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Dirty politics = Dirty air



Between 8-9AM on 6 January, Nepali Times reporters fanned out across the city with ambient air quality monitoring kits. At every point, Combined US AQI readings showed above 300 -- more than 10 times higher than the WHO's safe threshold. And that was on a good day.

● Sonia Awale

That Nepal's political leadership does not care about the health of its people is abundantly clear from its handling of the Covid-19 crisis. But they do not seem worried even about their own health.

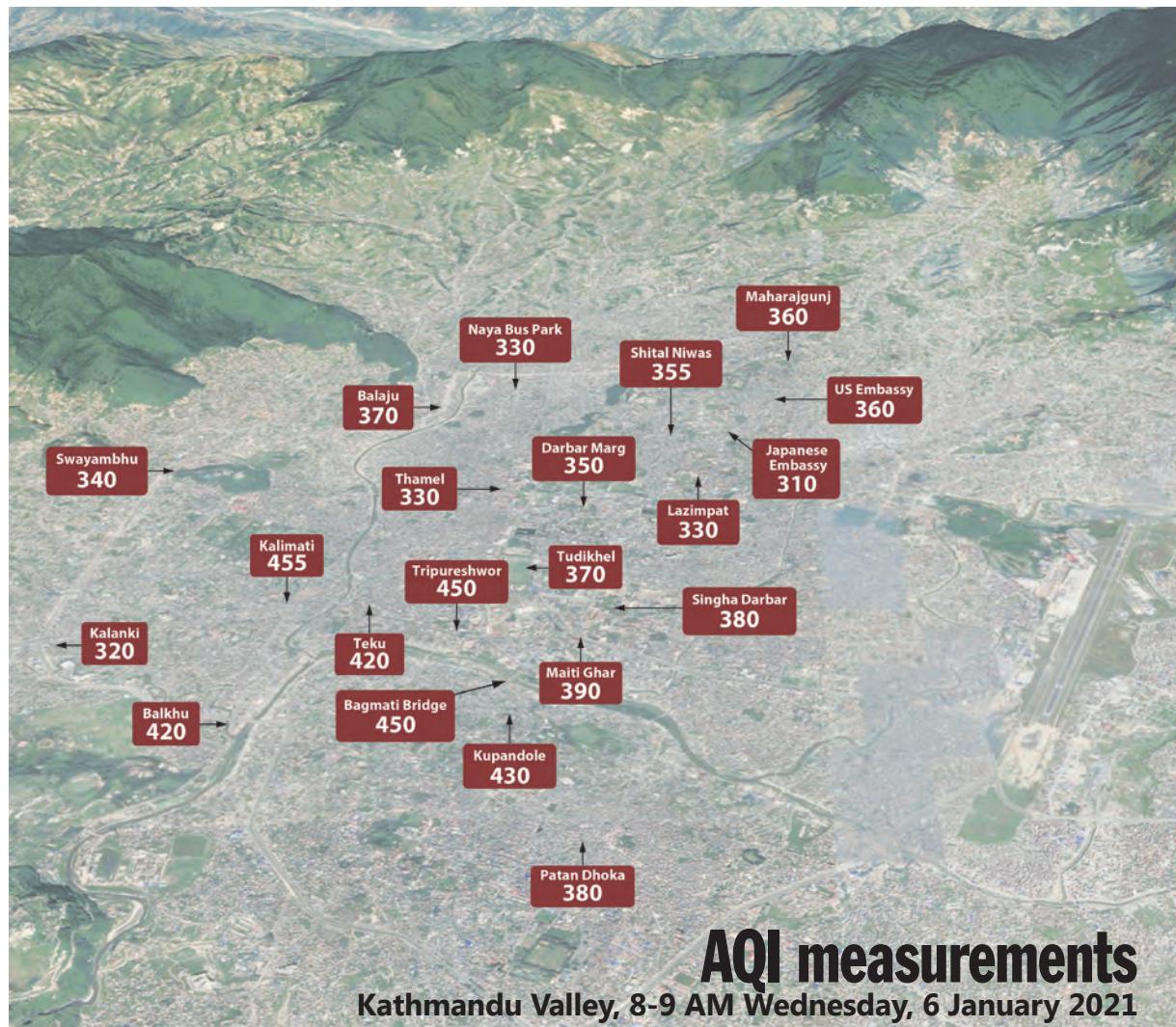
This week, politicians attended crowded indoor meetings without adequate Covid-19 precautions. And Kathmandu's worsening air pollution crisis, which they have done nothing to address, also affects their own lungs.

On Wednesday morning, the Air Quality Index (AQI) was in the maroon 'Hazardous' range in Singha Darbar (380), Minister's Quarters in Pulchok (380) and the official residence of the president at Shital Niwas (360).

Although AQI on Wednesday had improved after surpassing a record 500 on Monday and Tuesday, it was still at a very harmful level. In Kopundole, Tripureswor and Kalimati, AQI was above 450.

By afternoon, bright sunshine and a fresh westerly blew the smog away. Kathmandu's pollution was still high, but the dirty air was being exported to districts to the east. Despite the majestic mountain views, AQI in Patan still hovered at 200.

"People are blaming weather for poor air quality but we are polluting the air throughout the year. Only on Monday and Tuesday, the pollutants were trapped and had nowhere to



AQI measurements

Kathmandu Valley, 8-9 AM Wednesday, 6 January 2021

GREEN 0-50 Good	YELLOW 51-100 Moderate	ORANGE 101-150 Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups	RED 151-200 Unhealthy	PURPLE 201-300 Very Unhealthy	MAROON 301-500 Hazardous
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go," says clean air activist Bhushan Tuladhar.

Experts say the bad air on 4-5 January was due to open fires, brick kilns, vehicular emission, wildfires in the mountains, and cross-border smog combined with winter inversion trapping pollutants in the bowl-shaped Valley.

But Kathmandu's air pollution is also clear proof of governance failure: corruption in emission checks, lack of political will to relocate brick kilns, and inability of municipalities to control garbage burning.

Last year, the Cabinet decided to declare a health emergency if AQI exceeded 300. If it followed its own rule, there should have been an emergency every day this week.

Most major media this week

replaced political news with headlines about the pollution crisis. But as blue skies returned, people thought the worst was over, whereas air quality was still at very dangerous levels.

Even more lethal are poisonous invisible gases like carbon monoxide, nitrous oxides, sulphur dioxide and surface ozone, mainly emitted by motorcycles. Masks do not protect us against those.

While pollution spikes are worrying, long-term exposure to dangerously dirty air can reduce average life-span by nearly four years. A report last year said air pollution was directly responsible for 42,100 deaths in Nepal in 2019.

"Air pollution is a long-

Survive, revive, thrive

EDITORIAL

PAGE 2

term problem that needs policy level change. It should go hand in hand with education and awareness which are the precursors to

clean air," says Shisir Sharma of the group Dhristi Kathmandu that monitors air quality.

The good news is that this week's pollution emergency has public concern about health risks, especially its links with Covid-19. Says Bhushan Tuladhar: "We can make choices. Ride a Safa tempo, or bicycle. Brick kilns can be cleaner. Truck emissions can be controlled. There is a solution to pollution."

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TIMELESS DIZI CHANNEL

Survive, revive, thrive

Every crisis is also a chance to improve. The global pandemic wrecked Nepal's economy in 2020, and its impact will be felt on tourist arrivals for at least the next two years. But it also provides us the opportunity to re-invent the existing model of tourism.

This important sector of the economy could do with a major overhaul. The process should have started during the Covid-induced collapse of tourism, as the hotels, airlines, agencies were just trying to survive, with little indication of how long the crisis would last.

It now looks like global tourism will be affected right through the 2020s. Which is why Nepal's tourism entrepreneurs and planners need to think about riding out the next two or three years, and plan for a revival.

The direction we have to take is clear: the benefits from climbing, hiking, wildlife, culture tourism must be more equitably distributed and conducted sustainably. Nepal's new tourism model has to be high yield, the focus must be on maximum employment generation so people are not forced to migrate, while we also promote self-reliance in agricultural and other items that can be produced locally.

Spreading benefits of tourism means ensuring that visitor spending is maximised in regions where it makes the most difference in socio-economic wellbeing. The existing model diverts most of the money visitors spend on their Nepal package to tourism wholesalers in Europe and other source countries, or agency middlemen in Kathmandu.

Nepal's tourism has been sustained thus far by crumbs that find their way to rural areas. Which is why despite increasing trekking numbers, with some notable exceptions, there has not been significant impact on reducing out-migration from rural areas. In some cases, tourism has even driven up prices, making basic items unaffordable to locals.

Tourism netted Nepal \$700 million in 2019, making up 8% equivalent of the country's GDP. There were over 1 million Nepalis employed directly in the hospitality industry, trekking and mountaineering, with many more benefiting indirectly from arrivals.

How Nepal's tourism industry can be re-invented to really lift the country's under-served areas

But never has Nepal's tourism sector suffered as badly as during this pandemic. Only 230,000 tourists came to Nepal in 2020—lower than during the worst years of the conflict, and less than during the Earthquake-blockade of 2015. (*See chart*)

Ironically, Nepal's foreign exchange reserves in 2020 hit a record-breaking \$12 billion despite the pandemic because goods needed by the tourism industry and petroleum went down drastically.

Tourism has hit rock bottom, and there is nowhere to go but up. The question is do we keep on chasing visitor arrival numbers and tally annual hard currency income, or shall we try to redirect the focus to equity and spreading the benefits of tourism?

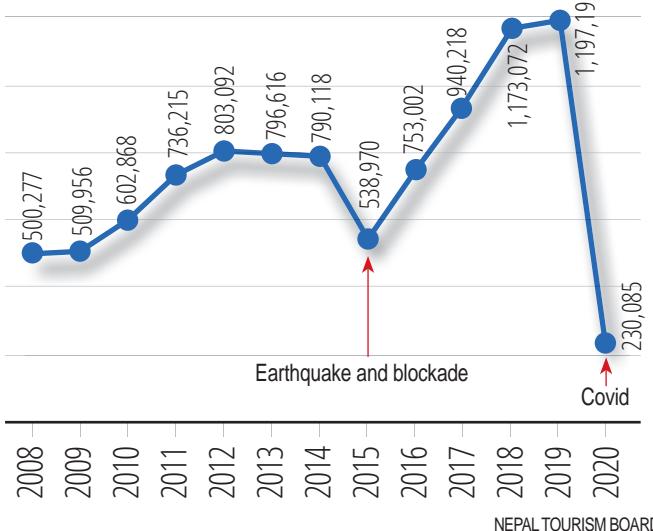
Visit Nepal 2020 tried to attract 2 million tourists last year, but with the pandemic the campaign was dead in the water. We might have hit the target for visitors had it not been mediocre and ad hoc planning. There was a lack of preparation in the main markets.

Nothing was done to improve the squalor and pollution of Kathmandu and the lack of amenities along the main tourist corridors gave way to a negative image. Nepal's once-pristine countryside is now mauled by messy road-building, wrecking scenic trekking routes.

The Covid-19 crisis has provided us time to take stock of things, and set things right. The most immediate lesson is to refocus on Nepal's nature as travelers in the post-pandemic era plan trips to pristine and tranquil areas in search of healing and rejuvenation.

This means building comfortable homestays, keeping trails clean not laying concrete steps, making visa, local logistics convenient and smooth. Tourists are not all looking for rock-bottom prices, they want value for money.

The prediction of post-pandemic travel is that people will avoid long-distance flights. Our promotion must be redirected to the immediate neighbourhood, and domestic and diaspora tourists. Visitors will seek health and safety, and will be willing to pay premium rates for the diverse attractions Nepal has to offer.



20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

The 'Young' Turks

This country is stuck in the rut. The best proof of that is the page 1 story in #25 of Nepali Times from 12-18 January 2001 which was a curtain raiser for the Nepali Congress party convention in Pokhara.

The main issue in Pokhara, our reporter pointed out 20 years ago this week, was going to be the top leadership of the party. And, as usual in Nepali politics, there was a gigantic tussle for leadership between a faction led by Girija Prasad Koirala and Krishna Prasad Bhattarai.

Both are now no more, but their acolytes are still carrying on that fight: Sher Bahadur Deuba vs Ram Chandra Poudel.

Here are excerpts from the story that are identical to the kind of factionalism that plagues both the ruling NCP and the NC today. Let us know if this gives you a feeling of déjà vu:

All eyes are now on Pokhara, where history of sorts is going to be made as delegates from all over gather. Whereas in the past the selected party president nominated all the members to the NC's Central Working Committee (CWC), this time half the members will be elected from the floor. (Nominating the other half will still be the prerogative of the president).

It is likely, however, that this first time election for CWC membership will point to the likely successor(s) after the septuagenarian dows Koirala and Krishna Prasad Bhattarai retire.

The NC realises well that Bhattarai (77) and Koirala (78) cannot



go on forever. Bhattarai, the now-you-see-him-now-you-don't leader of the anti-Koirala camp, is actually semi-retired. Even Koirala has set a deadline for himself. "I will quit both positions within three years, the younger generation must be more patient," says the prime minister.

Laughably, that younger generation is itself in its mid-to-late-fifties. But even then they quarrel like boys over toys. In fact, Bhattarai and Koirala have borne the burden of leadership mainly because there has been no clear front-runner among the 'youthful' wannabes. The Pokhara convention may be regarded as the primaries for the leadership round among this second rung, where the wheat will be sifted from the chaff.

Among the top leaders in this generation are Ram Chandra Poudel, Sher Bahadur Deuba and Shailaja Acharya. For now, Deuba represents the vortex of anti-Koirala sentiment, through his one-point agenda of forcing Koirala to relinquish one of his two responsibilities.

The other underdog is Ram Chandra Poudel, described as a hard if unimaginative worker. Known to have a limited, Tanahu-centric vision, Poudel lacks the strong regional support which is Deuba's trump card. By siding with Koirala since March 2000, however, Poudel has improved his chances.

From the archives of *Nepali Times* of the past 20 years, site search: www.nepalitimes.com



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ONLINE PACKAGES



NO PEACE FOR THE DEAD

In this video, Sangam Mahato remembers her brother Om Prakash 'Dilip' Mahato who was murdered on 10 January 2020, crushed beneath the wheels of a tipper truck after he spoke out against illegal mining in Dhanusa. A year later his family still seeks justice. Illegal mining continues unabated. An investigation: pages 14-15.



MEASURING THE MUCK

Follow *Nepali Times* reporters as they fan out across Kathmandu with AQI monitors to measure air pollution this week. The conclusion: even if the air is not as bad as Monday, it is still bad. And it is as bad in Singha Darbar as it is in Khasi Bazar. Story: page 1 and online.

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



Flying home in a pandemic

by Anjana Rajbhandari

Mental health counsellor and researcher writes about tackling tests, paperwork and conflicting emotions while flying across the world to Nepal. Check out her column on our website and watch her vlog about travelling during Covid times.

Most reached and shared on Facebook



Print is back!

by Alisha Sijapati

The Year of Covid hit economies hard, and none more so than the media business. Yet, the death of print is largely exaggerated. Full story at nepalitimes.com. Also visit our YouTube channel to watch video of avid Nepali Times explaining what they missed most about the printed edition which we restarted from 1 January 2021.

Most popular on Twitter

Most commented



Nepal goes online shopping in 2020

by Sonia Awale

Nepal was already transitioning to e-commerce and digital market, but the pandemic sped up the process and provided a much-needed boost. Read what up and coming online businesses have to say in this most popular report of the week.

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS

- Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**
Alisha Sijapati reviews how the pandemic affected every facet of Nepal's economy, environment, and socio-cultural life in 2020.
- Rita Thapa @bheribas**
Enjoyed reading Alisha Sijapati's review of Pandemic, well balanced showing both the good & bad takes of the Covid-19 in Nepal.
- Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**
It's true digital media has even more reach during the lockdown, but the publishers seem to have decided that not having a printed newspaper has reduced their clout. Alisha Sijapati on why the death of print is exaggerated.
- Utsav Shakya @UtsavShakya**
I'd be interested to learn how ad agencies measures the strength of reader loyalty for print publications vs digital. New ways to engage readers with advertising content critical - perhaps learn from successful magazines (if there's still such a thing)?
- Nepali Times @Nepalitimes**
As 2020 comes to a close, people in #Kathmandu are behaving as if the #pandemic is over. Photos by @ BikramRai0
- NimeshDhungana @NimeshDhungana**
When disaster by choice meets disaster capitalism, who is to save the old and vulnerable from disastrous consequences?
- Sac Rai @sachin_dumi**
It's not only Kathmandu but all over Nepal
- Man with no name @KTMbasinda**
I think the club owners are acting stupid for their vested interest. It's really pathetic. Maybe if someone from their family is serious due to Covid, they'll understand.
- Nepali Times @Nepalitimes**
In her last column for Nepali Times, @lisachoegyal writes about her solitary travel on the Trans-Siberian Railway during the Soviet days.
- Sujeev Shakya @sujeevshakya**
It's so important to tell stories @lisachoegyal. Hope to read you soon



A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER 

TIME TO MEET AGAIN: TORONTO

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TURKISH AIRLINES

CANADA

The vagaries of fate

In her last column, Lisa Choegyal takes us on the Trans-Siberian Railway during the Soviet days

It was my Dr Zhivago fantasy period, and I had this wild idea that it would be compelling to travel solitary by surface all the way from Japan home to Britain – in winter.



SO FAR SO GOOD
Lisa Choegyal

'How I envy you that railway journey,' wrote Jan Morris, who fully appreciated the 'special grace' of travelling alone. Several days were spent transiting by train the massive expanse of the Soviet Union, and an uncertain seasonal ferry across the Sea of Japan to the east Siberian port of Nakhodka.

We disembarked at Omsk, or was it Tomsk, and the teeth-aching cold was such that breath crystallised and tongues froze if anyone was unwise enough to open their mouth. The grey platforms, steaming wheels and stolid Soviet silhouettes were discouraging, and I quickly climbed back into the carriage.

I remembered that time on the Orient Express when helplessly I watched the train with all my worldly belongings aboard chug out of the station – the stuff of nightmares – only to miraculously reappear after a few panicked devastating minutes. Character building stuff.

I had no such alarms on the Trans-Siberian, just surviving the bitter sub-zero temperatures every time I ill-advisedly alighted at a halt, and navigating the food where an expansive menu always seemed to have everything 'off' and only thick soup 'on'. This became routine in the prescribed Intourist world of Soviet tourism, and was rather alarming at first. I adapted fast.

Frozen rivers became smooth wayfares for the winter trucks, and across a pristine snowfield from the relative comfort of my second class sleeper I witnessed a pack of wolves fleeing at the sound of our monstrous approach. The rich biodiversity of Lake Baikal was a disappointing expanse of frozen ice, fringed in skeletons of willow trees under a threatening sky. 'The earth ... spell-bound in a death-like winter trance,' in the lone walker



When I first arrived in 1974, on one of the royal elephants at Sauraha hatisar.

words of Kenneth Grahame.

The train windows were permanently edged with ice and outside the monochromatic views were truly bleak, but inside the atmosphere was cosy and encompassing. Large Russian ladies carried covered baskets of black bread and strong sausage with which I was plied.

Without any common language

it did not take long to realise that these robust figures were worried about my slender frame – at nearly six feet tall and nicknamed 'Kathmandi' back at Tiger Tops in Nepal, I was unfamiliar with feeling dainty and delicate, never before nor since.

It was the winter of 1974 and I was returning from Nepal — the long way round. Following a solitary trek to Jomsom and

my spell in Kathmandu as an unsuccessful hippie, I had been working in Chitwan for a few marvellous months until the monsoon floods drove us out of the national park.

A series of adventures had landed me in Tokyo, including a spell selling diamonds with a couple of canny cockneys in Malaysia and Singapore, hanging out with bankers in Hong Kong, and devouring the sophisticated design and elegant intricacy of Japan's ancient cities.

But my mind was occupied with schemes as to how to wangle my way back to Nepal and the conservation tourism work that had captivated me. It would take me less than a year. Looking back, we can see our lives hang by a thread on seemingly random decisions and the vagaries of fate that could not have been predicted.

That 1974 me, dreaming of the Himalaya in another railway carriage heading home from Moscow and Leningrad through Poland to another ferry across the choppy English Channel, would have been astonished at what lay ahead.

Fast forward to a couple of

years ago, and the long afternoon shadows of the Indian Embassy Residence reached us across the gently sloping and perfectly mowed lawn — white stucco columns, spreading balconies and blatant colonial blustering of the two story house first constructed for the British and handed over shortly after Independence.

I felt the distant presence of Brian Hodgson, the first British resident to inhabit the bequeathed badlands of distant Lazimpat, depicted in this garden supposedly with his Moslem consort. The contemporary drawing has a picturesquely primitive charm, that seemed strangely distant from the gathering of literary luminaries.

The scent of roses mingled with that of my be-saried neighbours as we settled into the lushly padded chairs to enjoy a discourse on a small stage in front of the begonias. The subject was a book on mid-twentieth century life in the Kumaon hills by an esteemed Indian author swathed in cashmere and silk.

'I can't cope with this nostalgia nonsense.' The Indian ambassador's face beneath his perfect turban was crumpled with nuance. 'We have to move forward from the Raj, away from those battalions of white men, into the current reality. Romanticising the hill station life into a forgotten yesterday does none of us any favours.' He fixes me with a steely glare. 'Nor all that Raj rubbish about polo in the jungle.' My most recent column in *Nepali Times*.

I have no trouble agreeing. Wrestling with nostalgia has been my fortnightly task in this space for the last three years. I prefer to think of my articles as recalling living history, as background context to today's evolving environmental issues and tourism landscape.

Without even a nod to nostalgia, there are many hardnosed lessons to be learned from the impressive track record in tourism and conservation of which Nepal should be proud.

After 100 articles and three years, Lisa Choegyal is closing her So Far So Good fortnightly column. All her past pieces are available in the www.nepalitimes.com/archives.

♦ prabhu bank

Internet boom

The number of Nepalis on the internet has increased dramatically during the pandemic, with high-speed mobile connectivity accounting for 59% of the total internet users, new figures by the Nepal Telecommunications Authority (NTA) this week show.

Some 96% of Nepali households own mobile phones, and the proportion of smartphones with data rose rapidly during the coronavirus crisis in 2020. Some 24 million Nepalis, which is 80% of the 2011 population, currently use fixed broadband and mobile internet to browse the internet.

As it is, internet consumption went up 35% during the first four months of the lockdown as Nepalis shifted their social and professional lives—education, employment, and entertainment—online.

While a majority of mobile users have 3G internet, 4G is rising fast as telecom companies encourage users to buy the service through affordable packages. Three telecommunications companies provide 4G Internet services in Nepal: Nepal Telecom, Ncell, and Smart Telecom. Some 6.3 million mobile users currently have access to 4G services—2.04 million

Nepal Telecom users, 4.08 million through Ncell, and 199,000 who are on Smart Telecom.

Meanwhile, 5.2 million users have fixed cable and wireless broadband, with 4.8 million among them using wireless services.

Nepali internet users, already increasingly hooked on YouTube, sought greener pastures on relatively newer social media like TikTok during the lockdown, helped by special offers from telecom companies.

Turkish for students

Turkish Airlines has introduced special fares and extra baggage allowance to students travelling from Kathmandu to Europe and the USA. Turkish Airlines introduces special



fares and extra baggage allowance to students travelling from Kathmandu to Europe and the USA. Turkish Airlines currently operates regular flights from Kathmandu to Istanbul and beyond. During the pandemic carrier has started flying to over 208 destinations with flexible travel opportunities. For information Lktmsales@thy.com

Nepal's Biggest IPO

Nepal Infrastructure Bank Limited is issuing Initial Public Offerings (IPO) for general public from 15 January and has appointed NIBL Ace Capital Limited as its issue manager. This is the biggest IPO in the history of Nepal's capital market with 80 million units worth Rs.8 billion.

Everest Bank 100th branch

In its bid to provide banking facilities across the country,



Everest bank has inaugurated its 100th branch at Hakim Chok in Chitwan district.

Sanima Digital

Sanima Bank has become the first bank in Nepal to introduce omni channel digital banking services. The bank has upgraded its existing Sanima Sajilo e-banking service to provide a complete digital banking experience.

Sanima Bank

From one emergency to another

Responding to crises has become a calling for the Bhaktapur's Covid volunteers

● Monika Deupala

The volunteer group RNA16 shot into the limelight in May 2020 after it handled the first coronavirus death in Nepal at a time when there was extreme stigma about the disease.

Eight months on, they continue to conduct rescue missions for other crises besides Covid-19, and the team has grown from four to ten.

"We have handled close to 26 Covid bodies," says Arun Sainju, who leads the team that worked closely with the Nepal Army in handling the coronavirus casualties.

Sainju and his team were awarded a national medal by President Bidya Devi Bhandari in September 2020. They also received the Gallantry Award First-class from Nepal Scouts in October.

RNA16 is a short form for 'Rescue And Awareness in 16 Types of Disasters', and speaks for the work it does. Currently, the team helps people with PCR tests, ambulance service in response vehicles, fumigation of affected areas, and training on Covid-19 safety to health institutions, hospitals, and community health groups.

During last year's monsoon, the team also was called to respond to landslides in Sindhupalchok where it conducted rescues.

"The last two months were quite busy with training sessions," says Sainju, who has just returned from Solu Khumbu after training 134 staff in dealing with Covid emergency response.

Arun Sainju

Not all heroes wear capes but the team in-charge of RNA16 Arun Sainju easily stands out in a crowd. Clad in a fluorescent green rescue jacket, a walkie-talkie slung to his waist, he sports a 'RNA16' tattoo on his neck. The 31-year-old recognised his calling in life after an incident involving the drowning of an 11-year-old girl.

During the 2015 earthquakes, he was hospitalised with injuries himself, and was constantly in the presence of people in pain in beds next to him. He asked if he could be of any help, and was soon assisting his medic friends in providing relief to others injured in the earthquakes.

Since then, he has not looked back. Sainju has gone on from one



Arun Sainju

emergency to another, providing his support to survivors and rescuing people during landslides, floods—even the crash of the US Bangla flight at Kathmandu airport in 2018.

"Everything looks normal now despite the pandemic, people have started to go about their daily lives. We are probably learning to adapt to the virus situation. But there will always be emergencies for which we need to prepare," says Sainju.

Rajesh Gainju

Team leader Arun Sainju noticed Gainju during a fire rescue drill, and immediately decided to ask him to join RNA16. Since then, they have been working together as emergency responders. Together, they became the ones to volunteer in managing



the first Covid dead body in Nepal.

Gainju, 30, has been a Scout for more than half his life. With skills in rope rescue, he has had an adventurous life, plucking people trapped on mountains

and in rivers. His temerity was first tested during the Nepal earthquakes of 2015. While his own house was damaged, he was busy pulling out other people from under the debris of fallen buildings in Bhaktapur.

After the earthquake, he traveled to different districts as a volunteer to rebuild public schools.

During the pandemic lockdown, he spent his days feeding an old couple in an isolation ward. When they recovered, he also helped them return home. "They wept in gratitude. Life has no purpose if one cannot use it to help people

in need," he says.

Nhuza Kiju

Nhuza Kiju works as a computer operator in Bhaktapur Municipality. A Scout from a young age, he was active in local youth clubs. After the April 2015 earthquakes, he helped build temporary shelters.

He met Arun Sainju at a scouting camp in Kakani, and currently manages information for the team, which includes handling not just social media but emergency calls as well.

Since the pandemic started, he has also been helping the team in contact tracing Covid cases and assisting in preparing funerals for coronavirus victims.

"It was very hard to see the grief of patients' families not being able to see their loved ones," says the 21-year-old, who is working to join the Nepal Police in the future.



Poonam Karmacharya



Rajesh Gainju



Nhuza Kiju

Poonam Karmacharya

Poonam Karmacharya was the first female volunteer in RNA16. A staff nurse by profession, she joined the team four years ago, conducts self-defense training and is also involved in rescue, safety, and awareness programs.

Besides her nursing skills, 23-year-old Karmacharya helps manage team communication. The bulk of her work comprises collecting details of Covid-19 patients and guiding them through recovery procedures in hospitals.

Karmacharya wants to conduct awareness programs related to women's health and hygiene in rural Nepal in future. She adds: "The hardest part of living in a tent for more than three months as a volunteer was not having proper toilet facilities, which made me realise how women's needs during crisis can be different."

Nepal's other pandemic: cancer

30 people in 3 neighbourhoods of a Tarai village have died recently of cancers



Uma Kumari Sah with her grandmother.

It started with persistent skin allergy for 15-year-old Uma Kumari Sah. She got a checkup at a leprosy hospital in Dhanusa, and later in India. Doctors detected a growth in her lungs. The very next day she flew to Kathmandu where she was given six cycles of chemotherapy, twice a week and radiotherapy for 15 days.

Sah is from Hariban municipality of Sarlahi district where 30 people have died in the past three years, seven others are undergoing treatment for various types of cancer.

The three neighbourhoods of the village have a population of 1,500. Extrapolating this figure nationwide would mean a death toll from cancer of a staggering 650,000 people all over Nepal in three years.

Hariban village is at the lap of the Chure Range adjoining the Tarai. There is well water, and its fertile fields are perfect for vegetables which are taken to Kathmandu to be sold. But what brings the farmers prosperity could also be one of the reasons for the epidemic of cancer here.

Farmers are using herbicides and insecticides, some of them banned in Nepal. The water table is receding due to over-extraction and what comes out of the pumps is arsenic-laced.

Cancer used to be so rare in Nepal that there is no word for it in the Nepali language. But Hariban could be a microcosm of the cancer sweeping the country. Cancer is now the fifth leading cause of death in Nepal, with lung, breast, cervix, stomach and colorectal cancers being the most common.

Approximately 28,000 new carcinoma cases are diagnosed every year in Nepal with mortality at 20,000, both at an increasing rate as per the Global Cancer Observatory estimates. But many more cases go undiagnosed due to lack of resources and insufficient screening.

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has added to the crisis. There are five times more funerals at the Pashupati cremation site in December 2020 compared to the previous year. While some could be people who died from the coronavirus, many others are thought to be patients with cancer or other chronic disease who could not get timely treatment.

Lockdowns and restrictions as well as fear of contracting SARS-CoV-2 had affected patients of many chronic illnesses such as cancer due to reduced treatment and screening facilities. This in



Phekini Devi Mahato Sundi and Sinai Mahato Sundi.



A garbage-filled well.



Drinking water that is not fit to drink because of arsenic and other pollutants.



turn has likely resulted in more fatalities, say health experts.

Back in Hariban, Sah is now doing well after treatment. She says: "I'm lucky because my family could afford the treatment. I now plan to study science, be a nurse and care for patients like me. I want to help the poor and provide them treatment without cost."

Rafi Miya also lives in the neighbourhood and can barely survive on income from farm. Now, in addition to poverty, the family is burdened with cost of cancer

treatment for himself and his son.

Miya was diagnosed with throat cancer after a biopsy in Bharatpur Cancer Hospital. "They operated on me and took the growth out, but my voice is hoarse now. We cannot get the medication here, and it is expensive."

His son Lipla Miya's cancer has affected his bowel and bladder functions. His treatment has already

cost Rs200,000.

Phekini Devi Mahato Sundi also lives nearby, and started getting skin rashes, and suspects the lump in her breast is cancer. She cannot even afford to travel to get a checkup. Her husband Sinai has asthma, and is despondent that he does not have the money for her treatment.

"We have no money, without it there is no treatment. Doctors only treat those with money," he says, pointing to his damaged spectacles, which he cannot afford to replace.

At Hariban's Namuna Community Hospital, physician Anil Kumar Chaudhari conforms that there has been a steep rise in malignancies, and patients are referred to hospitals in Kathmandu or Bharatpur.

"There is a steady stream of cancer patients from the surrounding villages, most have skin, liver, lungs and throat cancer," says Chaudhary. "Those who can afford it go to India."

The Nepal government provides Rs100,000 for cancer patients who cannot afford treatment, but this is negligible compared to the total bill. Most patients here seek treatment when the cancer is at an advanced stage, so they end up losing all their money as well as their lives.

Another neighbor, Jaggil Sah suffered minor illnesses for a few years, but when he got sick during the pandemic, the doctors diagnosed him with third stage brain tumour. Surya Bahadur Sangtang's father was also diagnosed with last stage cancer and died within few months.

Says Sangtang: "He was admitted to hospital for 2-3 months, we lost all our money, and we also lost our father."

The dramatic rise in cancer made Hariban's local government investigate possible contributing factors. Many residents depend on commercial vegetable farming, and there is rampant pesticide spraying.

With the depletion of groundwater, villagers have turned to shallow tubewells increasing the risk of arsenic contamination. A sample survey from community tubewells here showed the amount of arsenic at 0.63mg/l, several times higher than the safe limit of 0.05mg/l.

Near the village is the Indushankar Sugar Mill that buys sugarcane from local farmers and turns it into sugar and alcohol, letting out toxic effluent into surrounding waterways. There are also 125 brick kilns in Sarlahi district, 16 of them in Hariban alone. Soot particles from the stacks can also be carcinogenic.

Says a local Dhanbahadur Ghising: "Farmers use pesticides elsewhere too, but why aren't other villages also getting cancer? This probably means it has something to do with polluted water and arsenic here."

Hariban Municipality has been forced to act. It is installing deep tubewells from up to 30m so that there is less chance of arsenic contamination of drinking water. The Indushankar Sugar Mill also dug a deep well and installed three tanks to store drinking water for villagers.

Progress on the alternative sources of water is slow, and it will take time to have an impact. In the meantime, young and old in Hariban face daily exposure to whatever is causing the cancer epidemic here. This Sarlahi village also has lessons for other parts of Nepal, which may also be exposed to the same risk factors.

Based on Episode 2 of Saglo Samaj, a TV magazine program produced by Himalmedia which is broadcast every Monday, at 8:30 pm on Dish Home Channel 130.



CANCER KATHA

Watch the second episode of Saglo Samaj: Cancer Katha on YouTube. The new episode takes on epidemic of cancer in Nepal.

Right gizmos at the right time

List of Top 5 gadgets to prepare you for whatever the new year has in store

The pandemic may have set back the year in many ways, but the gears of the tech-verse have been moving ahead quietly, with gadgets taking up more and more space in the daily life of urban Nepalis.



TECH AWAY
Sania Shah

All it takes is the right gizmo at the right time for us to forget that we ever lived with tiny inconveniences and administered most tasks manually.

From fancy disinfectants to air filters, gadgets become a way to improve health and quality of life, and these items are all available in Nepal. Investing in a WiFi range extender makes life easier, while gadgets like the ring light and pocket printers are not just trendy, but a bang for the rupee.

Godrej ViroShield 4.0

Living in a time where health precaution is a priority, there could not be a more relevant device: Godrej Viroshield 4.0 is a disinfecting device that claims to destroy 99% viruses in 2 to 6 minutes through UV-C rays.



An Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) lab tested and certified product, its 4 UV bulbs carry out UVC sterilisation—a widely used method of dry killing pathogens—on products ranging from masks and gloves to groceries, parcels, toys, and documents. Medicines, batteries and power banks cannot be de-germed.

With a capacity of up to 30 litres, Viroshield can be used to disinfect multiple items at once, saving time and energy, and is perfect inside home entrances, in the lobby, or the first room that you enter when you get home.

Price: NPR 21,790 18,790
Where to buy: www.cgdigital.com.np

Bbluv HEPA Air Purifier

If you are asthmatic or allergic to dust, pollen, pet dander, smoke, mould, mites, or bacteria, this air scrubber is your ally. If you are also extra sensitive to odours from pets or smoke, this may prove to be a smart purchase. The Bbluv 3-in-1 HEPA Air Purifier uses triple air purification with activated carbon and ionising technology to remove 99.7% of harmful allergens and pollutants. The device sits on a table and works quietly by itself, making it easy to leave in the kids' bedroom or play room, so it does not disturb them while they sleep or study.

With a simple intuitive touch control panel with 2 speeds of air purifying intensity and a coloured LED indicator, its levels can be adjusted to accommodate your need. The HEPA Purifier filters all particles larger than 0.3 microns, and comes with an air filter that lasts 12 months. It is quick and



easy to install and replace. You can order a new air filter from multiple e-commerce websites in Nepal.

Price: NPR 7,090
Where to buy: www.gajabko.com

Portable Rechargeable Selfie Ring Light

For those who do not want to experiment and spend a couple thousand rupees on a 2m tall ring light with a tripod, here is a mini-version. During the lockdown we realised that camera ring lights are not just for onscreen celebrities, but could come in handy when shooting a new TikTok video, or during online office presentations. They up your image quality and make you look that much better.

The tiny gadget comes with 1 selfie light and a USB cord to connect to your phone for a recharge. The clamping thickness of up to 15mm allows the ring light to be easily attached to most cell phone models. With 1.5 hours of charge time, it gives 2 hours of usage. The LED is bright enough

for your selfie needs and has three levels of brightness, adjustable to different lighting conditions. This one is for the Tik-Tokers, the Instagram artists and selfie-savvy Gen Z or millennial consumers.

Price: NPR 799 449
Where to buy: www.bestdealsnepal.com.np

Netgear WiFi Range Extender EX6120

A WiFi range extender, does exactly what its names suggests: it extends the range of your Internet connectivity so that you can access your favourite streams from any corner of your home or join a Zoom call without having to move around, trying to get better reception. Netgear WiFi Range Extender EX6120 does just this alongside offering outstanding features and efficiency.

The AC dual band WiFi device covers a range of 111m² and lets 20 devices to be connected at one time. It can repeat up to 1200 Mbps Internet speed and its FastLane technology makes it an optimum choice for users who stream HD content and play video games online.

The compact form factor hardly takes up space and plugs in neatly in a wall socket. It works with any wireless router, gateway or cable modem, of any brand, as well as any up-to-date Internet browser (Safari, Firefox, Chrome, Internet Explorer, MS Edge). Netgear also offers 1 fast Ethernet port for maximum speed in wired devices such as a computer, video game console or a smart TV.

Price: NPR 10,900 6,200
Where to buy: www.sastodeal.com



Huawei Portable Photo Printer (Pocket Printer)

While the sharing of digital images via social media platforms is all the rage, nothing beats the feel of a printed image that captures a cherished memory. The Huawei Portable Photo Printer enables you to bring to life your smartphone photographs through beautiful 50x76mm prints. The printer conveniently slips into your pocket and all you need to do is take it out, connect it to your smart device via Bluetooth and press print to turn your images into mementos.

Lightweight and compact, this brilliant little gadget uses inkless printing technology with a resolution of 313x490dpi, print speed of about 1 minute and comes with 10 sticky photo papers that you can keep replenishing. Whether you are traveling, getting together with friends and family or simply wish to gift someone a beautiful photograph, the Huawei Portable Photo Printer is just the thing to carry around and spread joy.

Price: NPR 19,999 9,989
Where to buy: www.daraz.com.np

कोरोनाबाट सुरक्षित रहने तीन उपायहरू



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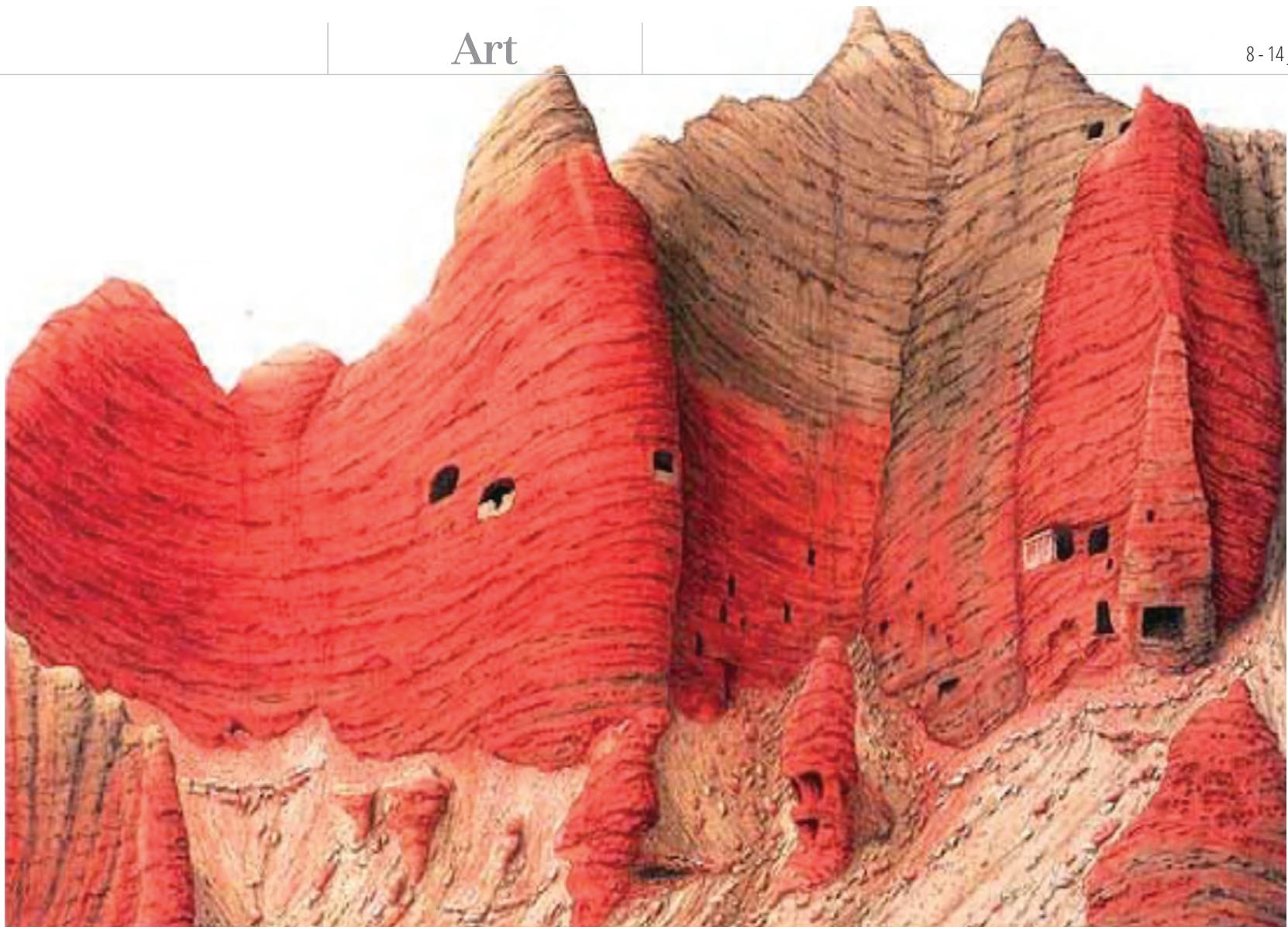


नेपाल सरकार
स्वास्थ्य तथा जनसंख्या मन्त्रालय



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Visionary artist brought out Mustang's magic with pen, pencil and brush



The coloured cliffs of Drakmar, Mustang.

Robert G Powell

● Linda Kentro and James Giambrone

Wednesday, 16 December 2020, marked the passing of a visionary artist who shared his unique perceptions of Asian architecture, art and culture with the world.

With an eye beguiled by beauty and a heart attuned to the strange and ineffable qualities of physical heritage, Robert Gordon Powell was a magician with pen, pencil and brush.

Born in Australia in 1948, Rob was teaching art and studying architecture when the Baul clan just divided state of Bengal in India, came to perform songs, dance and rituals in his university town.

This initial introduction to the human-spirit world deeply intrigued him, and the Bauls, who

stayed at his home, recognised in him a kindred soul. Laxman Das Baul invited Rob to visit their Bengali village.

Arriving at the teeming Howrah train station, riding the branch line through idyllic rice paddies and ending with an hour-long rickshaw ride deeper into mud-walled thatch-roofed villages, the young man from 'down under' was transported into an utterly different reality.

While sketching and experiencing life in Bengal, Rob heard that Ladakh had recently opened to foreigners, and determined to visit there as well. His camera disappeared en route, being fate's way of telling him that hand drawings were to be his primary means of documenting what he encountered.

This foray immersed him in Himalayan culture which became his most famous subject matter. He first documented Ladakhi buildings painstakingly with dots, the lightest possible method of rendition, well-suited to a patient artist and perfectly to the high mountain light, soft palette of colours and often eroded surfaces of Ladakhi

architecture.

Rob recorded architecture in Swat and Kalash Valleys of Pakistan, evolving a still detailed but faster illustration of light and shadow through cross-hatching in ink.

He documented the shamanistic culture of Western Nepal, portraying the initiation of a female shaman who meditated all night on a makeshift perch of perilously few small branches lashed high on a pole above her village. He drew drums, amulets and drumsticks – ritual implements that shamans used to mesmerise the world and captivate those journeying with them.

These ethnographically rich locales were sparse in material comforts, and Rob found his way to Kathmandu to more comfortably complete and develop paintings from his sketches. Here he became familiar with the Newa brick, wood and plaster architecture of the Kathmandu Valley. He recognised that temples and residences follow traditional shapes, incorporate sacred proportions, and create a feeling that resonates with

community, professional, and visitor.

He turned to red pigment watercolours to depict the राते झाँडे brick and tile work, and used browns, creams and greys to show how time tempers wood, plaster and stone. He was commissioned to design the Green Pastures Hospital in Pokhara, a comely complex resembling monastic quarters in layout, with the warm detailing of a traditional, welcoming inn.

Early in Rob's three decades in Kathmandu, he encountered the German government's largest development project in the world at the time – the restoration and conservation of the traditional city of Bhaktapur.

Fortunately meeting its leader, the Austrian conservation architect Götz Hagnmüller and his wife Ludmilla before they departed on holiday, they commissioned Rob to produce eleven drawings of Bhaktapur, including the Kuthu Math priest's house that they would later renovate as their exquisite residence. These drawings were exhibited at the Vajra Hotel art gallery.

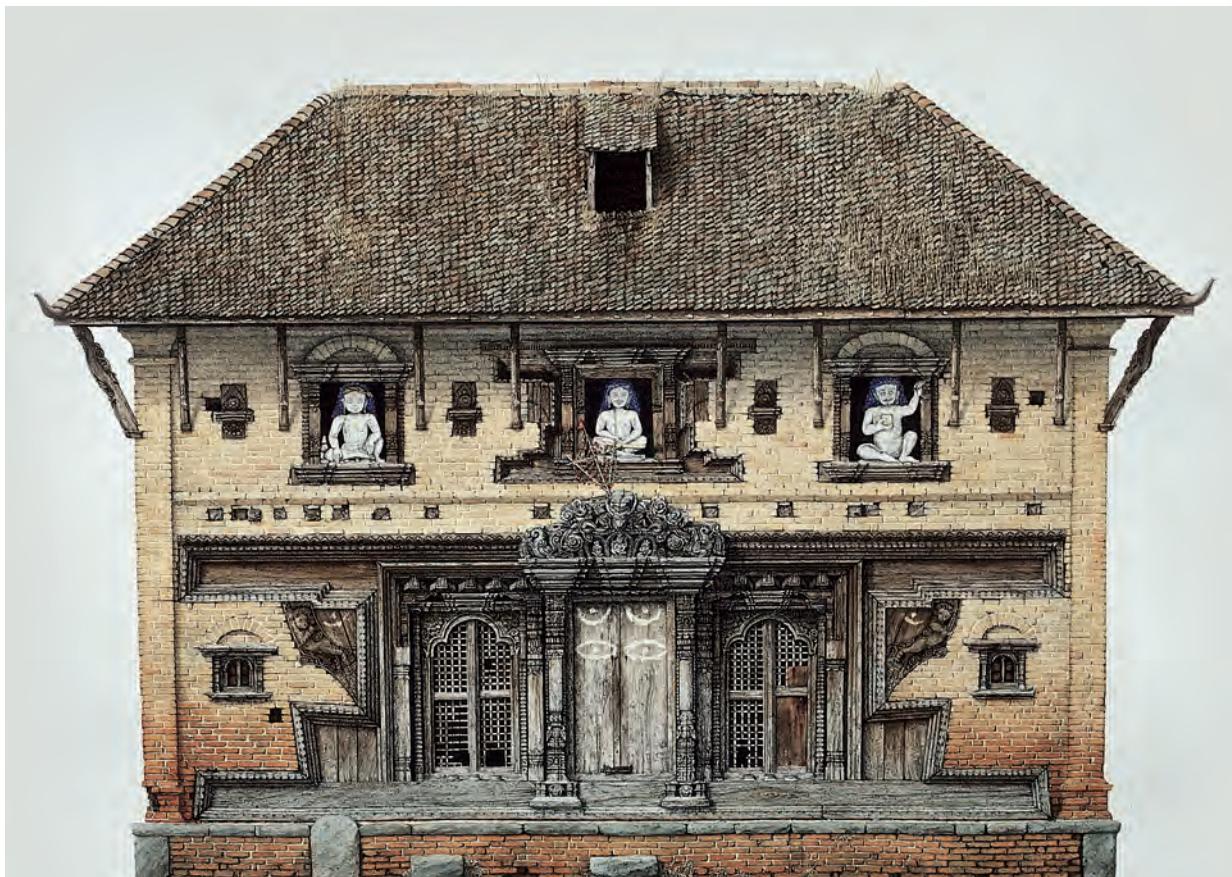
The most challenging piece was a small Kuthu Math room which had been used for years for distilling छाङ beer. The first sketch showed it cluttered and with blackened walls. After careful cleaning, Rob painted it as the three-century old *puja* room it originally was — every inch of wall richly decorated with sacred Krishna-Lila murals.

Rob's Bhaktapur work generated a lifelong friendship with Götz, and professional recognition that brought further work in cultural heritage. His skills had arrived at a moment when the world was athirst for all things Himalayan, including the Kathmandu Valley's ten World Heritage sites. Rob deeply appreciated the works of the great traditional Newa Malla artisans and honed what he saw into radiant compositions that elicited ancient memories and enticed new perceptions.

Before long, Rob was engaged by the Nepal government's Department of Archaeology to accompany their team to Mustang. He travelled on foot and horseback to Lo Manthang, sketching the luminous, mineral-



The Eight Chortens of Lo Manthang.

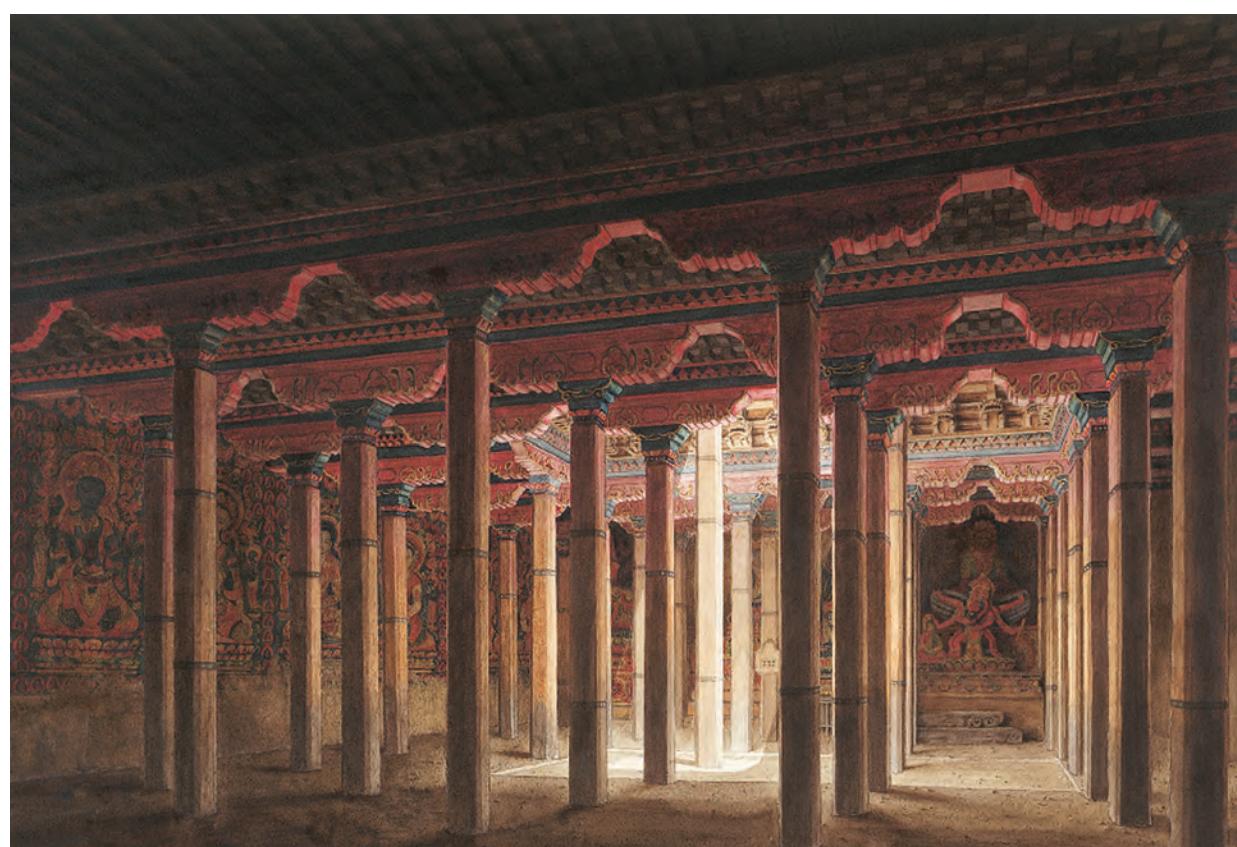


Agamche (Sacred House) of Unmatta Bhairava, Panauti 1984.



Tree with Horns.

Mani Wall with Horns, Gemi.



Thubchen Lhakhang, Mustang.

laden mountain-scape.

At the town of Lo, he spent hours on site, absorbing the forms and feelings of the buildings. He celebrated the rich red, white and black colours painted and poured down walls, to call forth the protection of the gods, Manjushri, Avalokitesvara, and Vajrapani on vulnerable building corners and doorways. He vividly highlighted the ram skulls and horns that are positioned above an opening to protect the inhabitants against malicious spirits.

When Rob met Mary Slusser,

cultural researcher and author of *Nepal Mandala*, she was impressed with his virtuosic artwork and arranged for him to show at the Sackler Gallery, part of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC.

That exhibition, 'Earth Door, Sky Door, Paintings of Mustang' in 1999 introduced the global art world to Robert Powell. His works embraced and slipped beyond the boundaries of ethnography into apparitional forms that reflect the essence of the Himalaya. Michael O'Sullivan of *The Washington Post*

said it well, 'Robert draws buildings in an animistic way that reveals something that lies beyond what can be seen.'

In 1992, Rob married Lieve Aerts, a Belgian woman and teacher of yoga and *chi gung*, who became his partner for life. After three decades happily settled in the centre of the culture that he portrayed so well, Rob contracted a lung infection that left his health vulnerable.

Rehabilitating at length in Europe, he was advised not to return to the poor air quality of

Kathmandu. Rob and Lieve moved to Koh Samui, Thailand, where he designed the Kamalaya spa and an exquisite home for themselves that encompassed huge hillside boulders, lush trees and a sublime view over the Gulf of Thailand. As the inside trees grew, so did the building, with some roof sections rebuilt several times to accommodate the surging foliage.

In Thailand, Rob expanded upon the Himalayan themes that had fascinated him. Rams' horns that protected the doors of Lo Manthang grew to a full, fantastical wall of hornery.

Mountainsides that had housed the awesome Bamyan Buddhas in northern Afghanistan were re-depicted with *dakinis*, looming, sensual female figures with small fangs to ward off treacherous foes.

He discovered new media,

moving into acrylics to capture the brilliant, evanescent skies and water around them, and to explore singularly potent spiritual symbols.

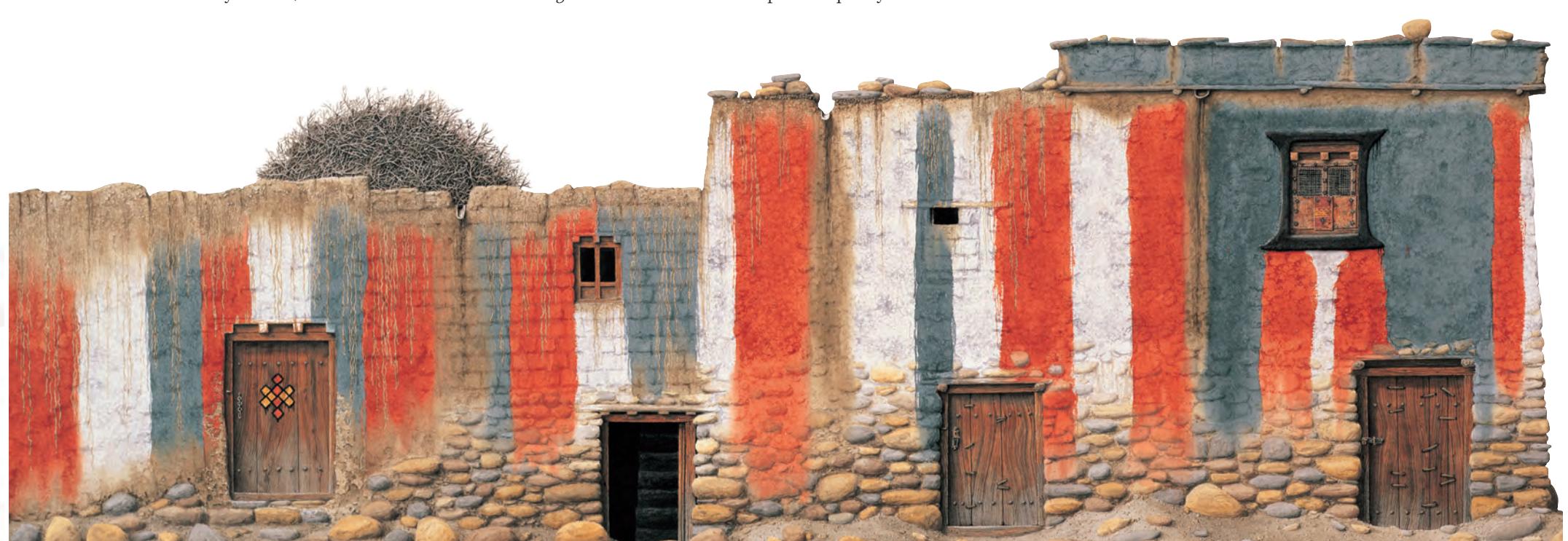
In 2019 Andrei Jewell made the documentary, *Enchanted Matter*, capturing Rob's life, art and philosophy. Sadly his health gradually deteriorated. He passed away with Lieve at his side, in a room brightened by a view to a brilliant, orange-flowered tree, with music and candles to accompany his final journey.

Robert will not be forgotten. He will live on in our memories as a beloved, gentle being and a prodigious creator of wondrous works of art, who encouraged us to let the strange and beautiful lift us into enchantment. 

Linda Kentro and James Giambrone are founders of the Indigo Art Gallery in Kathmandu.



Rob Powell in his Koh Samui studio.



Monk's quarters, Tsarang Gompa.

EVENTS

**Herbal Workshop**

Join herbalist Preerna Sejan's workshop about healing medicinal plants and flowers for everyday wellness and rejuvenation. Registration required.
10 January, 3 pm, Kar:Ma Coffee, Jhamsikhel

Maato

Gallery Mcube invites art enthusiasts to Maato, an art exhibition by their resident artist Zoe Williams. Visit the website for more. 8 January, 5:45pm, Gallery Mcube

Earthquake Safety Day

Earthquake Safety Day will commemorate the 8.5 magnitude mega-earthquake of 16 January 1934 and will remember the loss of lives and property that resulted from the 2015 earthquake and subsequent aftershocks.

16 January

Boudha Farmer's Market

The Farmer's Market serves as a place of encounter between clients, farmers and artisans facilitating discovery, debate, and tasting. Get organic vegetables, fruits, homemade goodies and more.

Saturdays, 5pm, Utpala Cafe, Boudha

**Wine and Canvas**

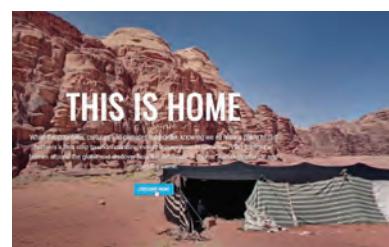
Mithila house is set to welcome 2021 with some wine and art sessions by Mithila artists. Register to visit and learn basic Mithila art and have a glass of delicious wine from the Vesper House.
9 January, 12pm - 3:30pm Dhokaima Cafe

**Maghe Sankranti**

The first day of the Nepali month of Magh marks the southward march of the sun, and heralds longer and warmer days. Spend the day with family and fill up on chaaku, til ko laddu, and tarul.

14 January

ONLINE ARCHIVES

**This is Home**

Visit traditional homes from countries around the world with Google's This is Home virtual tour. Learn about the history behind each of these places and get a glimpse inside the unique structures with Google Street View.

Crash Course

A channel started by authors/educators John and Hank Green, of Vogbrothers fame, Crash Course is a one-stop destination for educational material. Watch tons of courses in one channel, from organic chemistry to literature to mythology.

**British Council library**

The British Council Digital Library is making it easier to download books for free and read it on the go. Sign up for free and unlimited access to books, audiobooks, newspapers, magazines, comics and short films from around the world. Register for free until 31 March.

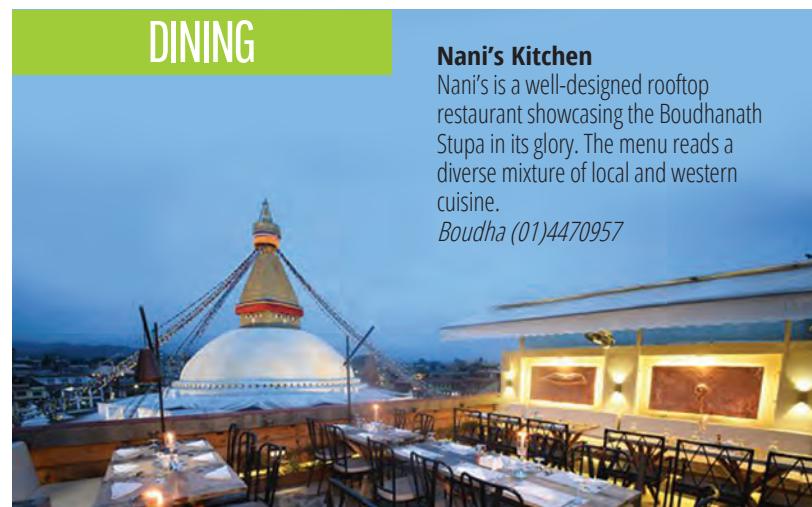
**Tasty**

This is the time to broaden culinary horizons. If there was one app that was made for millennial chefs, it's Tasty. The Tasty website and the mobile app has hundreds of recipes to choose from, and quick 'n easy how-to videos.

**Photo.circle visual stories**

Photo.circle has curated a series of stories called Nepal 2020: The Year in Pictures by 15 visual storytellers based across the country who documented their communities from the beginning of the lockdown. Browse through the archive.

DINING

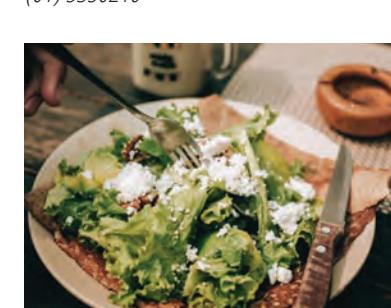
**Nani's Kitchen**

Nani's is a well-designed rooftop restaurant showcasing the Boudhanath Stupa in its glory. The menu reads a diverse mixture of local and western cuisine.

Boudha (01)4470957

**Fire and Ice Pizzeria**

Fire and Ice is popular amongst travellers, climbers and local residents looking to enjoy a morning cup of Italian espresso, or to share stories and travel tales with friends whilst savouring delicious pizzas, pasta, desserts whilst opera plays in the background.

**French Creperie Kathmandu**

A cosy french oasis in the centre of Thamel, French creperie serves some of the finest creperies in town.

Thamel, 9843339062

**Yangling Tibetan Restaurant**

Popular among tourists and locals alike, Yangling is affordable, cosy and serves one of the juiciest meaty dumplings alongside steaming Tibetan butter tea.

Kaldhara Marg (01) 4257408

Wine & Canvas

@ Dhokaima Cafe, Patan Dhoka
9th January 2021
12-3:30 pm

DHOKAIMA Cafe Vesper

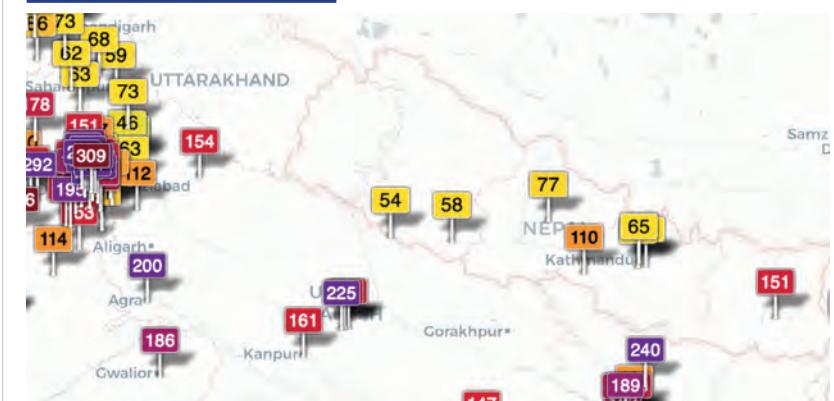
Please message us for registration



That was quite a week. A westerly that dumped snow, but only up to central Nepal. The rest of the country had overcast skies, but little of the much-needed precipitation. The cloud cover also exacerbated Kathmandu's poor air quality. But the wind has now shifted, and we are expecting passing clouds into the weekend, with the temperature 2-3 degrees above normal. Still no major westerly disturbance on the horizon into next week to bring in the traditional *Maghe Jatra*.



AIR QUALITY INDEX



This was the week AQI in Kathmandu Valley hit a hazardous Air Quality Index (AQI) of 600 and above. As atmospheric scientists have pointed out, this was due to high clouds, no wind, winter inversion, vehicle emissions, open garbage burning, brick kilns and wildfires in the mountains and cross border pollution. But on Wednesday, AQI was back to a Moderate 64 as Kathmandu's pollution was blown away by the afternoon breeze. Go to www.nepalitimes.com for full story.

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

KRIPA JOSHI



This EcoLogic series was started a year ago to raise awareness of our ecological crisis. Every human being has the fundamental right to a safe living environment. Governments have the obligation to protect this right in the face of the climate crisis. We need to hold governments and polluting corporations accountable and we need to stop their tactics to delay meaningful climate action. We need a sense of sustained urgency and political pressure on leaders to act for the long-term interests of humanity. The year 2020 has shown us how the whole world can come together and adapt to face a crisis. And as this series draws to a close today, and we herald a new year, it is important to remember that we need to continue to raise our awareness and our voices for people and the planet. Our personal choices, our daily actions, our purchases, and our voice makes a difference. #FridaysForFuture



OUR PICK

Dish Home is currently streaming Turkish television drama *Karadayi*, which revolves around Mahir Kara, who joins court of Istanbul as a trainee lawyer to fight his father's case who is found guilty of a murder he did not commit. The story unfolds as it takes viewers back to the 1970s Istanbul and stars Kenan İmirzalıoğlu and Bergüzar Korel.

बालबालिका माथि हुने हिंसा, दुर्व्यवहार, शोषण भएको, जोखिमपूर्ण अवस्थामा रहेको वा बालअधिकारको उल्लंघन भएको छ भने बाल हेल्पलाइनको पैसा नलाग्ने

फोन: नं. १०१८ मा खबर गरौ।



नेपाल सरकार
सञ्चार तथा सूचना प्रविधि मन्त्रालय
सूचना तथा प्रसारण विभाग

Welcome to suburbia

Meet Jyoti, leader of a group of children living on Kathmandu's outskirts

Her hair is up in a pony tail some days. Some days, she wears it in pigtails. I rarely get to see her face up-close, but watching her from my balcony I can tell that she is mostly laughing. Her eyes, if not her throat. She is called Jyoti.

I have known Jyoti for less than



SUBURBAN TALES

Pratibha Tuladhar

a year.

When we moved to Kathmandu's suburbia, we came to a place packed with three-storey houses that had quickly replaced paddy fields. All houses here look similar. Each is two and a half-storey, mostly built on *chaar-aana* lands, with pointy rooftops, popularly known as 'namaste' in the local construction lingo.

The only thing that gives the houses some character is their colour. They come in the brightest hues you can imagine—from parrot green to fuchsia. This is the post-civil-war, new Kathmandu—stretching in whichever direction it can, both horizontally and vertically.

Even with the lockdown, new houses kept cropping up in our neighbourhood. They went up overnight, sometimes. Jyoti's father is one of the realtors in the area. His job is to slice the fields into little plots, and find buyers for them.

Another of his jobs is to make sure Jyoti doesn't go out to play with the neighbourhood boys. But the kids show up anyway, and often I

overhear conversations like this one:

"Jyoti! Jyoti!"

"What do you want?" Jyoti's father puts his torso out the window and shouts at the boys standing below his window.

"We want to go play. With Jyoti," they say.

"She isn't here. Go away!"

"We want to play with her."

"She isn't here," he tells the kids.

"Where is she?"

"She's gone to the temple."

"I know! I know!" says one of the boys. "It's some festival today when all women go to the temple. Let's go there and find her."

"No need to go there. Go home!" The father shouts.

"I'm going to start fasting, too. Next year onwards," shouts the first boy.

"How old are you?" asks the father.

"Nine. And he's seven," he says, pointing at the boy in his tow.

"And who told you that you would have to start fasting? Fasting is for women," says Jyoti's father.

"I know. But boys could do it as well. I am going to start fasting next year," says the nine-year-old. They race off on their bikes.

Jyoti returns. She's dressed in a red *kurti* and walks alongside her mother, who has donned a red *sari*. Just like the other women in the neighbourhood. She follows her mother obediently inside the gate and disappears.

•••

"Jyoti! Jyoti!"

"I told you boys to go away. She won't be playing with you all anymore. *Badmasharu!*"



poles, Jyoti dragging one of them.

•••

"We need to build a kennel for the puppy. I shall get him a box from my house. It will be your job to dig up space, so we can build him a kennel," says Jyoti.

The puppy, barely a few weeks old, cuddles in the warmth of Jyoti's arms. Other children wait their turn to hold the puppy. When Jyoti's hands tire, she hands the puppy to other children.

By the end of the day, a cardboard kennel has been built. One of the boys has brought a piece of foam to serve as the mattress.

"We will call this one Bruno," announces Jyoti. No one contests it.

Bruno also has a bowl for milk now. They put him in the cardboard box and leave him in the open space in front of Jyoti's house, before parting to return to their respective homes.

•••

Bruno has gone missing.

The children confirm from some people in the neighbourhood that a woman was seen dragging the puppy towards the wasteland. The day is spent in search, but Bruno is nowhere to be found.

Next day, Jyoti deploys her team in different directions. They speed off on their bicycles. Some walk, interrogating random people in the village about Bruno. No one seems to have an idea.

On the third day, Jyoti and team interrogate the adult community dogs.

"Blink twice if you've seen Bruno," orders Jyoti.

"Blink once if he went left. Blink thrice if he went right. DO NOT blink if you haven't seen him."

But the adult dogs stare at Jyoti and team, huff a little and lie down on the badminton court, turning their backs towards the sun.

•••

Jyoti is sitting in front of her house with Mahi. They are sitting close and talking in whispers. When they walk by my house, I see that Jyoti is holding a kitten, wrapped in a scarf.

"You adopted a kitten," I say. "Yes," she smiles. Then she asks, "You cut your hair?"

"Yes, I cut my own hair," I say.

"It looks nice. I like it," she says, smiles and then walks away with the kitten snuggled in her arms.

•••

Jyoti is wearing a loose top and her hair is up in a pony like one of those girls from Korean dramas. She clings to her mother, who stands on the terrace, talking to a neighbour. She has not been allowed to leave the house for days. Neighbourhood kids show up asking for her and then leave, disappointed.

"Bring your bicycle up to the terrace and keep it there now. You're a big girl. You can't be riding around when you have your periods," I hear Jyoti's mother tell her.

Jyoti drags her bike up to the terrace, leans it against the kitchen wall, then grabs it and sits on it, astride. ☺

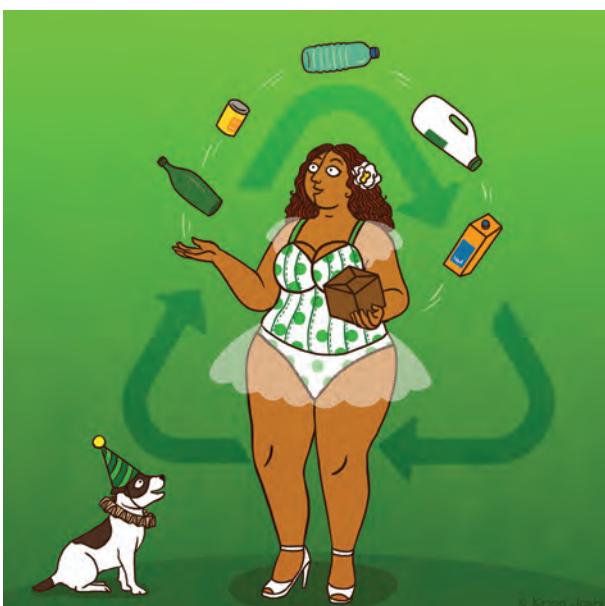
Suburban Tales is a monthly column in Nepal Times based on real people (with some names changed) in Pratibha's life.



स्वर्ण पदक
विजेता



लंडन स्प्रिटिस कम्पिटिशन २०२० को विजेता



INDIAN EMBASSY

HELPING HANDS: Deputy Chief of Indian Embassy Namgya Khampa hands over Rs306 million to CEO of Nepal Reconstruction Authority Shushil Gyewali for rebuilding schools affected by the 2015 earthquake.

A Year of EcoLogic with Miss Moti

RETROSPECTIVE
Kripa Joshi

Miss Moti is a body positive character that I created to deal with my own issues with weight and self image.

Over the years, she has become an outlet for my mental wellbeing. When I got postpartum depression following the birth of my daughter, I created the Miss Moti-vation series to evoke a more positive frame of mind. So, when I started to feel increasingly concerned about the state of our planet, I turned to Miss Moti once more and started the EcoLogic series that was a weekly feature in *Nepali Times* for the past year.

Eco-Anxiety is described by *Psychology Today* as 'a fairly recent psychological disorder afflicting an increasing number of individuals who worry about the environmental crisis'. A lot of people feel overwhelmed at the magnitude of the problem and powerless as individuals. The #FridaysForFuture movement and the proactiveness of young people around the world became my inspired. As an artist I thought I could contribute through my art... I could raise my voice to help raise awareness of our ecological plight.

I started with an image of Miss Moti juggling materials that could be recycled. And, every week, as I researched for ideas, I gained more insight about the environment and tried to implement better practices. Over the course of the series I myself became more rigorous about recycling and about using reusable products. I switched to ecological cleaning products, changed to LED bulbs, turned off electric devices not in use and ditched sanitary pads to use period underwear. We reduced the amount of meat, and the things we bought.

A few months into the series, the coronavirus pandemic started. We all had to change our way of living. New environmental threats like disposable masks appeared, and I could not promote some of obvious green practices, like encouraging the use



of public transport. We needed to reduce flying, and it did highlight how we are all connected and dependent on each other.

I had to also change some of my own misconceptions. Previously, I used to think that banning palm oil would help save rainforests and orangutans, but realised that palm oil is also an efficient crop, producing more oil per land area than any other equivalent vegetable oil. Extracting the same amount of alternative oil would just threaten other habitats and species. I shifted my stance to focus on the sustainability of the palm oil industry instead.

I also learnt that making electric cars or harvesting renewable energy like solar, wind or hydropower have their own environmental impacts. Sometimes things are not just black or white, and one has to weigh risk vs benefit. The interconnected

aspects of our lives create complex issues and we all need to lend a helping hand.

Every human being has the fundamental right to a safe living environment. Governments have the obligation to protect this right in the face of the climate crisis. We need to hold governments and polluting corporations accountable, and we need to stop their tactics to delay meaningful climate action.

The year 2020 showed us how the whole world can come together and adapt to face a crisis. And as this series draws to a close today, and we herald a new year, it is important to remember that we need to continue to raise our awareness, and our voices, for people and the planet. Our personal choices, our daily actions, our purchases, and our voice makes a difference. ☺



PEACEMAKERS: Nepali United Nations peacekeepers, 36 of them women soldiers, being awarded UN medals for their service in SUDAN.



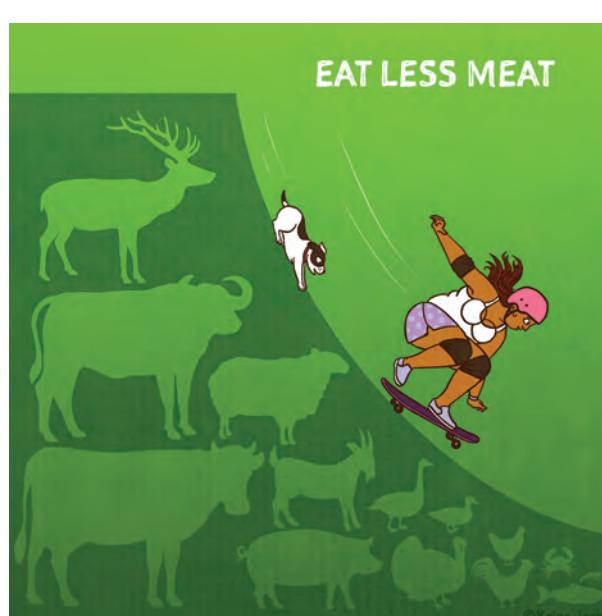
UNDP NEPAL

IN THE LINE OF FIRE: Lalitpur Fire Brigade during Fire Fighting, Rescue and Hazmat Handling training held last week with support from UNDP and EU Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid.



NEPAL LITERATURE FESTIVAL

CLIMATIC EFFECT : View of a snowless Mt Machhapuchre with a wildfire on its slopes viewed from Pokhara this week, showing the impacts of climate change in the Himalaya.



KRISHNA NEUPANE/RSS

TUNNEL VISION: A 2.38km highway tunnel under construction that will connect Nagdhunga to Kathmandu, shortening travel time by 45 minutes.

Holding up half the economy

Nepali women entrepreneurs should not be an afterthought

Why do women entrepreneurs and female small business owners in Nepal have a hard time attracting capital to grow their businesses? A series of conversations I had with banks and female entrepreneurs a few months ago provided some insights.



CROSSCURRENT
Ashutosh Tiwari

Suppliers of capital (i.e., banks) said that they funded mostly those women entrepreneurs who could use land as collateral, and who came to them via impeccable references, which was a euphemism for 'upper class'.

They repeatedly termed women entrepreneurs as 'risky', adding that they did not offer business advisory services. As such, they were unable to advise the women on how to make the best use of the loans.

Once the loans were disbursed to women with such impeccable references, the female entrepreneurs had to pay the interest every month, and that was the extent of the financial relationship with the banks. Most banks said that they did not feel comfortable advertising or marketing their women-focused business financing schemes for fear of attracting all sorts of 'small women entrepreneurs'.

But they all said that they did have the funds, earmarked for women-owned businesses. Disbursing the loans to them, was a bit of a hassle.

On the demand side, one small business owner said that even though she had been in business for

ten years, and wanted to expand her bakery to a Nepal-wide e-commerce platform, the bank she went to, told her to stick to her existing stand-alone bakery, and forget about the broader e-commerce idea.

Her frustration was that the bank did not see her years of experience as a plus, but instead wanted her to lower her ambitions to run only the bakery, which had been running well anyway since 2012. She had funded the business herself, and had only gone to the bank for additional investment to branch out to e-commerce.

Another entrepreneur was ready to accept foreign investment, but the government's policy of not allowing FDI of less than \$500,000 in Nepali small businesses put an end to the process. She then turned to local private investors who took too much time to decide whether to chip in or not.

When they did, they wanted more ownership and more control of the business, essentially turning her into their employee. This discouraged her from talking to other moneyed local investors.

Another female entrepreneur said legacy women's business associations were managed and run by women of means, who had long-standing social, cultural and professional ties to one another. They were not agile or sensitive enough to the financing needs of the next generation of ethnically-diverse, less 'well-connected' women entrepreneurs.

One entrepreneur funded her medical business by taking out loans from friends and family businesses. Her business took off, and she struggled not so much with finances but with operational issues. She said she would have paid for this ad-



MONIKA DEUPALA

vice, which, would have saved her money. This showed that finance that came with operational or technical assistance had a greater scope of helping women entrepreneurs grow their business and generate additional jobs.

Another café owner we spoke to mentioned that she did not consider bank loans because interest rates were high and the paperwork looked intimidating. Besides, once she learnt that the bank interest rates were unstable, she gave up on the loans altogether, for she did not want to be hit by a rising interest rate over a five-year period.

Instead, she borrowed money from her partners. That partnership did not go well, which led her to think that she needed training or advice on negotiations and partnership management—skills, which would have saved her money.

Another tech entrepreneur shared that her lack of knowledge about finances came to light when her company ran out of cash during Covid times, making her unable

to meet the payroll. Looking back, she wishes she had a better grasp of financial knowledge which would have helped her manage cash better.

All the female entrepreneurs I spoke to said that the financing institutions did not pursue them.

The banks' assistance to women entrepreneurs remains available but appears to be deliberately under-marketed and under-sold. Nepali society lacked role models of financially successful women who rose through their own hard-work, and not on the coat tails of their husband or father.

Venture funds, one entrepreneur said, had such high requirements and demands that women had so far stayed out of their radar. All agreed that financial solutions catering to women entrepreneurs should not be looked at in isolation. Instead, it should also encompass enhancing women's financial and investment literacy and their knowledge of business operation efficiency.

After all, running and scaling up a business was not only a matter of

accessing finance but being prepared to access finance in ways that assure the lenders or capital providers that the women entrepreneurs would make good use of the invested capital.

Likewise, another entrepreneur said that of all the sources of funds, the most reliable are personal and family funds. These allow the women to get things started, but, after that, women get stuck as to how to leverage their credibility to access further funds from strangers and institutions. This was, she said, the valley of death – where most women-owned businesses either failed to grow further and continued to gasp for cash or stayed small without maximising their business potential.

Though Nepal's laws around women entrepreneurship and women's right to own assets have improved somewhat in recent years, they are still framed through a lens of patriarchy, which does not count women as possible economic beneficiaries, except as an afterthought.

That women need to join the workforce is a given. That women can start businesses and scale them up well to provide jobs, is not. The constraints appear to be around growth capital and advisory services.

Unless government policies, donor funds and private capital unblock these constraints, funding and scaling women-run and women-serving Nepali businesses remains a promise far short of its potential. ◻

Ashutosh Tiwari, founder at SAFAL Partners, starts this monthly column CrossCurrent in *Nepal Times*. He will focus on entrepreneurship, management, public policies and development as if Nepalis mattered.

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TRIVENI

Drawing a line in the sand

A year after activist Dilip Mahato was killed by the sand mafia, his family still seeks justice. Illegal mining continues unabated.

● **Bhrikuti Rai** in Dhanusa

Each time Sangam Mahato passes the excavators scooping up sand from the Aurahi River, it brings back painful memories of her brother, Om Prakash. Also known as 'Dilip', her brother had been protesting illegal sand mining, and lobbying for the conservation of the ecologically fragile Chure Hills.

Dilip was murdered on 10 January 2020, tortured and then crushed beneath the wheels of a tipper truck. He was only 24.

"My brother had been in arguments with contractors who he believed were destroying the Chure and the rivers nearby with uncontrolled excavation," recalls Sangam. "We never thought that his activism would cost him his life."

Dilip's murder made headlines. Social media was filled with 'Justice for Dilip' posts. Everyone, from former president Ram Baran Yadav to MPs, condemned Dilip's murder and vowed to protect the Chure. The Province 2 government said it was stopping all illegal riverbed mining, and handed half a million rupees to the Mahato family for their loss.

But a year on, the spotlight has moved on to other injustices, and the rampant destruction of the Chure is in full swing again to feed a booming construction industry.

Dilip was an engineering student at college in India and had come home for his holidays. Seeing his community suffer from the consequences of uncontrolled riverbed mining, he had become an environmental activist.

Deforestation and mining were drying up water sources, the ground water table was receding, and in



Illegal sand-mining along the foothills of the Chure along the East-West Highway.

the monsoon the flooded rivers destroyed homesteads and farms. Forest cover in the Chure, which makes up 15% of Nepal's area, is vital for groundwater recharge in the Tarai.

"Earlier, we only had to dig about 20 metres to install a hand pump, but now we have to look for water as deep as 100 metres, and even that does not guarantee water supply for more than a year or two," says Dhanusa activist Dev Narayan Mandal.

It is in Province 2 that the

consequences of the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources are most acute, and are further impoverishing an already underserved region. Stripping the Chure has led to water shortage in the dry season, and floods in the monsoon.

Not any drop to drink
Digambarpur in Chhireshworath municipality, is a quiet village on the banks of the Jallad River of Dhanusa spread out over sprawling green fields where farmers

grow sugarcane, mustard and an assortment of vegetables, from cauliflower to eggplant.

But with each passing year, growing crops in Digambarpur's fertile soil has become more difficult, and expensive. Despite being situated less than 500m away from the Jallad River, once-abundant water sources have dried up. Black plastic pipes connected to water pumps snake out of the openings of deep wells beside each home.

Ward chair Asheshwar

Mahato of Chhireshworath 5 blames deforestation in the Chure, and the wholesale exploitation of the province's rivers. He says he has been able to limit the use of heavy machinery in his ward, but nearby excavators are digging up the riverbed lowering it by 6m.

Ram Devi Tachamo Shah is a river ecologist at Kathmandu University who says extracting sand and pebbles means riverbeds lose their ability to retain water, which is crucial for groundwater recharge.

"What we see now is just layers

NEPALI
Times



Dilip Mahato's sister Sangam prays for him at the family altar.

MURDERED
Om Prakash 'Dilip' Mahato, 24
Sripur, Dhanusa

Second oldest of his siblings, Om Prakash alias Dilip, was the ideal son — socially responsible, active in the community, and with hopes of supporting his family as an engineer. But on 10 January 2020, he was found dead on the banks of the Aurahi river, beaten with iron rods and crushed under a tipper truck to make it look like an accident. Neighbours say Dilip was murdered by sand miners with whom he had altercations. The case is currently *sub judice* at the Dhanusa District Court.

"My brother lost his life fighting against environmental exploitation. We hope this will not happen again," says Sangam Mahato, Dilip's sister.

ASSAULTED
Sanjay Mahato, 27
Bateshwor Rural Municipality, Dhanusa



On the night of 2 May 2020, Sanjay joined his friends and neighbours on a march to the Badahari River which flows near his home. They demanded excavating the river

for sand be stopped past the 6PM deadline. The argument escalated, and they were attacked while returning home. Sanjay was struck on the head by a metal rod and had to be rushed to a hospital in Kathmandu.

"I vaguely remember the first few blows before collapsing to the ground," he says. "People later told me that the miners would have buried me alive if it hadn't been for the villagers who came looking for me."

Since then, Sanjay is not as physically fit as he used to be, which has affected his family finances. As the sole breadwinner of a family of five, he is unable to provide for his family.

"I can't lift heavy things anymore and my head still hurts because of the injury," he says. "But I can't stop working so I try to find light work."

THREATENED
Nanda Kumar Silwal, 50,
Mithila Municipality, Dhanusa



Last December, sand mining contractors on the Basahi River threatened to burn down Nanda Kumar Silwal's house when he and his neighbours protested excessive sand

extraction. A few weeks later, news came of Dilip Mahato's murder and this sowed fear.

"Earlier, everyone would get together to confront contractors, but now they find excuses to not go to the river. People are scared now," said Silwal. "Even those who used to take the initiative to organise villagers are fearful now."

ATTACKED
Rajkaran Mahato, 28
Journalist



Rajkaran Mahato has received countless threats in his ten-year career in journalism, but nothing as serious as what happened last April. He was reporting on the activities of crusher companies in Gaujhala of Mahottari district when he and his colleagues were chased by angry sand miners. The journalists fled and managed to escape without anyone getting hurt.

"I have received several direct and indirect threats for my work, but nothing like this physical intimidation," says Rajkaran.

of loose material like clay, which is less permeable," Shah says. Indeed, farmers now need to go down 150m to pump up water to irrigate fields.

Moving between rows of cauliflowers in full bloom, Gulab Devi Shah deftly cuts off their heads with a large knife, leaving the green leaves in place. But this harvest has come at a steep price. She pays nearly Rs4,000 each month just on electricity bills for a water pump which eat up a quarter of her profits from annual cauliflower harvest.

"It's getting harder every year to cover the plantation cost, but we have to pay for pumping the water. There is no other source of income here except farming," she adds.

Existing government guidelines clearly state that industries need to maintain proper standards to protect the environment and the community they operate in, especially along the ecologically-sensitive Chure.

Excavation of sand and pebbles from rivers cannot go deeper than 1m, and the use of heavy machinery is limited. Excavation pits and ditches need to be filled in and levelled. These guidelines are often ignored.

"The government's focus on creating water tanks by spending installing expensive water pumps while allowing exploitation in the Chure to continue is like pouring water into sand," says journalist and activist Rajkaran Mahato from Mahottari district.

Bikram Yadav, a local activist, started the 'Save Kamala River Campaign' as he watched the river dying up slowly. Along with the Kosi and Bagmati rivers, the Kamala is one of the three primary rivers that start in the mountains and flow across Province 2 into India. There are dozens other rivulets that flow down from the Chure.

"Drilling deep tube wells isn't a long-term solution to the



Sangam Mahato at the now closed Churiyamai quarry where her brother was killed.



growing water shortage, because unless rivers and other water bodies go back to healthy levels, the water table will not recharge," Yadav says. "For that to happen, we need to overhaul our idea of development, which relies so heavily on sand and gravel from the rivers."

Urban expansion in the Tarai, coupled with a growing emphasis on road connectivity, especially since the local elections in 2017, have fuelled demand for aggregates from the rivers.

Nepal is the top importer of heavy earth-moving equipment in South Asia. Backhoe loaders, excavators and wheel loaders facilitate the country's road

building projects, that are taking up an ever-growing share of physical infrastructure budgets.

According to the Ministry of Finance, Rs109 billion was earmarked for infrastructure projects in 2018/19, which grew to Rs163 million the following year. This year, the budget allocation was reduced because of the pandemic, but construction projects have continued to be a priority with Rs138 billion, nearly 10% of the federal budget earmarked for infrastructure.

Lives lost to negligence

In Mahottari, on the banks of the flood-prone Ratu River, the gouging of sand and gravel from pits as deep as 8m have left many cavernous ditches, which contractors have not bothered to fill up after mining.

Last year, 16-year-old Rohit Mishra of Bardibas drowned in a 6m deep pit left behind by sand miners on the Ratu River. Less than a month later, two more people drowned in abandoned ditches near

riverbanks in Dhanusa.

Despite this, mining companies like the Churiya Mai Crusher Factory in Dhanusa, where Dilip was killed, are rarely penalised. Companies hush up the crimes by paying victims' families compensation money.

These crimes continue under the watch of elected leaders, many of whom have a stake in the construction industry, according to Dhanusa-based environmental activist Som Prasad Sharma.

The mayor of Mithila municipality of Dhanusa, Hari Narayan Mahato's family have reportedly invested in bulldozers and tippers. His son Roshan Mahato is also in the construction business, although the mayor denies having any investment in the business.

An investigation in this paper has shown that a quarter of all local politicians in the 2017 elections had ties to construction companies and sand mining operations. This has made the work of environmental activists even more challenging.

Activist Som Prasad Sharma has taken up the issue of river conservation with local leaders and policy makers for years now. But he is a frustrated man.

"When we question elected leaders about the illegal mining happening under their watch, they say contracts were given to companies following due process," he says.

Last May, a parliament committee inspection team, led by assembly member Ram Chandra Mandal, visited mining sites along the Ratu River that flouted guidelines. No action was taken.

Last year when Dilip Mahato was murdered, Province 2 had already issued a directive mandating conservation guidelines. But companies are still openly mining rivers without permission.

Falgun Magar, Ward chair

of Bardibas 7, is among the few elected leaders who have made stopping uncontrolled sand mining a priority, but without much success. He says contractors with political connections are just too powerful.

"This year, we decided not to call for tenders because mining would flood nearby villages," Magar says. "But the Bardibas Municipality didn't listen, they see the rivers only as a source of revenue."

One step forward, two steps back
In November, the Home Ministry announced that all illegal sand mining factories across the country would be shut down. But advocate Chiranjivi Bhattacharai is more sceptical.

"These are all half-hearted directives to deceive the people into thinking that the government cares about these things," Bhattacharai says. "The nexus between the contractors, police and political leaders is too strong."

The Constitution clearly states that the three levels of government can make their own policies on natural resource use. But the lack of oversight, a sense of ownership towards natural resources, and a business-political nexus have created this mess, says federalism analyst Khim Lal Devkota.

"Unfortunately, our politics isn't clean, which adds complexities around regulations when it comes to governing natural resources," says Devkota.

Dilip Mahato's family has set up a foundation to continue his environmental activism. Walking past the deep pits dotting the riverbed in Dhanusa worries Dilip's father, Ram Jiwan. He says: "It is too late to bring back my son, but limiting how much sand can be taken out could save lives and the environment."

Bhrikuti Rai is a Bertha Fellow.

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[BLEEP] and [BLEEP]

As Nepalis go forth where no Nepali has gone before to the far corners of the Planet, they will come across words that will make them homesick for the land they have left behind.

Nepalis in Malaysia, for instance, will break into a smile as they thank locals with a "तेरिमा खसे". Loosely pronounced, *Terima Kasih* could, under certain circumstances, mean 'Your Mother Is a Goat'.

First-time Nepali visitors flying to Kuala Lumpur on MaLindo Air have been known to break into collective laughter upon finding that the plane they are boarding means 'Big Turd' (or words to that effect).

And after takeoff there is more naughty merriment when flight attendants hand out sugar sachets that have the Malay words [BLEEP] and [BLEEP].

White Sugar - Gula Putih

Something similar happens in Chennai at the Mahalingam Store. No, it's not a sex toy store. It sells 'Aachi' condiments, 'Gu' Energy Gel, and an assortment of fine wine.

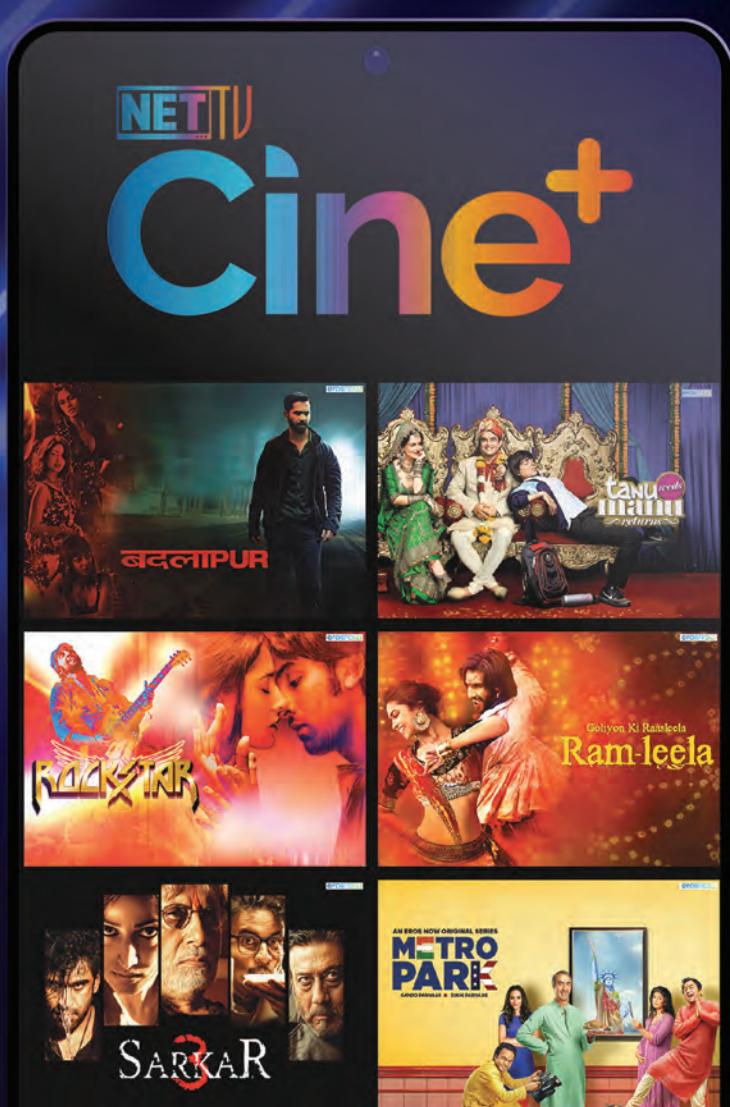
There is one Japanese international retail chain that might also be hit if it ever opens up shop in Kathmandu.



Although, Muji might need to put up signs warning customers that cursing is strictly not allowed inside. **The Ass**



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