What is desire without shared happiness?
What is hope if no one smiles?
Come together, erase the dark past, Our turn has come, imagine peace.
Dreams come true when awakening becomes revolution.
Do not think you are the master and others your servants,
Without humanity, power collapses.
Create smiles for others, that is true love.
If we understand each other, Nepal will smile.

[Chorus]



Nepal's AI-generated election

Forget the candidate's manifesto, just post their memes

Nobel Rimal

During the 2022 election, populist candidates campaigned with algorithms and were elected mayors. In 2026, they are campaigning with AI-generated memes and videos.

Four years ago, the idea that the most potent weapon in the next election in Nepal would be artificially generated clips of politicians beating each other up would have been science fiction.

Yet, here we are: at a fever pitch of AI-based political content.

Some are generated by the IT cells of political parties, while most are just produced and posted by young tech-savvy supporters of the new candidates. Most of them ridicule older leaders, and the predominant target is former prime minister K P Oli who was forced to resign after the September protests.

On 20 January the TikTok account 'iamfunnyman88' posted a slapstick video in which former Kathmandu Mayor Balendra Shah is seen accosting ex-prime minister K P Oli with a giant bell (pictured), swinging it in Kung Fu Hustle style in what looks like Patan Darbar Square. Oli is sent splattered on the ground.

K P Oli has become a symbol of the legacy parties and their aged leaders, and everything that is wrong with them. Balendra Shah represents the new protest candidate. The two are contesting from Jhapa-5, and it is turning out to be a prime ministerial race for 5 March.

In another video, the RSP vs UML clash played out as a high-stakes war from the Mahabharat. Oli is a young warrior with a chiselled jaw and wearing a heavy golden armour ready to lead his followers to battle (pictured). A stylised Nepal flag flutters above him to the accompaniment of filmy dialogue.

The videos are everywhere on TikTok, YouTube and Facebook. Many of the posts are hitting over 200,000 likes and 5 million views. Such content seems to be engaging more voters than speeches and door-to-door campaigning at the hustings. The videos are fake, but the numbers, and the attention they command, are very real.

At first, it looked like the RSP's digital media presence was a joke aimed at getting easy-to-access publicity via the far-reaching arms of the algorithm. But it is looking like a carefully designed strategy promoting Balen Shah as the RSP's star player in this election.

In 2022, it was just for the mayor of Kathmandu. This time, Balen Shah is already being promoted in these videos as a winner who has defeated the legacy politicians.

In previous elections in Nepal, political parties used to spend lavishly on the 'masu bhat' strategy — feeding heavy plates of mutton curry and rice to constituents in return for votes. Ideology was swapped



for immediate caloric gratification often accompanied by free-flowing alcohol.

But surely, the new voter is too sophisticated for this. Politicians insist they have rebooted their operating systems to serve this enlightened demographic. We are talking, after all, about the generation that brought down a government over 36 hours in September.

The assumption is that young voters today are too aware and far too proud to trade democratic agency for something as crude as a plate of steaming mutton curry and rice.

But the question is: are voters today any different? Aren't these social media memes digital versions of the masu bhat that delivers a dopamine rush to voters? Watching the videos is entertainment that delivers a state of bliss, a protest against what is old but no enlightenment about how to get to the new.

The I-cannot-go-a-single-minute-without-checking-my-phone demographic has leaned firmly towards politicians whose main focus is to be a social media star first, and an accountable politician second. More than 70% of Nepalis have smartphones now and most are hooked on data plans. The public has acquired a taste for a different kind of masu bhat - the digital kind.

Instead of being made to slurp up the free spicy, fatty goat curry with deep guttural satisfaction, voters are being made to swallow easy-to-digest online clips to make serious voting decisions.

After all, it is more fun than paying attention to a candidate's policy proposals

and actually thinking critically about the candidates.

TURNING POINT

An important moment for the evolution of this digital masu bhat is the 2020 pandemic. It was just six years ago that the entire population was cut off from physical interaction. The phone screen became the sole mediator of social existence.

Technology changes what we see as important, and this prolonged immersion fundamentally alters our perception of reality, training us to accept the flattened, binary logic of the algorithm as a substitute for the complex, multisensory texture of political reality. What is on the phone has started to dictate the questions we ask and the answers we accept. If it is not on the phone, it is starting to look irrelevant. The memes manufacture consent.

Gerontocratic politicians habituated to legacy media have not fathomed the implications of this new virtual world. Everyone has been swayed by a good story since the beginning of time. Now, the phone has allowed millions of Nepalis to tell, retell, consume, and remix stories that would traditionally have huge barriers to entry.

Consider the vegetable vendor killing time between customers, Gen-Z youth with no memory of the Maoist conflict, or the grandad who cannot distinguish an AI video from real footage.

When they finally step into the voting booth, what is guiding their hand? Is it a careful calculus of policy proposals, demonstrated competence, and leadership integrity? Or is it the cumulative impact of those AI-generated dopamine hits they have been fed on a loop?

This digital fog of war cuts both ways. In a twist of supreme irony, actual footage of candidates behaving badly is now routinely dismissed as 'AI-generated' by their PR teams. This was a convenient get-out-of-jail-free card that Balen's camp used when a video of him shoving cadres went viral.

Meanwhile, completely fabricated tear-jerkers of old leaders like Prachanda weeping are consumed by the public as gospel truth. We have arrived at a point where the inconvenient real is dismissed as a glitch, and the emotional fake is embraced as history.

In Society of the Spectacle, Guy Debord argued that images eventually replace real life. Today's voters in Nepal and elsewhere are not even consuming the actual meat-and-bones of mutton curry; they are swallowing the 15 second digital imitations of it.

Welcome to the age of digital मसु भत.

 nepalitimes.com

Go online to watch memes.



Events



Art exhibition

Siddhartha Art Gallery presents a solo exhibition of paintings by Samrat Joshi, exploring themes of landscape, culture, and memory. **Till 18 February, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Babar Mahal Revisited, Kathmandu**

Taragaon Talks

A conversation exploring turning waste materials into art, the Waste to Art competition, and experimenting with new, ecologically conscious mediums. **31 January, 4pm onwards, Taragaon Museum**

Changing Times

An exhibition featuring works of six artists exploring shifting beliefs, time, and transformation in contemporary art, curated by Sophia L. Pande. Read review on page 9.

Till 14 February, 11am-8pm, The Kala Salon, Chhaya Center



Farmers Market

Le Sherpa's farmers market brings people together with the finest produce from across town. Enjoy organic vegetables, artisanal breads and cheeses, and more. **Saturdays, 7am-1pm, Le Sherpa, Maharajganj**

Dog Show

A nationally recognised canine championship bringing together dog owners, professionals, and enthusiasts from across Nepal. Featuring internationally renowned judge Reetha Liza from Dubai.

7 February, 9am onwards, Tickets: Rs200-Rs600, Satdobato Swimming Pool



Dining



Silk Artisanal Creamery

Truly artisanal ice cream with a variety of flavors you won't find elsewhere – Biscoff and Brownie is always a favorite. **Lazimpat, 9861444776**



Music

Bob Marley tribute

Joint Family Internationale pays tribute to Bob Marley's on the iconic musician's birthday. Join the musical celebration.

6 February, Tickets: Rs599, EDEN, Sanepa

Moksh side session

Join Pritisha and the Cuties for a night of cozy music, cosy vibes, and good company.

4 February, 7pm onwards, Moksh, Jhamsikhel



Trendz

LOD Nepal's seven-year anniversary celebration featuring major live performances by Swar and Khwopa.

4 February, 6pm onwards, Tickets: Rs1,000 (Early Bird General), Rs1,500 (Early Bird VIP), LOD, Thamel

Bhajan Utsav

A soulful devotional gathering to experience melodious bhajans, Kathak, flute solos, meditative raags, bhajan baithaki, and Sankirtan.

31 January, 6pm onwards, Tickets: Rs500, Nepal Academy (Pragyapratisthan)



Fundraising concert

A fundraising concert in collaboration with GEMS School, bringing voices together to support aspiring music students.

31 January, 6pm onwards, Tickets: Rs500, Moksh Live Restaurant & Bar, Jhamsikhel



Getaway



Village Heritage & Resort

Located at the top of Rara Hill, this humble hotel offers one of the best views of the breathtaking Rara Lake and the spectacular forest of Rara National Park. In the summer, ride horses along the lake and go on scenic boat rides that can last as long as a couple hours.

Rara, Mugu, 9841297644

Bandipur Kaushi Inn

A small, rustic place to stay in the idyllic village of Bandipur, replete with cultural diversity and traditional architecture.

Bandipur, Tanahu, 9803008170



Dalai-La Boutique Hotel

The hotel provides an unforgettable experience, letting you step out of Kathmandu's chaos and into peace and serenity. Decorated with historic artifacts over 50 years old, the hotel is an attraction in itself.

Thamel (01) 4701436

Nana Jungle Resort

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

Chitwan National Park, 9802000916

Tiger Mountain Pokhara

The resort with a Gold award from Travelife for sustainability offers a model for the kind of tourism Nepal should be promoting: homegrown high-value eco-tourism that uses local products and showcases the best of Nepal's scenery, nature and culture. The weather is perfect for view of the world's 8,000m magnificent peaks.

Kandani Danda, Pokhara (01) 4720580

Lhakpa's Chulo

Tucked away in a hidden part of Jhamsikhel, Lhakpa's Chulo offers a variety of delicious Nepali and Continental cuisines. With a menu spanning both Asia and Europe, enjoy spinach and cheese momos, Thai red curry and even Chicken Parmigiana.

Jhamsikhel (01) 5542986



Capital Grill

This diner offers a large assortment of appetisers and entrees to suit everyone's tastes. Present three bills paid in Capital Grill paid in the same month and get a privilege membership for discounts and seasonal offers.

Tangal (01) 4537674

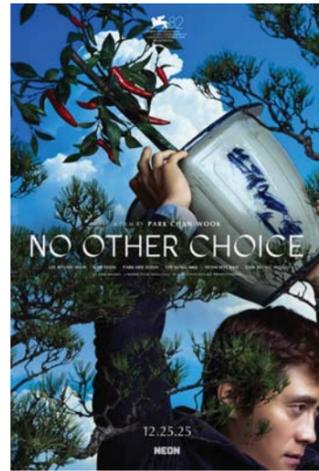
Weekend Weather



Wet West, Dry East

The back-to-back low pressure fronts from the west dumped lots of snow at higher elevations and rain lower down in western and central Nepal. Kathmandu Valley just got a spattering, and the eastern mid-mountains were left high and dry. There is another weaker westerly system due later next week, but it may also fizzle out by the time it gets to Kathmandu. The Tarai and the river valleys could be blanketed by mist mixed with smog over the weekend, while the mid mountains will see a slight rise in maximum temperature.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY
☀️ 21° ☁️ 5°	☀️ 20° ☁️ 6°	☀️ 21° ☁️ 5°	☀️ 21° ☁️ 6°	☀️ 21° ☁️ 7°

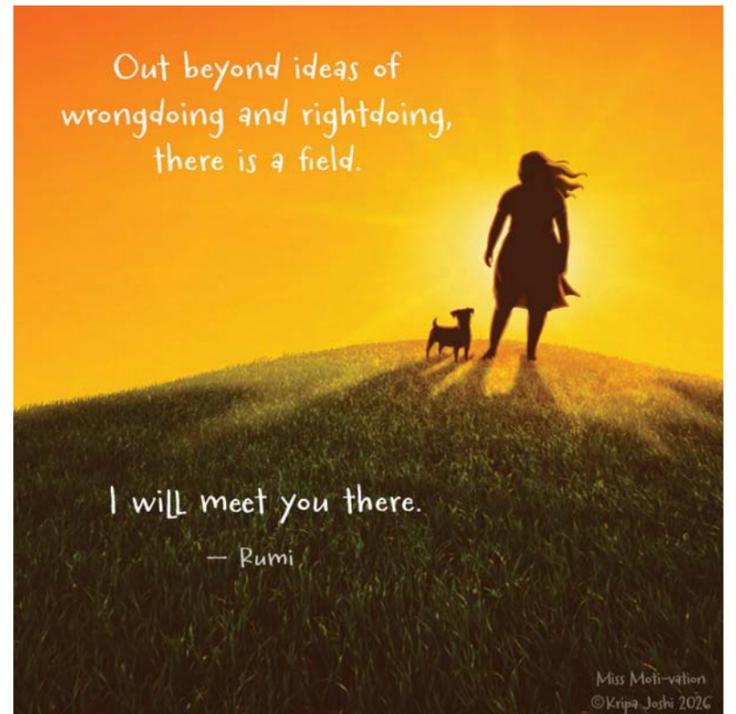


Our Pick

Park Chan-wook's critically acclaimed 2025 dark comedy thriller *No Other Choice*, adapted from Donald Westlake's 1997 novel *The Ax*, follows Yoo Man-su, who is a valued and well-paid employee at the paper company he has worked for 25 years. But when the company is brought out by an American Company, Man-su is among the many employees laid off by the new management. Unemployed and increasingly desperate, Man-su vows to eliminate anyone who could be his competition as he seeks to resume papermaking. Stars Lee Byung-hun, Son Ye-jin, Park Hee-soon, Lee Sung-min, Yeom Hye-ran, and Cha Seung-won.

MISS MOTI-VATION

KRIPA JOSHI



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



Time, transience, transition

Ongoing exhibition depicts society, balancing tradition and technology through art

Sangya Lamsal

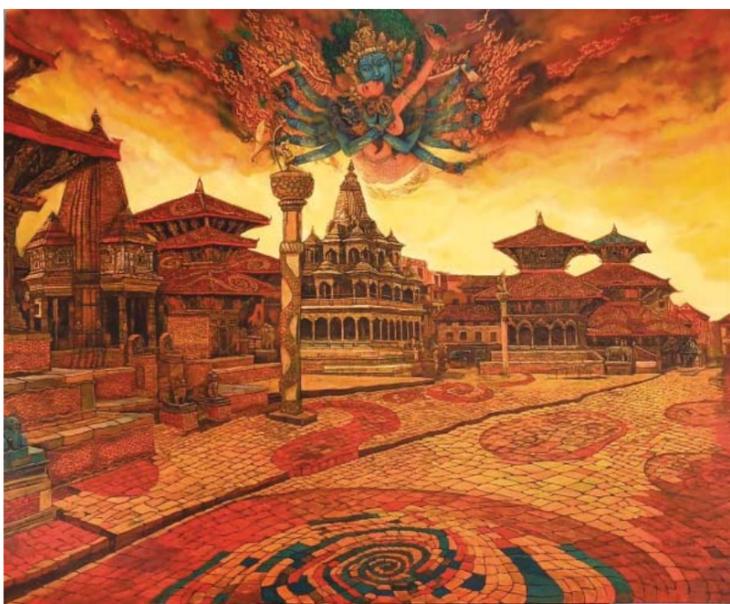
We walk past familiar neighbourhoods and wonder how they have changed so much. An ongoing exhibition at The Kalā Salon titled *Changing Times* by The Pagoda Group aims to capture ever-changing society in a captivating display of colourful canvases.

Brick-lined houses, local tea shops, ancient temples, and quiet devotion are themes in Pradhuma Shrestha's series *Shangri-La*, much of which is an imagined past filled with nostalgia of the place he grew up in. By keeping people out of the frame, he allows space for what he calls a divine aura to surface.

"I was born and brought up here and my canvases echo the nostalgia of cities like Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Lalitpur which are dense with myth, folklore, religion, and an ever-present divinity. All of this is truly what is ours, and we must treasure it," says Shrestha.

The swirling clouds that drift across Shrestha's canvases borrow from *thangka* and *paubha* traditions, lending the scenes a sense of mysticism and otherworldliness (pictured, right). Within this dreamscape are circular forms which represent wheels of chariots.

Divinity dominates the sky, its presence asserted in soft brushstrokes below, as if the deity's gaze itself has seeped into the land. Gods linger as guardians and



temples hum with enigma.

In an earlier work, *Cultural Bond*, a masked *lakhe* dancer bursts forward in vibrant red, dancing against a backdrop of molten gold clouds. The *lakhe*'s trance signifies protection and where it steps, evil cannot follow. Hence, the skulls that surround it never fall beneath its feet but one leg hangs suspended in midair, suggesting uncertainty, raising questions.

Is this symbol of a culture secure, or is it endangered by modernity? The work captures society at a crossroads, honouring the old while grappling with the new.

In *Panchatatva Mandala*, Pasang

Bikram Lama fuses two mandalas into a single visual meditation, suggesting unity where each colour carries symbolic weight: yellow evokes the soil of the earth, blue flows as water, red burns with fire, and black opens into the vastness of the spatial sky. These elements form a cosmology of creation and destruction.

Says Lama, "Everyone has a mandala of their own being, and the elements represent the cycle of life."

Mala Shrestha's works *Water of the Divine Mother* and *The Spirit of Serenity* unfold in a dreamy and delicate fusion of nature and religion, suggesting that divine

forms are not separate from the natural world. Trees and branch-like motifs appear as sacred sculptures and spiritual presences.

Her goddesses, adorned in alluring ornaments, emerge from trunks and streams, painted in aqua green, pink pastels, and rustic browns, as if grown rather than created, affirming that the divine is inseparable from nature and present everywhere.

In Kishor Nakarmi's *Essence of Nepal*, Gautam Buddha is embedded in leaves, brick walls, birds, and wilderness, dissolving boundaries between the sacred and the earthly. The canvases radiate calm and their subtlety is enriched by finely observed details.

Rudra Bahadur Pun captures the vitality of mask dances and rituals found in the monasteries of Mustang, weaving together tradition, landscape, and daily life.

The essence of the exhibition comes together in Roshan Pradhan's paintings that reflect contemporary tension of technology colliding with ancestral myth and the power of tradition. A fierce *Garud* rises within a landscape saturated by technological apparatuses, while at its feet a human form clings tightly, attempting to assert control.

In another work, *Bhairab* confronts a human embodiment of AI in a theatrical standoff, with the deity ultimately prevailing,

reaffirming endurance over technological dominance (pictured, above).

The human figures in Pradhan's paintings are drawn from life with his friends volunteering as models, photographed and later translated onto canvas.

"Technology has taken over our lives. Many can probably not even imagine life without it now. But, culture, too, is integral to human existence. Our life would be much different without our culture, it is a part of us," notes the artist.

Rather than framing technology as purely antagonistic, Pradhan explores coexistence, and while acknowledging its destructive potential, affirms the power of our myths and traditions.

ART AS ARCHIVE

Pradhan adds, "These paintings are also an archive of its time. Viewers centuries from now may read these paintings as records of the age we inhabit. While technology is important, cultural continuity must walk alongside it. Festivals must still be celebrated, oral traditions must be sustained, and our roots must be remembered, by future generations."

Curator Sophia L Pande says the exhibition took more than a year to put together: "It responds to a shifting world, seeking to capture both transformation and the quiet fear of loss. Its themes move fluidly across environment, technology, artificial intelligence, and climate change, reflecting the diverse yet interconnected practices of the artists, providing a glimpse into the evolving landscape of contemporary Nepali art." 🇳🇵

Changing Times
The Kalā Salon
Chhaya Centre, Thamel
11AM-8PM

Homecoming after nine years

A domestic worker's experiences from Jajarkot to Kuwait, and the freedom of coming back



DIASPORA
DIARIES 80-81

These are the 80th and 81st episodes of *Diaspora Diaries*, a *Nepali Times* series in collaboration with Migration Lab providing a platform to share experiences of living, working and studying abroad.

I worked in Kuwait for 11 years before deciding to call it quits. I had not visited Nepal in nine years. A broker from eastern Nepal had arranged the migration of 15 of us, and I was the only one from Jajarkot.

Since the government did not allow female domestic workers to migrate, we went through India. We were afraid he might sell us off in India. I had never left my village, and as a precaution, we made the female broker accompany us to India till we flew out to Kuwait.

At the airport in Kuwait, no one came to pick us up and we waited there for two days. We did not have any money so we had to beg for food and water. Some gave us noodles, biscuits and water.



We even drank water from used bottles in the trash. The Indian agent finally came to pick us up but we were too scared to confront him.

The first house I was placed in was not good. I did not speak Arabic and I did not know how to

use the iron or washing machine. A Filipino worker helped me, but madam kept following me around and making me do everything twice. It was not easy at all.

Not able to understand the language, I was like someone dumb

and deaf. Hand gestures were not sufficient. I don't know how I passed those two years before returning to Nepal. But there were no jobs, no money. So I decided to migrate again to Kuwait because it felt familiar, and by then I could

speaking Arabic.

This time, I stayed with the same family for nine years. All four children in the house were born when I was there, so they are very attached to me. Madam was alright although she made me work a lot and micromanaged me. Every family member in Kuwait had their car and driver. Back home we don't even own personal bicycles.

Taking care of children meant that I could go wherever they went, so I got to travel and eat pizzas and burgers. They paid me on time, and I sent money home to take care of my sister, a cancer survivor. With my savings I also bought land and built a small house in Surkhet. I have no educational background or work experience, so this was a big deal.

For nine years, I did not see a reason to return because of my obligations to my sister and her son. In Kuwait, I met with colleagues from different countries like the Philippines, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and India but we communicated in Arabic. We worked for different families but got to meet every Thursday when madam used to go to her mother's house.

We got along and fought like sisters, but most of our time went running after the children. There was no time for anything else.

The sky is not the limit

From washing dishes to Michelin stars, one Nepali's spirited journey from Australia to Doha

Raj Silwal

I went to Australia in 2008 because everyone was headed there. It was my first time leaving the country and my first job. My college helped me find work as a kitchen helper in a Brisbane restaurant.

I did not know that being a kitchen helper meant washing dishes. I was young and did not know how to handle the steam, the hot water, and the busy kitchen.

The utensils were thrown at the dishwashing station continuously, and water splashed on my face. My shoes and clothes were always wet.

It was an on-call job. A couple days into the job, I was asked to come in when I was at the movies. I refused. They fired me. That was that.

I then worked on a farm, picking lemons and oranges. The lemon work was particularly hard because I would get cuts all over my hands. This hustle was not for me.

Within a year in Australia, I decided to return to Nepal because life abroad did not suit me. But after spending eight months in Nepal, reality sank in. Nepal was not all that great either.

I went back to Australia. On the plane, I befriended a Nepali woman who was homesick and a first time traveler. At the immigration in Australia, the officer noticed my long absence and started interrogating me.

He noticed the Nepali woman waiting for me and asked who she was. Without thinking I lied



that she was my girlfriend. That seemed to do the trick because he did not want us to be separated. He stamped my passport. She went her way. I went mine.

In Sydney, I again found a dishwashing job at a fine dining restaurant. A Sri Lankan colleague

helped me learn. The pace at which I had to do the dishes was insane but I got the hang of it in two weeks or so.

I always dreamt of one day wearing the chef's white coat. It commanded respect, I could tell. In addition to becoming good at



my job washing dishes, I also had good language and networking skills so I built good relationships with colleagues.

There was a need for a pizza chef at the restaurant. It was expensive to hire someone new, and they asked me if I was up for the job. I said yes even though I knew nothing about making pizzas. My Italian colleagues coached me and before I knew it, I became better than others at the job.

Soon, I realised that I did

not just want to make pizzas. Whatever I wanted to learn, I just asked seniors to take me under their wings and I would help without pay. They would agree but still pay me. It wasn't a strategy per se, I genuinely wanted to learn.

At some point, a Japanese sous chef in my restaurant and I had coincidentally applied to the same restaurant, and there, under him, I got to learn even more. Working with a Japanese chef is really difficult, but you learn a

Madam's house where I spent nine years was good, but it is actually how well the employers treat us that is important.

I watched TikTok videos during my free time. Mostly deuda songs. During the GenZ movement, I was glued to social media. I supported it, but wished they had not burnt down government offices. I was not allowed to post on social media from there.

By the time I left, I was making 180 Kuwait dinar a month (\$580). I have heard horror stories from Nepalis about their employers, but mine paid me well and on time. But she could have been better by allowing me to rest more, or use the phone more freely.

Between preparing children for school, ironing, washing, cleaning the house, cooking, taking care of the children, I had no time for anything. Not even to sleep properly. What can we do?

ATTACHMENTS

Back in Nepal I often wonder how the children are doing. If they are eating well. You get attached to them, but as they grow older, they also complain about us. I used to sing and dance with the kids. They depended on me for everything and I had watched them right from the time they were born.

Sometimes, they used to refer to me as their mother which my madam did not like. I don't have my own kids. That is why when I made up my mind to leave, I felt bad leaving them behind, especially the youngest one who relied on me for everything.

Even now, when I think about it, my eyes tear up. Madam asked me to take a long vacation and return to Kuwait, but I had made

up my mind to go back to Nepal. A Sri Lankan woman replaced me, and we overlapped for a month as I trained her and the children got used to her.

On my last day, Madam and I decided that I should sneak out without telling the children because they would not be able to handle it. I asked the Sri Lankan woman how the children are holding up, and she said the youngest one still cries asking about me. Madam was also emotional about me leaving, she gave me olive oil, clothes, and sweets but no money. I cannot describe how happy I was to get on the plane to return home, my heart was full of excitement.

Since I came back, it has been a different experience. After nine years of living in someone else's house where my every move was monitored, I feel so free. I can use the phone as I please. I can sleep as I please. I need to catch up on my sleep. There is so much freedom.

Because of the children, I had developed a taste for pizzas and burgers but they are not as tasty in Nepal. I don't know why. But the meal I was craving for when I came home was freshly made rice, lentils and mustard greens. I went to the hospital here, and I saw nurses in uniform and it reminded me of the domestic worker maid's clothes I wore in Kuwait.

I am worried about money running out, even though it has only been a few weeks. Expenses are high in Nepal. The monthly income has stopped. When I went a decade ago, I relied on others financially. Now, there are others who depend on me. 🇳🇵

Author wants to remain anonymous.

lot. He would sometimes even hold my hand with tongs dipped in hot water when I screwed something up.

I worked in a few restaurants after this and was earning well. When one of my colleagues, a dishwasher, was let go unfairly, I decided to leave because I did not want to be a quiet bystander to this act. I returned to Nepal immediately after this.

I started a restaurant called Ghumti, but it was struggling. The location of the restaurants was not good and it failed. I bought another restaurant in Darbar Marg. I was managing two restaurants when Covid hit. The rent kept piling up, and there was no revenue. I took a huge loss.

I gave them up and returned to Chitwan and started making migration plans. I came across a job vacancy for Alba in Qatar by the famous Enrico Crippa. I still remember the heat when I got out of the airport in Doha, it was like entering an oven. Thankfully, I had a Nepali roommate who showed me around and helped me adjust.

ON TO MICHELIN

The hotel was still under construction, but training had started. We worked really hard for the opening and things went well. In 2023, we even won the Best MENA Restaurant award. But at some point in 2024, the international Crippa chain decided to leave.

Some colleagues including the head chef left and I suddenly was put in charge. I had some head chef experience from Australia and had previous experience working in high pressure environments, so I stepped up. We had to start from scratch again, this time as Alba in Raffles, Doha.

The name of our restaurant comes from the Alba white truffle, which is the best available and is expensive, selling at around 40,000 QAR per kg. We had heard the

official announcement that the Michelin was coming to Qatar, so we worked even harder.

Michelin inspections are strict, highly secretive and you have no idea you are being investigated. Even then, we were up for the game. We were 'selected', which meant we had potential.

I went to the award ceremony with low expectations. But because they announce the name alphabetically, Alba came first. I was very happy and felt validated. Being recognised as a one Michelin star restaurant is a huge achievement for us.

My MD reminded me of a promise I had made of getting a Michelin tattoo if we got the award. I guess I will get it done when I come to Nepal next. My plan is to get a tattoo that captures my journey right from the dishwashing days.

I have cooked for Obama, Beckham, Kaka, Trump, 50 Cent, Lindsay Lohan, you name it, because our restaurant is visited by high profile guests. At first, I used to feel the pressure. Now I view all guests as the same. The food you make is the same no matter who is eating it.

I love the work. In fact, it does not feel like work. The rush in the kitchen, the atmosphere, the heat, the scent, I live for it. When I am not working, I get bored.

It is like an addiction without which I get withdrawals.

Nepalis overseas have a lot of potential in the hospitality sector. But my advice to youth is to focus on building a strong base and invest in learning. It is increasingly common for Nepalis to job hop for a salary jump.

While other skills like language are also important, it is the hard knowhow that we really need to focus on. In our field of work, it is the plate that needs to speak. 🇳🇵

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Sudiksha Tuladhar

Harka Lama felt as though his life was ending when he was diagnosed with bladder cancer in 2020. The treatment was a hard-won battle, with two surgeries and 27 rounds of chemotherapy before he went into remission in 2022.

As harrowing as his journey was, he did not have to worry much about covering the cost of his treatment, thanks to friends and well-wishers, particularly those overseas, who extended financial support. Lama's fight against cancer was less painful because of this support.

However, throughout his grueling treatment, he could not help but think of those who might not have the support he got.

"I had help from friends, but I saw many cancer patients who could not even afford to be admitted to hospital for treatment," says Lama. "I had to do something to help."

An avid cyclist, Lama had met Bikash Parajuli, an orthopaedist at Dhulikhel Hospital, in 2017 when he participated in the Yak Attack high-altitude mountain bike race in which Parajuli was a medic. When Lama was diagnosed with cancer, Parajuli encouraged him to go for treatment at Dhulikhel.

While brainstorming about ways to raise funds for patients in need,

Lama was inspired by Yak Attack to raise money through cross country bicycling. He teamed up with Dhulikhel Hospital and the Cycle Culture Community (CCC), planning to cycle east to west along Nepal's foothills to raise funds.

Five years later this month, bicyclists began their fundraising tour from Panchthar's Chiwananjyang in eastern Nepal to Baitadi's Jhulaghat in the west, cycling 1,800km across Nepal from 1-27 January.

Lama and Parajuli, along with Kabita Chitrakar, Bhairaja Maharjan, and Keshav KC cycled the full route. Along the way, more than 50 people had joined with their bicycles for parts of the trail.

Lead rider Kabita Chitrakar is

Cycling to combat cancer

Cancer survivors and healthcare workers bicycle across Nepal to raise funds for patients needing treatment

currently being treated for breast cancer that was diagnosed four years ago after she had lost both her mother and sister to the disease.

CYCLING, A SAVIOUR

"It was doubly painful to be battling the disease by myself after losing them," says Chitrakar who found out during a radiation therapy session that the cancer had spread to her lungs and the doctor gave her six months to live. "I fell into a depressive spiral. I could not eat or sleep."

Her friends and family encouraged her to take up cycling to keep her spirits up. Her nephew brought her a bicycle with a modified seat so that she could ride comfortably. In time, what had started as a hobby became a passion.

"As I rode through mountains and forests, I began to enjoy cycling, and my heart began to feel lighter. I was no longer sad, cycling changed my whole perspective towards life," she told us, back in Kathmandu. She has gone through eight rounds of chemotherapy and has heard from other women how much her spirit inspired them, too.

"My family was my pillar through my treatment, encouraging me to fight this disease and live my life to the fullest," she says. "I want to encourage other women to who

are going through the same thing that I did."

As Lama and Chitrakar cycled up and down mountain trails, the team did not just raise funds, they also held awareness programs in 14 schools across 11 districts about cancers, mobilising local mother's groups.

"We encouraged young girls and women to be aware about the risks of breast and cervical cancer, and go for screening and mammography," says gynecologist Suman Raj Tamrakar, a member of the cycling team. "We met with over 1,700 young girls and women during our journey."

The cycling team has raised Rs.2.3 million, and it will be handed over to Dhulikhel Hospital, which has committed to matching the amount raised to cover the cost of treatment for poorer patients.

Says Lama: "I am beyond happy to have completed this journey. But even happier that we raised all that money for the cause." 🇳🇵

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