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DIWAKAR CHHETRI

जाउँ है POKHARA



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More Himalayan tsunamis

The devastating collapse of the Nanda Devi glacier in India's Uttarakhand state on 7 February that killed hundreds should be a warning for Nepal to be prepared for similar disasters in future.

A PlanetLabs image seems to confirm that a rock-ice slope detached completely from near the summit of the 7,816m high peak in the Garhwal Himalaya near Nepal's western border, crashed on to the glacier below, and bulldozed the ice and debris into the Dhauliganga and the Alkananda Rivers.

There are tell-tale signs of new brown dust on the western side of the valley in satellite images. The ice melted as it reached a warmer, lower altitude and unleashed the flood that raced downstream. Two hydroelectric projects on the rivers were completely destroyed, highways were washed away and settlements buried under metres of water and debris.



The Nanda Devi disaster is almost identical to the Seti River flash flood of 2012 north of Pokhara that killed nearly 80 people. A massive chunk of rock near the summit of Annapurna IV broke off, fell on the glacier and the ensuing flood barbelled down the Seti, causing the fatalities.

Another flash flood on the Arun River in eastern Nepal in 2017 was traced to slope failure on a mountain on the Nepal-China border that fell on a glacial lake, triggering a flash flood that washed down so much debris that it dammed the main river.

In all three cases, disasters that at first thought to be a Glacial Lake Outburst Floods (GLOF) turned out to be rock-ice avalanches that led to a glacier collapse. The water and debris then cascaded down the valleys in a deadly paste obliterating everything in its path.

Whereas the increased risk of GLOFs in the Himalaya is linked directly to the climate crisis melting the ice and expanding moraine-impounded lakes, this does not appear to be the direct cause of the Nanda Devi event—just as it was not in the Seti and Arun. Rockfalls that lead to the collapse of glaciers, squeezing the water out of ponds in them and melting of the ice as it is pushed down to a warmer altitude.

Some of these glaciers may have lakes that top over when an avalanche or rockfall hit their surface, or global warming may have

melted the ice within debris-covered glaciers. We do not know if these events are becoming more frequent due to a Himalayan thaw caused by the climate crisis.

Whatever the case, it is clear that the countries that share the Himalaya from Afghanistan to Burma have to be prepared for more frequent disasters of this type. The risk of GLOFs and flash floods have to be factored into planning infrastructure and human settlements downstream.

Although GLOFs and glacial collapse get all the attention, the Himalaya are also prone to landslide-blocked dams during the rainy season. The mountains are relatively young, they are seismically active and their slopes very unstable. Monsoon rains have been known to trigger landslides the block major rivers, as happened on the Bhothe Kosi in Jure in 2014.

Fortunately, the river found a way around the blockage. But there have been cases when the impounded lake is large enough to cause catastrophic *bishyari* floods downstream when the landslide dams collapse.

The flat terraces where the city of Pokhara is situated today was probably formed, geologists say, when a landslide blocked the Seti upstream some 700 years ago. It gave way, unleashing a tsunami at least 150m high. Pokhara is located in the debris fan of this flood which dammed side rivers, forming Phewa, Begnas and other lakes.

To warn that similar catastrophes can strike in the Himalaya is not panic-mongering. It is a call to be prepared. And let us

hope the worst-case scenario of a mega-quake causing multiple glacial lake outburst floods does not happen any time soon.

A Himalayan Glacial Lake Inventory launched at a webinar on Monday says that of the expanding glacial lakes in the Himalaya, 47 on the watersheds of Nepal's three main rivers are at high risk of bursting, and causing catastrophic floods downstream. Of these, 42 lakes are on the Kosi River basin in eastern Nepal, three are on the Gandaki and two on the Karnali watersheds.

A report last year by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) and UNDP mapped 3,624 glacial lakes in the Kosi, Gandaki and Karnali basins and found 47 lakes at risk from bursting. Of these 25 are in Tibet and drain into rivers that flow into Nepal.

For now, existing towns along the rivers must have early warning systems. Infrastructure planning must take into account the glacial flood risk. And because so many of the high-risk glacier-fed rivers flow across national boundaries, international cooperation is a must.

The Nanda Devi glacial lake flood on 7 February is a warning for the rest of the Himalaya to be prepared

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

The country has now been held hostage to the ruling party infighting for nearly a year. There was hope that the ministerial reshuffle this week would finally close that chapter, but we underestimated the intensity of the competition among politicians for the juicy ministerial posts.

That is not a paragraph from this week's *Nepali Times*. It is the lead of a page 1 political analysis from exactly 20 years ago this week. It shows how little the political culture in Nepal has changed in the past two decades. The only difference is that the ruling party then was the Nepali Congress, which was split between the Koirala and Deuba factions, and now it is the ruling Nepal Communist Party bifurcated between the Oli and Dahal factions.

Here is more from the story, aptly titled 'Back To Square One', from *Nepali Times* #29 of 9-14 February 2001:

That was the reason for the original infighting in October, and that is why Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala's efforts to soften dissidents by offering them cabinet carrots failed on Wednesday. In the end it all boiled down to who got what.

Koirala tried to make sure he had covered all the bases. He made sure his grouchy colleague Bhattarai would be happy with the choice of Khum

Bahadur Khadka and Omkar Shrestha, he picked nephew Prakash Koirala as a senior minister to rein in rebellious relatives. He even nearly roped in some of Sher Bahadur Deuba's key supporters like Chiranjivi Wagle and Bhakta Bahadur Balayar. But, in the end, it all came to nought. The bottom line is that Congress infighting will continue and long-suffering Nepalis will have to keep on paying the price for selfish politicians who can't get along.



Koirala's house of cards began crumbling hours after the new appointments were announced on Wednesday morning. So, one year later, we are back to where it all started. This shameless exposition of greed, power and disunity was music to the ears of the main opposition Unified Marxist-Leninists which is gearing up to oust Koirala in the winter session of parliament that started Thursday. But the Congress still has a majority in parliament, and the arithmetic does not favour the UML. But the UML is mounting this challenge more with the 2002 elections in mind.

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

ONLINE PACKAGES



COLD WAVE

Just as it has every winter, the cold wave in Nepal's Tarai has had a devastating impact, but local governments have provided little to no support to the neediest. Full story on [page 8](#).



FLYING HIGH

At a time when most airlines are reeling under the impact of the pandemic, Nepal's Buddha Air did not just survive the crisis but is expanding.



LIFE TIME

Watch the video accompanying a new installment of Anjana Rajbhandari's column Life Time, in which she talks about the need for kindness when discussing marriage with women.

KATHMANDU'S URBAN SPRAWL

Land mafia, local governments and the corrupt federal government are letting the environment go to ruin ('Nepal's air ambulance saves mothers', *Saglo Samaj*, Issue #1048). The coming generations may find the country a desert, with floods and landslides. It's a crime against nature. No one, not the government institutions or stakeholders care.

Raman Dhakal

- Is it time to think about moving the capital to another place and preserve the valley or what is left of it? Asking for a friend.

Sagar Onta

- This is what happens when the keepers of the environment look the other way. The present day fresh water problems of the Kathmandu Valley are all down to inconsiderate and irresponsible planning of yesterday. Sadly, the problem will be magnified by this sort of destruction and the next generation will suffer.

Ian Wall

- An eye-opening piece. I look out of my window every day in Budanilkantha and I see the brown creeping up to the edge of Shivapuri National Park. As your reporter points out, this is not just an eyesore, it has devastating consequences on Kathmandu's watershed, the source of ground water and springs below the mountain. Greed and power, that is the disease. The excavators are just the symptoms.

K Budathoki

OLI-DAHAL

I think all they have left is publicity stunts and defaming the opposition ('Oli's tit-for-tat show of force', *Nepali Times*, Issue #1048). Public trust in these politicians is decreasing. These are hollow people.

Jayson Jar

AIR AMBULANCE

Never knew about this wonderful initiative. ('Nepal's air ambulance saves mothers', *Nepali Times*, Issue #1048). This is where our tax payer money should be spent. Not on elections, where outdated, selfish, corrupt leaders get elected time and again in a non-functioning political system that cannot deliver basic human needs like water in each household of the capital city on a daily basis.

Arvind Das Joshi

- So heartening to see women in need getting this service and the good work that is being done to save so many lives.

Sunaina Saraf

- This is so heart warming to watch. Thank you for covering and sharing this.

Shrijana Singh Yonjan

- Such an important service does it only run from Kathmandu or from all regional airports? It also raises the point that one should not receive treatment because they cannot afford it at the local level so these costs also need covering.

P Thapa

Times.com WHAT'S TRENDING



Protecting Lumbini's rare cranes

by *Rajendra N Suwal*

There is a sense of urgency to conserve Sarus Cranes and its foraging habitat as Lumbini's wetlands are increasingly threatened by pollutants, land encroachment, proliferation of industries, siltation, invasive vegetation and pesticide and fertiliser use.

Most reached and shared on Facebook



Kathmandu remembers Aung San Suu Kyi

by *Sajana Baral*

Well-wishers at a monastery in Kathmandu with which Aung San Suu Kyi has a connection, hope she will be freed soon, that Burma will return to normal. Full story on [nepalitimes.com](#)

Most commented



Heavy snowfall over Nepal Himalaya

by *Nepali Times*

Heavy snowfall and rain last week over Nepal obstructed road and air traffic, and put an end to a prolonged drought, also putting out devastating wildfires.

Most popular on Twitter

Nepal's air ambulance saves mothers

by *Saglo Samaj*

Every day, at least three mothers die in Nepal during child birth. A helicopter emergency airlift service is a lifeline for women in remote areas with birthing complications. Read the full article and watch video online.

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Kathmandu Valley's urban sprawl is affecting aquifers, and increasing risk of landslides for residents. @mukeshjee reports.

rupa joshi @rupajoshi
When greed becomes like blinkers for horses and cannot allow us to see beyond immediate monetary gain...

Prabhakar Shrestha @prabshr
Very nice article, the #hillsofKathmandu is our only remaining #lungs, besides #recharge for #GWT, it provides #freshair which flows down the valley in night, helps to lift warm pollutants up, and reduce #airpollution near surface - also provides natural beauty for a good hike!

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Experts have called for urgent protection of wetlands following another winter with a sharp decline in the number of migratory water fowl in #Nepal's lakes and rivers.

ヒマラヤNight@Night04812666
Due to the efforts by the institutions and local youths committed to conserving the wetlands in Lumbini and raising public awareness on protecting Sarus Cranes, we can observe the tallest flying birds gliding elegantly through the clear air and foraging for food on rice paddies.

Sia Spiilopoulou Akermak @SiaAkermak
#Climate change has concrete and acute impact around the world. #biodiversityloss in physical environment, means also #culturalheritage loss and loss of #linguistic wealth.

Nepali Times

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Publisher and Editor: **Kunda Dixit**
Audience Engagement: **Sahina Shrestha**, Associate Editor: **Sonia Awale**, Layout: **Kiran Maharjan**
Published by **Himalmedia Pvt Ltd** | Patan Dhoka, Lalipur | GPO Box 7251 Kathmandu
editors@nepalitimes.com | www.nepalitimes.com | www.himalmedia.com
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TURKISH AIRLINES

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“Pokhara will be a game changer”

Birendra Bahadur Basnet, Buddha Air

KUNDA DIXIT

At a time when most airlines around the world are folding, and Nepal's own carriers struggle to stay airborne, Buddha Air has not just survived the crisis but is expanding. It is adding two more ATR-72 aircraft when others are selling or mothballing their planes.

This is driven by a spurt in domestic traffic when flights resumed last September. A combination of low fuel costs and a fear of travelling by bus, convinced many to fly. Forced to tighten their belts, airlines have also reduced overheads so cheaper fares are possible for middle-class Nepalis. Trunk routes, including between Kathmandu and Pokhara are packed with domestic tourists. Nepalis are flying where they had not flown before, like on Mt Everest sightseeing flights which used to be mainly for international tourists. Innovative strategies like buy-one-get-one-free to use aisle seats have meant that the weekend mountain viewing flights are full.

Nepali Times spoke to Buddha Air founder Birendra Bahadur Basnet about the lessons of the pandemic and his future plans.

***Nepali Times:* How did Buddha Air tide over the Covid-19 crisis?**

Birendra Bahadur Basnet: From our very inception 23 years ago, we were very focussed on prudent fiscal discipline, that helped us ride out the pandemic and to survive the worst crisis in the 100 years of global aviation history.

During the pandemic, our overdraft hit the sky, we had maintenance and insurance costs despite the lack of revenue. We tried to manage cash flow the best we could, and put salaries in staff accounts. We encouraged team spirit, and collective ownership of the airline by all our 1,100 staff. This gave us the strength to survive and grow. Every crisis creates an opportunity, and we created our own opportunity. The last two months were the most difficult. We brought everyone down to a basic salary. We decided that everybody has to contribute for the survival of the company.

But after the flights started on 21 September, we immediately went into recovery mode, and could start paying full salaries again, so we are now back in a normal situation.

At a time when other airlines are shrinking or going belly-up, you have not just survived, but are expanding.

Yes, right now we are in a recovery mode, but you are right we just added one ATR-72 aircraft and one more end of July. This is because the Covid crisis has actually opened up a new business avenue for us — domestic passengers. What helped was the reduction in aviation fuel price and lower overheads, which allowed us to reduce fares. This in turn made it possible for a big jump in domestic passengers. In December 2020, we carried 20% more passengers than the previous December.

We knew that Nepali passengers would be our bread and butter. And we started planning for a Covid-19 prevention protocol three months before we started operations. We trained all our employees, implemented the procedures, we did a lot of drills, we were able to convince passengers that it will be 100% safe to fly Buddha Air. That was the strategy that allowed us to keep flying.

How badly were you hit by the loss of tourist traffic in 2020?

We used to carry about 900 tourists a day pre-Covid. We are now sustained by the Nepali flying public. Nepalis who used to travel by bus have shifted to aviation because fares are comparable. So when the tourists return, it will be a bonus.

What is your reasoning behind flying to remote areas within Nepal?

From September 22 we are starting operations to Lukla and Taplejung in eastern Nepal from a new hub in Manthali. For this we are acquiring two STOL (short takeoff and landing) aircraft, and we are currently comparing the Viking Twin Otter and Textron Sky Courier.

Why Manthali?

Manthali because congestion and visibility at Kathmandu airport forces planes to go into

long holds to land and take off. Flights are longer, are delayed and are unreliable. From Manthali, it will be a very short haul to Lukla, only 17 minutes. One aircraft can perform 10 shuttles between Manthali-Lukla in one morning. Our plan is to provide transport to and from Manthali, get passengers to drive two-and-a-half hours to Manthali one day before, stay overnight in our lodge, and the package will be cheaper than the current fares for Lukla.

How about other sectors?

We will serve STOL airfields in western Nepal like Jumla, Rara, Simikot, Manang, and of course Jomsom, from our Pokhara hub starting September 2023. That will also be a game changer for rural aviation in Nepal. Many of these airports have been blacktopped, some like Simikot need runways extended, and we are talking to the Civil Aviation Authority to upgrade nav aids. And once flights are reliable, passenger confidence will grow and it will open up a neglected part of the country to tourism and travel.

We think there is potential for Pokhara-Nepalgunj post-pandemic as Indian tourists arrive. We are planning to evolve the Lucknow-Nepalgunj-Pokhara package for Indian tourists through Buddha Holidays, our 100% subsidiary.

Why did you shelve your international expansion plans?

Once you are making a profit and consolidated, you have to expand, that is the golden rule of business. You don't expand when you are making a loss, which a lot of business entities have learnt the hard way. So, before the pandemic we were thinking of international operations and did a lot of homework, we did a technical evaluation of Boeing 737, Airbus 320, Embraer 190. But international flights do not just depend on good internal management, there are external factors. We would actually make a loss if we went international at this juncture. We are always ready to fly international from Pokhara's new airport, we have the capacity, we have the license, but the government has to help remove all the constraints.

What are the prospects of a revival of international tourism?

I am not very optimistic about 2021, but 2022 will be a good year. If the Nepal Indian border opens, we will see an inundation of Indian tourists by road and air. Not sure about Chinese tourists because that is determined by their government. Once the vaccine is available, there will also be a return of international tourists. That will be momentous in 2022, and we have to prepare ourselves for that scenario.

What should the Nepal Tourism Board be doing?

We can have another interview on that. They need a lot of things that they have not done because of political instability and leaders focussed on other issues rather than development. They need to start marketing in an unconventional way. Nepal should be able to convince global tourists that flying is safe within Nepal, Nepalis have been flying without being infected because the protocols have been established. We can create that confidence in the international tourism mindset. People have been locked down for so long, they want to get out — especially to be in nature, in a pristine environment, open spaces. That should be Nepal's selling point to revive tourism.



Join us on a walkabout in the Buddha Air hangar at Kathmandu airport with Managing Director Birendra Bahadur Basnet as he explains how the airline did not just survive the pandemic, but is expanding its service.

PRABHU BANK

Easing entry into Nepal

Nepal's tourism industry is miffed at the government for not streamlining entry process for foreign visitors. Even the head of the Nepal Tourism Board is impatient with the confusing immigration and health rules. It feels that immigration, health, tourism and security agencies have not been able to coordinate policy so that foreigners can get visa on arrival, reduce quarantine times, and remove other red tape.

Tourist arrivals reached 10,000 in December, but dropped in January to 8,800. Airlines and hotels blame the sluggish arrival figures on the lack of clarity and on complicated entry procedures. Foreigners can fly to Nepal, but need a visa from an embassy abroad, although tour groups with connections can get visa on arrival if their company makes a request. This leaves a

lot of room for ad hoc decisions, and confusion at check-in since international airlines flying to Nepal are not apprised of the exact rules.

Passengers also need to show reservation at a designated hotel for one week quarantine, and this duration is 10 days if visitors are arriving from countries with new strains of the coronavirus.

“To be sure, the government has gone some way in easing restrictions. For example, a person with a vaccine certificate will not longer have to show a PCR negative report before boarding a flight to Nepal. But the rule is not clear on what happens after arrival in Kathmandu.

Turkish partners with Advanced College

General Manager of Turkish Airlines in Nepal Abdullah Tuncer Kececi, and Executive Director of The Advanced

College of Engineering and Management Kapil Regmi signed a MoU to play a key role in technological upgradation, innovation, and competitiveness of industries.

Qatar and MoNA

Qatar Airways, KGH Group, MoNA & Nepal Art Post have decided to join hands to create awareness amongst the local community through art and artists. Through the collaboration, they are offering a chance to win 'Anywhere in the World' round trip tickets and discounts to anyone visiting MoNA till 24 March.

White Lotus eVs

Hyderabad based electric vehicle maker, Pure EV has marked its international debut with the launch of its e-scooter in Nepal partnering with White Lotus Motors for

distribution of its electric vehicles in the country. White Lotus Motors signed Anushka Shrestha, Miss Nepal World 2019, as Brand Ambassador.

BMW test drive in Pokhara



The test drive program of BMW has been successfully completed in Pokhara. Laxmi Premium Motors, Nepal's official importer for BMW, organised a test drive with its X5 and X3 models at the Shangri-La Village Resort.

History of female (im)mobility

Immigration Dept proposal is just the latest proof of a misogynist, bungling bureaucracy

● Upasana Khadka

A proposal by Nepal's Immigration Department requiring consent from a guardian and local government for women under the age of 40 to travel abroad has sparked public fury, and is taken as yet another proof of a misogynist, bungling bureaucracy.

The Department made the recommendation to the Home Ministry on Wednesday, saying it needed to curb trafficking of Nepali women, especially to the Gulf.

Teknarayan Poudel at the Immigration Department told *Nepali Times* that a 2009 directive had to be amended because of "rampant misuse". The following changes are proposed:

1. Women travellers on visit visas need Rs1.5 million insurance.
2. They need vouchers of currency exchange
3. Women under 40 traveling alone for the first time to the Gulf need permission from family members and the local ward.

It is this third proposal that set off outrage. In the past labour permits have been prone to misuse when unnecessarily restrictive, especially for women.

By not granting labour permits or approvals for household work abroad, women cross the open border to India, or use visit visas since that is their only way out. Curbing visit visas, will increase travel via India and trafficking.

Poudel says public reaction to the proposal overlooks the criteria that it only applies to first time travellers



to the Gulf. "It is the first-timers to the GCC who are most vulnerable to visit visa misuse that this proposed amendment is addressing," he said.

Nepali workers have been bypassing cumbersome labour permits by travelling visit visas. The Immigration Department had been severely criticised for an earlier requirement that those with visit visas have to speak English.

Poudel dismissed this, saying, "It was one of the many options that were tabled, but it was never given much consideration."

To be sure, the misuse of visit visas is a pressing problem because it has put many migrants, especially women, at risk. In addition to bypassing jobs and countries for which labour approvals are banned for safety reasons, visit visas are also misused by recruiters who want to circumvent legal safeguards.

"Countries or sectors restricted for foreign employment are the most ripe for misuse of visit visas," says Kumar Dahal of the Department

of Foreign Employment. "We get calls from women in places like Syria that are banned for foreign employment. Stranded domestic workers from Kuwait call us in the worst imaginable situations. They all left on visit visas."

Many workers go to the UAE on visit visas, and they are on transit to third countries. On Wednesday the Nepal Embassy in Abu Dhabi asked Nepali workers not to come to the UAE on visit visas because of cases of stranded migrants.

The latest proposal on visit visas has its roots in Nepal's labour migration system that requires workers to obtain approvals to work abroad. The government labour permit is like an exit pass that signifies legal pre-departure procedures are followed.

The permits have their merits since they keep intermediaries and employers accountable.

However, the new proposal is reminiscent of past restrictions on women:

1985 The Foreign Employment Act prohibited recruiters from providing jobs to women without the consent of guardians.

1988 An amendment expanded this to include permission from a mother or father of an unmarried woman or husband of a married woman, or elder or younger brother aged 21 years or more of an unmarried woman living in the same family, or father-in-law or mother-in-law of a married woman.

2007 The Foreign Employment Act stated: No gender discrimination shall be made while sending workers for foreign employment pursuant to this Act.

2021 The proposed amendment requiring approvals from guardians and local governments for first-timers to travel on visit visas puts Nepali women back on square one.

Shambhu Niroula, a legal adviser to the National Association of Foreign Employment Agencies (NAFEA), says the ban on domestic workers that are predominantly female contradict legal clauses, and the new proposed rule is regressive.

The latest ban on domestic workers was put in place in 2017 after a Parliament committee decided it was unsafe for domestic workers, regardless of gender. After a similar trip by a team led by Bimal Prasad Shrivastav, Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Labour instructed the government to make country specific policies for domestic workers.

However, Covid-19 derailed action. The pandemic itself impacted women workers abroad disproportionately, especially those who had traveled through India

or on visit visas since they did not exist in government records and were ineligible for any support from Foreign Employment Welfare Fund.

The restrictions on travel that disproportionately target women are lazy because the alternative requires stakeholders to be proactive, engage in bilateral discussions with destination country governments, have strong interagency coordination, hold complicit immigrant officials accountable, ramp up action against traffickers, train and inform workers on safe practices, to look for safer, legal pathways, create jobs at home, and clamp down on domestic violence.

Nepalis reacting on social media to the proposal have questioned on what grounds a 'guardian' is eligible to grant permission for a woman to travel. 'Why should men under 40 be spared from this provision?' asked one. How will the consent from the guardian and local authority address trafficking, said another. What if the same guardian is the very source of domestic violence from which the woman is escaping for overseas work?

Because of the public reaction, it is likely that the Home Ministry will not move forward with the proposal.

Sarda Rai is a migrant who has worked in households in Dubai, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. She is now back in her home in Morang, and says: "I left via India but used to return home through Kathmandu airport. The immigration officials gave me a hard time every time. I had to fight back and tell them either to lift the ban, to not issue us passports at all, or to give us jobs in Nepal. All that is still true." 🇳🇵

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Incubating Pokhara's business ecosystem

Pokhara is not just tourism, it can be a hub for Nepali innovators and entrepreneurs

Thanks to the year-round pleasant weather and its geography as a valley with lakes nestled below mountains, Pokhara has been synonymous with tourism.



CROSSCURRENT
Ashutosh Tiwari

But in the last few years, it has diversified its appeal. Pokhara is now home to upcoming universities and colleges that attract both domestic and foreign students. It has a growing manufacturing and service economy, a thriving construction industry and a slew of venue for adventure sports.

It has an international cricket stadium, to which the Annapurnas provide a postcard-perfect backdrop. Soon, a spanking new airport will connect Pokhara directly to cities outside Nepal. In these days of global connectivity, can it also be a hub for young Nepali innovators and entrepreneurs?

That was the question when I worked as a Pokhara University faculty two years ago. The university wanted to start a business incubation centre for its students, and was looking for ways to make it a successful undertaking by first making sure that the faculty was ready.

Ecosystem before the species: Donor-funded micro and small business development programs have been training Nepali chicken farmers, beauty-parlour owners and the like at least since the late 1970s. Few of these showed success beyond the end of the public funding cycle.

One reason was that the past generations of small-business development work did not focus on building up and strengthening the ecosystem for entrepreneurs to first survive and then thrive. They used public funds to train individuals--often in batches and for days on end. But they did not see their role in improving the business environment under which the entrepreneurs struggled and laboured for little gains.

These days, universities, municipalities and other public-serving institutions need to add the task of building entrepreneurial ecosystem to their to-do list. They can provide space with low or no rent for initial years, basic infrastructure such as the internet, electricity and water, subsidies for advising and mentoring services, seed funds to help the entrepreneurs start accessing other services that they need, and a network of local investors.

Public institutions now know that paying for training services

alone is not enough. They need to attract, work with and retain entrepreneurs akin to the federal government's effort to attract and work with foreign investors. And much like in nature, where the right combination of water, oxygen and temperature helps species to grow and evolve to complexity, entrepreneurs flock to areas where the public institutions have first put in the basic elements of the entrepreneurial ecosystem in place.

With its inviting weather and amenities, and its tourism-honed customer-service orientation, Pokhara should stand ready to strengthen its own ecosystem for domestic and foreign entrepreneurs.

Can-do mindset over business jargon: Universities and public institutions are averse to taking risks. They aim to minimise failures.

But entrepreneurship is all about learning from mistakes and failures so that success can eventually be maximised.

If public institutions see entrepreneurship training as an exercise in creating 'safe to experiment' and 'safe to fail many times and get back up' spaces for students and innovators around their campus and the city, that resultant mindset alone would pay for several years' worth of pricey MBA fees.

Because of high upfront costs of starting a business, most Nepali entrepreneurs dare not fail. As such, they start small, take no risk, and remain small for years--hardly growing beyond the cottage-industry category.

If a progressive city like Pokhara defrays the upfront cost of starting and running a business, say, for the first two years, a number of firms could potentially grow to scale, providing hundreds of jobs and other spillover benefits that would more than make up for the initial loss of the rental and income tax receipts.

Without the ever-present worry to pay the government from the first month of starting their business, entrepreneurs would learn to calibrate risks and initial energy to maximise success, and not just play safe and remain small by design.


Investments over grants: Both grants and investments are important for the growth of an entrepreneurial culture. But Nepali public institutions tend to give grants to individuals (especially in agriculture), but tell them to seek high-interest loans for basic infrastructure upgrades, when it should be the other way around.

Pokhara's public institutions can pay for the basic infrastructure (cold storage facilities, work-machines, etc), while encouraging entrepreneurs to seek equity investments by convincing those

with money.

More than public institutions, private investors have a better sense when it comes to deciding who to fund and who to let go. If public institutions pay for basic infrastructure while enabling private investors to bet on entrepreneurial teams, then this blend of public and private money minimises entrepreneurs' start-up risks while their potential for success gets recognised. This is where Kathmandu has failed, and the opportunity is for Pokhara to take.

In 2015, Korea's Ministry of Science and Technology paid for the Nepal Innovation Technology & Entrepreneurship Centre that got its start at Pokhara University, which will soon be handed over to the PU faculty. My conversation with the faculty two years ago was about how to run the Centre for its students.

The level of ambition could be much higher: how to start and run a few such Centres across Pokhara to help innovators--students and others--launch and scale up their own businesses that take advantage of Pokhara's hitherto untapped potential as a destination for entrepreneurs. 

Ashutosh Tiwari, founder at SAFAL Partners, writes this monthly column CrossCurrent in Nepali Times focussing on entrepreneurship, management, public policies and development as if Nepalis mattered.





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Rowing for Nepali children

They took 37 days to row across the Atlantic to raise money for schools in landlocked Nepal

Four members of a boat that took part in the world's most challenging competition to raise money for schools in Nepal have come third in a grueling trans-Atlantic rowing race. Calum Barclay, Ashley Jones, Nick Kempster and Jack Carter took part in the Talisker Whisky Atlantic Challenge to row 5,000 km from the Canary Islands to the West Indies in 37 days (pictured, right in Antigua).

"Being a Gurkha officer in the British Army, I had knowledge and love for Nepal, and we have so far raised enough money to build two schools in Nepal and hopefully we will raise more," says Ashley Jones. The two schools are in Taplejung in eastern Nepal.

The crew has a target of raising \$300,000 for The Human Practice Foundation (HPF) to help build schools to educate 1,300 children every year. HPF, set up in 2014 has built 59 schools in Nepal and Kenya, helping educate 27,000 children. It also supports a Coffee Impact Program in Nepal.

The team rowed for two hours at a time and had two hours off, doing this for 24 hours a day for the 37 days it took to make the crossing. They ate freeze dried high calories foods, and consumed 5 litres of water each per day from a water maker device on board. They navigated using an electronic chart plotter and had information on weather so they could avoid



The crew did some fishing more for distraction than for food, catching mahi-mahi and tuna. They saw minke whales, dolphin, turtles, and swordfish. Of the 20 boats that left the Canary Islands, four were attacked by marlin, and their hulls speared.

Members of the crew have served in war zones, rowed the North Pacific, climbed mountains and ran marathons. Some members of the group now want to row across the Indian Ocean, but the others will go back to their day jobs in the UK. "We will have to wait and see how the recovery goes, but I imagine it will take some time to forget the hardship, but who knows," Jones says.

More people have climbed Mt Everest than rowed the ocean, and the team members spent two years planning for the race with over 100 hours of training. They battled 10m waves, and used buckets for toilets, losing 12kg of body weight during the crossing. 🇬🇧

bad weather and take advantage of winds.

"We never slept for more than 1.5 hours at any one stretch, and once a day could link to the internet for 5 minutes," Jones said.

The team left the UK at the height of Covid-19 and reached La Gomera in the Canaries. But for the worst part of the pandemic the team was out at sea. The team

took a more northerly route because of the weather, but it lost its lead. Then northerly winds battered the boat with waves over the beam.

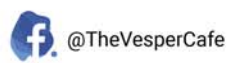
"During the last third of the trip, it was really quite hot and no escape. The cabins were hot to touch and the inside was like an oven," Jones recalls.

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Nepalis still dying of cold



Annual cold waves have far-reaching consequences on health, agriculture and economy of the plains

Just as it has every winter, the cold wave in Nepal's Tarai has had a devastating impact on the livelihood of its people, but local governments have provided little to no support to the neediest. As a result, even in this day and age, Nepalis still die from the cold.

There are indications that the ground fog that covers the Indo-Gangetic plains that includes the Tarai, is getting thicker and lasts longer because of a combination of moisture in the air due to the spread of irrigation and pollution. Water droplets stick to soot particles, and even the sun cannot burn the smog off during the day.

"Only those who can afford it wear warm clothes here. Our children run around in hand me downs, and sometimes without warm clothes, even in winter," says Lalmati

Devi of Birganj. "We have had no income because of the lockdown, so we couldn't buy clothes."

In Nepalganj 500km away to the west, passengers at the airport wait for days on end for flights, which are cancelled or delayed due to poor visibility. It is the same story in Dhangadi, Simra, Biratnagar and Bhadrapur.

"We have visibility of only 10-20 metres right now, it is too low to operate flights. This has been the case here for the past few days," says Prem Nath Thakur, head of the Nepalganj Airport.

Even a decade ago, the winter fog used to clear by afternoon. But in recent years it stays for days on end, sometimes for a week or more. People are trying to cope, but cannot seem to stay warm.

"When humidity is over 95% and visibility is below 1km, water droplets are suspended in the atmosphere or near the earth's surface, like a thick cloud that touches the ground," explains Archana Shrestha of the Department of Hydrology and Meteorology. "It is only at ground level, but it is persistent and doesn't allow the sun to warm the ground, leading to a cold wave."

The cold kills people. Either because of hypothermia, or indirectly through smoke inhalation inside the home as people try to keep warm.

The problem lies in the lack of awareness about indoor air pollution, ventilation, insulation and as well as inappropriate architecture. Winter fog is getting thicker and lasts longer every passing year because of open agricultural burning, industrial emissions, transboundary pollution,

wildfires and smog.

The cold wave on 21 January reduced the maximum temperature in Nepalganj to 14°C whereas it was 19.3°C in Jumla, which is at an altitude of 2,500m in the mountains.

The first recorded cold wave in the Tarai occurred in 1998. At that time, the difference between the minimum and maximum temperature was a mere 1.3°C, meaning the temperature was constant throughout the day. The longest cold wave recorded was in 2002/03, when it continued from 26 December to 27 January without any sunshine. Prior to this, a cold wave in the plains lasted from 15 December 1997 to 15 January 1998.

This year, the cold wave has hit the Tarai in short spells but they were no less menacing, particularly in central Nepal where they were longer and denser. In Mahottari, the fog was so thick people could hardly see a metre away. Families huddle inside their homes, and do not venture out unless there is an emergency. But like all other disasters, the poor are disproportionately affected by the cold wave.

"People with means have homes, warm clothes and heaters, they can even employ others if they are unable to work because of the cold," says Tula Narayan Shah of Nepal Madhes Foundation. "But even among the poor, women and Dalit in the Tarai are hit the hardest."

The Musahar community in this Province 2 district have homes built with public housing programs but with no roofs. Families do not have warm clothing or electricity. "It has been two years since we paid for the roof but we are still waiting,

government does not listen to us," says a local resident, Biraj Majhi.

Oftentimes, people burn straw in order to warm themselves from the cold. There are fatalities every year from fires. Nine people have died in house fires this winter alone. But these aren't listed as deaths caused by the cold wave. Open burning to keep warm also degrades air quality further.

Bheri hospital in Nepalganj is often crowded with hypertension patients and those having difficulty breathing in the winter season.

"Generally, blood pressure increases during winter, even of those who have it under control, other chronic illnesses are also more pronounced and people need a higher doses of their medications," explains cardiologist Krishna Prasad Adhikari. "There is also an increased risk of heart attacks as morning chill leads to spasms and narrowing of blood vessels. Covid has added to the risk."

The cold wave also affects agriculture. Crops wilt without the sun, and insects infest the vegetable patches.


Moreover, due to increased deforestation in the Chure, wild animals have moved down the plains, destroying crops as they search for food. But farmers are unable to stand guard during a cold wave and are forced to send their produce to the market before they have fully ripened.

Even by moderate estimates, cold spells affect at least 125,000 households in the Tarai every year and these numbers are increasing. The Cold Wave Contingency Action Plan has estimated that 50,000

people from 5,000 households in Saptari (where 19 people died of cold three years ago) would be affected this year. Another 30,000 and 6,500 households in Dang and Bardia.

Cold waves are listed as a disaster in Nepal now, and the District Disaster Management Committee has a plan to reduce its impact. Says Krishna Bahadur Katuwal, former Chief District Officer of Mahottari: "No citizen should suffer from the cold wave or die from it. We are ready to respond and we have made arrangements through municipalities to distribute warm clothes, blankets and bedding."

But in most places, such support is yet to reach the neediest of the bunch. "The CDO came for inspection a month ago, the help hasn't reached us yet," says Rampriti Sada of Kaira in Mahottari.

Adds Lalmati Devi of Birganj: "We haven't received anything from the municipality, this is a Dalit neighbourhood. Our children just burn the cow dung to keep warm." 



Trailer of the 6th episode of Saglo Samaj, a tv magazine program produced by Himalmedia which is broadcast every Monday, at 8:30 pm on Dish Home Channel 130. Previous episodes are available for viewing on YouTube.



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How weather elevates air pollution in Kathmandu

Analysing the impact of weather can help forecast high pollution episodes so citizens can take action

● **Jagdishwor Karmacharya**
and **Shanti Kandel**

Kathmandu Valley witnessed hazardous levels of air pollution on 4-5 January 2021, with the Air Quality Index (AQI) highest among cities in the world that week. The pollution level had been stable or slightly below the daily average in the preceding days.

Air pollution over an area is determined by emissions and their transport. Sources of pollution can be both local and remote, whereas it can be carried into and out of the area depending on its geographical setting and atmospheric condition.

Understanding the role of geography and seasonal climatic variations in altering air pollution levels in Nepal is generally well understood. The role of weather events in air pollution fluctuation is of key importance in predicting pollution levels across the country. Predicting weather therefore is closely related to predicting air pollution.

Advance pollution forecasting has practical as well as policy implications. If pollution levels can be predicted, people can plan their activities accordingly. It also allows the government ample time to introduce temporary restrictions to reduce the severity of pollution during adverse weather conditions.

The alarming levels of pollution in Kathmandu Valley in winter has been receiving much publicity, and has been a matter of serious concern. The high pollution episode on 4-5 January got widespread publicity in the media, raising public awareness about the issue.

Residents of Kathmandu already taking precautions against the Covid-19 pandemic were made conscious of the additional hazards of poor air quality on their health.

As the PM2.5 AQI (the concentration of fine particles less than 2.5 microns in diameter) exceeded 600 at its peak in some areas of the Valley, the Department of Environment (DoE) issued a statement on 5 January, urging people to remain indoors as far as possible and refrain from making open fires. The high level of pollution would prevail for some time, depending on how weather impacted its diffusion.

Research has shown that the lifespan of some Nepalis has been reduced by up to five years because of the air we breathe. Advance knowledge of the situation would have been more useful for the public.

Every time there is a discourse on Kathmandu's pollution situation, experts flag their opinions citing the topography of the valley and winter inversion as the major factors that trap polluted air.

In the case of the early January pollution, however, the air pollution decreased to pre-episode level from 6 January onwards, which promoted an analysis of the impact that cloud cover from a westerly front had on AQI.

The daily and hourly time series of air pollution level and concentration of gases was recorded by air quality monitoring stations for the analysis. A newly established Department of Hydrology and Meteorology (DHM) monitoring station at Nagarkot as well as others in the

valley were used for measurements. The vertical atmospheric profile measured by DHM's radiosonde station at Kirtipur, satellite imagery and surface weather charts related to the first week of January were reference points.

A comparison of the time series of high-frequency PM2.5 counts shows that hazardous air quality levels were recorded within the Kathmandu Valley in Bhaisepati, Bhaktapur and Ratna Park areas.

Air quality deteriorated to dangerous levels from the afternoon of 4 January till the morning of 6 January, whereas such counts were comparable to those recorded before and after the hazardous air level episode in Nepalganj, Dang, Pokhara, Hetauda.

A comparison of AQI PM2.5 daily average time series shows that their values on 4 and 5 January is comparable with the values on preceding days at the same stations outside the valley, whereas it dropped by 30% or more on 6-7 January for Nepalganj, Dang, and Pokhara stations.

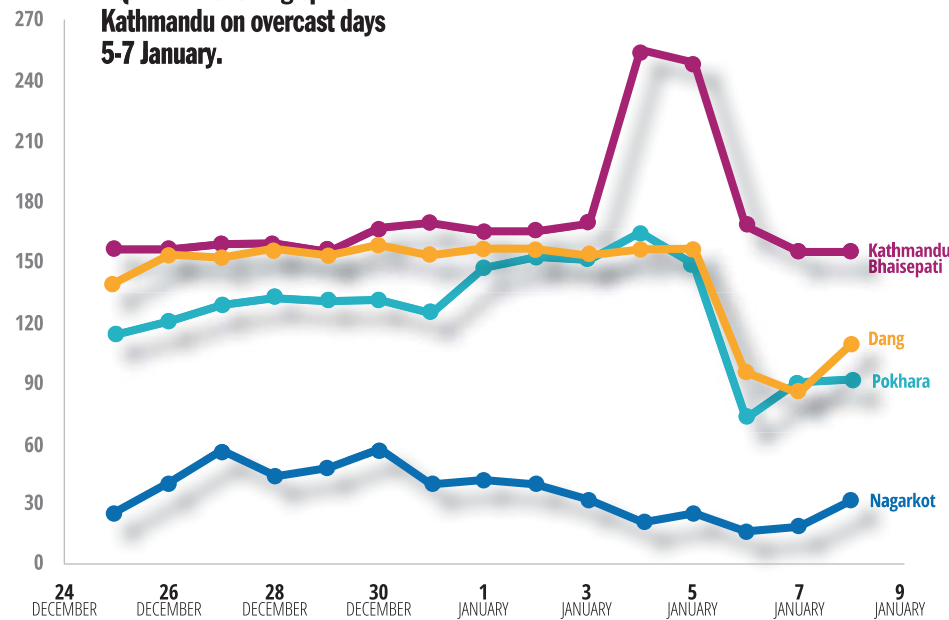
However, the stations at Ratna Park and Bhaisepati recorded a 50% rise in pollution levels on 4 and 5 January. The Bhaktapur station recorded only a 15% rise.

In contrast, the Nagarkot station recorded better air quality by about 40% from 4-7 January. Similarly, the concentration of ozone, nitrous oxides, carbon monoxide and black carbon-8 (soot particles) also came down by about 10% or more in Nagarkot during the period, which is consistent with the reduction of AQI PM2.5 there.

It is worth noting that Nagarkot and surrounding regions on the eastern rim of the Valley are considered as the primary outflow region for wind-blown pollutants from inside the valley trough since upper-level wind is predominantly westerly across Nepal in winter. In fact, this was why the government selected Nagarkot as the site for establishing an air quality monitoring station.

The differences in the daily average for the

AQI PM2.5 showing spike in Kathmandu on overcast days 5-7 January.



AQI PM2.5 count for the stations in the Valley and that at Nagarkot are of particular interest. The measurements for 4-6 January could mean that the stations could be valuable in enhancing our understanding of the variation of ambient air quality in the valley over time, and the transport of pollutants.

Data from the radiosonde station at the premises of Tribhuvan University Kirtipur is being released regularly at 5:45AM since March 2019. Attached to a hydrogen balloon, the radiosonde measures temperature, relative humidity, wind speed and direction at different elevations.

Globally, there are hundreds of such stations that make measurements once or twice a day, providing valuable insight into the global weather pattern at different altitudes.

Comparing the Kirtipur data on 1-5 January there is a clear indication that ground-level inversion was present on both days. This happens when a layer of warm surface air is trapped by cooler air above it, trapping pollutants. Ground-level inversion occurs almost every day during winter in the Valley, and has the effect of concentrating overnight pollution.

The stronger the inversion, and deeper and stronger the stable layer, which makes it harder for a parcel of air to rise as it will be relatively colder, hence denser, than its surrounding. Consequently, it is squeezed downwards.

Hence, pollutants suspended in the bottom layer of the atmosphere are confined within the inversion layer. The shallower the depth of inversion, the higher the concentration of air pollutants, even with the same amount of emission load, from being confined in a smaller volume near the ground.

On most days during the winter, ground-level inversion is gradually established in the Kathmandu Valley from the evening and intensifies in the night, but it weakens as it is burned away by the sun during the morning, disintegrating by noon. Once the inversion

decays, the bottom layer of air mixes with the higher levels of the atmosphere, leading to lowering of air pollution level at the surface.

In addition, as the wind picks up towards the afternoon, much of the pollution is blown to the east, leading to a reduction of the concentration of pollutants in the Valley.

From the afternoon of 3 January till the morning of 6 January, Nepal was under the influence of a westerly disturbance, and the most parts of the country were covered by high clouds (Figure 3) with light scattered precipitation in the western parts.

The overcast condition, however, prevented the sun from dissipating the inversion and prevented the mixing of the lower atmospheric levels with upper layers over most parts, including Kathmandu Valley.

It can be inferred that the surface inversion did not fully disintegrate on those days, though it would have been weakened and lifted slightly higher in the afternoon. This is also supported by the relatively calm winds recorded in the afternoons of 4 and 5 January, at Kirtipur and Khumaltar stations (Figure 5).

Daily average AQI PM2.5 values in stations outside Kathmandu valley remained more or less stable from last week of December to 5 January, which goes to show that the higher concentration of PM2.5 in the Kathmandu Valley on 4-5 January was mostly contributed by the local sources. Moreover, the relatively lower levels recorded at Nagarkot station on the same days is likely due to confinement of pollutants.

With the passage of western disturbance, the sky over Kathmandu Valley became clear from the early morning of 6 January. As a result, mixing of the bottom layer of air with the higher levels became possible, thus leading to subsequent dissipation of pollutants from the valley floor much sooner than anticipated.

Short term changes in the weather conditions can lead to a significant variation in the level of air pollution in the Kathmandu Valley, especially during the winter season. It is interesting to note that adverse weather conditions alone can significantly enhance the pollution level even when the socio-economic activities remained subdued after the onset of Covid-19 pandemic in the last spring.

More collaboration among the government agencies engaged in air pollution and weather monitoring and forecasting, and researchers is required. Moreover, there is a need to strengthen the capacity of various agencies so that citizens can be informed about prevailing pollution levels and forewarned about impending episodes of a hazardous pollution level.

Partnering to share information about prevalent pollution levels will provide valuable returns on recent investments made by the government in establishing and maintaining online air quality monitoring and meteorological stations. 📌

Jagdishwor Karmacharya and Shanti Kandel are with the Department of Hydrology and Meteorology. Sunny Maharjan, Kamal Datta Acharya and Bikash Nepal helped analyse the results. A more technical version of this article can be found at 'Climatic Articles, Reports and Papers' section in the DHM website.



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Land of milk and money

Ganesh Bahadur Shrestha was a civil servant in his native Pokhara, and his mother made pustakari at home and the children packaged it for sale in the market.

The milk sweets sold like, well, hot pustakari, and Shrestha invested NRs70 in new equipment to increase production. His mother could not keep up with demand. Soon, he left the government job and started a confectionary business making candy, toffee and chocolates.

But the business could not grow as fast as it could have because of the lack of raw materials: mainly milk and sugar. When the government decided to privatise the Dairy Development Corporation (DDC) in Pokhara, the family acquired it and launched a dairy processing business.

says Niranjana Shrestha, Ganesh Bahadur Shrestha's son who looks after the family's dairy business in Pokhara. "We worked with Laxmi Bank to provide microcredit to farmers, but the dairy industry is a long gestation business and it takes time for full-scale production, so we initially faced a milk shortage at our plants."

The livestock needed to be procured, they needed artificial insemination, the feed supply chain had to be established, and a cold chain needed for delivery. All this took more than three years.

Niranjana Shrestha says a dairy business and brewery are similar with pasteurisation and equipment made by the same companies. But a litre of beer sells for NRs1,000 while fresh milk sells for



Today, Sujal Dairy is one of the most remarkable success stories of privatisation and business growth in Nepal. It is the tale, not just of self-made entrepreneurship, but how just one business idea can have such a dramatic socio-economic impact on a region, or even a country.

Twenty years ago, Pokhara used to be known for its milk production. But even though household dairies produced a lot of milk, and there was no market for the surplus. The DDC had 'milk holidays' and there was no incentive for farmers to increase productivity.

Once Sujal Dairy came into the picture with demand for new value-added products and a powder milk plant, milk production shot up. The veterinary industry thrived, farmers took loans to invest in buffaloes and cows. But it did not happen all at once.

"We had to start from ground zero,"

NRs60, and a dairy requires more expensive equipment, which takes much longer for a dairy plant to break even.

But the Shrestha family's patience paid off. Not only is the company thriving, but its Safal brand has reduced Nepal's total import of milk powder from NRs8 billion a year to NRs2 billion. The import bill for other confectionary, chocolates and ice cream have also come down. Farmers who would have otherwise migrated to the Gulf or Malaysia have stayed in Nepal as Sujal buys milk from households in a 100km radius around Pokhara.

The firm is already processing 4 million litres of milk a day, and adding more processing plants in other parts of Nepal for production of Safal milk, Loverbird ice cream and kulfi. Its Safal brand ghee is exported to Japan and other countries. 🇳🇵



Organic Annapurna

Gandaki Urja, which built Nepal's biggest biogas plant in Pokhara has launched Annapurna Organic Fertiliser to boost farm productivity and reduce the country's chronic dependency on imported chemicals.

Annapurna Organic Fertiliser comes with a manual on how much to apply for crops, vegetables and fruits. It keeps the soil chemical-free and increases its productivity, as well as help reduce infection and pest infestation resulting in higher yield for the farmers. Each sack contains 15 different nutrients including phosphorus, nitrogen, potash, iron, boron, copper and zinc. GandakiUrja can produce 1,000 tons of fertiliser a year.

Based in Pokhara, Gandaki Urja was set up in 2020 by Kushal Gurung and is being supported by the group Business Oxygen (BO2), which helps entrepreneurs running Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to scale up by injecting equity and providing technical assistance.

The company has enlarged household digesters into an industrial-scale plant that uses climate-friendly technology to turn livestock and farm waste into flammable methane gas, which can replace imported LPG. The effluent is dried to

make organic fertiliser.

The technology can be scaled up to significantly reduce Nepal's growing trade deficit with India and slash its import bill. Annual LPG import from India is currently worth Rs33 billion, which has grown four-fold in the last decade, making up 2.5% of Nepal's total import bill. Similarly, the country imports 500,000 tons of chemical fertiliser a year, while the demand is 800,000 tons.

Nepal's corruption and fertiliser crisis go hand in hand. Only five months ago farmers faced a major shortage, which is projected to lead to a decrease in rice production despite a healthy monsoon last year. However, reliance on hybrid seeds and subsidies will increase farmers' dependence on chemical fertiliser.

Government and aid agencies working on agriculture can help businesses investing in alternatives like organic fertilisers and industrial biogas to scale up with incentives as has been done with hydro, solar and wind power.

The good news is that Nepal is already a world leader in locally-designed household biogas digesters. Across the country, there is over 300,000 biogas, which has significantly improved the health of people while reducing deforestation. 🇳🇵



Revival of trout farms

One of the many downstream industries that tourism in Pokhara benefited were the vegetable, poultry, mushroom and trout farmers. During peak tourist seasons in spring and autumn, supply could not keep up with demand and food items had to be imported from Butwal and Kathmandu.

One of the investments that has taken a direct hit from the collapse of tourism has been trout farming. However, with the arrival of Nepali tourists, albeit in lower numbers, as well as the increased demand from customers in Pokhara itself for trout, business is picking up.

One of the pioneer farms is Gandaki Rainbow Trout Fish Farm established 12 years ago in Sardi Khola north of Pokhara. It has been supplying trout to restaurants and hotels in Pokhara, and business was booming until the pandemic struck.

Restaurants and supermarket sales have decreased, and so has the price of fish. Gandaki has had to make door-to-door sales in order to keep the business going.

"Now that visitor numbers are increasing gradually, the demand for our trout has grown again," says Lachhin Gurung of Gandaki Trout.

Banking on Pokhara

After the Rastra Bank allowed an open policy to encourage financial institutions, Pokhara has also emerged as a banking centre. The early days brought Machapuchre Bank, six finance companies to Pokhara, after which six more development banks also came up. Sudeep Acharya has been closely involved in the board of Kaski Finance Ltd as well as the Chair of Kamana Bikash Bank. "Some of the banks moved their headquarters to Kathmandu, but they showed that Pokhrelis have a strong trading tradition and a keen business sense with which they have contributed to Nepal's prosperity," says Acharya. The following are financial institutions based in Pokhara: Pokhara Finance Ltd, Om Finance Ltd. (Later merged with NMB Bank), Annapurna Finance (Later merged with Prime Commercial Bank), Machapuchre Bank, Citi Finance (Merged with NIBL), Shangrila Development Bank, Garima Development Bank, Fewa Finance (Merged with Mega Bank), Kaski Finance (Merged with Kamana Sewa Bikash Bank), Biswo Bikash Bank (Merged with NMB), Kamana Bikash Bank (Merged to Kaman Sewa Bikash Bank), Api Finance (Merged to form Apex Development Bank which merged with NCC Bank) and Gandaki Bikash Bank (merged with Mega Bank).



Noodle central

When the history of how instant noodles started in Nepal is written, Pokhara will have a prominent mention. It was exactly 36 years ago on 5 February 1985 that Himshree Foods of Pokhara started production of its now famous Rara instant noodles. Rarely had Nepal seen the promotion of a new brand as aggressively in the mass media at the time as Rara. The catchy ditty in the radio commercial still echoes in the minds of those who were teenagers then.

Himshree then launched a differently-flavoured Aha noodles. Since then new noodle brands have grown literally like mushroom, however Rara and Aha have maintained a loyal following because of their distinctive taste.

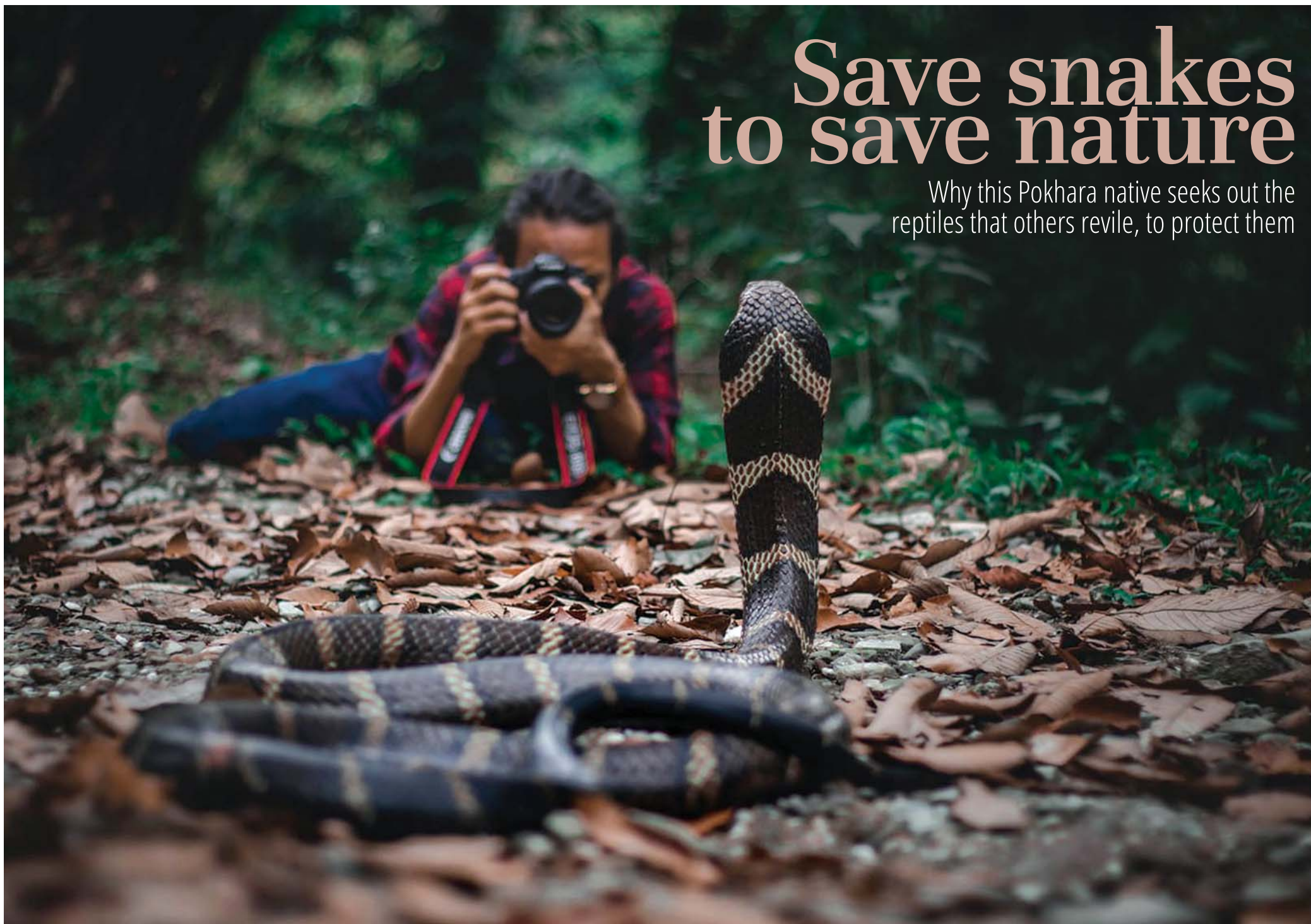
Today, Rara is exported directly from Pokhara to the United States, Canada, and the EU – mainly to those in the Nepali diaspora who miss its taste.

"There was a shortage of raw materials during the lockdown, and we cut production by 25% but we are now back to ten tons daily," says Amit Thapa, General Manager of Himshree, who sponsors the Aha Rara Sports events in Pokhara.



Save snakes to save nature

Why this Pokhara native seeks out the reptiles that others revile, to protect them



Giri uses photographs to capture the audience's attention and share his knowledge of snakes (*above*).

Rohit detangles a common rat snake entangled in ghost net (*far, left*).

Giri lures a king cobra away from spectators during a rescue mission in Pokhara. (*left*).

● Tulsi Rauniyar in Pokhara

Unlike those who recoil from the sight of venomous snakes, Rohit Giri thinks these increasingly endangered cold-blooded reptiles need to be protected.

At an age when his friends would either run away from snakes or try to kill them with sticks, Giri was fascinated by these creatures that used to slither around in the fields near his home in Pokhara.

He thinks his obsession with snakes started with watching National Geographic documentaries endlessly on cable tv. Once a snake was spotted in a neighbour's garden and there was panic in the locality, but the 14-year-old calmly hooked the snake with the end of a stick took hold of the squirming reptile and released it into nearby bushes.

It was a green pit viper, and the young boy's courage became the talk of the neighbourhood. For Giri, it was the beginning of

a strong bond with the animals that have religious and cultural importance in Nepal. Since then he has been summoned to rescue more than 700 snakes.

"At that moment, I was thrilled to be holding this amazing creature," recalls Giri, who is now 22, and like the shy creatures he handles, hides behind his hoodie almost like he is trying to stay undercover. "The best part was, he was not afraid of me either. He was just curious."

Residents of Kaski and surrounding districts call him up several times a day when there is a snake in the vicinity that needs to be removed and rescued. Sub-tropical Pokhara Valley with its many hollows and boulders is an ideal habitat for snakes. Rohit is among a handful of snake rescuers in the country, and always has a snake hook and bag ready.

In March to July, when snakes are more out and about than usual,

he usually rescues five to ten snakes a day. Giri comes across as a quiet, withdrawn man, but he is fearless when it comes to snakes, even if they are the deadly vipers, or king cobra.

Just watching a video of how he hooks a writhing snake and shoves it into his bag is chilling enough.

But to think that Giri is risking his life every time he catches a snake to save it shows his extreme motivation to the task.

"It's not that I am fearless. I take calculated risks. Knowledge is the key. If you know the type of species you are rescuing, you can decide accordingly. Different snakes behave differently," explains Giri.

The first instinct with most people is to kill a snake, but Giri says that is because the creatures are misunderstood by many. Indeed, snakes get a bad press and snake-like attributes are used to describe humans who are cruel, untrustworthy, or slimy.



"Snakes are labelled as dark and uncharismatic, which has caused confusion about these beautiful creatures. I want to be able to change that," Giri says.

On his many rescue missions, he makes it a point to explain the value of snakes in maintaining the ecological balance of nature.

"Snakes play an important role in the food chains in ecosystems.

Areas where snakes are removed often have a population explosion of rodents, and it affects agriculture," says Giri, who has YouTube videos in which he counsels people about saving snakes. "When people are made aware of the relation of the reptiles to the ecosystem, they prefer to having them removed rather than killing them."

An undergraduate student of biology at Prithvi Narayan Campus, Rohit Giri uses Instagram, YouTube and Facebook to raise awareness and document his rescue missions. His photographs, videos

and research papers on snake conservation have encouraged others to walk the same wild terrain.

But he has a note of caution: "I don't want to influence people to do something that they are not equipped to do. There have been instances when people have lost lives while trying to imitate snake handling for the sake of showmanship. That is very risky."

Giri is a loner, and enjoys being in nature by himself. He says he is not after fame, and had to be cajoled into agreeing to do this profile. His drive for conservation is purely led by his compassion for the species.

"Snakes are so striking because they are so seemingly unperturbed about everything around them," he says. "It is just a creature being itself, a pure soul. It doesn't know that it is so earnestly hated and loved. Which is why I love them." 🐍



2020 was a write-off for Nepal's tourism, and for Pokhara, the country's prime destination, it was catastrophic. But guess who have come to rescue the city from complete ruin: Nepali travellers.

Pokhara's hotels, bars, paragliding and ultralight clubs for which international tourists was the main source of income have, at least partially, recovered because of domestic visitors.

To be sure, Lakeside wears a forlorn look—especially since Phewa has been drained for dam repairs. The trekking trails of Annapurna Base Camp, Mardi, Sikles, or Ghorepani for which Pokhara served as a base camp, are also largely deserted.

One year on after the pandemic scare sent visitors home in a hurry, Pokhara has never really recovered. More than 25% of hotels, restaurants and shops that depended on tourism have permanently closed, others are for sale.

"Pokhara has more than 700 hotels with 30,000 beds, but the pandemic has affected all of them, including restaurants, paragliding and ultralight companies, zipline," says Gopi Bhattarai of Pokhara Tourism Council. "They all need a stimulus, tax breaks or debt rescue from the government."

But Pokhara has survived. The city's hospitality industry now sees light at the end of the tunnel with the new vaccines, a drop in Covid-19 cases in Nepal, the completion of Pokhara's new international airport. But most of all, it is the arrival of fellow-Nepalis that offers respite.

Many urban Nepalis fed up of being locked

down for months yearned to escape. For those planning to get away from Kathmandu's pollution, or the damp cold of fog-bound Tarai cities, Pokhara became the ideal escape.

"We have at least 50-60 Nepali passengers on package tours to Pokhara from Kathmandu every day through our Buddha Holidays subsidiary," says Buddha Air Managing Director Birendra Bahadur Basnet (see interview, page 4).

Basnet has big plans to make Pokhara's new airport the hub for his expansion into western Nepal in 2023 with new aircrafts that can operate in remote airfields with short runways. He also sees huge potential for Indian tourists after the border is re-opened, for which he plans Nepalganj-Pokhara flights.

After the lockdown, the tourism industry here realised that internal visitors could sustain the sector until international tourists returned. It launched the Jaun Hai Pokhara campaign in eastern Nepal in December, and in the Western Tarai in April. Pokhara's businesses also lobbied hard with the government to declare a 5-day work week in an effort to tap weekend visitors.

"If the government introduces two-day weekends, that would support internal tourism, while providing Nepalis with a much-needed stress relief caused by the pandemic," says Bhattarai at the Pokhara Tourism Council. "But now is the time to also diversify our destinations, we cannot depend on the same landmarks like the lake,

waterfall and cave."

Says Hotel Association's Tulachan: "We need to work on drawing domestic tourists not just towards temples, monuments, and landmarks, but also towards the events that happen in Pokhara."

Pokhara is now connected directly by air to Kathmandu, Bharatpur and Bhairawa. If flights were added to Nepalganj and Biratnagar, there may be more internal tourists, says Buddha Air Pokhara Station Manager Gautam Baral.

Airlines, hotels and travel agencies are waiting for the much-delayed Pokhara International Airport (pictured) opening early next year so that more domestic flights can be accommodated, and international tourists can bypass Kathmandu.

Says Binesh Munankarmi, manager of the airport project: "Domestic tourists will now be able to come to Pokhara for weekends, which has not been feasible due to the restricted flights. And Pokhara will be connected directly to the outside world."

Kashi Raj Bhandari, head of Gandaki Province for Nepal Tourism Board thinks that post-pandemic the airport can start flying in tourists from neighbouring countries. He says, "Since Covid-19 is under control, we must open our borders to visitors from China and India. Later, we can also think of European, North American and East Asia visitors. There is a lot of pent-up demand for wilderness adventures in Nepal."

However, even though the coronavirus numbers are not as

frightening as before, some business owners here are not so optimistic about the return of international tourists. Of the two 5-star hotels in Pokhara, only one is functioning, four 4-star hotels are open but they all have only 10% occupancy even with domestic tourists.

"Foreign tourism is zero, and it does not look like they will return until the conditions improve," says Bikal Tulachan of the Paschimanchal Hotel Association. "Even if the Covid-19 numbers are down, political instability is hurting travel and shutdowns have started again."

Some, however, have taken the opportunity of the lockdown to expand, maintain and upgrade their hotels in the hope that travel will pick up and even exceed pre-Covid levels. Raniban resort is spending NRs60 million to add 14 more rooms.

"Local tourists have started coming, but until international guests return we will not be able to sustain the business and keep paying staff salaries," says Raniban's Aksab Shrestha. "Despite all this the future of tourism in Pokhara is bright. That is why we are investing on expansion."

At the Shangri-La Village resort in the city occupancy over new year was 90% thanks to Nepali guests. "We would not have had so many Nepalis staying before the pandemic," says manager Gupta Giri.

Along Lakeside, there used to be more than 200 restaurants and bars. Many had been shuttered, but with the return of Nepali tourists, a few have reopened. "We see a glimmer of hope as visitors have started to return to



Thrills and spills



One of the most dramatic growths in Pokhara has been in paragliding off Sarangkot and surrounding hills. There are now 60 paragliding companies which employ 350 licensed pilots. After the lockdown was lifted in September, paragliding took off as companies offered 50% discounts for Nepalis.

"There are now young Nepali tourists from Kathmandu, Chitwan, Butwal and other cities making up to 300 flights a day," says Krishna Bhandari of the Nepal Airports Association.

Even as the streets are emptier than usual, the skies are dotted with the colourful paragliders. Up at the jump-off point in Sarangkot, the excitement is palpable among

Nepali tourists lining up to buy tickets. As he checks on his equipment in preparation of a flight, pilot Aayush Shah notes that he has seen more Nepalis lining up to paraglide lately than before the pandemic.

Nepalis have been attracted by discounts for flights. Says Krishna Bhandari, "Usually, Nepalis make up 30% of the total paragliders annually, this year it is 100%."

Paragliding companies did a total of 800 flights a day on average during the Dasain holidays after the lockdown, now it averages 300 a day.

The three ultralight companies which operate sight-seeing flights to the Annapurna from Pokhara airport have also seen an increase in interest from Nepali guests.

Pokhara also has zip-line and bungee jumping, but these have not seen a tourism rebound as the other adventure sports.

HighGround Adventures gets only four to five passengers for its 1,865 meter feet zip-line but is still keeping itself operational. HighGround's Hari Chapai says, "It is shortsighted to close down a business because of the current situation. We have to send the message that we are up and running."

Because of social media posts, the numbers of Nepalis taking the plunge to bungee jump is picking up. "We have introduced the tandem jump after the lockdown targeting domestic tourists," says HighGround's Dinesh Maharjan. "The response has been very encouraging."

Pokhara,” says Laxman Baral of the Restaurant and Bar Association of Nepal (REBAN, Pokhara).

Small clothing and handicraft shop owners at Lakeside note that although domestic tourists do not splurge as much as the foreigners, the purchases are crucial to keep them afloat. Taxi owners like Keshav Raj Baral now makes only five local sightseeing trips, but says there are Nepalis who book his car for the whole day.

Live music still floats out of numerous bars and restaurants during the evening, but the pandemic has affected Pokhara’s once-vibrant nightlife. “The business is alright during the weekends with Nepalis but there is not much traffic on weekdays,” says Yogesh Bhattarai of the popular Busy Bee bar.

Catwalk is also gearing up to open its doors. “We were closed for a year, but did not wait any longer,” says the night club’s Amrit Pahari.

Dorjee Lama’s Moondance Restaurant reopened after the lockdown and has been operating with less than 10 staff. He says that although the pandemic wrought havoc in the restaurant business, he has not given up hope. “We survived an insurgency and an economic blockade, so this crisis doesn’t faze us,” says Lama, expressing Pokhara’s indomitable spirit. “We see the hope of brighter days.”

Although Nepali visitors have rescued businesses for now, Gopi Bhattarai of Pokhara Tourism Council says: “Because of the investment that has been made by Pokhara’s tourism entrepreneurs, it is clear that we cannot survive just on the income from domestic tourists.” 🇳🇵

**Hit hard by the pandemic,
Pokhara’s economy revives with a
little help from Nepali tourists.**

CLEARED TO LAND

Hike hype

Nepal Tourism Board has used the pandemic period to come up with new trekking trails and destinations, including the Sikles-Tanting Trail, Kapuche Lake Trek and the Maurice Herzog Trail to North Annapurna Base Camp (see page 22-23).

The best promotion has been Nepalis posting photos and videos of their treks to Mardi Himal, Mulde Peak, or Kapuche Lake – turning these to new destinations besides the usual Poon Hill and Ghandruk.

Indeed, Shuvabi Pradhan from Kathmandu decided it would be well worth a visit to the Gurung village of Sikles after having watched travelogues and blog posts. When a video of an avalanche at Kapuche Lake went viral last month, there was a spurt in trekkers to Sikles.

“The trails around Pokhara has a place for everyone and every adventure,” says Pradhan. “It has always been the perfect getaway location for me, be it solo or with family and friends. Since foreign travel is restricted, Nepalis are discovering Nepal.”

Realising this, Nepal Tourism Board is forming a Domestic Tourism Revival Committee that will work towards strategising ways to encourage domestic tourism to destinations like Pokhara. “Domestic tourism needs to be more organised. NTB’s effort will create opportunities for organized trekking and mountaineering among domestic tourists.”

There is a silver lining in the absence of international trekkers, the fact that Nepalis are venturing forth where they did not go before.

“Revenue wise, the mountain tourism industry is at a zero right now. There’s no revival, only survival,” says Sushil Poudel, the Chairman of Trekking Agencies’ Association of Nepal. But he says it is encouraging to see adventurous Nepalis on the trails.

For domestic backpackers, the pandemic has proven to be an opportunity to discover their country. “With the lockdown, many were seen returning to their villages and ancestral homes. Many started exploring beyond the normal trekking routes and discovered new trekking trails while showcasing them to other Nepali backpackers on social media,” says Rishav, one of the five members of Ghumante, a band of young Nepali travellers based in Pokhara.



TULSI RAUNIYAR

On location in Pokhara

Shooting spree for Nepali cinema as city cashes in on its scenic beauty



provided for better infrastructure than other places. And for some of us, we want to film closer to familiar community," says Gurung. "Natural beauty enhances cinematic aesthetics. But besides the lakes and mountains, villages are close by. What more could a producer want?"

Pokhara, called the lake city by some, is also seen as being at the heart of inspiration.

"Pokhara is a complete package," says Khagendra Lamichhane, of *Pashupati Prasad* fame. Lamichhane's first film *Talakjung Tulke* was shot in Hemjakot, a village that is a little more than an hour's drive away from Pokhara.

"A filming crew consists of 50-70 persons, sometimes bigger. If you want to film in rural locations, it's hard to find proper accommodations. That's what makes Pokhara so attractive. Hotels are good, cheap and comfortable," says Lamichhane, who is currently in Palung, shooting for *The Secret of Radha*, which establishes a random village in central Nepal. He says Pokhara is also more than just logistics.

"I started my career as a theatrist from Pokhara. When I first arrived, I was blown away by the environment for creatives. It is the home of so many musicians, artists," says Lamichhane.

Pokhara has always had a vibrant literary scene, and over the years has become the venue for the Literature Festival, organised by Fineprint. Pokhara is also a popular location for music videos and *dohori* songs and film sequences, even when the story is set elsewhere. But there are some stories that are written with Pokhara in the mind.

"Purano Dunga is a very beautiful film that captures Pokhara in its essence, beyond using it as a location," says Lamichhane. The film tells the story of two brothers, who spar over an inherited boat. While the elder brother wants to continue working as a ferryman, the younger brother wants to sell it to start business—a representation of reality for some families in Pokhara.

"Growing up near Begnas lake, I saw the lives of the boatmen closely. We all do boat rides in Pokhara, but never hear the stories of those behind the oar," says Maotse Gurung, actor, filmmaker and script writer of *Purano Dunga*. "Movies don't carry real stories, only using the location for aesthetics might not be enough, as there are not enough local stories that represent the emotions of the residents, and the soul of the land."

Pokhara has also been a major destination for indigenous films, many being generic love stories. And filmmakers today want to explore.

"Our stories need local context, as well," says Lamichhane. "Portrayal of local culture and language would mean doing more than just showing off the landscape. Gandaki's population is diverse with Magar and Gurung communities and a significant Muslim population. Hopefully, our cinemas will be more authentic in the years to come. It would also bring pride to what makes Nepal what it is." 🇳🇵

Acoy Mala Sinha turns her face away from CP Lohani, as he sings नमन लाज, with Machhapuchre as a quiet backdrop. As the two lovers sway through the musical interlude, they walk amidst Pokhara's bucolic farms and row a dugout on Phewa.

From the first Nepali film, *Ama to December Falls*, which is currently being filmed, Pokhara continues to be a favourite shooting location for Nepali movies. As filmmakers went back to shooting recently after a low-key year because of the pandemic, Pokhara was the obvious choice for many reasons.

"After being cooped-up in Kathmandu for so many months, it's good to get out and get some fresh air," says actor Upasana Singh Thakuri. Parts of her first film, *Kabadi Kabadi Kabadi* were filmed in Mustang and Pokhara in 2019, and she has been staying in Pokhara for close to a month now, with the *December Falls* unit. "I like it that Pokhara is so peaceful and convenient to work out of."

The Covid situation has put filmmakers under pressure to maintain distance while working, and choices of locations that provide ample space, has also been a consideration.

"The film industry is reeling under the impact of the pandemic. The last few weeks have been vibrant as some people in the fraternity have started filming again," says Ram Babu Gurung, who directed the *Kabadi* trilogy. "We're doing safety drills so that filming and audience arrangement in the theatres can be safe. With the vaccines coming, we have newfound hope."

As filming for *December Falls* gets underway in Pokhara, for production manager, Bishnu Prasad Mainali, the priority has been to ensure safety and comfort of his 60-member crew.

"Pokhara was our choice because it's scripted, but also because of the logistics. At a time like this, we have to think safety in living arrangements for the unit," he says. When working from 'outdoor locations', it is also a time to bond as a team and Mainali says there's something about Pokhara.

Pokhara is known to offer a variety in terms of locations, both urban and rural.

"Visually, Kaski has diverse beauty, and tourism has also

SOON MORE FLIGHTS TO POKHARA

AFTER THE NEW NORMAL
ANNOUNCING THE OPERATION OF
7 DAILY FLIGHTS TO POKHARA

STARTING FROM MARCH 2021



Pokhara, the education hub

Its scenic setting, a more relaxed urban life has made Pokhara not just a tourism destination but also an educational hub. Pokhara has a long tradition of hosting good residential schools, and is seen by many families as a desirable alternative to Kathmandu for their children. With better road and air connectivity, Pokhara's importance as an educational centre is likely to grow in future. *Nepali Times* spoke to five Pokhara educationists about the importance of their work.



Khem Lakai
CEO, GATE Vocational – FAB School

What is your school's role in promoting tourism in Gandaki Province?

We are already the preferred school for many employers in the hospitality sector in Pokhara and beyond. That is because our graduates demonstrate a high level of professionalism and commitment for their chosen profession, and we wish to continuously improve the quality of the tourism sector in Pokhara and Gandaki Province, where tourism is the mainstay of the economy. The service sector needs and deserves highly competent

and committed human capital that needs to be continually renewed as younger people join jobs.

It looks like Pokhara has become a hub for schools like yours.

We completely believe that Pokhara should be developed as Nepal's education hub, and this school is our contribution. The federal government must reform some of the outdated policies like visas for international students and modernising policy. The Gandaki Province leadership is forward-thinking, Kathmandu needs to catch up. We have eight Vietnamese students already and there is potential for foreign students coming to Pokhara for hotel management training.

How were you affected by the pandemic?

We remained closed for several months, but quickly switched back to residential training where students resided on the premises, so that they could cover intensive hours of learning within the campus. FAB School operates like a living lab, having everything in the premises, such as bakery, kitchen lab, 14 bed training hotel, coffee shop and organic garden, which could easily accommodate learners and trainers in small size. We are unique because half the students are on scholarship and we prepare them to provide the hotel sector with staff who have relevant competence, not just a certificate.



Binu Gurung
Chair, Informatics College Pokhara

Why did you choose to locate your British degree college in Pokhara?

It was disheartening to see Pokhara's youth migrating to Kathmandu and abroad for higher studies. We felt we had to do something to reverse that trend. We collaborated with the

London Metropolitan University with its rich history with strong educational roots dating back to 1848 and which delivers Cisco Certified Network Professional (CCNP) and is ranked 38th in the International Student Table. It is the first UK degree college in Pokhara, and represents a milestone in education here.

How were classes affected during the Covid-19 pandemic?

At Informatics College we responded with a range of online and other options for teachers, students and guardians. All classes were held as per the same timetable as physical classes. Each student had access to Coursera and sat for Structure Query Language classes via LinkedIn, where they received the certification. Final year projects were completed through online supervision. The written exam was replaced with course work for each module and graded.

What plans post-Covid?

We will move towards blended classrooms, the admission process is digitised, counseling is performed through Google Meets. Paper work for admission has been omitted. The feedback to online classes has been terrific.



Milan KC
Principal, Pokhara Montessori Kinderhome

Are you planning to reopen classes soon?

Currently preschools are trying to reopen up

following the health and safety protocols. Preschools have been badly hit by the pandemic, and it has been a struggle to convince parents to send their children to school.

How did you conduct classes during the lockdown?

We upgraded the school to online learning. There were challenges to make children aged 2-6 to stay online as they need individual and physical attention. Online teaching was less effective for this age, so many schools gave workbook to help parents guide their children at home. Early childhood is foundation-building time for children, and they need good guidance and protection. Parents, society and government are equally responsible to ensure quality of instruction.



Rojana Joshi
Principal, Pokhara Engineering College

How is your college contributing to Nepal's higher education from Pokhara?

Our alumni are in all sectors of the economy in Pokhara and all over Nepal. They have jobs in Pokhara Municipality,

Nepal Telecom, and Pokhara University. There are many who also chose to become entrepreneurs providing service within the region as well.

How did the pandemic affect classes?

We had to abruptly stop internal exams which were running smoothly before the pandemic. Students were not able to take the board exams on scheduled dates, and had to wait nine months for it. It was also difficult to maintain the academic calendar for the University, extending the semester as a result. Online classes were not as effective because many of the subjects need laboratory and field work. Online classes also suffered from bandwidth issues and also it was difficult to keep student constantly engaged.

Why did you choose Pokhara as the location for your college?

Pokhara is not only a hub for tourism, but also for education. We have a university along with plenty of schools and specialised colleges in engineering, medical, hotel management, nursing. The people of Gandaki Province do not need to go abroad for higher education any more.



Kiran K.C.
Principal, La Grandee International College

What is the outlook for Pokhara as an education hub?

Pokhara is known for its diversity, it is rich in culture, religion, language, sports,

environment, natural scenery. The people are known for their hospitality. Pokhara also located right at the centre of Nepal and is easily accessible to all parts of central Nepal. It is getting a new international airport, and the highways are being upgraded. Having Pokhara University here also helps. The climate is also moderate.

How bad was the pandemic for your school?

It had a big impact. We never expected it, and it was a very bitter experience. Pokhara's tourism was devastated, and it had a knock-on effect on the rest of the economy. Businesses have not yet been able to get back on their feet. But we are adapting to the new normal and things are getting better.

How did the online classes go?

It was a real challenge. Since everything happened so suddenly we had to adapt. But every challenge comes with opportunities. We taught ourselves to conduct online classes effectively. All levels of academia ran virtual classes. Need generates solution, and that is what the pandemic taught us.



गण्डकी प्रदेशका सरकारका मुख्य कार्यक्रमहरू

- 🏠 एक घर - एक धारा
- 👤 समृद्ध प्रदेश र सुखी नागरिक
- 🏢 एक सहकारी - एक उत्पादन
- 💡 गण्डकी प्रदेश - उज्यालो प्रदेश
- 🏠 एक निर्वाचन क्षेत्र - एक सडक
- 🏭 एक स्थानीय तह - एक उद्योग ग्राम
- 🌿 एक पालिका - एक उत्पादन कार्यक्रम

मुख्यमन्त्री तथा मन्त्रिपरिषद्को कार्यालय, गण्डकी प्रदेश, पोखरा

Under Biden, hope for Nepali migrants in US

In the four years of the Donald Trump administration in the United States, there have been over 400 anti-immigration executive actions. This made the role of human rights and social justice organisations like the US-based non-profit, Adhikaar, even more critical.

Their strategy was to "buy time" for a more friendly administration so there would be more space to advocate for reforms while migrants were protected from deportation.

As Joe Biden prepares to be sworn in on 20 January, after a tumultuous few months including the storming of the US Capitol, there is hope for non-US citizens including Nepalis whose lives have been in a limbo for the past few years.

Nepali Times spoke with Adhikaar's Executive Director Pabitra Benjamin, Director of Advocacy Narbada Chhetri, and Campaign Manager Prarthana Gurung about how the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) under a Biden presidency will affect Nepalis.

Nepali Times: First off, how is Adhikaar working on TPS?

Pabitra Benjamin: Adhikaar has been around since 2005, and we describe ourselves as a 'workers center' in that we focus on workers from low-income jobs, especially informal sector workers that are not unionised and do not have the same labour standards-- such as nail salon workers, domestic workers and gig workers. We work with new immigrants so worker rights and immigration rights have both been important focus areas. We also work on language and healthcare justice issues and have a reach of 10,000 Nepali speaking individuals, including people from Bhutan, Tibet and Burma.

Adhikaar fought hard to get TPS status to Nepal and it required advocacy, lobbying with congressional members and coalition partners to push the Obama administration in that direction. The Nepal Embassy had sent a letter requesting for TPS status, but that is not enough. Lobbying is key.

It was important as it would give Nepalis, including undocumented workers, a legal status, allow them to visit home while also being important for rebuilding Nepal.

We have also been fighting for the renewal of TPS after the Trump administration canceled it for many countries, including Nepal. A lot of people under the TPS status have been here for a while, so we are fighting for their permanent residency.

We have been pushing for permanent residency for TPS holders but it takes a couple of years at minimum. After Trump terminated TPS we had to challenge it and buy time by filing a lawsuit to prevent deportations.

We started talking with American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and other legal organizations in 2018, and did a nationwide search for plaintiffs who could represent Nepal. We filed in 2019, and we won a preliminary injunction. So even if TPS was terminated, people could not be deported while the judicial branch investigates the rationale for termination.

In September, the 9th Circuit Court backed the government's decision not necessarily on the arguments of the case, that it was racially biased, that the Trump administration did not follow the rules and protocols, and that you cannot separate parents from their US-born children-- but on the basis that the judge in the lower-court who created the preliminary injunction did not have the authority to do so. Our lawyers appealed this decision, and for now the timeline for TPS holders has been auto-extended till October 2021.

Narbada Chhetri: The frequent changes and uncertainty can be nerve-wracking for TPS holders because their lives are in limbo. There is a lot of uncertainty about



their future but there is also hope. Every time the TPS is terminated, we have used litigation to allow them to remain legally in the US, which has helped build trust.

But more importantly, we have helped empower TPS holders to share their stories, focused on their leadership skills, empower them politically and be part of the movement. They lead the meetings with DC officials, and we are just a mediator.

In 2019, we mobilised 300 Nepali TPS holders and in September 2020. Over 100 came to DC in the midst of the pandemic to advocate, as they have taken ownership of this movement. It is because they turn out to share their stories, to lobby in DC, to be a part of the movement that they are seeing they have a role in changing what happens in Congress.

Pabitra Benjamin: For Adhikaar, it is not about being their 'saviours', but ensuring that they have the power to change the laws and policies that directly impact them. Politically empowering the most impacted communities and working in coalition with like-minded organizations from other communities to pressure those in Congress, is what creates change and how we have succeeded so far.

What do you think will change for TPS and other Nepali visa holders under Biden?

Pabitra Benjamin: A big part of our litigation strategy has been to buy time to get into a more pro-immigration government. With the Biden administration and a more friendly Democrat-majority Congress, there is now more room to push our demands.

In fact, just a few days ago, Vice President-elect Kamala Harris said she wanted to introduce legislation

for DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) and TPS recipients from day one to provide them Green Cards so we are in a wait-and-see mode.

The other strategy is to look at a settlement of the case and see what comes out of it. From the very beginning litigation by itself was not going to give us what we wanted which is permanent residency. It is a tool to extend the timeline to fight for permanent residency.

We have already started having meetings with the transitional team of the Biden administration and are looking towards a redesignation of all countries to maintain their TPS status.

If redesignation is not possible, we are also asking for other ways to help TPS status holders to stay in the US.

One such alternate is to get Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) that will allow those who have lost TPS status to get DED status which can be designated by the President. Redesignation requires Department of Homeland Security to do country assessments and is a long, convoluted process that involves embassies and the State Department for a 18-month extension. We are hopeful that if the redesignation happens, it will be for all TPS countries and not on a country-by-country basis.

But both these have the ultimate objective of buying time to help TPS holders win permanent residency through Congress. The President doesn't have the power to provide permanent residency, it is up to Congress to pass the legislation which Biden would then have to sign off on.

We were involved in writing the legislation of HR-6 (American Dream Provinces Act 2019). We made sure that all Nepalis who were in the US

in 2015 and qualified for TPS but did not get it would also qualify for permanent residency. This means PR for 30,000 Nepali, which is a big deal.

We are fighting a bigger fight than just TPS. We are also looking at comprehensive immigration reform. It is broken, and reform is overdue by decades, so we want to push for comprehensive immigration reform including a pathway to permanent residency for undocumented workers or those in the middle if a status. Within that it is to make sure TPS holders and DACA recipients get permanent residency.

Adhikaar does not necessarily work with diversity visas, but we expect the Biden administration to roll back the limit on diversity visas by the Trump presidency.

What was the status of undocumented workers during the pandemic?

Narbada Chhetri: Vulnerability is relative, TPS workers at least had work permits and pay taxes. Undocumented workers were disproportionately impacted. Because they do not pay taxes, they did not get benefits like everyone else. In addition, they also do not have insurance nor the confidence to access healthcare. Adhikaar supported 768 Nepalis financially. It is easy to forget that undocumented workers are doing essential jobs as well. It is because a domestic worker takes care of a doctor's child, while he or she is in the hospital fighting to save lives.

Many undocumented workers are still under a lot of financial and mental stress, especially those who have spent an enormous amount of money to come here through irregular channels, and continue to pay lawyers or loans back home.

Pabitra Benjamin: Undocumented workers do not have desk jobs, they

have to be physically present at their workplaces, which increases their levels of risk to exposure. There is some potential conversation on support for PR in the case of essential workers. When we fight for what essential worker means, it is also the delivery workers, Uber, Lyft drivers and domestic workers. Any pro-immigrant benefit that goes to essential workers should go to them as they were also doing essential work during the pandemic.

What has Adhikaar's engagement with elected officials like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez the Representative for New York's 14th Congressional District been like? And your experience mobilising voters of Nepali origin?

Pabitra Benjamin: The focus for Adhikaar is about building the power of Nepali speaking workers, but services do not just come from anywhere. It requires fighting for policy changes, building relationships with elected officials including Congress members, state representatives and city officials. They understand that we provide something unique: we have a large reach with the most impacted communities of over 10,000 Nepali speaking individuals, and as numbers speak in politics there is trust in the organisation.

Narbada Chhetri: When we first started in 2007, there were not many Nepalis with voting rights, but that has changed and so has our civic engagement and reach.

The good thing is that those who win come back to us and keep their promises, which has been encouraging whether it is our work on health insurance for TPS holders, bill for nail salon workers, language justice for health provision in hospitals, litigation for TPS and so on. We choose who we work with, based on issues. If there is a common cause, we engage with them as representation is important.

Pabitra Benjamin: Representation is important. We fall under new immigrants and as our communities grow, it is exciting to see people who look like us running for office, but that is not sufficient. We not only need representation but also need people who take our interest, support us, and can be held accountable, not just to those who vote for them but also to everyone including those without voting rights in their districts whom they represent.

● Sonia Awale

Nepal was one of the first countries in the region to start a mass Covid-19 vaccination drive two weeks ago, but less than half of the frontline workers prioritised by the government have chosen to inoculate themselves.

Official figures show that only 184,000 of the 430,000 people on the government's list for the first phase opted for jabs from the 1 million doses of the Astra Zeneca Covishield vaccine donated by India.

The vaccines were manufactured in October 2020, and will expire by April. The government is therefore running out of time to use up the doses before another batch of 2.25 million Covishield doses under the WHO's COVAX initiative arrive.

"It's a new vaccine against a new disease, people are naturally concerned about taking it," says Sher Bahadur Pun of the Sukraraj Tropical and Infectious Disease Hospital. "We should have addressed concerns and about its minor side effects to curb any doubts."

Pun said even some of his doctors and nurse colleagues refused to take the vaccines, doubting their efficacy. Possibly because there are still so many doses left, the Ministry of Health has decided to depart from its own vaccination strategy and expand the first phase to also include civil servants, diplomats and journalists.

"The first phase showed us that the vaccine is safe, there were no major side effects but our coverage was much lower than targeted," admits Shyam Raj Upreti, head of government's Covid Vaccine Strategy. "The vaccination campaign was not as decentralised as we would have liked and we were not able to reach as many people. We need to take vaccination booths to areas closed to the public, especially as we prepare to jab the elderly and those with morbidities in the second phase."

Why is there vaccine hesitancy in Nepal?

Communicating efficacy of Covid-19 jabs and making it more accessible will increase coverage

Medical personnel posting safety doubts on social media did not help, and vaccine hesitancy spread through clickbait media. Others in the priority list such as cleaners and security guards were suspicious of being turned into guinea pigs.

"The government was unsuccessful in properly communicating the significance and efficacy of the vaccine and explain why certain groups of people are being prioritised for the vaccination," says Ramesh Kant Adhikari of the National Immunisation Committee.

To be sure, vaccine hesitancy is not unique to Nepal. But other countries have beamed national leaders and celebrities being inoculated live. Many influencers took to social media to declare jabs safe.

Excluding people under 18 years, Nepal needs vaccines for 72% of its population. So in the meantime, the government is in talks with India to purchase another 2 million doses of Covidshield, which will arrive in a month.

China's promise of 500,000 doses of Sinopharm vaccine in March is up from 300,000 previously promised. India's Bharat Biotech-manufactured Covaxin and Russian Sputnik V are in a race to supply additional jabs for Nepalis.

Earlier doubts about Russian and Chinese vaccines have been quelled with new findings and due to the limited manufacturing capacity of Covidshield, Moderna and Pfizer.



MONIKA DEUPALA

A recent research paper on the medical journal *Lancet* called Russian Sputnik V safe and effective (91.6%) based on interim results from its phase three trials. Sinopharm has had efficacy ranging from 86% to 79%.

So far Covidshield is the only Covid-19 vaccine registered at Nepal's Drug Development Administration, even though South Africa has discontinued its use because it was found not to be effective against a new strain of coronavirus found there.

"For us to administer Sinopharm and others, we need a different strategy, get an approval from a health authority in the manufacturing company and a study of its side effects in similar populations," explains Adhikari.

There is also an on-going debate about the use of different vaccines for the same individual. Experts agree on using the same vaccine for both the first and second dose

as far as possible, but a mix of two different shots is also being advocated given there is a limited stock of vaccines of one kind.

Vaccines are here at a time when positivity and fatality rates are going down in Nepal. Multiple factors have been credited to this: fewer tests and contact tracing, large chunks of the population developing immunity against SARS-CoV-2 after contracting it and the natural peak and fall cycle of infectious diseases.

But one cannot ignore the possibility of another wave as seen frequently in the US and Europe and continue to wear masks, maintain physical distance and practice handwashing.

Says Sher Bahadur Pun: "This is the right time to vaccinate and be better prepared for possible next wave by strengthening our health infrastructure and human resource while continuing to follow safety measures, we must use this period to the fullest." 🇳🇵



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EVENTS



Tandem Bungee

This Valentine's Day, share the scare with a Tandem swing. Go full throttle with 70m tower Bungee. The tower is cantilevered over a river adjacent to a 50m cliff in Hemja. Free fall for 5 seconds in a blitz of pure fear and adrenaline rush. Visit the website. *High Ground Adventures, Hemja*

Valentine's with Sugam Pokharel

The Culture Resort invites you to the grand live event for Valentine's Day with the legend singer of the night, Sugam Pokharel. Limited entries available. Register. *13 February, The Culture Resort*



Pokhara International Marathon

Pokhara Marathon is an event held every year by the Ex-Sportsmen Forum and other aligned organizations of Pokhara, aimed at promoting awareness of health and peace. Run to preserve the sporty spirit of the valley or witness a runner compete for first place. Visit the website. *13 February, Pokhara football stadium*

Pokhara Enduro

Pokhara Enduro involves a community of locals and overseas volunteers to initiate, build and maintain mountain biking trails in the foothills of the beautiful Pokhara Valley in Nepal. Although delayed due to COVID-19, to celebrate this community initiative, it has been planned to hold an International race attracting racers from more than 25 countries to gather in Pokhara. Visit the website. *7-24 March*



Mardi Himal Trek

To develop a women-friendly tourism trend and explore Nepal freely, a team of women have planned to embark on a journey up to the Base Camp of Mardi Himal on the occasion of Women's Day, 8 March. Join them for the cause. *4-10 March*



A second westerly disturbance is approaching Central Nepal and it will bring overcast skies and precipitation. The rain is welcome to farmers, and mountains that have been bare will get some snow cover. It will also increase our hydro-electricity production. The good news is also that the rain will not be accompanied by very low temperatures, in fact the maximum will climb to 20 Celsius and the minimum will hover around 5-7 Celsius in Kathmandu. Pokhara may get some passing showers on Sunday.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
20° 6°	20° 6°	19° 7°

AIR QUALITY INDEX



The cloud cover into Friday and the weekend will exacerbate the pollution level in Kathmandu Valley, which as we have seen in January is worse when the sun cannot burn off the smog. It will be a similar situation in Pokhara. However, if the forecast rain does fall on Sunday it will wash off some of the pollution. Higher temperatures will also reduce the inversion effect in Kathmandu and Pokhara Valley which means less soot particles trapped at ground level. As we can see from this Air Quality Index map from Thursday morning, the air is uniformly bad all over north India and Nepal.

ONLINE ARCHIVES



Shilpee Theatre

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

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 of the unique structures with Google Street View.



Digital Archaeology Foundation

Look at historic photographs from Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur durbar squares, and watch 3D reconstructed videos of temples around Nepal. Visit the Digital Archaeology Foundation website for more details.



Global Nepali Museum

Global Nepali museum is the first database of its kind in Nepal that features Nepali art and artefacts, 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.

The world at home

Travel may be limited these days, but discovering incredible experiences from across the globe does not have to be. Get your Guide's The world at home initiative brings some of their top tours, activities, and attractions to you online. Find everything on their YouTube channel.



OUR PICK

2020 release, science-fantasy action flick, *Monster Hunter* is based on video game series Capcom. The film stars Milla Jovovich as the titular character. The movie also stars Tony Jaa, Tip 'T' Harris, Meagan Good, Diego Boneta, Josh Helman, Jin Au-Yeung and Ron Perlman. The film, which received a mixed review worldwide did garner accolade for its visual effects and is currently being screened at QFX Cinemas.

DINING



Juicery Café

For those craving for some tempting yet health-conscious food, look no further than The Juicer Cafe. It's located in a vibrant little store right by the lake. The owner has had 30 years of experience in hospitality all over the world which is reflected in the diverse range of options. *9823781787, Bangladi*



Fresh Elements

At Fresh Elements, it is believed that everyone deserves to eat real food, grown on the mountains. Order their specialty gourmet salads, fresh juices and smoothies, lava grilled and creative dinners. *(061)455744, Middle Path Street*



Gusto The Restaurant

Gusto creates a symphony of various flavors to provide the visitors with food that is diverse. Grown through a decade, it is a spacious outdoor restaurant and also includes a low seating indoor area, a casual bar and a romantic panoramic view of Fewa. *9802828711, Panchase Marg*



Natssul Korean Restaurant

After a welcoming cup of bonicha, Natssul plates Korean barbecue, kimchi and plenty of pork and chicken dishes. Try their special samgyeopsal – sliced pork belly, pan-fried at the table to be dipped in sesame or red soy paste and wrapped in fresh lettuce. *98066743394, Lakeside road*



Krazy Gecko

Down a short pathway off the main road through central point, Krazy Gecko is right by the lake, a secluded hangout that serves food and drinks. The best time to go is during the sun down—there's a rope swing for plunging into the lake! *9841249081, North Lakeside*

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फोन: नं. १०९८ मा खबर गरौं ।

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How about Valentine's Day in Pokhara?



It is Pokhara's setting amidst lakes and mountains that gives it a romantic aura, and this comes into full bloom every year on Valentine's Day on 14 February.

In pre-Covid days, Kathmandu's urban class made a bee-line for Pokhara to mark the day of love. And virus or no virus, it looks like 2021 will be the same.

The temperature has just started climbing, and there is a

whiff of spring in the air. Being much lower than Kathmandu, Pokhara is balmy, almost tropical. And there used to be lots of places to visit, eat and drink during the weekend break.

This year, due to the pandemic, most of Pokhara is shuttered. But the influx of domestic tourists means some establishments have started opening up. This year the shoreline of Phewa Lake has receded because of repairs on the dam, but there are still plenty of

bars and watering holes open not just in Pokhara but further afield on the outskirts.

For those who want to get away from it all there are secluded hotels like Rupakot, Tiger Mountain, Raniban, Pavilions, and new hotels on Sarangkot. For those who are more adventurous in their relationships, there are tandem flights on paragliders, ultralights, on the new zip-line or white water rafting on the Seti.

Mughlan Restaurant and Bar on Pokhara's Ring Road is proof that not all the action is at Lakeside. To mark its second anniversary this subsidiary of a restaurant with the same name in Sydney is organising a ghazal musical evenings and others on 13-15 February to also coincide with Valentine's Day. The establishment is spacious, can accommodate 200 guests, and has two karaoke rooms and an outdoor garden area for children.

"We are hoping that it will be a great anniversary and a popular night out for Valentine's Day," says manager Santosh Gurung.



Lockdown delivery

As Pokhara went into lockdown, and tourists were stranded in hotels and locals could not venture out for provisions, the city's Saleways Department Store outlet sprang into action with home delivery.

The store transformed itself overnight into an online home delivery service and customers placed their orders with SMS or social media. The deliveries were made with all safety protocols via motorcycles, and sourced provisions from Saleways' Kathmandu depot.

All staff were insured, and the store worked with the municipality to ensure that there was no shortage. The group suffered losses with all its outlets across the country, but things are returning to normal in Pokhara.

The revival of domestic tourism, has given traders hope that soon international tourism will also pick up again.





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उद्योग, पर्यटन, वन तथा वातावरण मन्त्रालय, गण्डकी प्रदेश पोखराको अङ्गरोध

विकास निर्माणका कार्यलाई वातावरणमैत्री तथा जलवायूमैत्री बनाई दिगो विकासलाई सुनिश्चित गर्नका लागि वातावरण संरक्षण ऐन, २०७६, वातावरण संरक्षण नियमावली, २०७७, प्रदेश वातावरण संरक्षण ऐन, २०७६ मा स्थानीय तहको अधिकार क्षेत्रभित्र पर्ने विकास निर्माण सम्बन्धी कार्य वा आयोजना सम्बन्धी प्रस्तावको हकमा संक्षिप्त वातावरणीय अध्ययन प्रतिवेदन वा प्रारम्भिक वातावरणीय परीक्षण प्रतिवेदन भए सम्बन्धित स्थानीय कानूनले तोकेको निकाय समक्ष र वातावरणीय प्रभाव मूल्याङ्कन भए उद्योग, पर्यटन, वन तथा वातावरण मन्त्रालय समक्ष पेश गर्नुपर्ने व्यवस्था रहेको छ । त्यसैगरी गण्डकी प्रदेश भित्र गरिने विकास निर्माणसम्बन्धी कार्य वा आयोजना सम्बन्धी प्रस्तावको हकमा संक्षिप्त वातावरणीय अध्ययन प्रतिवेदन वा प्रारम्भिक वातावरणीय परीक्षण प्रतिवेदन भए सम्बन्धित मन्त्रालय समक्ष र वातावरणीय प्रभाव मूल्याङ्कन भए उद्योग, पर्यटन, वन तथा वातावरण मन्त्रालय समक्ष पेश गर्नुपर्ने व्यवस्था रहेको छ । त्यसैले विकास निर्माण कार्य गर्दा नियमानुसार वातावरणीय अध्ययन प्रतिवेदन स्वीकृत गराएरमात्र अगाडी बढाउनु हुन सबै सरोकारवालाहरूमा हार्दिक अनुरोध छ।

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Dreaded bliss

How society's pressure for women to marry has more to do with cruelty than culture

In December 2020, I was at the hospital with my mother when I ran into an old acquaintance, a very modern and well-travelled doctor and the first thing he asked me was: "You don't have kids yet? Are you planning on getting married any time soon?"



LIFE TIME
Anjana Rajbhandary

Just another example of how some Nepalis have no sense of boundaries when it comes to others, it does not matter how modern they are. The problem is not that they do not know how what they are saying is affecting others, the problem is that they do not care to think how it is potentially hurting others.

Ironically, those people are extremely private when it comes to their own families. This is more than a cultural issue. This is a matter of lacking compassion and being blatantly cruel to those that they do not care about.

At first glance it may seem societal but when you look deeper, you will notice that it has more to do with intentions and lack of empathy. People need to keep in mind that this is an extremely sensitive issue where boundaries need to be respected, and unfortunately, most of the time they are not.

What most people do not realise is the amount of stress and pressure it puts on the women and their families especially when they are already dealing with many other stressors caused by the pandemic.

Maya, 29, is a smart and accomplished professional who is financially stable and is giving back to her community. When asked what frustrates her about Nepali family gatherings, she said: "My extended family tell my mother that someone is looking to get married so they assume I should be interested. अब त बेला भयो. The whole concept of marriage drains me. Thankfully, my parents don't pester me."

I remember one uncle always asking me: "भोज कहिले खुव्ने? When is the party?"

I always responded with an uncomfortable smile and would walk away, trying to avoid being disrespectful to him. In reality, respect goes both ways, and we learn from our elders how to respect others.

Another friend of mine, who is also 29, said that her parents nudge her about her plans to get married because of her age, and how it makes her feel like a failure for not having found someone already.

When it comes to most parents, it comes from a place of concern and love, but they don't always understand how it makes their children feel. Perhaps, the parents forget how the idea of marriage made them feel in the past or it is possible, they did not feel the same pressure as their children today. I do know that people in our parents' generation were more patient and more tolerant than us.

Assuming the pressure to settle down and get married was more in the past. I wonder if some women, who experienced the same scrutiny in their youth, became more jaded and continued the 'tradition' of treating other young women the way they were treated. It is sad. Experiences either make you wounded or wise.

Some 'aunties' can be kinder because they understand as they experienced the same frustration. They learned and know that it is not okay to make others feel the same discomfort and pain someone in the past had made them feel. That is the kind of aunty, I want to be.

One of my friends in the US told me that it must be easy for Indian women to find husbands because they can go to their mothers and say, "Hi mom, I am a loser, find me a husband."

I am at a loss for words when some Americans tell me about their perception of South Asian matrimony. The societal and cultural pressure to get married has made marriage quite repulsive to many people. Honestly, the idea of marriage is beautiful because it is a union between two people and their families to provide support and companionship.

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is the importance of emotional support and genuine connections that help keep our sanity during these difficult times. We know that having a caring partner is more helpful than having no one during challenging times, but having no partner is better than being in a bad relationship.

I used to feel a lot of frustration and resentment towards those who asked me such questions and made those comments but maybe because I am much older now, I want to give them the benefit of the doubt that maybe they do not know how their words are affecting others. However, it is time for them to be aware.

It is important, irrespective of age, to acknowledge the consequences of what we say to others. It is important for children and adults to know and remember that you cannot take words back after they have been spoken, and that it is important to be mindful and aware of what we say and to whom.

Think before you speak is a useful advice for everyone, not just children and young people. Can we also request and expect that from the older generation? Before you say the first thing that comes to your mind to other people's children, try to imagine how it would feel if someone said that to your children.

We all grew up in a society where people stare, gossip, and make up stories about us. Let's try to stop that and try to give the next generation the life we wish we had. Let women choose their freedom and the way they want to live their lives. Let women choose their own happiness, whatever it may be. Let's let women be happy if they want to get married and let them be happy if they don't. 🇳🇵

*Names have been changed.

Anjana Rajbhandary writes this fortnightly Nepali Times column Life Time about socio-cultural issues, mental health and physical health.



LIFE TIME

Watch the video accompanying a new installment of Anjana Rajbhandary's column Life Time in which she talks about how kindness works both ways, especially when it comes to discussing marriage with women.



UNMISS

HELPING HANDS: Nepali peacekeepers in South Sudan distribute stationery, sports kits and face masks to teachers, health care workers and students on Sunday.



SUSHIL GYEWALI/TWITTER

SKY HIGH: Workers hard at work as they complete reinforcement for 21 of the 22 storeys of the Dharara tower this week.



RSS

SUMMIT TO LAKESIDE: Nepali K2 team felicitated in Pokhara. Ten Nepalis climbed the world's second highest mountain (8,611m) on 19 January, 2020.

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Model for post-Covid ecotourism

Halt to road project in fragile bio-diversity hotspot revives conservation hopes



Ornithologists Carol Inskipp, Rupendra Karmacharya and Prem Thapa on how their lobbying has halted a controversial road project in a northern Chitwan forest and restored hope for the rare Spiny Babbler and other endangered wildlife.

In April 2019 our report in Nepali Times highlighted the serious threat posed by a new road through the Gadi-Siraichuli watershed and its rich wildlife habitat in the Mahabharat Range. Last week, the Ichakamana Municipality in Chitwan district halted its construction and re-routed the road to save the forest.

The road serves the remote, under-developed region inhabited mostly by the Chepang people, and the road had been forcefully constructed by the people of Mathlo Kaule to Chisapanitar and Gadi.

See also: Protecting the last home of the Spiny Babbler

The region also has historical significance because of an 18th century fort, and is exceptionally rich in biodiversity. In fact, the Gadi-Siraichuli forest has been designated

an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area by BirdLife International and Bird Conservation Nepal.

It is one of a network of sites around the world which are of international value for birds and other wildlife. Gadi-Siraichuli is a stronghold of the Spiny Babbler (*Turdoides nipalensis*), the elusive bird found only in Nepal and nowhere else.

Local people from Gadi objected strongly to the new road because it would destroy their only water source, and result in landslides. Indeed, rockfalls from the new road have already damaged the forest. If construction had continued, it would have dried up the only two remaining water sources for eight villages.

A 2015 survey in Chitwan after the earthquakes concluded that the geology of the region had been disturbed, and the slopes were too unstable for unplanned road building.

Now, there is good news. Last week, Ichakamana Municipality halted the construction of the

road, and passed the budget for an alternative alignment suggested in this newspaper two years ago for the road to go via Thapthali and Mayatar to Gadi. This new route will be far less damaging to the environment, as well as connect more villages to Gadi.

The Ichakamana Municipality acted with foresight to protect both the watershed and the environment. It also opens up opportunities for Gadi-Siraichuli to develop low-intensity sustainable tourism through nature and culture tours.

Such small-scale ecotourism could bring great advantages including additional income to the Chepang, Magar, Gurung and Chhetri communities here, and could be a model for similar areas in other parts of Nepal.

If the Municipality designates the area as 'Gadhi-Siraichuli Watershed and Bird Sanctuary', it will be a recognised destination for tourists interested in pristine forests with rich wildlife. Indeed, it would be the first bird sanctuary in Nepal.

Local youths could be trained

as guides by the Bird Education Society (BES), a Sauraha-based NGO that has been monitoring the district's birdlife since the 1990s and has recorded sightings of 320 species of birds, with new ones continually being added to the list.

Some of these are very rare birds like the Red-faced Liocichla, sighted here four years ago for the first time after the 19th century. There are also 15 mammal species including the splendid Black Giant Squirrel and Assamese Macaque. The richness of birds and other wildlife will undoubtedly attract naturalists from overseas as well as many from Nepal.

The region's other attraction is the historic Upardangadi Fort, located above Gadi village, which was built by the Shah kings 250 years ago to protect Nepal from attacks from the south by the British East India Company. The fort lies on the top of a 1,275m mountain top with a sweeping panorama of Himalchuli-Manaslu to the north as well as a magnificent view of the Chitwan

Valley to the south.

The rich traditional culture of the Chepang, Gurung and Magars inhabitants can also be a draw, and provide additional income to the indigenous people of the region. There are already new homestays in Gadi and Tallo Kaule, that offer visitors a place to stay and immerse in local traditions and wildlife tourism.

BES is providing homestay training in a sustainable and eco-friendly way for local people, many of whom are from marginalised communities. The Municipality will now have to invest in proper homestays, improve trails, train locals and conserve bird, and other biodiversity would be highly beneficial to ecotourism development here.

When local villagers find they are benefitting financially from such grassroots tourism, they are much more likely to actively protect their wondrous forests with its bio-diversity. And this is also the kind of post-Covid tourism model Nepal should strive for. 🇳🇵

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The Other

Following the footsteps of Maurice Herzog to Annapurna, 70 years after the first ascent of a 8,000m peak



● Bimal Kadel in Myagdi

In Pokhara, you do not go to the mountains, the mountains come to you. This is one of the most fascinating spots in the world, a tropical valley less than 1,000m in elevation but barely 25km from Mt Machapuchre at 6,993m.

Pokhara's other-worldly scenery is what draws visitors here from all over Nepal and the world. It is a place where the senses take in the energy and radiance of creation. The mountains gleam in the fresh morning light, shine brightly all day, and are phosphorescent in the moonlight.

Pokhara is the launching pad for numerous expeditions to the Annapurnas, and the starting point for treks. But 70 years ago when Nepal was still under Rana rule and a French expedition came to climb Annapurna, its climbers did not come here. They marched straight up from Butwal in the Tarai.

In December last year, a 25-member team from Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) Pokhara, and the Trekking Agents' Association of Nepal (TAAN) Pokhara chapter and Annapurna Rural Municipality set out to explore North Annapurna Base Camp. The idea was to use the pandemic lull to find new trekking destinations, and to develop this historic route.

The trail we took would follow the footsteps of the French Annapurna Expedition of 1950, and re-enact their march-in to the mountain. It is now known as the Maurice Herzog Trail, after the climber who, with Louis Lachenal, made the first ascent of an 8,000m peak – two years before Mt Everest itself was climbed.

Herzog became a global

celebrity, and his adventure classic Annapurna made him even more famous, with 11 million copies sold in many translations. Herzog's book also brought the Nepal Himalaya into the global spotlight. The book is not just about the final climb. It contains details of the exploration of the Kali Gandaki Valley at a time when there were no reliable maps. They had to find their way through uncharted territory to find the mountain they wanted to climb. Then they raced against the onset of the monsoon to blaze a trail up the Miristi Gorge to North Annapurna Base Camp.

Our own journey began in Pokhara with an eight hour bus ride to Tatopani, and another six hours to reach Lower Narchyang, which has one of the most enchanting waterfalls in Nepal.

We immediately hit the trail to reach Upper Narchyang, our destination for the day. From here on, the trail is almost exactly as the French climbers and their hundreds of porters must have seen it in the spring of 1950. And like trekking in

most of Nepal, it is one steep climb followed by another steep descent.

This takes a toll on the knees, but after three hours of this, we soon get used to it as we reach our destination for the day, with the rock and ice south face of Mt Nilgiri looming over us.

Sitting by the camp fire that night under a sky full of stars, we can imagine how difficult it must have been for Herzog's team to navigate through this rugged terrain without proper maps or GPS. Indeed, this was the first international expedition given permission to climb by the Nepal government at a time when historical changes were afoot in the region—the British had left India, and Nepal itself was witnessing the last days of hereditary rule by the Rana dynasty.

The expedition had permission to climb either Dhaulagiri or Annapurna, the two eight-thousanders separated by only 35km on either side of the Kali Gandaki, which at this point is the deepest gorge in the world. After flying from Paris to Delhi and Lucknow, the

French climbers arrived with their gear at the Nepal border to be joined by expedition sirdar Ang Tharkay and hundreds of porters.

The expedition found Dhaulagiri too difficult to climb, and could not even locate Annapurna, since it was hidden behind Nilgiri and Tilicho Peak. They sent scouting parties to explore and finally decided that the north face of Annapurna despite avalanche risk, was not too technical.

The march up the Miristi Khola was an adventure almost as challenging as climbing the mountain itself, especially since Herzog and his team did not know where they were going and had to first locate the mountain they wanted to climb.

And that is where we found ourselves the next morning, gazing at the mountains towering above us as they caught the first golden rays of the rising sun. Very few trekking groups and climbing expeditions have come this way in the last decades, and it was all untouched wilderness. No towns or tea houses, everything had to be carried.

This also meant there were hurdles every step of the way – narrow, slippery trails, landslides and rockfalls, and fragile log bridges. We came face-to-face with Himalayan black bears several times, both humans and bears shocked by the encounters.

The forest path was continuously uphill, and even as the sun went low on the horizon, there was no sign of our camp site. It soon got dark, and

Boulders in the narrow canons of the Miristi have been sculpted by water over millions of years. Previous floods have deposited these boulders in a narrow canyon.

The North Annapurna Base Camp Trek is mostly wilderness, the trail needs signage.

The French Ambassador, Prime Minister Mohan Shumshere and Maurice Herzog in Kathmandu in July 1950. "We welcome you here as a brave man," the prime minister told him.

Maurice Herzog on the summit of Annapurna I on 3 June, 1950.

The difficult northwest ridge of Annapurna I from the Miristi Khola (*overleaf*).

we used head torches to find our way, communicating with the rest of the team on walkie-talkie. A support staff fell off the trail with a big thud, and even though the sole of his shoe had come off, he kept walking.

Finding an appropriate location to spend the night, we finally pitched our tents, and lit a camp fire to keep away wild animals. Exhausted, we soon fell into deep sleep.

The next day we were retracing the steps taken by Ang Tharkay and three other French members of the expedition as they explored the deep canyons of the Miristi Khola to see if it had a passage to Annapurna.

There were lots of wild bee hives dangling like black stalactites from the cliffs above. But we had to keep our eyes on the narrow trail, and in the steeper sections we even needed ropes. There were parts where the trail completely disappeared, and there was no way forward or back. Instinct told us to follow the sound of the roaring river.

Finally by mid-day we reached



ABC Trek

the wild and tumbling Miristi Khola and had lunch by its icy waters, crossing it on a makeshift bridge of boulders and logs. There were more steep slopes with treacherous loose boulders on the other side where we needed to be roped up. But we finally made it to the night-stop at Chotapa.

We spent the night in a dream-like trance with visions of growling rivers, roaring waterfalls, chirping birds in the undergrowth, misty ridges and the mute peaks touching silent sky.

The highlight of the fourth day was the Phutphute Fall, which was true to its onomatopoeic name as the water fell through a single hole in the rock onto a turquoise pond. We were now at 3,157m and the trail crossed the river along narrow planks precariously placed between boulders—nothing to hold on to and nothing to stop you in case you lost your footing. One dared not look at the icy waters gushing below.

Yet, we could not but pause to admire these polished boulders that had been rounded, sculpted by water flowing through them over aeons. One can almost imagine millions of years of erosion in timelapse as the river cut through the rising terrain.

It was now getting bitterly

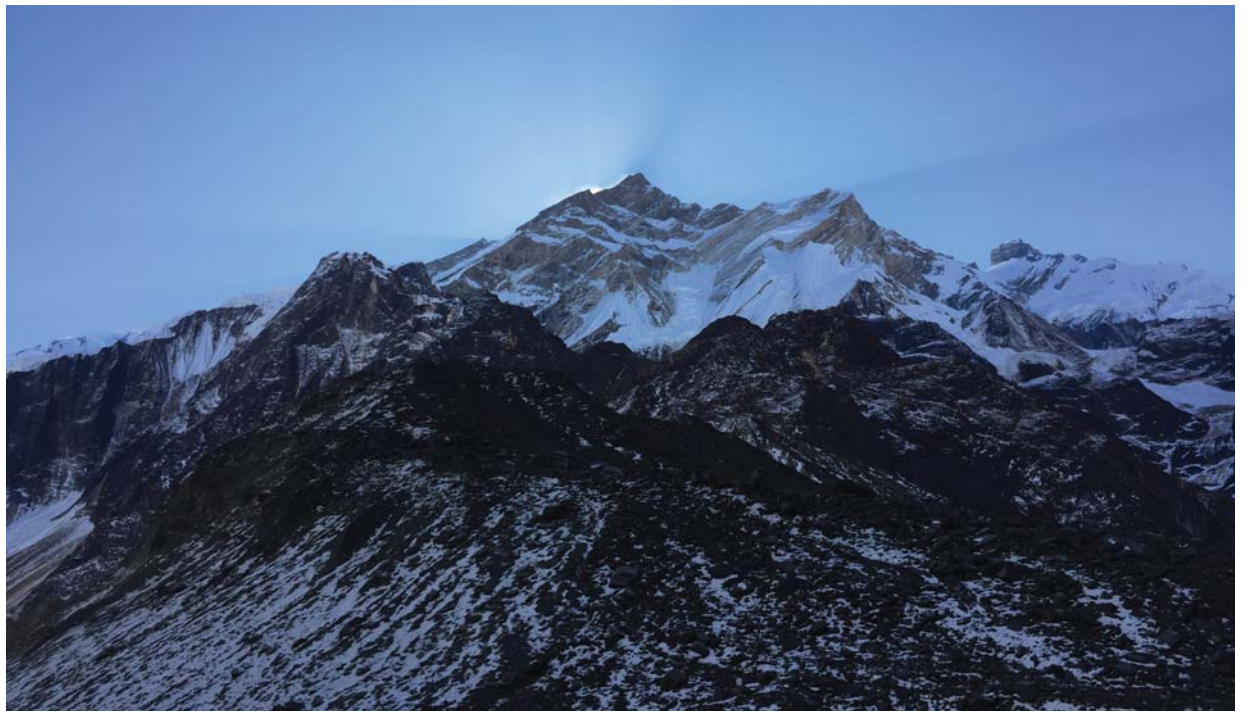
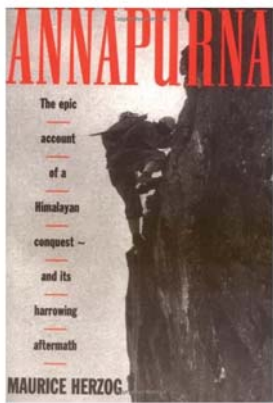
cold, and despite dinner around a camp fire on the fifth day, our only thought was to keep ourselves warm. Even the beauty of this wild wonderland failed to impress us through the bone-chilling cold.

Base Camp was a stone hut with a tin roof. One side was open, with a stupendous view of the glacial lake, but it also allowed an icy wind to come through turning the room into a deep freezer. We coiled ourselves inside the sleeping bags with layers of clothing, but they were no match for the cold, and sleep was out of question. It was minus 15o Celsius with wind chill at base camp at 4,400m.

A massive avalanche roared down the north face during the night, bringing the snow dust to the hut where it lingered till morning, suspended in the air. So much beauty, and yet how brutal and violent nature could be.

Morning light illuminated the north face, with its sickle cliff and the vast ice slope

leading to the 8,091m summit of the world's tenth highest mountain. K2, the world's second highest, is often called a 'Killer Mountain', but it is Annapurna I that has the highest death rate among eight thousanders. Since Herzog and Lachenal, 157 climbers have been on top of Annapurna I from both sides, but 60 have died in the attempt. This gives



Annapurna a fatality ratio of 38%. K2 is 29%.

Herzog recounts in Annapurna the heroic life-and-death struggle with primitive equipment and violent weather to get to the summit at 2PM on 3 June 1950. But the descent was even more treacherous, delirious with lack of oxygen, exhaustion, snow blindness, and severely frost-bitten, the two finally staggered down in white-out conditions, surviving bivouac in a snow cave, and an avalanche.

The chill that ran down my spine as I gazed at the golden summit that morning was as much from the cold as from the realisation of the sacrifice it took in those early days of Himalayan mountaineering to accomplish the feat. I bowed to the forces of existence with deep reverence and divinity.

Just like Herzog's team, we started our trek back down. We were doing this in winter, but the French

expedition was racing against time to traverse the Miristi gorge before the monsoon submerged the trail and washed away the bridges. They barely made it out.

Besides, Herzog and Lachenal had to be carried in ढोको on porter back even while the expedition doctor kept amputating their gangrenous fingers and toes one by one as they made their way down to Lete, and then over the next month down to the Indian border.

From there, Herzog went by train to Raxaul from where, even in his state, he travelled via Bhimphedi to be feted by Prime Mohan Sumshere Rana and the French Ambassador. A photograph of the period shows Herzog sitting painfully in a chair with his hands bandaged.

We had it a lot easier. The road has now reached Naryang, and from there were drove back to Pokhara. Our bodies were aching, but our spirits were jubilant as

the energy of Annapurna coursed through our veins.

As the bus climbed the last ridge, and the rays of the setting sun cast a pink light on the south face of Annapurna, lights of Pokhara came into view. The dark forests rushed by and were wrapped by the blanket of night.

It was humbling to think that the hardships we endured were negligible compared to what the French climbers and their Nepali guides and porters went through 70 years ago negotiating uncharted territory with flimsy equipment.

Every adventure has its rewards, and by reliving history on the North Annapurna Base Camp trek we were metamorphosed by the adventure. All of us were indelibly changed, and are now a part of what we experienced. 🇳🇵

Bimal Kadel is Manager at the Nepal Tourism Board in Pokhara.

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Anti-corruption antigens

There has been a lot of hair-pulling and bemoaning ever since Translucency International revealed recently that Nepal slipped four places in the rankings of the most corrupt countries in the solar system, if not the known universe.

In 2019, Nepal was ranked 113th among countries deemed most corrupt but last year during the pandemic we overtook (or, undertook, depending which way you are counting) four other countries to be 117th.

Many in Nepal saw this as a matter of national shame and proof that we are a failed state. But that is looking at the glass as half-empty. I see the glass as fully empty, and time for a refill. Under the Oligarchy we can to drink and be merry as if there is no tomorrow.

There are some misguided calls for GONE to acquire the Anti-Corruption Vaccine that has recently got FDA approval after Phase 3 trials in South Africa and India. This move threatens to put Nepal back decades, maybe even centuries, as bribery is eradicated, and we lose our way of life.

We have learnt through the grapevine that MOFA is engaged in 'vaccine diplomacy' to inoculate Nepalis against corruption starting with frontline workers in the Department of Immigration, the Tax Office as well as the Commission on the Instigation of Abuse of Authority. Fortunately, because Nepal is so late in the game to reserve its stock of the vaccines, it does not look like we will get the doses before elections.

Corruption has been honed into a fine art in Nepal. Temple friezes depict lesser gods handing baksheesh to those higher up in the divine pecking order.

Without corruption, Nepal would grind to a halt. Why would anyone in their right mind want to get rid of one of the only things that work well in this country? How are you ever going to get your driving license, or expedite your passport? No one can get an ambassadorial appointment if the pre-paid system is abolished, or become honcho of Nepal Oil Corruption. The Fast Track will never be completed if contractors can't pull a fast one.

Without corruption, Nepal would be an unequal society. Graft spreads the wealth around and levels the playing field, it greases the system so that the wheels of government can turn, and it raises Nepal's per capita GDP. Without bribes and kickbacks, we would not have made the progress we have in lifting millions out of extreme poverty.

This is why we want the Lower House restored so scoundrels, swindlers, mafia from the medical-industrial complex, fossil fuel cartels, goons and war criminals can regain their rightful places in the Federal Lazyslature.

The anti-vaxxers are right. Nepalis do not need anti-corruption antigens, we should legalise graft and make it contribute to the national economy by taxing it. This will turn Nepal into a more transparent nation since every time someone slips a bribe in the Land Office, he will be slapped 13% VAT on the spot.

And we should aim to go even lower in the Transparency International Rankings. Even if it means we have to bribe someone in Berlin.



The Ass



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