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DIMAKAR CHETTRI

## Push and pull of politics

After weeks of bitter fighting within the ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP), the three feuding factions have now agreed on a ceasefire and there is an uneasy calm in Kathmandu.

The political counter-coup by Prime Minister KP Oli last week allowed him to keep his job for now, but in the process he had to make some compromises. The upshot is that the concentration of power in the prime minister's office that had characterised Nepal's politics for the past two-and-a-half years has now been replaced with a tense triangular standoff.

Although Oli managed to forestall attempts to oust him, he is not as strong as before, and has been forced to yield to party co-chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal and the faction led by former prime

minister Madhav Kumar Nepal.

It is difficult to say what tricks Oli had in the bag to disarm Dahal, but one major factor was the strong message from Beijing delivered by the Chinese Ambassador Hou Yanqi not to split the NCP.

The party rank-and-file got the message and lobbied intensely with Dahal and Oli to sort out their ego-clash, desist from holding the party and nation hostage.

The deal hammered out allows Oli to complete his term and effectively serve as incumbent during the 2022 election. In return the prime minister has agreed to back Dahal as the sole executive head of the NCP during its Special Convention in November.

Oli even convinced Dahal that Maoism as an ideology was obsolete, and he should espouse the 'people's democracy' of the

late UML leader Madan Bhandari. But Dahal may have also realised that his next rival in the party is Madhav Nepal and not Oli, and decided to jump ship.

Oli has also reportedly agreed to reshuffle the Cabinet by inducting more Dahal loyalists. There may have to be additional portfolios for supporters of Madhav Nepal, who already has two loyalists in the Cabinet: Agriculture Minister Ghanashyam Bhusal and Tourism Minister Yogesh Bhattarai.

Critical in the political arithmetic that allowed Oli to survive the latest threat was the defection of Home Minister Ram Bahadur Thapa and UML leader Bam Dev Gautam. We can only speculate what those two got

in return. But it looks like the prominent third-tier leaders deeply involved in mediation, including former Maoist guerrilla commander Janardan Sharma, Devendra Poudel and Haribol Gajurel, would probably also stand to be rewarded with posts in the next government.

Finance Minister Yubaraj Khatiwada has made no secret of his desire to be the next ambassador to the US, and he may be replaced in the reshuffle by either Surendra Pandey or Bishnu Poudel.

There may also be a rearrangement of Chief Ministers, and Oli may have to let go of some his people including Prithvi Subba Gurung of Gandaki Province and Shankar Pokhrel of Province 5.

After all that hectic horse-

trading, all is quiet this week in Khumaltar, Balwatar and Koteswor – the three residences of Dahal, Oli and Nepal respectively. Dahal is said to be spending time with his family, and feeding pigeons. Nepal is sulking. And Oli, being Oli, must be plotting his next move.

Now that there is no imminent threat of government collapse, it would be a good time for Prime Minister Oli to focus all his attention on monsoon disaster relief and the COVID-19 crisis. But he is probably already busy doling out portfolios so as to keep all factions happy.

There is so much bad blood between the three NCP factions that even when the reshuffle happens, the Cabinet will probably function like a coalition government.

Saindra Rai

**YOU STAB MY BACK, I STAB YOURS**  
EDITORIAL  
PAGE 2

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# You stab my back, I stab yours

The back-stabbing in Nepali politics is now going into hyper timelapse. It is getting difficult to figure out exactly who is doing whom in.

Nevertheless, it does look like reports of Prime Minister KP Oli's imminent political demise were greatly exaggerated. We ourselves have written numerous editorials in the past six months either predicting the prime minister's ouster, or advised him to step down for governance failure, and mishandling the COVID-19 crisis.

But the wily Oli has outfoxed his rivals yet again. Even his enemies hand it to him: this is one crafty fellow. He was outnumbered in the party Secretariat, outgunned in the Standing Committee, his Cabinet was mutinous, his hold on the Nepal Communist Party seemed tenuous, and he was playing brinkmanship with India. But not only has he held on, he seems to have turned things 180 degrees in his favour.

The history of the power struggle (some say ego clash) between Prime Minister Oli and his NCP co-chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal goes back to their 'gentlemen agreement' to take turns at prime ministership. But Oli dragged his feet, and when Dahal confronted him last year, Oli said OK-OK, I'll make you executive head of the party if I get to stay on as PM. Dahal agreed, but Oli double crossed him.

In April, Dahal stepped up pressure again and Oli was isolated. At which point, he got saved unexpectedly by India unilaterally opening a road in Lipu Lekh through Nepali territory. Oli grabbed the chance to play the nationalism card.

This bought him some time, but Dahal turned on the heat again in the Standing Committee this month. Once more, Oli fell back on anti-Indian rhetoric: accusing the embassy spooks of trying to oust him and then declaring that Lord Ram was a Nepali.

This time, the India card did not work. What was more effective was Oli's threat to split the party and revive the old UML. This alarmed the Chinese, whose ambassador to Nepal Hou Yanqi openly lobbied to prevent a party split. Her message from the highest level of the Chinese Communist Party to comrades in Nepal was: stay united.

This message resonated with the mid and lower rank and file of the NCP, who then upheld their pressure on the two leaders to

sort out their ego differences and not hold the party and country hostage anymore.

Which was why last week, just when it was looking like he was cornered at last, Prime Minister Oli managed to wriggle out of it again. After multiple marathon one-on-ones with Dahal, Oli hammered out a deal in which for the sake of party unity Oli would stay on as PM, he would help Dahal get elected as sole party leader in the November convention, and Oli would reshuffle the cabinet to induct some Dahal loyalists. Oli and Dahal then went over to President Bidya Devi Bhandari on Sunday and got her to stand witness to the pact. In return, Dahal had to agree to back the UML principle of 'people's democracy' first espoused by President Bhandari's late husband Madan Bhandari, and drop the Maoist ideology once and for all.

All this would have been a workable compromise, except that Dahal's allies (former UML prime ministers Madhav Kumar Nepal, Jhal Nath Khanal, et al) were completely left out of the picture. They were so incensed by having the rug pulled from under them that they trooped off to Khumaltar on Monday to ask Dahal for a clarification.

At first Dahal denied there was deal, but admitted that to save party unity he had to strike a compromise with Oli, but that he was committed to the alliance with Nepal and Khanal. By now, Oli had got other fence-sitters like Home Minister Ram Bahadur Thapa and Bam Dev Gautam once more to his side.

What changed Dahal's mind appears to be pressure from the second-tier leaders like Janardan Sharma, Barsha Man Pun and Shakti Basnet to save party unity. Dahal must have also been convinced that even if the party split, there was little chance of him being prime minister. But the final straw was probably Dahal's realisation that his real rival within the party was not Oli, but Madhav Kumar Nepal.

However, given that back-stabbing, breaking promises and not acting as agreed are the hallmarks of Nepali politics, it is not certain how long the Oli-Dahal pact will endure and if it will just be the latest in the long list of betrayals.

The tragedy in all this is that the multi-layered crisis Nepal and Nepalis are facing does not figure at all in this power struggle.



Nepal's wily Oli has outfoxed his rivals yet again

## 20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

One landmark story that changed the course of Nepal's history was the abolishment of virtual slavery – the Kamaiya system. Today, one of the former kamaiya, Shanti Chaudhary, is a published author and Member of Parliament. Excerpt of story by Hemlata Rai:

The 17 July government announcement abolishing the virtual slavery known as a kamaiya came as a sudden surprise. No one expected the government to free the bonded labourers in an announcement on 1 May, International Labour Day. But neither the government nor the NGOs campaigning for their freedom are prepared for rehabilitation. Funds are inadequate and landlords are evicting the freed kamaiya off their lands.

In the same issue, Salil Subedi investigates rumours about the sighting of missing anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista in Haridwar in India after disappearing from Jumla five years previously. His disappearance continues to be one of the biggest unsolved mysteries even after two decades. Excerpt:

The mystery of Dor Bahadur Bista's disappearance deepened



Twenty years ago this week, Nepali Times in its #2 print edition (26 July-1 August 2000) contained stories that continue to be relevant to present day Nepal – even two decades after they were published.

with rumours that he had been killed by high-caste villagers who opposed his radical consciousness-raising among the poor. Even his family had given up hope. Then, three weeks ago, word came that a Nepali pilgrim, Jitendra Bahadur Karki, had met an elderly Nepali in Haridwar in India two years earlier. On his return to Kathmandu, Karki had forgotten about the encounter until, while flipping through some magazines, he came across a picture of a man resembling the person he had seen in Haridwar. It was Dor Bahadur Bista.

Sudheer Sharma who is now the editor-in-chief of Kantipur and the author of Nepal Nexus, covered the Maoist war from the conflict zone for Nepali Times 20 years ago. His reportage covered the growing influence of Maoists in four districts. Excerpt:

As the police withdraw from vulnerable forward bases, the Maoists are moving in to fill the vacuum in four western districts: Rolpa, Rukum, Jajarkot and Salyan. The police strategy now is to concentrate their forces in iloka (area) police fortresses. Rukum, for instance, used to have 23 police stations, now the number is down to six. In Jajarkot there are only six. In Jajarkot there are only six from the earlier 15, and in Rolpa the number is down to eight from 39.

For the archives of Nepali Times of the past 20 years, site search [www.nepalitimes.com](http://www.nepalitimes.com)

## ONLINE PACKAGES



BUILDING BACK RANI POKHARI

Rani Pokhari has gone through many avatars in the past centuries. But five years after the earthquake destroyed its central temple, the 350-year-old royal pond at the centre of Kathmandu is finally getting back its original look. Watch video in our YouTube channel. Story: page 7.



LANGTANG CHEESEMAKER

Don't miss video clips by cheesemaker Gyalbu Tamang of his beloved Valley and the reconstructed cheese-making facility in Kyangjin. Read about his childhood, and his commitment to the upliftment of his community. Story: page 8-9.

### NEPALI TIMES AT 20

Congratulations on two decades of persistence (20 years ago this week, Kunda Dixit #1019)

Anita Anand

### ENDING LOCKDOWN

This is an overconfident act ('Nepal ends COVID-19 lockdown', nepalitimes.com). There might be second wave in Nepal especially when the number is increasing to the South.

Nis Tiwari

I think Nepal government did what is best for country. But people still must be cautious. Face mask, sanitiser and physical distancing...

Maniram Bahadur Pradhan

Not a good idea. Unless Nepal government manages this better it will be a disaster. Australian cities are back in second lockdown and we thought we had good management

Susan Welch

The Cabinet might as well announce that Nepal is COVID free now! What a joke! We have crossed 18,000 mark and they've lifted the ban? No plans & no strategies in place. Unreal!

Vairochana Sherpa

### HIPPE HAVEN

Nice piece, though I arrived in early 1977 and it was still very cool ('Hippie Trail nostalgia in Kathmandu', Lisa Choegyal, #1019). I doubt if much had changed in the intervening years, except for the demise of the official hash shops, which I don't remember being a problem. Excellent hash had been available - either legally or very openly - from Herat onwards.

John Winward

Great piece, Lisa. Brings memories of those days when I roamed on the open road in a VW bus, but mostly across the waters.

Beverly Hines

Reading your piece made times stay still for a moment of great memories.

Peter Hinze

### DOLPHINS IN NEPAL

That's a rare sight, even in the Karnali ('Freshwater dolphins in Nepal', page 5).

Arup Rajouria

The usual count for these lovely creatures is around 40-50 on average. So, I'm wondering if we are looking at larger numbers this year?

Nilu P. Basnyat

### NEPALIS IN INDIA

Great piece ('Spat with India may hurt Nepali workers', SurendraPhuyal, www.nepalitimes.com)! Migrant workers need a better deal -- biggest message from the COVID-19 lockdown. Nepali migrant workers are treated no better or no worse than internal migrant workers in India.

Ranjit Devraj

### DALIT KILLINGS

Thank you for a great piece of reporting ('Caste aside', Shusma Barali, #1019). Our hearts go out to the families of the deceased. Dalit Lives do matter - and this case demands the best from Nepal's Justice system.

Joy Stephens

## Times.com

## WHAT'S TRENDING



### The rise of Curtis Waters

by Kashish Das Shrestha

Get up and close with Kathmandu-born Curtis Waters aka Abhi Bastakoti who is fast becoming international music sensation with his infectious single 'Stunnin'. Read about how he went from Nepal to song writing and managing sudden stardom.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

Most visited online page

### Don't just blame God for floods and landslides

by Diya Rijal

Total precipitation this season was not above normal, yet more than 100 people had died by mid-July in floods and landslides. Casualties are going up every monsoon season due to haphazard infrastructure construction. Full report at nepalitimes.com.

Most popular on Twitter

### Hippe trail nostalgia in Kathmandu

by Lisa Choegyal

From the distant days when Kathmandu was a hippie haven that saw dusty overland vans parked between rickshaws, tiger taxis, lounging bulls and grazing goats until the end of Nepal's hippie culture and the beginning of tourism industry, the author takes us on one nostalgic trip back to old Kathmandu. Join discussion online.

Most commented

## QUOTE TWEETS

**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
20 years ago this week  
The #1 print edition of Nepali Times shows that even though much has changed in #Nepal in the past 2 decades, a lot has remained the same. Read more from the first hardcopy issue of Nepali Times from 19-25 July 2000.

**NavitaSrikant@NavitaSrikant**  
#NepaliTimes is a must read for informative, thought provoking & community building reporting. The research based writings play key role in creating awareness about cultures, traditions & builds bridges across #SouthAsia. More power to the team! #20years

**NgamindraDahal@ngamindra1**  
The coolest English weekly of my generation not only for its style and nearly flawless contents but also for its simply the best masthead. Always feel proud of my association as a regular contributor to its weather corner. Long live Nepali Times!

**KHORUNGA @Guragaimohan**  
I bought the first issue of Nepali Times in Hile bazaar of Dhankuta. I was its regular subscriber until 2008. Since then I read the office copy. Now online has long been the medium but the feel of the clean sleek paper lingers in mind

**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
Building back Rani Pokhari better  
Rani Pokhari has gone through many avatars in the past centuries. But the reconstructed royal pond is beginning to resemble what it must have looked like 350 years ago. @Suvexa\_ documents reconstruction post earthquake.

**Alok Siddhi Tuladhar@aloktuladhar**  
Ranipokhari in a nutshell -- past, present & future. Ranipokhari is a great example of how a community united can make the government @NRANepal@Sushigiyewali do things right.Well, almost!Exquisitely crafted by the talented @Suvexa\_ for @NepaliTimes.

**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
4 months of #lockdown has killed many more #children in #Nepal compared to the same period last year because of lack of access to health care, interrupted vaccination campaigns and the shortage of medicines. Get latest figures and analysis in this report.

**KrityShrestha@Dankrity**  
I think change begins with dissatisfaction, so we have to complain! But I agree we should also work to sustain the hard-earned change and give it a better direction!

**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
Even these figures are likely underestimates as I understand some FCHVs have stopped moving around in their areas, fearing COVID19, and are not as successful in collecting information by mobile.



# Stop complaining, start contributing

Whether you see the glass as half empty or half full, it is time to take action and move ahead.

The People's Movement in 1990 erupted because for three decades of partylessness, Nepalis could not let off steam and socio-political pressure had been building up.



**1/2 FULL**  
Anil Chitrakar

We got a constitutional monarchy, the parties were unbanned, the mass media was unshackled. And soon enough, we started using our newfound freedoms to complain about the king and queen. When the Maoists took the country to war, we complained about the violence.

After the ceasefire of 2006, we were not happy about the restoration of peace – we started complaining about the political transition. Our constant moaning and groaning probably prolonged that transition.

Then the earthquake struck in 2015, and even as the aftershocks rocked us, we whined about the relief being poorly distributed, and the slow pace of reconstruction. We then had the Indian blockade to complain about. And as soon as the 2017 election was over, we started criticising the very leaders we had just elected to power.

We were about to run out of things to complain about when there was the COVID-19 pandemic, and we could complain about the lockdown and the corruption



MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

in the procurement of medical supplies and the government's general incompetence.

It is human nature. Like most people around the world, Nepalis are never happy with the state of affairs. In fact, we do not score very high in the Happiness Index. That itself is a positive thing because it means we know there is plenty of room for improvement. Things can always be better. That is the whole idea behind the need to see the world as half full.

Remember the days when there were 16 hour power cuts every day? Now that there is surplus power, we are complaining that the electricity we generate is going waste. What

to do with it? Where to sell it?

There was a time in the 1980s when the proponents of the Himalayan Degradation Theory predicted that Nepal would be a desert by the turn of the century. Here we are four decades later, and Nepal has doubled forest cover. We have almost a quarter of our area designated as national parks, and 15% of Nepal is covered in community-managed forests.

Enrollment in school is nearly 100%, infant and maternal mortality have seen dramatic reductions. Absolute poverty has been halved in 25 years. The education we got and the remittance economy has exposed

many Nepalis to jobs all around the world, and the quality of life for many have improved with the money sent home.

Yet we complain that our youth are away. But that is also good because the end goal should be to create jobs for them at home.

There are many products in the market that require energy to produce. If Nepal is to select a few of these and manufacture them near our many hydropower plants, we could become productive and competitive.

In Birganj, for example, there are truck loads of metal sheets coming in from India. They are rolled into pipes and poles, and sent back out. This is the value added for Nepal's abundant, clean, reliable energy.

Entrepreneurs will begin to look for energy production sites where goods can also be produced. We will then see how education will be valued in these areas because it means jobs at the local level. We will no longer have the debate about exporting energy, and sending Nepali youth abroad to prop up the remittance based economy. Local agriculture will have a local market. Nepalis will also understand the true meaning of Value Added Tax.

We can use spilled hydropower at night to pump water for to irrigate farms and boost food production, and during the day use the water to generate power. This is the chance for an entrepreneur to set up a factory to manufacture rice cookers and electric kettles so we

reduce our reliance on imported LPG.

Nepal's poverty related problems can be solved with political will. Nepal's problems are simple and so are their solutions. Unfortunately, we like to complicate things so we can seek complicated solutions. It is almost as if we want to remain poor so we keep getting grants for poverty alleviation, so our experts and consultants have jobs. It is precisely because we have only complained and not implemented solutions over the past seven decades that we would rather export manpower than value-added good and services.

Historically we have always described Nepal with what we do not have. For example, we do not have access to the sea. Or the terrain is not easy. These were always top reasons given for why we remain poor, rather than look at poor governance and mediocre leadership.

More and more Nepalis now live in comfortable homes, drive fancy cars, send their children to the best schools. And yet we complain. Human progress is about not being content and wanting things to improve. There is so much to do as we move ahead whether you see the glass half empty, or half full. It is time to take the lead and move ahead. 🇳🇵

*Anil Chitrakar is President of Siddharthinc. This is his last written column, he will now be hosting a fortnightly 'Anil's Walkabout' video program on the Nepali Times YouTube channel.*

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# Underpasses to reduce roadkill in Nepal

More than 400 wild animals were killed on the East-West Highway in past three years

Tufan Neupane

Cutting through the dense jungles of the Tarai national parks, the East-West Highway is turning into a death trap for Nepal's endangered and protected wildlife. Now, Nepal is building more underpasses so animals do not have to risk crossing highways.

Of the 1,028km East-West Highway, nearly 400km slice through national parks in Parsa, Chitwan, Bardia, Banke. Another 122km stretch of roads cross wildlife corridors connecting protected areas, as well as linking Tarai forests with the mountains to facilitate wildlife migration.

Nepal's conservation success story means that there is now more wildlife movement between national parks, while upgraded highways have increased the number of vehicles and their speed. In the past three years alone there have been 400 road kills involving wild animals.

The 30km Narayanghat-Mugling Highway was recently improved to meet Asian highway standards, and this meant not only did it have to ensure adequate road safety features but also address conservation needs.

The highway features the first two of Nepal's four new wildlife underpasses in the Aptarai and Ramnagar in the section where the road passes through an important animal migration corridor.

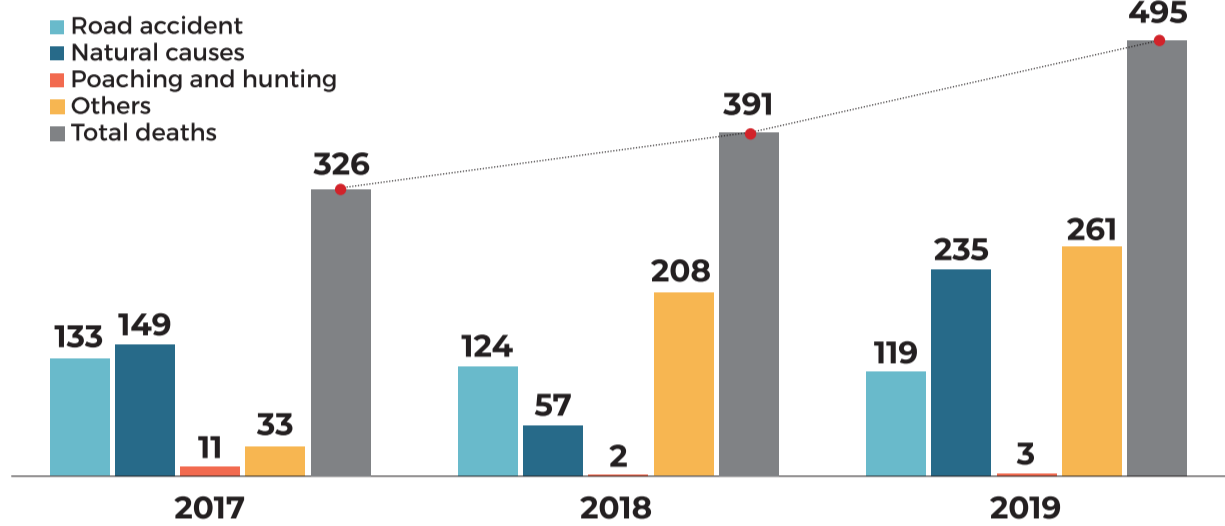
The underpasses were also equipped with 14 camera traps by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and its 'Hariyo Ban Program' to better understand wildlife migration in the Barandabhar Forest Corridor and to monitor whether the underpasses are effective.

The WWF has now released its findings from the study, and concludes: 'Wildlife crossing structures are essential for all linear infrastructure projects traversing critical forests, incorporating designs based on international practice and available guidelines in all planned projects seem imperative in the future.'

According to the Department



Cause of wildlife deaths



Source: Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation

of National Parks and Wildlife conservation, the road kill problem is getting worse. There were 119 animals run over by vehicles in national parks in 2018/19, down from 124 in 2017/18 and 133 in 2016/17. In some years this was up to a third of the total number of recorded wildlife deaths in national parks. However, conservationists say the number could be much higher if highways through unprotected forests are also counted.

"With such massive new

investment in large infrastructure project, the impact on biodiversity and wildlife will be heavy, and we need mitigation measures such as underpasses and overpasses not only to save wildlife but also for human safety," says WWF Nepal Representative Ghana Gurung.

The WWF monitoring of the underpasses after the Narayanghat-Mugling Highway was upgraded from August 2017 till June 2018 shows that more than half of the animal movement occurred in winter when wildlife moved to

sources of water.

The WWF's Pramod Neupane says the use of underpasses will increase as animals get more familiar with the structures. He adds: "Our research proves that underpasses are effective in facilitating safer wildlife movement, and we need to replicate this in other critical jungle corridors in the Tarai."

Only a quarter of the movement was during the monsoon months, while the pre-monsoon dry season saw the least movement. Most of the wildlife using underpasses were

deer, wild boar and other medium-sized animals, and only 10% of the animals were large mammals like tigers, leopards and rhinos.

"It seems the underpasses are not being used to their full extent because they are too small for large animals like wild elephants, and also because of the litter from the highway some of the underpasses have become constricted so bigger wildlife cannot easily pass through," explains Padma Raj Nepal of the Division Forest Office in Chitwan.

Manoj Aryal at the Department of Roads says the Chitwan study has shown that underpasses are effective in reducing wildlife deaths. After studies showed 30 spots along the 160km stretch of the East-West Highway between Narayanghat and Butwal that wild animals frequent, the Department is constructing four more underpasses and one overpass.

Other wildlife underpasses are planned on the highway from Patalaiya of Bara to Dhalkebar of Dhanusha on the East-West Highway, which passes through the Charkose Jhadi and Parsa National Park.

In Bardia, various line ministries in Province 5 in coordination with the Division Forest Office in Bardia have prepared a detailed project report for a 45m overhead wildlife bridge in an important migration corridor where wildlife movement is very high.

The overpass will allow tigers, rhinos and wild elephants migrating through jungle corridors connect Bardia National Park with Katarniaghat Wildlife Sanctuary in India. The overpass will cost Rs81 million and construction will begin once the Environment Impact Assessment is done.

Adds Aryal: "In the past, the cost of building such passes were considered unnecessary. But the success of the Chitwan experiment has shown that safe passage for wildlife is vital in reducing wildlife death along our highways." ❏

## Don't follow my footsteps, says female mahout

Woman elephant driver in Nepal national park faces discrimination and harassment

Mukesh Pokhrel  
in Bardia

Himani Tharu may be the first female elephant mahout serving in Nepal's national parks, but her story is hardly inspirational.

Instead, it exposes a system that is unable to welcome gender inclusivity. She faces double discrimination: first because she is a woman and second for belonging to an indigenous community.

Harassed by her lower-level co-workers, and ignored by senior staff, Himani says she hopes no one will follow in her footsteps and become a female mahout.

"I wouldn't wish this much suffering upon anyone," she says.

Born on the outskirts of the Bardia National Park, Himani Tharu, 27, grew up close to elephant sanctuaries, and was familiar with both elephants and the people who cared for them. Despite that, Himani did not really want to become a mahout. She had plans to graduate from school and get a regular office job. But ten years ago, the Public Service Commission put out a notice for the position of a female mahout, and her family encouraged her to apply because it supposed to be a stable government job.

Himani struggled to keep up with the demands of her new profession: she had to learn to take care of elephants, collect grass,



MUKESH POKHREL

take the elephants out to graze, constantly feed them, and clean up after them. She was also required to ride the elephants on the Nepal Army's jungle patrols.

She loved the elephants, especially a baby one, and made friends with them. It was her human co-workers who were unhelpful, disrespectful and ordered her around.

"Sometimes they would leave me alone in the middle of the jungle and I would get lost. Other times they would lead my elephant into the river and leave it there," she says.

As the only female among 30 mahouts

at the national park, she is often targeted for bullying and harassment, but there is no one she could talk to because of the park's hierarchy.

"Had there been about three or four of us women, they would not have dared misbehave but I am the only woman," says Himani, recalling how her colleagues would deliberately make loud obscene conversations when she was around. When she told them to stop, they scolded her instead.

Himani faced constant attacks on her character and integrity. Every time she even

**THICK SKIN:** Himani Tharu is so frustrated with her job as the only female mahout in a Bardia National Park elephant camp that she mustered the courage to speak to a journalist.

spoke to a fellow-mahout or asked for help from a male co-worker, she would subject to vicious teasing.

"One of the senior male mahouts used to help me, but after other men in the camp started associating us he was intimidated and stopped coming near me," says Himani.

All complaints to senior officers at the camp were ignored, and Himani felt there was no point reporting her colleagues anymore when they engaged in lewd conversation when she was around.

The whole system is gender-blind. The elephant camp does not have separate quarters for women, and she has to sleep in a dorm with 15 other men. It is worse when she had to go on overnight jungle patrols in Bardia National Park.

Fed up with the treatment and frustrated with her job, Himani mustered the courage to speak frankly to a journalist. She said she had packed up to quit her job many times, but was always persuaded by her relatives and friends to stick it out.

She says: "I am determined to find another job, and finally resign during this lockdown. I have put up with everything for so long, I don't know how long I can take this." ❏

# Freshwater dolphins make comeback in Karnali

The blind aquatic mammals swim upstream to breed during the monsoon



means the rivers are polluted, there is overfishing, they are entangled in fishing nets, or new dams are preventing their migration for breeding.

Over the years, the total number of Gangetic dolphins have decreased from 5,000 to less than 2,500. They used to be present in all of Nepal's big rivers like the Kosi, Gandaki and Karnali. But except for the Karnali the other two are both dammed at the Indian border for irrigation and flood control, and the numbers in Nepal have dramatically declined.

"Although Gangetic dolphins visit our rivers annually in the monsoon, increased pollution of the rivers and the poaching for food has seriously depleted their numbers," says dolphin conservationist Vijay Raj Shrestha, who noticed that the dolphins appeared earlier than usual this year possibly because of heavy pre-monsoon rains and the lack of disturbance due to the COVID-19 lockdown.

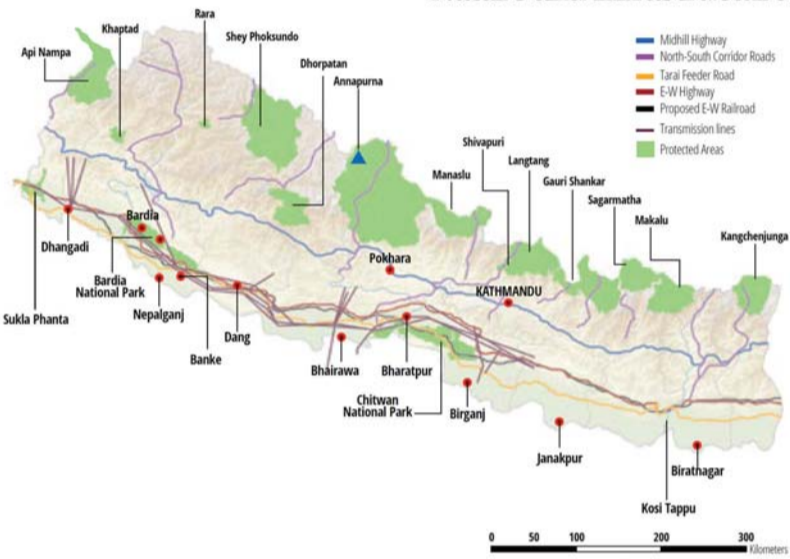
The government is now trying to declare the confluence of the Mohana and Pathriya as a Dolphin Conservation Area, ban the use of fishing nets and prevent plastic garbage dumping and use of fishing nets in the rivers.

Wildlife enthusiasts from all over the world used to flock to Kailali to watch dolphins, contributing to the local economy and spreading awareness among local people about the importance of conserving the rare mammals. However, visitors had to rough it because of the lack of standard hotels and difficult access through dirt tracks.

Freshwater dolphins are found in South America and Asia, and regarded as some of the oldest creatures on earth. They have lost their sense of sight because they live in such murky waters, instead they use ultrasonic clicks to navigate and find prey. They travel in pods with their calves.

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) is helping Nepal and India to upgrade conservation efforts and to spread awareness about river pollution. In Nepal, WWF has supported a dolphin census and monitored their population, while also advising the national and local governments about their conservation. 🇳🇵

## Nature and Infrastructure



### Unnati Chaudhary in Kailali

It is the annual monsoon season, and despite the rains this would be the time of year when tourists flocked to the tributaries of the Karnali River in Nepal for dolphin watching.

When the rivers are in spate is when the endangered Gangetic Freshwater Dolphin swim upstream from India to the mighty Karnali, Nepal's longest river, to find mates on the still backwaters of the oxbow lakes.

But this year, due to the COVID-19 lockdown there is no one here to watch the nearly-blind aquatic mammals as they surface to exhale noisily through the blowholes on top of their heads.

Swimming upstream in the strong current is hard enough, but navigating through memory and echo-location could be even more difficult for the only cetacean species found in Nepal. But they follow mind maps that they have inherited from ancestors to travel to the same spot every year to breed and rear calves.

"When water levels begin to rise, they can be easily spotted," says Bhoj Raj Dhungana of the Dolphin Aquatic and Biodiversity Conservation Nepal. "They swim all the way from the Ganges to breed and rear their young in safer, more shallow waters in Nepal."

Dhungana says that although only a mother dolphin and her calf had been sighted till mid-June, in the past month five juveniles and 10 adults have been seen in the waters.

Locally referred to as 'Susu' after the sound they make while surfacing to breathe, these playful mammals are mostly found along the Karnali's confluence with

rivulets like the Mohana, Pathariya, and Kada in Kailali. As the monsoon tapers off, they swim back downstream into India.

After being red-listed as an endangered species by both the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Gangetic Freshwater Dolphins are now actively protected in Nepal and India. Local conservation organisations in Tikapur and Bhajani municipalities whose communities benefit from dolphin tourism are also involved.

River dolphins are known to be accurate indicators of a river's health. If their numbers decline, as they have been for decades, it

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## prabhu BANK BIZ BRIEFS

### Monetary policy welcomed

The business sector has welcomed the government's new Monetary Policy for 2020-21 announced by Nepal Rastra Bank governor Maha Prasad Adhikari on 17 July. The policy focuses on reviving the economy from the COVID-19 crisis, and aims to regain the growth target of 7%. Banks will now have to invest 25% of their loans in agriculture and energy. Interest payment on past loans has been extended by six months. Banks will now be encouraged to merge with other financial institutions. Banks' CCD ratio has also been upped slightly to 85%.

### Xiaomi router

Xiaomi has announced the launch Mi Router 4C in Nepal. Equipped with 4 high-gain external antennas and capable of reaching a maximum network speed of 300Mbps, it is optimised for ease of use, speed and range and is accessible through smart Mi Wi-Fi app on smartphones.

Starting from Rs2,399, Mi Router 4C will be available for purchase across all Mi retail partners, offline stores, and online partner Sastodeal.

### Nabil Bank

Nabil Bank has introduced its 36th



Anniversary Offer for its customers to address the needs of Retail and Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) customers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Bank is offering special discounts on the loans, with interest rates of 7.99-8.49%.

### Aloft 1st anniversary

Marriott International's Aloft Kathmandu Thamel celebrated its first anniversary



on 17 July, and the hotel is offering an 'Anniversary Special Stay' with 50% off on bookings and meals.

### NIBL

Nepal Investment Bank has pledged to support reconstruction and relief to help people severely affected by landslides and



floods caused by continuous heavy rainfall in Myagdi, donating 20 tents and 100 blankets in the district. NIBL Ace Capital has also introduced 'Invest Now Pay Later' Professional Portfolio Service to create investment opportunities in the stock market.

### Sonam

Nepali retail and manufacturing brand Sonam Gears has donated 100 units of PPE



to Manmohan Cardiothoracic Vascular and Transplant Center at TU Teaching Hospital.

### NIC and EPF

Himalayan Bank and NIC Asia bank have signed an Memorandum of Understanding with the Employees Provident Fund, following which those who have been saving money in the Provident Fund will be able to repay loans taken from the fund digitally through the Connect IPS e-payment, a product of Nepal Clearing House Ltd.

### Herbal NMB Bank

NMB Bank and Nepal Herbs and Herbal Products Association (NEHHPA) have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to establish partnerships in capacity building, financial advisory account operation and loan facilitation.

### Ncell

Ncell has launched a new starter pack Naya Sajilo SIM under its umbrella campaign "Plus", which allows subscribers to enjoy bonus data on the first recharge as well for every Rs 100 spent. New customers can subscribe to the starter pack for Rs99.

### Himalayan Bank

Himalayan Bank has provided financial assistance worth more than Rs140,000 to repair and maintain the Rapid Sand Filter, Hospital Vessel and UF Filtration at Kanti Children Hospital.

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## EVENTS



## Weekend hike

Feeling cooped up after months at home? Go on a one-day trip through farming villages whilst enjoying views of the snow capped mountains on this hike from Lapsi Phedi to the Nagarkot Farmhouse. Call for more details and to book the hike, or head to the Weekend Eco Trek Facebook page. 25 July, 7:30am-4:30pm, 9801046333

## Summer Flash Fiction

Submit a work of fiction or nonfiction in any genre in less than 1,000 words for a chance to win \$1,000 and get published in The Writer Magazine. Learn more at [writermag.com/contests](http://writermag.com/contests). Deadline: 12 August

## KIMFF 2020 submissions

Fill the KIMFF 2020 entry form and send relevant films directed or produced in the last two years. Go to the website for more details.

Deadline: 1 September



## Dance Classes

Thinking about learning something new while stuck at home? Sushila Arts Academy hosts contemporary private dance lessons or remote lessons via Zoom. Get details via Facebook, or call the academy. 9860588626



## Boudha Farmers Market

Buy fresh and organic fruits and vegetables, fresh baked goods, and other delicious goodies. Support local products and farmers, and follow physical distancing guidelines.

Every Saturday, 8-am-12pm, Utpala Cafe, Boudha, 9801978106

## Live COVID-19 seminar

COVID-19 East West Centre Webinar: The Learning Curve: Public Health Experts on Lessons from Covid-19 Response in Asia and the US.

Tuesday, July 28 11:45AM Nepal Time. To register: [www.eastwestcenter.org](http://www.eastwestcenter.org)

## ONLINE ARCHIVES



## Movie locations tour

In this Google Earth tour, travel to landmarks in the Mediterranean where iconic movies were shot, from the InterContinental Carlton Cannes where Alfred Hitchcock's *To Catch a Thief* was filmed to the Villa Malaparte in Italy where Jean-Luc Godard's critically acclaimed film *Contempt* was shot.

## Literary Disco

A trio of writers discuss books, writing, and reading, and talk to other writers about what they are reading these days. Find Literary Disco on Stitcher, Apple podcasts, and Google podcasts.

## Global Nepali Museum

Global Nepali museum is the first database of its kind in Nepal that features Nepali art and artefacts that are housed in museums around the world. Go to the museum website and learn about sculptures, paintings, as well as contemporary art, and other Nepali cultural objects.



## Educational resources

Looking for support during the COVID-19 crisis as a teacher or educator? Find a list of resources and events offered by the British Council to help educators globally to manage the current situation. It includes information about webinars, Facebook Live events, lesson plans for online teaching, remote teaching guidance and more at [bit.ly/3fQsqbt](http://bit.ly/3fQsqbt)



## Shilpee Theatre

Plays from Shilpee Theatre are on YouTube channel. Watch *COMA*, and their adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*.

## DINING



## Akari &amp; Koko

Vivanta Hotel's Asian-inspired fusion restaurant serves an impressive assortment of East Asian dishes with modern twists. Try delicious breakfast, sushi, pastries, and more. Head to Facebook for details. [Jhamsikhel](http://Jhamsikhel) (01) 5525002 / 9863191511



## Dhokaima Cafe

Rainy day + jhol momo = bliss! We hear it's going to rain all week. Come get yours at Dhokaima. [Patan Dhoka](http://Patan Dhoka) (01) 5522113 / 9851272925



## La Casita

La Casita is the place for the best of Spanish food. Choose from a selection of tapas, tacos, paella and burgers. Don't miss Churros for dessert. Call and order. [Boudhanath](http://Boudhanath), 9808311240

## Bungalow Bar and Kitchen

Enjoy authentic Thai dishes like Som Tam Thai, Pad Kra Pao and Pad Thai or asian-fusion dishes like the Buff Lemon Grass and Chicken Satay. Find the menu on Facebook. [Naxal](http://Naxal), [Bhatbhateni](http://Bhatbhateni), 9801068630 / 9840660928

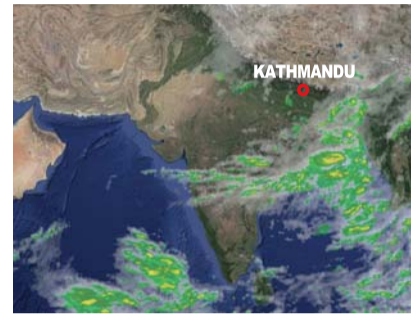


## Raithaane

Eat your way through Nepal at Raithaane, a restaurant committed to using locally sourced food. Each dish on the menu is connected to different communities of the nation. Look at the menu online. 12pm-7:30pm, [Patan Darbar Square](http://Patan Darbar Square), 9801002971

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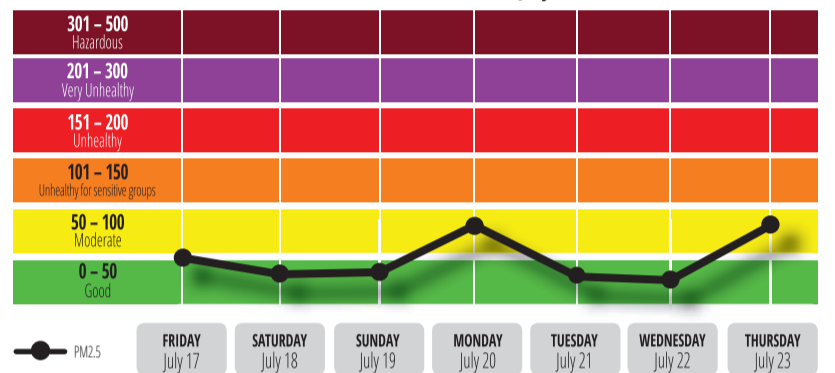


There seems to be no end to the monsoon onslaught this year. Rainfall throughout the country has been 30% higher than average for the first two weeks of July. Most of the rain fell on Gandaki and Province 3, with some cloudbursts that triggered deadly landslides. Rivers will continue to flow above the danger mark, there will be flooding in the Tarai. Kathmandu Valley will get more rain on Friday, it will taper off on Saturday and resume Sunday.



## AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 17 - 23 July



With the government's announcement of the lockdown being lifted, and the odd-even rule scrapped, the Air Quality Index (AQI) in Kathmandu deteriorated sharply to AQI 61 on Thursday (*above*). It is still at the yellow 'Moderate' zone because there was also rain that washed away the pollution, however, we can expect pollution levels to climb steadily. As public health experts have warned, pollution in the air we breathe together with COVID-19 that attacks the lungs can be a deadly combination.

<https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>

## ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

KRIPA JOSHI



Governments are recommending the use of masks to reduce the spread of the coronavirus. The benefit of wearing a face covering is not only for our own protection but also to safeguard others around us. But if everyone used single-use disposable face mask it would generate tens of thousands of tonnes of contaminated plastic waste that would end up polluting our streets and washing into our oceans. Unless you are a healthcare professional, a frontline worker or fall into a high-risk group, you can use washable, reusable mask or face covering. Not only will this reduce plastic waste, but it will also ensure that supplies of clinical PPE remain available for frontline workers who really need them. Wearing a mask should not give us a false sense of security, and we must avoid touching our face and keep up with social distancing measures and diligent hand-washing. #FridaysForFuture



## OUR PICK

In *Pushing Daisies*, Ned is a pie maker who can bring dead people back to life with his touch. However, if he touches a revived person for a second time, they will die again - forever. Over two seasons, this fantasy comedy-drama follows Ned as he revives his murdered childhood sweetheart and uses his powers to solve murder mysteries. Starring Lee Pace, Anna Friel, Kristin Chenoweth, Chi McBride, Ellen Greene, and Swoskie Kurtz.

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

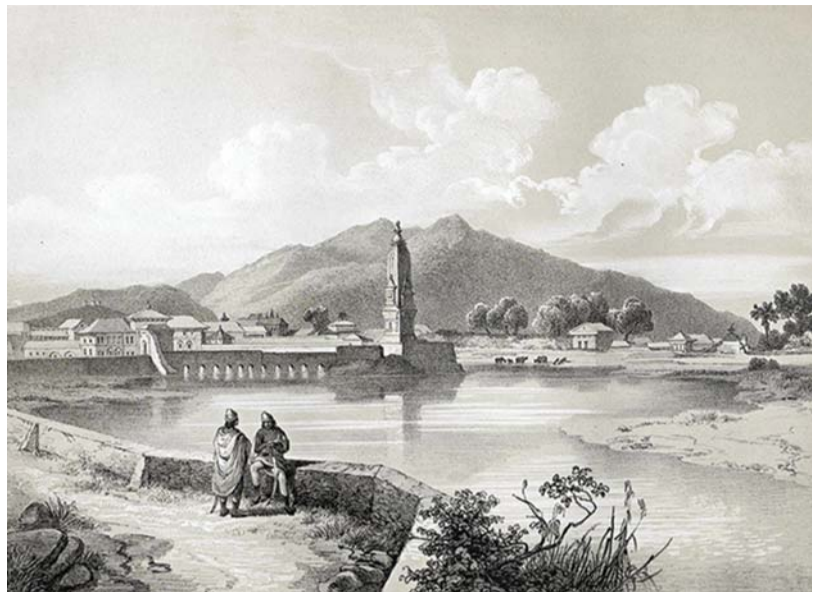
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नेपाल सरकार

सञ्चार तथा सूचना प्रविधि मन्त्रालय

सूचना तथा प्रसारण विभाग



Rani Pokhari from the German publication *Die Reise Seiner Königlichen Hoheit des Prinzen Waldemar von Preußens nach Indien in den Jahren 1844 bis 1846* (The journey of His Royal Highness Prince Waldemar of Prussia to India: in the years 1844 to 1846). The temple is in the original Shikhara style spire.



Rani Pokhari and the original Ghanta Ghar clock tower before the 1934 mega-quake that destroyed Kathmandu and killed 10,000 people. Both the clock tower and temple were rebuilt by Jang Bahadur Rana in 1860 in the Moghul dome style.



Juddha Sumshere Rana rebuilt the temple after 1934 as well Ghanta Ghar, and surrounded Rani Pokhari with a metal fence.



Today, the russet *dachhi appa* bricks give Rani Pokhari a more accurate resemblance to what it must have looked like when it was first built by King Pratap Malla in 1671.

Suvexa Pradhan Tuladhar

Five years after the earthquake destroyed its central temple, the 350-year-old Rani Pokhari royal pond at the centre of Kathmandu is finally getting back its original look.

The temple had been rebuilt after previous earthquakes in the Moghul stucco dome style, and was going to be converted into a concrete-lined structure. But today, the shrine, the causeway and pond perimeter gleam with russet brick.

Rani Pokhari has gone through many avatars in the past centuries. The earliest, an engraving commemorating the visit to

Kathmandu by Prince Waldemar of Prussia in 1845, shows the Balgopaleswar Temple having a Shikhara style spire. After it came down in an earthquake, Jang Bahadur Rana had it rebuilt with the Moghul dome architecture of north India that he admired so much.

This structure came down again in the 1934 mega-quake, and Juddha Sumshere Rana had it reconstructed and whitewashed, adding a metal fence around the pond. This structure, too, was destroyed in the 2015 earthquake, and Kathmandu Mayor Bidya Sundar Shakyas's attempt to surround the pond with cafes and shops was vehemently opposed by



SUVEXA PRADHAN TULADHAR

# BUILDING BACK RANI POKHARI EVEN BETTER

The reconstructed royal pond is beginning to resemble what it must have looked like 350 years ago

the local community.

Finally, the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) is giving Rani Pokhari more or less its original look. After delays due to the lockdown, reconstruction is finally nearing completion.

The pond was built in 1671 by King Pratap Malla after his consort, Queen Anantapriya was devastated by the sudden death of her son, Prince Chakrawatendra Malla. The king could not bear to see his queen so distraught, so he built Rani Pokhari to soothe her, and memorialise their lost son.

It was an exquisite architectural and ecological masterpiece showcasing the meticulous craftsmanship of the Malla era. The pond was consecrated with the crystal clear waters from 51 sacred sites from all over the subcontinent.

On the south side of the pond there still stands a statue of an elephant bearing King Pratap Malla and his two sons Chakrawatendra and Mahipatendra. Four smaller temples protect the central temple from the four cardinal points.

Besides its beauty, the pond was also an engineering feat. It was fed by an intricate underground network of channels to keep it full throughout the year. It also served to manage the surface water around in the area during monsoon, so that runoff from as far as Asan market would empty into the pond and overflow past farmlands down to Tukucha Rivulet in the east.

Because Rani Pokhari recharged ground water, it kept the water sources like hits and wells in the surroundings flowing even in the dry season. The pond bed was lined with semi-permeable black clay (*dyo cha*) so it retained water but also allowed some of it to seep through. The pond thus served as a rainwater reservoir that not just replenished groundwater, but also

irrigated nearby farms.

"Rani Pokhari shaped the water management system around the area at that time," says Sudarshan Tiwari, professor at the Institute of Engineering and a conservation architect.

Kathmandu Valley traditionally had an urban-rural symbiosis with densely-packed towns situated on higher ground, with intensive farming in the fertile soil below. The pond is a reminder of the wisdom of Kathmandu's rulers who understood this ecological balance, as well as its cultural significance.

"Since the day of its inauguration the pond was already considered a sacred site due to the temple in the centre and because water from 51 holy places were ceremonially poured into it," says heritage conservationist Alok Siddhi Tuladhar.

After it was damaged again in the 2015 earthquake, President Bidya Devi Bhandari inaugurated the reconstruction of Rani Pokhari in January 2016. The Kathmandu Metropolitan City got a budget of Rs120 million for the job, but it started to line the perimeter with cement for shops, and used concrete to rebuild the temple. After opposition, the work was stopped and handed over to the NRA.

"We wanted to make sure everyone involved had a say in the reconstruction, as the NRA is just a temporary organisation, so we formed a committee consisting of people from KMC, Department of Archaeology and local experts," explained the NRA's Sushil Gyewali.

After much debate the NRA decided to rebuild the temple in the original 1671 Shikhara style, and also revive the original hydrological elements used in the pond. This was not an easy job. Experts from Bhaktapur were brought in to line the pond with black clay and bricks.

The biggest challenge was to revive the previous water management system. The artesian wells and underground channels that fed the pond have dried up or have been destroyed by surrounding building construction.

"We will do our best to fill the pond through natural means but we will have to take extreme measures if the plan fails," explained Gyewali.


One of those "extreme measures" was to start filling the pond last week with muddy water from a nearby tube well. But this was also stopped after local opposition.

"It was a mistake. Rani Pokhari is a holy site and using tubewell water diminishes its religious, cultural and ecological value," said Tuladhar. The NRA stopped using the tubewell water, but Gyewali says that even the heavy monsoon rains will not be enough to fill the pond.

Other options are to use the trial feed from the Melamchi tunnel, or rainwater harvesting from the reconstructed Darbar High School and Tri Chandra College.

Another problem might be that the bed of the pond is lined with trapezoid *dachhi appa* bricks and the gaps between them could over time be blocked by debris and prevent seepage of water for recharging.

"This will not only defeat the purpose of recharging the underground channels but it will also make the pond dirty, so money has to be spent in cleaning it," says Sudarshan Tiwari.

Despite the compromises during its reconstruction, Rani Pokhari has become a symbol of what proper restoration should look like. Relentless activism and communities uniting to preserve this heritage has saved Kathmandu's past for its future. 



AUSTIN LORD



# The story of Langtang cheese

How Nepal's famous yak dairy centre survived a deadly avalanche, and built back better

Gyalbu Tamang

**M**y name is Gyalbu Tamang, and I was born in Kyangjin Gompa of Langtang Valley. I am now 44. My father Pasang Norbu worked in the cheese factory here when the Swiss first established it in the 1950s. My mother Tshering and us children grew up helping him with chores.

My father was trained by the early Swiss experts who first came to explore the feasibility of having a cheese factory in Langtang. I think they found Langtang very similar to their own country so they liked it here. My father used to mention the names of Toni Hagen who first came here in 1952, and was probably one of the first white men to come to the village.

Most people in this remote village of Langtang had goitre then caused by iodine deficiency. The valley was at least a week's walk away from Kathmandu in those days, and people did not have access to sea salt. Tibetan rock salt did not have enough iodine. Goitre was so common that it was even seen as a sign of beauty among some.

When children in Langtang saw western mountaineers and Swiss cheese makers, they used to run away and hide. They called them "go sherpu" (Yellow Head) or "ni karpu" (pale eyes) and kept away.

My father worked with Sepp Dubach and Werner Schulthess, both Swiss cheese makers who were convinced that cheese had a future in Nepal even though at that time Nepalis did not really eat cheese. We had chhurpi but that was hard, and took hours to melt in the mouth. We were not used to the taste of cheese.

After spending a year in Langtang, Schulthess concluded that the best way to preserve the surplus yak and nak milk production in the high mountains of Nepal was to convert it into cheese so it could be transported to market. He was convinced that yak cheese from Nepal would be as good as if not better than Emmentaler cheese from his home country. He brought the technique of Swiss making, and trained my father and others in Langtang. Most of them have passed away now, and Schulthess himself died in 2011.

My father remembers that the

Swiss were very passionate about their work, and were impatient with the laid back attitude of the Langtangpa. At first, the yak herders were so suspicious, they refused to provide milk to the Swiss cheese factory, even if they were paid for it. The Swiss gave a milk quota for each herder depending on the number of their yaks which they were forced to sell to the factory.

On days when there was not enough milk the Swiss would hike up to the pastures, break into herders' huts and confiscate the milk. Sometimes, they would be so angry they would even kick the milk bucket and spill it. After that, my father used to tell me, many of the herders started hiding their milk.

Then Schulthess and his team brought the village Lama on their side, got him to convince the yak herders that it was for their own good. We also came to realise that the Swiss had a different culture, they had come to Nepal to do a job, and they wanted to do it well. Especially Schulthess, he was convinced that cheese making would uplift the nutritional level of the people of the mountains, and provide them income to send

children to school and benefit from their pastoral livelihood.

The Swiss ran Nepal's cheese-making program with other dairies in Jiri and elsewhere, and handed the facilities over to the government's Dairy Development Corporation in 1964. It was because of the Swiss devotion to quality that Langtang cheese soon became popular in Kathmandu, and Nepalis slowly developed a taste for it. The tourist industry started buying cheese in bulk, and even local sales picked up in Langtang's guest houses.

My father used to wake up every day while it was still dark, and walked over to get the fire going before the yak herders arrived with their morning milk. When I got older, I used to help him stir the milk as it was heated, watch him add the culture, and go through the whole process. I accompanied him to Langsisha and down to Ghora Tabela to check up on the yak herders.

My childhood memories are of a holy valley steeped in culture and religion. We were deeply ingrained into our traditions, carrying on as the spirits of our ancestors looked down upon us. For us the

mountains are not inanimate, they are spiritual beings as well. Every rock, tree, the breeze fluttering the prayer flags, the water gushing out of the glaciers, herds of tahr grazing above the treeline, the alpine choughs soaring on the updrafts, were all fellow-sentient beings connected to humans through a divine bond.

We learnt about the impermanence of life, how the cycle of birth and death and rebirth defines existence. Being a human being is but a small segment of this cycle. What we do in this life, the karma that we earn will determine our reincarnation in the next life. The body may come and go, but the soul lives on in the cosmic realm.

I went to primary school in Langtang, and then after Grade 5 my family sent me down to Dhunche to complete Grades 6-8. My father knew schooling was important and wanted to make me smart, but my heart was not in reciting sentences from the bland text books and I longed to be back up in Kyangjin with my family and amidst a familiar landscape.

My father retired from cheese factory, but he was not planning a sedentary lifestyle. Dairy farming





**SAY CHEESE:** The Kyangjin cheese facility went down in the 2015 earthquake and avalanche. Herders and yaks were killed, all the equipment inside were destroyed. In 2018, the factory was back in operation, with better machinery and a modern lab (left and below).

Gyalbu Tamang (page 8) at Yala Kharka, one of the pastures where he herded yaks with his father as a child. The vast east face of Langtang Lirung looms over the valley.



was in his blood. So with his pension he bought ten yaks and carried on doing what he did before, and selling the surplus milk to the cheese factory. His, and our, life revolved around the yaks. In summer, when the snow-covered slopes were replaced with a carpet of green grass with brilliant coloured flowers, we took the yaks up to graze on the slopes below Naya Kanga. It was the herbs mixed into those grasses that gave the milk its unique flavour, which is passed down to the cheese.

We used to watch the sun rise from behind the fluted summit of Gang Chhenpo to the east, and the shadows travelled across the valley as the afternoon clouds moved up, bringing the misty monsoon rain. At night the clouds would part, and we looked up at the dome of stars with occasional meteorites cutting across the ghostly celestial river of the Milky Way. My father did not like sleeping indoors, and if the weather was all right he would take a nap in the grass as the yaks grazed nearby.

Looking at the children of Langtangpa today in schools in Kathmandu, I feel sorry that they cannot experience the kind of idyllic childhood we had. My own four children only get glimpses of this life when they came home for holidays, even though this year Langtang's children have got to stay is longer up here because of the COVID-19 lockdown.

When I turned 18, I got a job at the Langtang Cheese Production Centre that my father worked in, starting from the bottom – weighing the milk as it came in, collecting firewood, turning the blower to get the fire going, doing all the back-up work that was needed to make cheese. I knew much of this from assisting my father when I was a boy, so it was all familiar territory.

Tourism really picked up in Langtang after 1990, there were people from all over the world: Americans, Israelis, Japanese, Australians, New Zealanders. The fact that people from so far away came all the way to Langtang to admire its wilderness made us proud of our land, and convinced us that we needed to protect it as much as we could.

By now, the valley was a part of the Langtang National Park, and there were strict rules about trail-building, cutting trees and killing wildlife. The new road to Dhunche was built, so we did not have to walk all the way down to Trisuli to catch a bus to Kathmandu anymore. Langtang was now only a two-day

walk up from Syabru.

This meant that it was easier to transport the cheese to market in Kathmandu, and with more trekkers coming in, local demand for cheese also rose. This meant more income for the yak herders, and it started becoming really busy during the peak milk season during the monsoons.

In Langtang itself, locals started adding floors to their homes as trekking traffic increased and their earnings went up. The hotels became fancier, there was electricity, solar panels for hot showers, and better rooms and meals. Attracted by the scenery, and the fabulous day hikes in the surrounding mountains, many tourists started staying longer, and local incomes rose. Porters got jobs ferrying chicken, eggs, meat and other provisions from Trisuli. People started flying in by helicopter for day trips.

The spring trekking season in 2015 had started well, there was a steady stream of trekkers walking up from Syabru to Lama Hotel. Those who had come earlier were on their way down to take transport back to Kathmandu. I remember the morning of 25 April was overcast and I left my parents in Langtang, and walked from Kyangjin to the cheese factory. My three children were in the home a 10 minute walk below the factory.

Just before noon, there was a deep rumble from below the ground, and the building started to shake. The wall of the cheese-making building collapsed, the roof caved in. The shaking was still going on, when there was a more ominous roar from above but we could not see anything because it was cloudy. Things turned dark, and there was a terrific blast of wind with bits of dust and ice blowing down the mountain. I realised it was an avalanche, but initially we could not gauge where it came from, or what it hit.

I rushed home to see if my children were ok, my son and one of my daughters were still hiding under the bed. They had been told in school to go under the bed if there was an earthquake, and that is what they did. It probably saved their lives. When the air blast of the avalanche hit the house, it blew in through one window and across the room to go out the other window, hitting the next door house. My children were shaken, but safe.

I then hurried down to Langtang village to see if my parents were all right. The closer I got to the village,

the most worried I got. The scale of destruction got worse the nearer I got to Langtang village. There were dead and injured people everywhere, yaks and horses had been blown away. The ground was white as if it had snowed – but it was ice from the avalanche.

There was nothing left of Langtang, it was all gone, buried under 100m of ice and rock. My parent's house was on the outskirts of the village. Still, there was no trace of it. My father was 62 then, and had been outside grazing his yaks. We found him only after five days, down the slope resting with his arms under his head as if he was sleeping. His face was turned towards where the yaks would have been. His body was perfectly preserved by the ice all around.

My 65-year-old mother was inside the house, and we found her buried in the debris as the stone walls collapsed around her. Nearby, two of my aunts were killed, my younger sister and brother-in-law, a sister-in-law. There was no time for elaborate rituals, and we cremated them nearby. Probably about 300 people died that day in Langtang, and some of the bodies were found on the other side of the valley, while others were forever entombed in the debris.

The avalanche also killed 27 herders and 400 yaks, and the cheese factory building and equipment inside were all destroyed and was forced to cease operations. Cheese-making was already in crisis in Langtang before the earthquake because the older generation was unable, or unwilling, to do the strenuous work required. Youngsters wanted to leave for the bright lights of the city, yaks cost Rs50,000 each and the price of milk was too low to make farming sustainable.

But the disaster of 25 April 2015 turned out to be a chance for us to breathe new life into cheese-making in Langtang. The Swiss connection was revived, and the embassy in Kathmandu helped compensate the herders who lost yaks, and donated nearly Rs18 million to rebuild the facility and replace the equipment with more modern ones. They have installed a new lab to check the milk and cheese. It even sent a quality control trainer to give us all a refresher course.

More importantly, the Dairy Development Corporation in Kathmandu which earlier did not listen to us small people from the mountains, finally agreed to our

demand and doubled the selling price for milk to Rs120 per litre. Suddenly, it became quite feasible for the farmers to go back to yak herding. Many took out loans to buy yaks and increase the size of their herds. A herder with 17 yaks, for example, could now sell the cheese factory 45 litres of milk a day and earn Rs5,400 daily. These were unheard of sums. We are now collecting 300 litres of milk a day, and in the monsoon it can go up to 600 litres a day.

There are 63 farmers registered at the factory supplying milk to us daily. During this lockdown, with schools closed, I am glad to see that among them are younger Langtangpa. There are many 10+2 students who are learning to milk yaks and help their parents and grandparents. Some have found that the earnings are quite good, and have changed their mind about migrating abroad for work. Even if we can keep a dozen of our younger Langtangpa in our valley home, all the investment that has been made by the Swiss and Nepal government in making cheese here over the past many decades will have been worth it.

Today, the Langtang cheese centre is making 14 tons of cheese a year, in addition we churn out another 2,000kg of butter used for local consumption to make Tibetan tea and for the lamps in our gumba. It took a lot of effort to get the factory going again, but I think we have come out stronger than before the disaster. We have found new meaning in our work, and have seen that it gives us self-sufficiency and helps raise our living standards.

Every morning, I wake up at 4AM just like my father used to. I put on my white gown that makes me look a bit like a doctor, and starting heating water in the big vat, the herders start coming in a few hours later, and we weigh their milk, measure the fat content, add the cheese culture and begin the usual process. The cheese wheels have to be immersed in salt water for up to 48 hours so the rind becomes salty. It is then left in store to mature for up to three months.

Because of the lockdown the store is now brimming with 8kg cheese wheels, waiting to be taken down to Kathmandu. I have written to headquarters in Kathmandu to send transport to Syabru to take the cheese, but there has been no response so far. If it is stored for too long the cheese will start to dry and the quality will go down.

There is now so much milk we

have added new cheese facilities in Langsisha at 5,050m and at Naya Kanga at 4,100m. I often travel to those stations to inspect and do quality control. This is very important, because if the cheese does not meet quality standards, it will not be sold. With some Italians we are trying to build another cheese station on Kyangjin Ri at 5,500m. If it goes ahead, it will be in the Guinness Book as the highest cheese making plant in the world.

Among the many changes I have seen in Langtang, most are for the better. But one worrying trend is that in the past 5-6 years, most springs have gone dry across the Valley. Even the ones that had water all year round do not have water. Some scientists from ICIMOD had come here, and they told me this is happening across the Himalaya. The reason, it seems, is that the ice in the glaciers is melting because of climate change and there is no more water seeping down to the springs. There are also years when there is no winter snow, or there are freak storms.

This directly affects dairy production. With less water, the nature of the grass in the high pastures have also changed. I have noticed that the quality of the yak milk is also going down. The fat content is lower, and the milk is not as tasty. Climate change is caused by burning petroleum, but even though we have no cars in Langtang, we are feeling its effect.

Everyone here in Langtang says that the 2015 earthquake destroyed only the areas with human habitation, and spared nature. It is true, the avalanche was selective in what it annihilated. We believe it was God's wrath, and a warning to us to mend our ways, to be more compassionate towards other human beings and caring about nature.

And because we are now more grateful to our Gods and nature for the bounty that the cheese centre provides us, we are rewarded. Our children our now better educated and they have a sense of belonging to their home valley. We all eat better, we are healthier, especially the children. Langtang is being rebuilt for the day when the tourists will return, and hopefully they will find a place that has changed for the better. Where the nature is more resplendent than ever, and the people are kinder. 🇳🇵



GOPEN RAI

Sonia Awale

On Friday, it will be four months since Nepal closed the country down to prevent the spread of SARS-CoV-2, the virus strain that causes COVID-19. Of the 40 who have died of the infection in Nepal, two are children below 5.

But many more children have died during the four months of lockdown compared to the same period last year because of lack of access to health care due to the restriction on mobility, interrupted vaccination campaigns and the lack of medicines.

However, the coronavirus grabs all the headlines. Mortality due to non-COVID-19 causes does not make the news – even though it is clear that a lockdown enforced to control one disease has caused far more deaths from other prevalent diseases, and threatens to undermine Nepal's progress in infant and child survival over the past four decades.

"The COVID-19 crisis and lockdown have pushed many families into poverty, many have lost their sources of income, leading to malnourishment among children," says Jhalak Gautam of the Child Health Division at the Health Ministry. "Increased malnutrition means children are more susceptible not only to COVID-19 but to many other infectious diseases such as measles and diphtheria."

Under-5 child mortality rate in Nepal had declined substantially from 271 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1969 to 32 in 2018. Government figures show that since 17 July 2018 - 16 July 2019, a total of 1,357 children under 5 died of various infectious diseases all over the country. Preliminary figures for the same period 2019-2020 is 1,263 – even though only 78% of the data has been collected.

Initial government figures also show that a total of 204 children under 5 have died across the country during the lockdown between 14 March-14 June. This number was at a much lower 151 during the same period last year.

This data clearly show that the total child death numbers collected by Female Health Care Volunteers is higher this year – meaning they died at home. The number of those who have died at hospital in the same three months this year is lower than last year probably because parents are not taking children to hospital when they are sick during the lockdown.

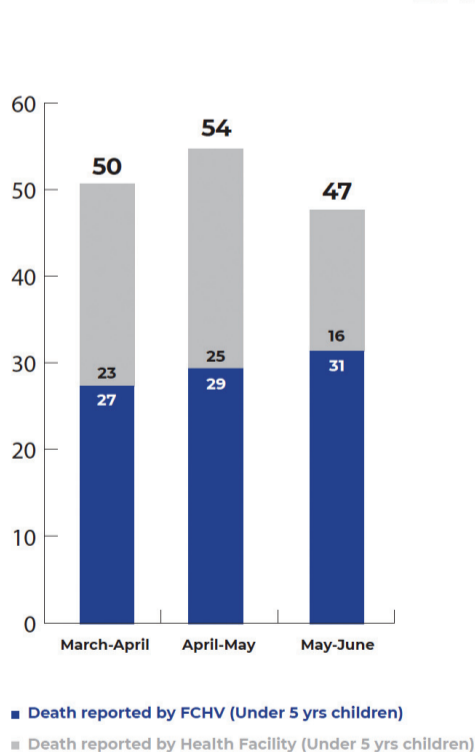
An expert at the Health Information Management System says when all the data for this year comes in, it is bound to be much higher than last year. This means the lockdown has pushed Nepal back in meeting its health targets under the United Nations' SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals).

Under the SDG target, Nepal is supposed to bring child mortality

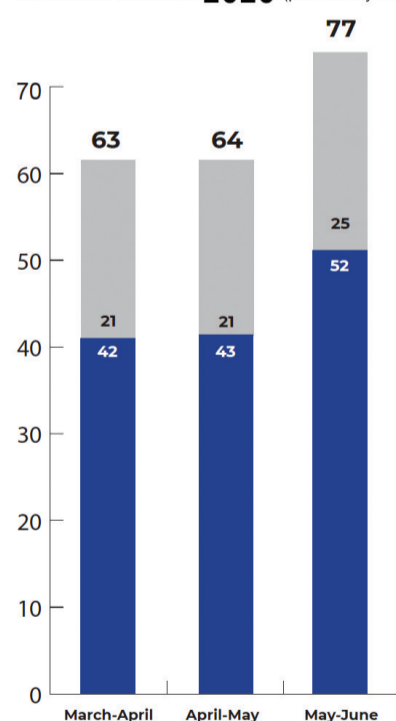
# Children are collateral damage in Nepal lockdown

Four months of lockdown has killed many more children than the disease it was supposed to control

Child mortality from 14 March-14 June 2019



Child mortality during lockdown 14 March-14 June 2020 (preliminary data)



down further to 25 deaths per 1,000 live births by 2030. Persistent childhood malnutrition is a major reason for infant and child mortality remaining high despite dramatic progress in the 1990s. Figures for stunting, wasting and anaemia in Nepal have plateaued in the last decade. Now, the lockdown has added to the challenge.

Says Elke Wisch, UNICEF Representative to Nepal: "Progress made on children's nutrition in the last decade is at risk of being reversed as rising numbers of children are facing malnutrition

due to loss of household income and resulting food insecurity. The social and economic loss for Nepal resulting from the deterioration in children's nutrition status will be felt long after the COVID 19 crisis is over."

The lockdown has also disrupted vaccination campaigns across the country, leading to measles outbreaks in Dhading and Gorkha in April. Although regular immunisation services have now been restored in health facilities in all 77 districts, parents have been unable to take their children for

shots because of restrictions on transportation and also because of the fear of COVID-19 transmission in health posts.

In fact, the WHO and UNICEF earlier this week stated that preliminary data for the first four months of 2020 points to a substantial drop in the number of children completing three doses of the vaccine against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis (*DTP3*), first time in 28 years. Moreover, at least 30 measles vaccination campaigns were or are at risk of being cancelled, which could result

in further outbreaks in 2020 and beyond.

"Vaccines are one of the most powerful tools in the history of public health, and more children are now being immunised than ever before," said Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General. "But the pandemic has put those gains at risk. The avoidable suffering and death caused by children missing out on routine immunizations could be far greater than COVID-19 itself."

With schools closed for the past four months, children in many schools are also not getting their lunches. Domestic violence has also seen a spike during the lockdown, with many of the victims children. There is also evidence of a rise in child marriage anxiety, stress and mental disorder

Nepal appears to be on track to proving correct the grim prediction in May by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health that 1.2 million children worldwide could die from pre-existing diseases like malaria, pneumonia or diarrhoea in the next six months due to the disruption to health services and food supplies due to the lockdown. That makes 6,000 fatalities a day – a whopping 45% rise in child mortality.

"Under a worst-case scenario, the global number of children dying before their fifth birthdays could increase for the first time in decades," UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore warned. "We must not let mothers and children become collateral damage in the fight against the virus. And we must not let decades of progress on reducing preventable child and maternal deaths be lost." 🇳🇵