



A SHADOWY 100 DAYS

Shristi Karki

The slew of decrees in the first 100 days of the Balendra Shah administration has divided public opinion between those who see them as erratic and authoritarian, and those who admire his statesmanship.



ARREST SPREE

The new government hit the ground running with the arrests of former PM K P Oli and Home Minister Ramesh Lekhak. Since March, more political and business leaders have been arrested, including tycoons and former Finance Minister Bishnu Paudel.

SUPPORTERS
Balen is serious about bringing the corrupt and those responsible for the 8 September massacre to justice. He is cleaning up cronyism and political patronage.

CRITICS
The arrests were driven by political vendetta, and denied due process. Home Minister Sudan Gurung and RSP Chair Rabi Lamichhane themselves have skeletons in their closets.



EVICION OF LANDLESS

A month into office, the PM sent in security forces on a sweeping demolition drive of settlements in Kathmandu and across the country, evicting scores of landless.

SUPPORTERS
The evictions were aimed to separate 'fake' squatters from the 'real' landless. In the past, parties and the land mafia settled most of them there as vote banks.

CRITICS
The homes were bulldozed at short notice. Detecting 'fake squatters' should have preceded mass demolitions. This was a blatant violation of human rights.



ORDINANCES

Despite its majority, RSP issued ordinances on bureaucratic reforms. The most controversial one allowed the PM to make his own man Chief Justice.

SUPPORTERS
The parliamentary process is too slow to deliver rapid anti-corruption reforms. The Supreme Court had been politicised and this was a way to clean up the judiciary.

CRITICS
RSP showed centralised power in the executive leadership. The Constitutional Council ordinance granted the PM undemocratic authority over Constitutional appointments.

BUREAUCRACY

The ordinances made way for the dismissal of more than 1,500 political appointees. The party is also pushing a one-time measure to downsize the bureaucracy. Decades-old financial records of 30,000+ officials have been demanded.

SUPPORTERS
This is necessary to dismantle patronage networks and ease financial strain on the state apparatus. The downsizing will make way for younger, digitally-savvy civil servants without political baggage.

CRITICS
Downsizing has caused a leadership and knowledge vacuum in the civil service. The sweeping purge has demoralised honest bureaucrats which will impact on efficient service delivery.



FOREIGN POLICY

PM Shah has refused to meet high-ranking foreign emissaries, maintaining he will only meet officials of equivalent rank. He has made pronouncements on the border riling both Nepalis and Indians. This has confused Delhi and Beijing and actually brought them together.

SUPPORTERS
PM Shah is showing that he is no pushover, and that Nepal will not grovel to foreigners. Meeting all ambassadors together makes diplomacy more transparent.

CRITICS
This is one foreign policy fiasco after another that has hurt Nepal's standing in the world. Alienating India, China and the US is not smart because it is needlessly aggressive and counterproductive.



PASSPORT PROCUREMENT

The PMO forced the CIAA to issue detention orders against those involved in a contract to supply e-passports and ordered proceedings against two German passport companies and 15 officials. German ambassador Udo Eugen Volz was mistreated during a PMO meeting.

SUPPORTERS
The Balen leadership is showing a zero-tolerance policy towards corruption even when foreign companies are involved. The CIAA was infiltrated by past politicians and needs to be cleaned up.

CRITICS
PMO officials breached diplomatic conduct by needlessly behaving rudely with the ambassador. The PMO pressured officials of an independent watchdog to do its bidding, which is unconstitutional.

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स्टेन्लेस स्टिल पानी ट्याकी

माथि चढ्न, भित्र पसेर सफा गर्न र प्लम्बिङ काम गर्न सकिने, आवश्यकता अनुसारको मोटाइ, आकार र क्षमताको उपलब्ध छ ।

महार्जन मेटल इण्डस्ट्रीज
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Performance vs Process

The first 100 days of the Balendra Shah government show lots of swagger, but little substance

Editorial

Sonia Awale

At the first General Convention of the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) in Chitwan this week, Nepali Congress President Gagan Thapa made an impassioned plea to the ruling party: “We made the mistake of turning our leaders into gods. Learn from us before it is too late.”

Whether the RSP faithful absorbed the message is unclear; they are certainly not showing it yet. That caution was intended not just for the RSP, but for Nepalis everywhere regarding the inherent dangers of a personality cult.

The Convention pushed for scrapping Provincial Assemblies, a move that would effectively dismantle federalism. It backed a directly elected chief executive, but for all intents and purposes, we are already witnessing strongman rule.

After decades of cronyism, corruption, and impunity, Nepalis were desperate for change. The RSP cashed in, sweeping the March election. Many of its decisions in the last three months were clearly intended to address the frustrations, punish those responsible, and put new structures in place.

These moves may be well-intentioned, and we all want genuine government reforms to succeed. But many of the decisions from the past three months demonstrate impatience, impulsiveness, high-handedness, and a disregard for the rule of law.



The RSP's moves have a legitimate rationale — cleaning up the government — but the problem lies in the execution. There is a tendency to resort to gimmicks rather than gumption. It is performance, not process. प्रक्रिया नै परियानाम.

Just because elected leaders in the past undermined the electoral process, it does not mean we should throw the baby out with the bathwater. Authoritarianism is not the answer to a mishandled democracy. As Churchill

said: “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried...”

The RSP's decisions over the past 100 days have been driven by an urgency to show it is action-oriented, yet many moves are hasty and undercooked. Immature handling of diplomacy has jeopardised Nepal's relations with its neighbours and the international community.

The government's most consequential decision to date has been the eviction of thousands in squatter settlements. Identifying the truly landless and arranging alternative housing should have preceded the bulldozers. Now, evicted families face yet another displacement from temporary shelters as the monsoon arrives.

The appointment of a new Chief Justice moved the goalposts via ordinance, but was cloaked as the selection of a politically untainted judge. It ended up looking like yet another political appointment designed to do the PM's bidding.

OLD VS NEW

The RSP claims to be making a clean break from the past to push meritocracy. In some cases, such as the appointment of the CAAN DG that holds true, elsewhere, however, the past is repeating itself as a farce. The blanket removal of 1,500 bureaucrats has also discarded competent civil servants, such as

the NEA chief.

Not everything old is bad, nor is everything new inherently good. Some past political appointees possessed experience and integrity, while many of the new ones are untested and lack exposure. The government's initial disdain for consultation even on matters outside its domain of expertise was puzzling. Now, it looks like arrogance and recklessness.

While the Convention attempted to patch up internal rifts, the RSP continues to face clashes of personality, ideology, and ambition.

The PM is buoyed by vast social media support, but a government cannot run on Facebook likes and shares indefinitely without tangible delivery. An analysis of the comment sections on the PM's own posts already reveals a decline in sycophancy.

Most of the flak the government receives is self-inflicted. Its moves are backfiring in the real world even if that is not yet apparent in the virtual space.

Prime Minister Balendra Shah told his party faithful in Chitwan: “We are on an expressway; we will apply the brakes only when we reach the destination.” It is an indication of his polarising persona that many applauded his infrastructure analogy, while others saw it as a sign of everything rash and dangerous about the man.

Nepal does not just need expressways, it needs equitable and sustainable development, which is only possible through genuine participatory democracy, inclusion, the rule of law, and accountability. That spirit of the GenZ movement is fast fading. 🇳🇵

Trending Online



Kathmandu Valley to Silicon Valley

by Vishad Raj Onta
MIT alumni Sudip Rokaya and Kartikesh Mishra, founders of Lamina Labs, built the AI tool, Simi, that turns simple text prompts into brilliant whiteboard explainer videos in minutes. Read about their work on page 5.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

Only some roads lead north

by Sonia Awale
An analysis of Nepal-China relations by Nepal Economic Forum concludes that obstacles to improving economic ties are within Nepal itself and not in geopolitics. Get details online.

Most popular on X

Indian tourism boom in Nepal

by Shailendra Thakali
Nepal is seeing an off-season Indian tourism boom due to the heatwave in the Subcontinent but the surge in visitors and pilgrims this summer have raised questions of equity and preparedness. Read more on our website.

Most commented



US and India are now regional rivals

by Brahma Chellaney
The Trump administration hopes that the US and India can remain global partners, even as they become regional rivals. The outcome of this will shape the strategic landscape in South Asia and beyond. Read the analysis online.

Most visited online page

Letters

NEPAL AND PHILIPPINES

I've lived in both countries, and Nepal is so much better. The only problem with Nepal is that there is no ocean (Nepali and Philippine economic models', Suugam Nanda Bajracharya, #1316).

Michael Mastin

A country can experience high GDP growth while the majority of the population remains in poverty, as wealth concentrates in the hands of a few. Comparatively Nepal is better than the Philippines in individual well-being. Development is not just skyscrapers, wide roads, and tunnels, personal wellbeing is more important, Philippines has huge gaps between rich and poor, Nepal has proportionally narrower gaps.

Suman Thapa Tharu

Nepal needs better innovation and better tourism.

Hemant Thapa

You cannot compete with or compare countries with dissimilar geographies.

You Utsav

INDIAN TOURISTS

I'm from Kathmandu, where I have been seeing so many cars with Indian license plates, especially near Pashupatinath (Indian off-season tourism boom in Nepal', Shailendra Thakali, #1316).

Sajana Raut

The visa regime between India and its neighbours ought not be so relaxed and without stricter controls. This serves India well, but does not similarly benefit Nepal.

Sumay Sarangi

The tourism boom from India is great for our economy.

Bunty Jain

GEOPOLITICS

So what if there is a trade deficit? Nepal has practically no industry ('Only some roads lead north', Sonia Awale, #1316), of course, they need Chinese imports.

Daniel James Murphy

This is absolutely insane. Nepal frequently blames India for its trade deficit, even though its trade imbalance with China is much larger. For years, communist-led governments pushed misleading narratives about India while largely ignoring the growing deficit with China.

Si Ping

This is one of the most relevant reads in recent times.

Sheershak Dahal

This is a good analysis ('The US and India have become regional rivals', Brahma Chellaney, #1316). If India expects to be nurtured and pampered by the US, it would have to be with it. Americans don't want to see India as a regional hegemon for South Asia anymore. India's wish for "strategic autonomy" is slowly melting into thin air. Times are changing.

Kedar Badu

GREEN FERTILISER

Why not just increase production and use of leaves, compost and manure - 'green fertiliser' ('Securing Nepal's fertiliser future', Chandra Bahadur K C and Sudhindra Sharma, nepalitimes.com)? The case for using compost, manure, interplanting and agroforestry.

David Seddon

Online Package



ROAD OUT OF NEPAL

Until Tribhuvan Rajpath in 1956, Kathmandu was the isolated capital of a country that had no modern surface transport link with the rest of the world. Watch video on our YouTube channel.



YARSA GOLD RUSH

In the rough terrains of Upper Dolpo, the quality and quantity of this lucrative Himalayan fungus is declining, meaning that the yarsa gold rush is becoming riskier. Subscribe for multimedia content.

1,000 Words



RSP/SOCIALS

IN ILLUSTRIOUS COMPANY: Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) Chair Rabi Lamichhane, Prime Minister Balendra Shah and Nepali Congress President Gagan Thapa at the first General Convention of the party in Chitwan earlier this week. The image went viral on socials with a caption 'Ronaldo, Messi and Mbappe' after three most popular footballers at the World Cup 2026.

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When the monsoon cannot be trusted

Nepal prepares to mark National Paddy Day on 29 June as faltering efforts fail to keep pace with climate change

Anju Pandit

Asar 15 observed on 29 June this year is a joyous day for many Nepalis.

It carries memories of fields prepared for planting paddy, bundles of ready-to-be transplanted rice seedlings, farmers engaged in playful mud fights and sharing दही चिउरा and dancing to joyous असारे गित.

But all this is changing as erratic rainfall impacts the crop calendar.

Says Ashok Kumar Rai, 70, a farmer in Dhankuta, "Our agriculture is totally dependent on rainfall timing." But the rain arrives too early some years, before farmers have prepared for planting, while in other years it is delayed, forcing them to wait and adjust. Both reduce harvests.

For households dependent on rainfed farming in eastern Nepal, cultivation is limited to the monsoon. The land lies fallow the rest of the year. This reduces production, raises food costs, and limits diversification into high-value crops.

The indigenous Aathpahariya community in Dhankuta has always depended on agriculture, but their livelihoods are changing because of climate uncertainty. Outmigration is the trend and remittances are now the major source of income for households. Although most families have access to drinking water through the 'one house, one tap' system, supply is limited to 500 litres every 2-4 days. This is barely enough for drinking, cleaning, cooking, and washing, let alone irrigation.

The springs that sustained these communities are also drying up. Of the 56 water sources mapped within Ward 8, 23% are dry, and the rest have slowed to a trickle.

Santosh Kumar Rai, 38, says he used to collect crab and fish



JITENDRA BAJRACHARYA/ICIMOD

from these sources 30 years ago. Now, flows have reduced and only tadpoles can be seen.

The root of this crisis lies in the overall decline of local water systems and not only in rainfall.

To the Aathpahariya, springs are not just water sources but an important part of their cultural and social practices. They worship and make offerings to these water sources during the full moon days in the months of Baisakh and Mangsir. No one is allowed to cut vegetation, bathe, or litter near the water source.

Some springs have dried up but cultural and religious activities continue. These traditions are assets for adaptation, they offer community knowledge and practices that can be integrated with scientific methods for spring restoration.

Communities are already doing their best to adapt. Forty

households in this neighbourhood who were struggling with limited water supply, came together to jointly identify and tap two springs to supplement their limited supplies.

Gyanendra Rai and Ratna Bahadur Rai, Chairs of the Tole Development Committees formed a water users' committee, coordinating with local government for financial support, and contributed labour. A rotational distribution system now ensures that all households have access to drinking water.

Some families grow fruit and vegetables in their kitchen gardens by making use of every drop of water, while others harvest rainwater or have shifted to less water demanding crops.

However, these efforts are mostly trials at household level, without proper technical guidance, long-term planning, or institutional

support. This raises questions about their sustainability and that of the water sources.

SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS

First, we need springshed management at scale. Spring flows cannot be sustained by protecting the discharge points alone. As springs dry up across the landscape, it is only a matter of time before the communities are forced to go farther in search of a new spring to tap.

The good news is that local governments are thinking along these lines. Dhankuta Municipality's investment in spring source mapping is an encouraging shift from ad-hoc responses to evidence-based water security planning.

Second, reviving water sources alone is not enough, communities need to benefit. Springshed management has to be connected

with the productive use in farming and livestock raising such as irrigation that is gravity fed or pumped to where it is needed using renewable energy.

Productive water use that strengthens and diversifies livelihoods options could further strengthen community interest in protecting these sources. This could also help restore traditional crops that have been abandoned over the years due to water stress and agricultural land abandonment.

Third, traditional knowledge and practice should be integrated with scientific methods to protect and rejuvenate springs. Communities have tried and tested traditional knowledge systems and institutional mechanisms that have helped them respond to changing climatic and environmental conditions. Any community ponds and buffalo wallows in hill and mountain settlements, which have been neglected and silted up, can be restored as recharge sites with hydrogeological evidence.

These priorities are closely interlinked. Springshed management can provide water for productive use in a reinforcing loop. Adaptation can become a pathway for sustainability and climate resilience when local government action and community knowledge come together.

Asar 15 must remind us of more than the timely arrival of the rains but that the future of farming will not depend only on whether the monsoon behaves as it once did but how well communities can adapt with its changing patterns.

Farmers are trying to adapt with the knowledge and resources available to them. Their efforts need coordinated support through science, sustained investment, and integration into climate plans and budgets. 🇳🇵

Anju Pandit is Springshed Management Specialist at the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development. The views expressed are her own.

BRIEFS



EU aviation events

The EU held programs in Kathmandu 23-25 June aimed at improving aviation safety in a country which is on its safety list. Over the next two weeks, regional airlines, regulators, and aviation professionals from across South Asia will meet in Kathmandu. CAAN is also holding a crew training and operational standards program with aircraft manufacturer ATR. The module touches on decision-making, operational resilience and fatigue management in the air. Then there will be a regulatory update workshop 29 June - 2 July.

Regulatory sandbox

Nepal Rastra Bank has drafted Regulatory Sandbox Guidelines to foster fintech innovation. The framework allows banks, fintechs, and payment firms to test new products in a controlled environment before full launch. The process aims to promote innovation while protecting consumers.

Ncell Turbo

Ncell is partnering with Trip Turbo to offer customers who buy packs worth Rs99 and over discounts on travel, flights, bus tickets, and other activities. Details of the deals are available in the Ncell App, in the Partnered Services section.

Mustang tourists up

Foreign tourists in Mustang rose 81.84% this fiscal year, reaching 244,880 visitors by mid-June compared to 134,664 same time last year. April-May alone saw 90,939 visitors, of them 90% Indian. The same month last year only saw 24,372 - reflecting a nationwide surge in Indian visitors fleeing the heat in the plains.

Rs3B green zones

The government has allocated Rs3 billion in the coming year to convert cleared squatter settlements into parks, green zones, expanded corridors, and wider river channels in Kathmandu. Plans include river control, sewer improvements, and debris management where 2,687 structures were recently bulldozed, displacing over 15,000 people.



Ather Birganj

Ather Nepal opened an Experience Centre in Birganj on 18 June to showcase the Ather 450 and Rizta e-scooters. Test rides, financing, and exchange schemes are available at the showroom, the company's 12th in Nepal. Ather also operates 40+ fast-charging points in the country.



Hyatt Le Petit Chef

Hyatt Centric Kathmandu's 'Le Petit Chef' is a 3D dinner theatre experience created by Belgian collective Skullmapping, featuring a 58mm animated chef projected onto guests' gourmet plates. Premium, Non-Veg, Veg, and Kids menus are available. Reserve at lepetitchef.com/Kathmandu.

Wildlife attack

The government provided Rs10,000 scholarships to nine students in grades 1-12 who have lost parents to attacks by tigers, bears, rhinos, or elephants. Minister of Forests Gita Chaudhary distributed the aid and promised efforts to reduce human-wildlife conflict.

Cardamom exports

Nepal earned a record Rs12 billion from exporting 6,034 tonnes of large cardamom in the first 11 months of the fiscal year. A strong average price of Rs2,500/kg and demand from India have driven the value. Productivity remains low at 531kg per hectare. Traders call for direct access to the Gulf/Pakistan and better logistics.

Carpet slump

Exports to China dropped 41.71% in the first 10 months of this fiscal year, mainly due to a 75.63% plunge in carpet exports. Rising costs, VAT, labour shortages, and competition from machine-made products have affected the industry. Other declines included copper goods and apparel.

Holding centre

The government has issued a five-day ultimatum to squatters in temporary holding centres to vacate this week, citing monsoon flood risks along riverbanks. Around 388 families in Nagarjun, Banepa, and Bhaktapur must leave. A relief package offers Rs25,000 one-time plus Rs15,000 monthly rental support.



Junior golf tourney

Sushant Kandel, Yeshwi Shrestha, Aaroha Neupane, and Srisha Kandel won titles at the Olympic Day Junior Golf Tournament at Royal Nepal Golf Club. Sushant topped Boys U-18 (15 pts), Yeshwi won Girls U-18 (12 pts), Aaroha won Boys U-14 (12 pts), and Srisha claimed Girls U-14. Around 30 players competed over nine holes.

Kathmandu Valley to Silicon Valley

AI startup secures investor commitment for video explainer project

Vishad Raj Onta

Two young Nepalis have founded an AI company that is on the cusp of takeoff after getting funding from a top accelerator program in the United States.

Sudip Rokaya and Kartikesh Mishra did know each other in Nepal, but met as students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Boston. They are now co-founders at Lamina Labs in San Francisco, working on generative video.

Their first product, Simi, generates whiteboard-style explainer videos based on a text prompt, and has received backing from YCombinator (YC), a top startup accelerator. It quickly also secured further \$3 million funding.

"In high school I did a lot of physics, and I was a visual learner so I really liked educational videos," says Rokaya, currently on leave from his Math and Computer Science undergrad program at MIT. Rokaya was inspired by YouTuber 3Blue1Brown, known for his use of animation and visuals to explain Math topics.

3Blue1Brown wrote Manim, a custom set of tools in the programming language Python that he uses to create animations. This set of tools, called a library, is available for anybody to use or modify.

Last summer, Rokaya was trying to see if he could automate this library to also create videos but he ran into problems because Manim was designed before the Large Language Model (LLM) era, for users experienced in Python.

"Trying to force it to only do this small library is difficult, it would take millions of dollars to fine tune it to get very accurate," says Lamina co-founder and Chief Technical Officer Kartikesh Mishra, who studied Electrical Engineering and Computer Science at MIT, and completed a Master's in Engineering before moving to San Francisco.

Besides, there were other startups already working on the problem that had received funding, so they abandoned that idea. Three months into the semester though, Rokaya was taking a Biology class that was "not one of my favourites".

"I looked for an AI tool that could help me learn through video. None of what I found had particularly good products, and they didn't seem to be improving much either," recalls Rokaya. The problem seemed to be technical and not financial.

At the time, Rokaya was exploring generative AI and agents



PHOTO COURTESY: SUDIP ROKAYA

to 'vibe-code' -- which involves using LLMs to rapidly generate and modify code and software.

"AI coding agents are the single greatest force multiplier available to founders right now. I'm not exaggerating. The leverage is unreal," wrote Rokaya to his 5,000+ LinkedIn audience two months ago.

Sensing an opportunity, Rokaya dove into research in late October, skipping classes, and concluded that the process could be sped up 50 times, while also generating a better end product. He showed it to Mishra, who had worked for two startups in San Francisco. He was impressed enough to join up.

"One reason I came to the US was to gather knowledge in ways that I did not have access to in Nepal," Mishra told us. "MIT was about learning, but in San Francisco I wondered if I should work on something the world needs."

BEATING THE COMPETITION

Their product, Simi, is named for Rokaya's home village of Simikot in the remote corner of northwestern Nepal. "I needed a cool name, and the investors dig it," he says.

Simi is free to test online, and in a test could generate a one-minute explainer video about a concept in economics. The video was structured, with examples, intro, and even tips on how to apply the rule to real life. A talented human animator would have taken many hours to do a similar video.

Users may put in as simple or as complex a prompt as they want to generate the video. For the end product, users can even choose

between three aspect ratios, a male or a female voice, 80 different languages including Nepali, and lengths of 1, 2, 3, or 5 minutes.

In the cutthroat world of AI and technology, where solutions get copied instantly, companies need 'moats' that elevate their products above competitors. Simi's impressive moat is that it is faster, cheaper, and generates better videos all at the same time.

From a quality standpoint, Rokaya and Mishra followed an intense iterative process that involved making small tweaks, solving what was not working, and evaluating the end product.

Simi is a 'deep tech' product, one that runs as close as possible to the machine, as opposed to an 'LLM wrapper' -- a product that uses other models under the hood. With attention span and patience dwindling, speed of generation is a major benefit.

It does all of this while being a relatively small model, cheap to run. Says Rokaya: "As we are both from Nepal, we wanted Nepalis to be able to afford the tool, and deploy it through cheap servers which cuts costs."

He believes that it could help teachers in isolated areas of Nepal like where he comes from.

While Lamina Labs initially thought education was where its product would be most used, the two ran into initial issues selling. "The education business is slow, so we targetted small businesses instead," says Rokaya who was confident it was a unique tool suitable for any field.

YC's first post about Simi went viral, and so has every subsequent update. Twelve days after launch, the company had 4,000 users, 187 of them paying customers.

"Some of our customers are small and home businesses in Kentucky and Florida," says Mishra. "Pet daycares are using our tool to make their clients' videos about dog vaccinations." One Saudi Arabian was on Simi's max plan and used his quota in three days.

Lamina Labs made news because it was the first all-Nepali startup to get funded with \$500,000 from YC which connects its startups to an extensive network of mentors and a community of other talent.

"The main thing is the community. We can text anybody in the system, like the CEO of Airbnb. And they are very active," says Mishra. "It has an acceptance rate of less than 1%. But if you get in, the resources are close to infinite. The mentors know what works, what doesn't."

Both point to the community, rather than the money, as most important. Once every two weeks they have one personal meeting with a YC partner—in their case, a CEO of a company that went public—and one group office hour 'pod' with 12 other companies where they set goals for revenue and number of customers for their company.

"By setting these goals publicly, it makes us accountable and urgent," says Rokaya. "It makes people 100x more productive and effective than they normally are."

Most recently, YC was holding

Demo Day 8 - 16 June, where founders present their product in front of a thousand potential investors. While each company expects to talk to more than 100 investors before getting funding, the first investor that Lamina Labs talked to was ready to invest all of the \$3 million they were asking for.

"They told us not to raise with anyone else, and just get to work. So we are pretty relaxed about the event," says Rokaya. "We are actually having to decline other investors."

With the funding secured, Rokaya and Mishra plan to hire more engineers. Up to now, it has just been the two of them.

Rokaya has cautionary advice for Nepalis in this sector. "People say they want to do startups, it sounds cool. But most of the time they are not ready at all," he says. "So many people are in computer science. There are maybe 1,000 people trying to be successful with the same idea."

Rokaya says people need to be "locked in" with 24/7 focus. The two used to get up at 10, walk four steps to their desks, and work nonstop until 2AM. Mishra admits that is not the healthiest lifestyle, but says the field is so competitive you have to be ahead of everyone else.

The shared Nepali background has been a major help. "A lot of startups break down because the founders can not get along over time. Both of us being from Nepal helps in talking to and understanding each other, and working," says Rokaya. 🇳🇵



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Spools of ropeway cable manufactured in the US.



Nepalis carrying cable to ropeway towers in 1960. The entire project was built by hand.



Running a test of the ropeway. Photo taken near Chandragiri.



Nepali workers and onlookers.

PHIL PUCHNER



Locating the route of the USAID-funded ropeway in 1959.

PHIL PUCHNER

1955

Nepal's Draft Five-Year Plan contemplated the construction of a new ropeway with a carrying capacity of 20 tons per hour between Kathmandu to Hetauda or to Amlekhganj to replace the one commissioned in 1922 by Chandra Shumsher Rana between Dhursing and Matatirtha and built by British engineers.

May 1957

The US Government agreed to grant \$2 million for constructing a ropeway from Kathmandu to Hetauda with Nepal to chip in Rs1.2 million.

1959

A contract between Riblet Tramways of Spokane, Washington and Nepal was signed in Washington on 19 April. Steel towers were fabricated in the US and carried to the sites in pieces for assembly. Long lengths of steel cable were hauled up mountains by porters. It was the most technologically advanced project ever attempted in Nepal. Although supplies came by air, rail and trucks, the ropeway was constructed entirely by hand.

February 1960

Newly-elected Prime Minister B P Koirala laid the foundation stone at Teku.

1962

The ropeway needed so much electricity that a test run dimmed the lights in Kathmandu, demonstrating that the capital's power supply was insufficient. Other technical and administrative difficulties delayed completion.

8 April 1964

Kathmandu-Hetauda Ropeway was handed over to the government and service began the following day. The agreement was signed by Secretary for Economic Planning Bhekh Bahadur Thapa and Acting USAID Director Albert Farwell.

The ropeway could transport 37½ tons of freight per hour. Riblet was to maintain the ropeway for one year and train necessary personnel to manage it. Chief Engineer Tirtha Bahadur Pradhan was trained in America.

27 April 1964

Ropeway inaugurated by King Mahendra and Queen Ratna. Also present was Minister for Transport & Communication Nageswar Prasad Singh.

The project ended up costing \$5,983,087 and its 42km distance was two-thirds shorter than the Tribhuvan Rajpath which was also being built at the time to link Kathmandu to Hetauda. Two thousand Nepalis worked on the project along with 11 American technicians. It was designed to run at 10km/h with a total 428.4 horsepower. Goods took 4 hours 15 minutes to reach Kathmandu from Hetauda. The terminals were provided with electric lights, so they could operate at night. Ropeway staff totaled 125: 40 were guards, the rest warehouse workers, telephone technicians, cable stringers, electricians, storekeepers and truck drivers.

1964

The ropeway immediately proved its usefulness within a few months when the monsoon caused landslides and closed the only road leading into the Valley. The ropeway ran 12 hours a day hauling vital supplies into Kathmandu to avert food and fuel shortages. Exports from Nepal got a 50% remission of charges.

February 1965

Management of the ropeway was handed over to the Nepal Transport Corp (NTC), which began managing the ropeway. Its seven Russian trucks were also transporting goods between Hetauda, Amlekhganj and Narayanghat.

May 1965

During its first 11 months in operation, the ropeway had transported 25,900,000kg of cargo to Kathmandu and 75,000kg from Kathmandu to Hetauda. It operated 9 hours a day carrying 250 tons of goods. The ropeway earned Rs2 million in its first year with expenses totaling Rs800,000.

August 1965

The NTC increased operation to 16-20 hours daily so it could transport up to 600 tons of cargo.

June 1966

Price for cargo transport was fixed at Rs2.50 for a maund (37kg) for foodgrains, and Rs2.85 for development materials, and Rs3.50 for other goods.

1968

The ropeway hauled 33,333 tons of goods that year, although it never transported its full handling capacity of 50,000 tons.

May 1969

NTC set rates from Raxaul on the Indian border to Kathmandu 36% lower than the corresponding rates per kg offered by trucking companies. It also provided covered carriers to protect salt, sugar, cement and other goods from rain and losses were reimbursed to customers. NTC opened an office in Calcutta to generate more business. But at the same time it also added additional trucks to its fleet to provide better service from Raxaul to Hetauda.

In September 1973 NTC planned to replace the ropeway's track cables at a cost of Rs6.7 million and increase the cargo capacity from 16 tons to 24 tons per hour. The new cables could support 425 carriers, nearly 100 more than the previous cable. It charged Rs55 per ton for food grains while trucks from Hetauda to Kathmandu charged Rs95 per ton.

January 1974

The global oil crisis due to the OPEC oil embargo meant that 3,000 tons of goods destined for Kathmandu were stranded at Raxaul. The ropeway transported 150 tons of goods daily to Kathmandu but could not operate at full capacity due to poor condition of its traction cables.



Technical Details

Capacity	25 tons/hour
Load weight	545kg each carrier
Carrier spacing	251m
Speed	90 seconds between carrier arrivals
Length	42km
Length of cable	177km
Cable stations	Hetauda, Bhainse, Golping, Chisapani Garhi, Nayagaun, Dhara Pani, Takse, Teku
Towers	280



Ropeway in operation near Kirtipur, 1974.

THE HETAUDA-KATHMANDU ROPEWAY

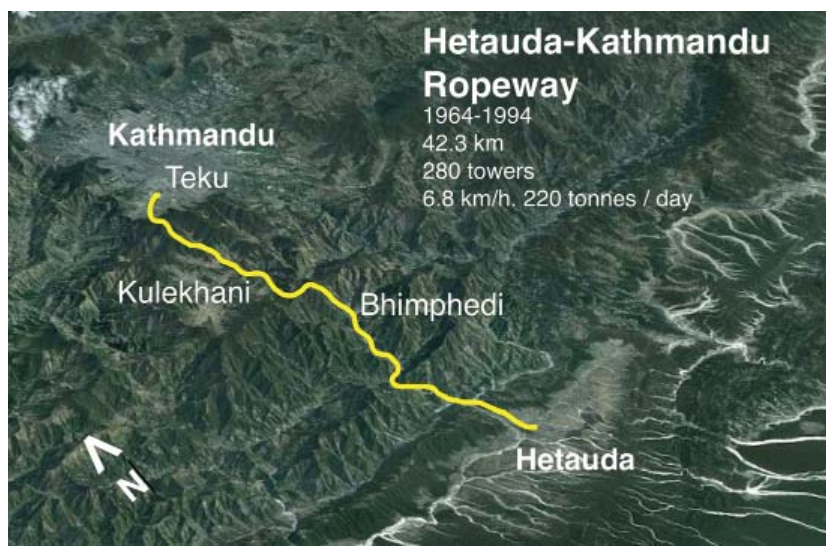
The cargo transportation system of its time, but was a victo

Dan Edwa



A ropeway tower in the Kathmandu Valley in 1982.

DAN EDWARDS



Hetauda-Kathmandu Ropeway

1964-1994
42.3 km
280 towers
6.8 km/h, 220 tonnes / day

agiri.

PHIL PUCHNER

THE KATHMANDU ROPWAY

system was decades ahead
victim of mismanagement

wards

October 1976

The ropeway idled for more than two months because there were no customers despite cheaper rates. Truck companies undercut the ropeway's tariffs. Nearly 200 private trucks were purchased with bank loans by Hetauda businessmen, and government corporations bought their own trucks.

March 1977

On some days, the ropeway operated only four hours and was idle because of inadequate and erratic power supply.

1979

Monsoon rains damaged highways leading to Kathmandu, and the ropeway had to come to the rescue once more.

1980/81

The ropeway was closed for two years because of the shortage of electricity.

1982

The opening of the Narayanghat-Mugling-Kathmandu Highway further reduced cargo traffic.

1985

Twenty years after it was launched, the ropeway was operating only once or twice a week due to lack of business.

1986

A feasibility study was undertaken to increase ropeway's capacity to 100 tons an hour and analyse ways to hand it over to the private sector. The study found:

- The total cargo imported to Kathmandu by truck was about 2,585 tons a day.
- Ropeway had annual losses of Rs2,564,500 in 1982/83, Rs3,041,000 in 1983/84, Rs3,439,000 in 1984/85, and Rs3,025,000 in 1985/86.
- Rs9.8 million rupees would be needed to rehabilitate the ropeway system.
- Tariff rate per ton could be reduced from Rs225 to Rs180 if working capacity was increased from 60% to 80%.
- Four modes to privatise ropeway were proposed: making it a semi-public enterprise, turning over management control, leasing it, or selling it to a private party.

March 1991

NTC losses rose to Rs3.36 million during 1989/90. Cargo capacity was reduced from 22 tons/day to less than 18 tons/day, 400 carriers were needed to operate at full capacity, but only 300 were in service. Working hours had decreased from 18 to 7 per day.

December 1991

Nepal signed agreement with Poma Co of France to repair the ropeway within 15 months.

August 1992

NTC announced French assistance of Rs70 million to improve the system. But only a 12km sector was repaired.

1993/94

The ropeway proved its value once again when severe monsoon floods and landslides caused major damage to highway and cut off Kathmandu Valley from the rest of the country.

August 1995

The ropeway remained underused as trucks did most of the cargo transport.

Why? "We are not able to provide reliable service," admitted NTC Deputy General Manager Prakash Kumar Paudyal. "The ropeway service is necessary whenever something goes wrong with highways. But after the trouble was over, government turned a deaf ear. Overstaffing, lack of proper rules and regulations, and lack of professionalism have led most public enterprises to the brink of virtual collapse."

Out of 360 carriers, only 125 were in daily use, and 29 of them were under repair. Due to damaged wires and carriers and sometimes power outages, service was delayed.

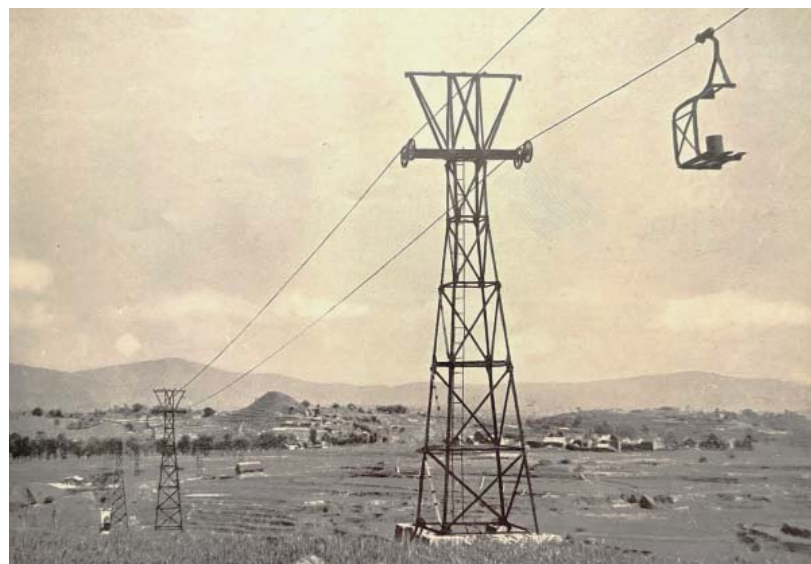
9 August 1995

The Rising Nepal wrote in an editorial: "It will surprise many that the ropeway service, started almost 32 years ago, has been 'hanging by a thread.' Instead of depending on ropeway, more goods are being transported through the highways, which of course costs more. It was realized in the past that the ropeway was cheaper, and it used non-polluting electrical power, which was not imported, unlike fossil fuels like petrol and diesel. Over the years,



Using a theodolite to survey the route of the ropeway.

PHIL PUCHNER



The new USAID-built ropeway near Kathmandu around 1965.

USAID

the import bill for petroleum products has risen dramatically. The cost of ropeway service is Rs. 330 per ton which is cheaper by Rs. 140 than truck transport. It delivers goods from Hetauda to Kathmandu 4 or 5 hours faster than trucks do.

Despite these benefits, ropeway service is barely able to sustain itself. NTC official admits that lack of proper maintenance and overstaffing are among the reasons for the deplorable condition of the service. Only a complete overhauling of the basic infrastructures, including the towers, cables, and a steady supply of electricity can save the ropeway from becoming defunct.

The use of electricity for transportation is reliable and cheap. The trolley bus service is also a good example of this, but that too may go the way of ropeway service. There is a loud call for non-polluting fuels, and both trolley bus and ropeway services deserve adequate patronage.'

May 1997

Ropeway service came to a standstill because of minimal cargo, its poor condition due to need for repairs and maintenance, and inefficient operation.

December 1997

Engineers reported that ropeway cables needed replacement and recommended 137 new carriers be installed to increase capacity. But due to lack of demand, the ropeway stopped daily services. Cement from Hetauda Cement Factory was unavailable due

to decreased production, and traders switched to trucks. Only 229 of the 366 carriers were in operation.

January 1998

Security of goods and potential safety of residents living under ropeway cables transporting tons of materials were serious issues. People could steal goods from carriers from their house verandahs in Kuleswor. Ropeway charged Rs386 rupees per ton as against Rs500 but it still could not run a business.

April 1998

The failure of two transformers at Bhainse and Takse permanently shut down service. Repairs would cost Rs800,000. NTC never made repairs and incurred losses of Rs900,000 a month as ropeway remained idle and staff continued to receive salaries.

August 1999

A government committee recommended scrapping the money-losing venture as Rs20 million would be needed for repairs and Rs100 million to towers away from heavily populated areas between Thankot and Teku.

December 2001

The NTC shut down the ropeway for good, its 200 employees were dismissed.

Dan Edwards was a Peace Corps volunteer in 1966 and is the author of several books on Nepal. This is the fifth instalment in a new limited series in Nepali Times on the historic transportation infrastructures of Nepal.



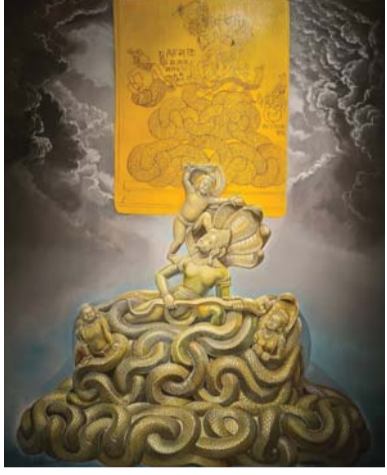
DAN EDWARDS



Events

Ropain Day

Connect with nature and join paddy plantation events in your neighbourhood and across the city. Enjoy farm fresh food, including dahi chiura, during the festivities. **29 June**



Archetype

The contemporary solo art exhibition Archetype by Krishna Gopal Shrestha takes inspiration from ancient manuscripts, painting and sculptures, and explores Nepal's earliest artistic traditions. **Until 12 July, 11am-7pm (closed on Mondays), Gallery 108, Darbar Marg**

Gwaramari Photowalk

Explore the streets of Kathmandu as part of Yeki Studio's photowalk open for all photographers and creators. The event is accompanied by a gwaramari breakfast. **27 June, 6am, Asan, Kathmandu**



Garden socials

Explore a variety of vendors and products at Garden Project's second weekend market. Support small and local businesses. Entry is free. **27 June, 12m-7pm, Garden Project, Bhanimandal**

Roots and Blooms

Shivangini Rana's solo exhibition Roots and Blooms displays paintings made on pashmina and silk shawls. **Until 11 July, Kala Salon, Chaya Center, Thamel**



Music



Kutumba

Watch Kutumba perform some of their most famous tunes at the Agro Tourism and Musical Fest this weekend. Learn a little about farming and enjoy good food with close ones. **27 June, Rs1,000, 9am onwards,**

Jhuma Limbu

Catch Jhuma Limbu perform her crowd favourites live for Raithane Ghumphir at Moksh. **26 June, 8pm, Rs1,000-Rs2,000, Moksh, Jhamsikhel**

Musical Night

Join an unforgettable musical night where popular artists including Neetesh Jung Kunwar, The Elements and others will perform. **27 June, Rs999-Rs6,749, 8pm onwards, Club Nova, Thamel**



Hip-Hop evening

Laure and Bad Company are set to woo the crowd with the help of Mumbai-based DJ FlipTrip. Go with friends. **26 June, Rs800, 8pm onwards, XO Club, Thamel**



Himalayan Rhythm

Witness a unique celebration with music maestros like Ujan Shakya Wo: Emerge, Kuma Sagar & The Khwopa at the Himalayan Rhythm & Fest. **4 July, Rs1,000, Everest Hotel, Baneswor**



Getaway

Meghauli Serai

Leave your worries behind and head to this luxurious safari lodge in the heart of Chitwan National Park. Overlooking the Rapti river, this lodge offers scenic views and design that integrates local culture and art. **Chitwan National Park, 9851218500**



Begnas Lake Resort

Located in one of the most agriculturally flourishing areas of Pokhara, make sure to take the opportunity to explore and try locally grown coffee, grains, oranges and more. **Begnas Lake, Pokhara, 9856061080**

Champadevi Hillside

Relax beside nature and take in views of the hillside. Perfect for retreats - visitors can relax poolside with refreshing food and drink options. **Dakshinkali, 9763699009**



Mountain Vista Retreat

Enjoy beautiful views of the hills and a peaceful escape. With ample amenities and special packages for the world cup season, this could be a perfect getaway. **Nagarkot, 97 3296489**

Village Heritage

Located at the top of Rara Hill, this humble hotel offers one of the best views of the breathtaking Rara Lake and the spectacular forest of Rara National Park. In the summer, ride horses along the lake and go on scenic boat rides that can last as long as a couple hours. **Rara, Mugu, 9748917755**



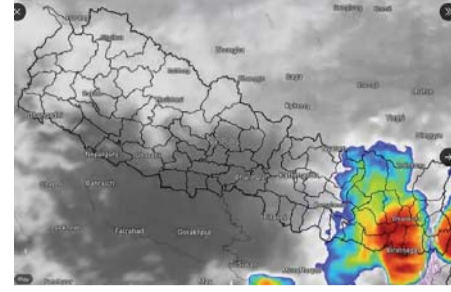
Tasneem King's Kitchen

Tasneem's mouthwatering authentic Bohra Muslim cuisine is a must for enthusiasts of flavorful, spicy and savoury dishes. From slow-cooked Dum Biryanis to traditional 10-course Bohra Thaals, it is a place that brings food-lovers together. **Pulchok, 9801121212**

8848 Mt. Bar

8848 offers a selection of world-class beverages at a reasonable price. Enjoy your favorite drinks inside the bar, on the patio or in the courtyard. **Gokarna Forest Resort, Thali (01) 4451212**

Weekend Weather



Monsoon Tug-o-war

The Southwest Monsoon arrives in Nepal from the east because the terrain forces the winds from the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal arms to swivel over Assam. The monsoon had already broken over Kathmandu on Monday, but it is now playing a tug-o-war with persistent westerlies. This precipitation map for Thursday shows the rain trying to force its way westward, but being blocked in the east.



Our Pick

BBC's new documentary Tiger Island takes viewers to a forested island in Nepal's Bardia district, where a crew of scientists and cinematographers track tigers in the wild and uncover never before observed behaviour in the big cats before. The team discover two tiger mothers raise their cubs together, and use night vision cameras that capture new details. Wildlife guides and sisters Sushila and Manju Mahatara play a significant role in helping the crew track the tigers. Tiger Island is available on BBC. Read the review of the documentary, and about sisters Sushila and Ranju Mahatara, on page 9.

MISS MOTI-VATION

KRIPA JOSHI



Dining



Dhokaima

Try their Chicken Florentine: tender chicken breast marinated in herbs and grilled, served with spinach sauce, corn and salad. Check out the excellent selection of cakes, brownies, and other desserts as well.

Bungalow Kitchen

At Bungalow Bar and Kitchen, try authentic Thai dishes such as Som Tam Essan, Pad Kra Pao and Red Curry. Also sample their selection of excellent asian-fusion dishes like Pork Bamboo Shoot, Buff Lemon Grass and Fried Calamari, with a side of refreshing cocktails. **Naxal, Bhatbhateni, 9802032396/980106830**



Mezze by Roadhouse

Smart interiors and a chic terrace with a view of the palace provide a great atmosphere to enjoy dinner with friends. From the menu, the chef's specials are highly recommended: smoked momo, and grilled chicken with linguine vegetable. **Mercantile Plaza, Darbar Marg (01)**

सामाजिक सञ्जाल प्रयोगमा सचेतता अपनाऔं

- सामाजिक सञ्जालमा अपरिचित व्यक्तिको साथी बन्ने अनुरोधलाई विश्वस्त भएर मात्र प्रतिक्रिया जनाऔं ।
- अपरिचित व्यक्तिलाई जथाभावी साथी बन्न अनुरोध नपठाऔं ।
- सामाजिक सञ्जाल तथा अन्य विद्युतीय माध्यमबाट चिठ्ठा पुरस्कार जस्ता आर्थिक प्रलोभनका प्रस्तावको भरमा नपरौं ।
- आफूले प्रवाह गरेका सन्देश वा सूचनाबाट समाजमा पर्नसक्ने नकारात्मक प्रभावको ख्याल गरौं ।
- आफ्नो सन्देशले कुनै व्यक्ति वा अन्य कुनै समुदायको आत्मसम्मानमा चोट नपुऱ्याऔं ।



नेपाल सरकार
विज्ञापन बोर्ड



NO TIGER IS AN ISLAND

Nepali sisters help BBC documentary uncover brand new Tiger behaviour in Bardia

Sudiksha Tuladhar

Sushila Mahatara and her sisters grew up in the wilderness of Bardia in the plains of western Nepal where their father was an elephant mahout.

Eldest of seven sisters, Sushila had to start earning at an early age to support her family. She started out working in a local lodge, but soon answered the call of the wild to volunteer for a community anti-wildlife poaching unit at Bardia National Park.

This was in the early 2000s, and the Maoist insurgency was at its peak. The Army was busy fighting the insurgents, and wildlife traffickers exploited the lack of jungle patrols to kill tigers and rhinos for their valuable parts.

Sushila (pictured) and her two sisters Manju and Ranju trained as nature guides at the national park, but it was not easy to be accepted. “Before me, there were no women wildlife guides in the area. Even after completing my training, people questioned at every step whether I could handle the jungle as a woman and become an effective wildlife guide.”

Sushila and Manju play an important role in tracking the big cats for the acclaimed new BBC documentary *Tiger Island* which was shot in Bardia over two seasons last year. Wildlife experts used drones, terrain vehicles and night vision cameras to track tigers in the wild and uncovered behaviour that is rewriting knowledge about the big striped cats.

“Working on the documentary with the BBC gave us an incredible opportunity to learn how new technology can help study wildlife behaviour from a completely different perspective,” says Sushila. “Along with a great learning opportunity, it gave us a chance to get a glimpse inside the night life of tigers and the behaviour of male cats.”

Nepal had only 121 tigers in 2010, but the number has now crossed 400. *Tiger Island* has put an international spotlight on this dramatic success in tiger conservation, but also the problem it has created with overcrowding in the country’s national parks



Stills from BBC's new documentary *Tiger Island*.



and the increase in human-wildlife contact.

The documentary spans two episodes and is filmed through Bardia National Park and surrounding buffer zones. Bardia is a hotspot for tigers in Nepal where the population has rebounded along the many riverine islands of the Karnali alluvial fan.

In the first episode, viewers are introduced to the tiger territories of Goma and her daughter Mala. Goma is nurturing two cubs and Mala three. Another tigress named Jugini has two cubs in an adjoining territory.

This documentary captures unexpected behaviour of these tiger families and the role of males that has surprised wildlife scientists, researchers and experts — overturning accepted belief about the habits of tigers in the wild.

Goma, for example, is seen in drone footage to be sharing

parenting duties with Jugini. Tigresses babysitting each other’s offspring was unheard of.

Another firmly held belief of tiger ecologists was that male tigers were solitary animals and abandoned their offspring — the film proves that they can be dads, too.

“Male lions live in family packs and help raise cubs if the mother dies, but male tigers were thought to be loners who do not share parenting duties,” says Sushila. “But the film has overturned that view.”

TIGERS AT NIGHT

The second episode of *Tiger Island* takes us on a nocturnal tour of Bardia with tigers are on the prowl. Night vision drones and thermal cameras offer never before seen footage of the big cats at night such as a cub and her mother working as a team to hunt deer.

The documentary has some of the most unique film sequences and perspectives ever seen in wildlife films. The guides and the team are themselves filmed as they film the tigers, recording their shock as they watch the drone monitors, night vision images or remote tracking cameras.

“The reason tigers seem to be cooperating more than usual is because of the change in their habitat,” says Dhan Bahadur Tamang of Nepal Tiger Trust. “A female babysits another female’s cubs while one of them is hunting so as to protect them from a dangerous male.”

Tiger densities usually compose 1 female per 15-20 sq km while a single male patrols 70 sq km of territory. With climate change and warming weather, tigers have been migrating to cooler, higher altitudes. They have been seen at elevations of 3,300 metres in Dadeldhura and Ilam. Increasing population and scarce water sources pose more threats.

Explains Tamang: “Many factors such as availability of suitable habitat, climate, prey and water play an important role in tigers moving or staying in any territory.”

Having worked as the wildlife guide for ten years now, Sushila Mahatara has amassed a lot of experience and has observed some of the changes in tiger behaviour but being a part of the filming team revealed even more secrets.

She tells us: “If more people learn about tigers in Nepal through this documentary, they will visit Nepal, boosting eco-tourism which in turn will help fund conservation efforts. The message is that tigers can co-exist with humans and are not just dangerous predators.”

Thermal cameras also capture the alpha male Badheil tracking Goma and her cubs. The ecologists expect him to be after the cubs to kill them and establish territorial hegemony. But what a surprise to see Goma greeting Badheil, and the cubs playing with him. Turns out Badheil is the father of the cubs.

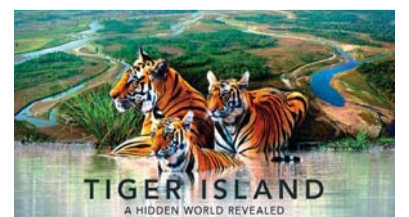
Nurturing cubs until they are adolescent is the duty of mothers. The role of males is to mate, and to remove male rivals from their territory. Male tigers roam across multiple female territories to mate with them.

While all this is still true, seeing Bandeil bond with the cubs and Goma being carefree after leaving them to Bandeil’s care is a rare sight that has left tiger ecologists and guides in awe.

Says Shovna Upadhyay, a wildlife photographer and writer, “There is so much we are yet to learn about tiger behaviour. We are just scratching the surface at present.”

However, head of wildlife programs at WWF Nepal Shashank Poudel says studies from India followed through a long period of time in 1982-83 showed similar tiger behaviour.

“In Nepal, we were not able to record such behaviour due to lack of modern equipment and technology, as a result of which the behaviour did not reach the public eye. So the behaviour itself cannot be called new, but a new observation or record,” he adds.



Tiger Island
BBC Studios, 2026
Directed by Patrick Evans and Lindsey Parietti
114 minutes (two episodes)
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m002x3br>
<https://nepalitimes.com/no-tiger-is-an-island>

NEPAL'S FORGOTTEN CULTURAL REVOLUTION

The war ended 20 years ago, but the reckoning with the Maoists' destruction of heritage has not begun

Sushan Bhattarai
in Dailekh

The schoolteacher walked ahead of me through the terraced hillside above Dullu in the west of Nepal, and paused where the path crests a small rise to gesture at a clearing below. We descended together into it.

There was one standing wall, sun-bleached, cracked along its upper courses, listing slightly as though exhausted, rising from weeds and what looked, from a distance, like piled rubble. This was all that remained of the Dullu Darbar, a palace built in the 1920s by artisans from Kathmandu on the site of the old Malla royal compound – centuries earlier it was the winter seat of Khas-Malla kingship.

"It burnt for several days," the teacher said. "You could see smoke from several villages away. Nobody came. Nobody stopped it."

Two decades on, the Dullu Darbar exists primarily as a negative space: a wall, a museum of surviving objects established in the shell of what was burnt, and an absence so complete that most accounts of the Maoist insurgency from 1996 to 2006 simply do not mention it. This is an attempt to take that absence seriously, and to ask why the taking-seriously has taken so long.

The scholarship on the war has grown considerably since the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA). What has not grown is a reckoning with what the conflict destroyed. The insurgency's destruction of cultural heritage remains largely unaccounted for.

This is not an accidental omission. It reflects the structure of post-conflict discourse in Nepal, which has consistently privileged political negotiations, constitutional change and the institutional trajectories of the post-conflict state.

What is absent from that discourse is the systematic destruction of heritage sites across western Nepal, the banning of traditional music and the erasure of local cultural life as a deliberate revolutionary program.

To understand why the palace was targeted, we need to understand what Dullu was, and what it was not, in the imagination of the Nepali state.

THE WRONG SIDE

The oldest inscription in the Nepali language is believed to have been composed here, during the reign of King Bhupal Damupal, some time in the 10th century. A dynastic pillar erected in 1354 CE by the Khas-Malla king Prithvi Malla still also stands on the site.

These are not minor antiquities: they are among the earliest material traces of the language and polity from which the Nepali nation claims its origins. And yet, none of it was legible to the Kathmandu-centred national heritage imaginary. Dullu was on the wrong side of the mountains, the rivers, and the historical imagination of the state.

By the time the writer Manjushree Thapa travelled to Dailekh, Kalikot and Jumla during a 2003 ceasefire, she found in western Nepal – the epicentre of the Maoist insurgency – a country almost entirely invisible to the capital: district headquarters that lacked road access, a generation of children whose schooling had been destroyed by the conflict, a population long dependent on migration to India for survival.



**30/20
CONFLICT
ANNIVERSARY
1996-2006-2026**

The Karnali basin had some of the country's worst food insecurity, lowest literacy, and highest maternal mortality. It also had the weakest state presence – which is another way of saying it had the most fertile ground for an insurgency that promised to address exactly these failures.

The Karnali basin's heritage was provincial residue in the national imagination, which made it, when the insurgency arrived, both a target and an absence: important enough to destroy, invisible enough that its destruction would go unrecorded.

The Maoists – officially, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) – launched their 'People's War' on 13 February 1996, drawing directly on Mao Zedong's dictum that political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.

The movement's vocabulary was explicit: the government, the



monarchy, and the social order they sustained were all 'feudal forces'. That term came with operational consequences. If the old palaces of the hill districts were materially feudal, if they concentrated in brick and timber the accumulated hierarchy of caste and kingship, then destroying them was not vandalism, it was doctrine.

It was also, within a framework the Maoists drew consciously from their ideological forebears, a form of political iconoclasm: the deliberate destruction of images and objects that anchor a particular symbolic order, undertaken not in spite of their significance but because of it.

The burning of a palace is not incidental to this program. It is the program. By eliminating the physical substrate of a symbolic order, the revolutionary actor performs, for witnesses and perpetrators alike, the death of the world the destroyed object had inhabited.

The cultural program of the insurgency operated within this logic. Cadres moved from village to village staging songs and plays depicting Maoist heroism, schools were reordered around revolutionary calendars, the royal national anthem was banned in Maoist-controlled areas and replaced with revolutionary songs.

The Maoists' student wing formally demanded the anthem's abolition. In western Nepal, even traditional deuda folk songs were suppressed as part of what the movement's publications called the elimination of 'declining and

indecent culture'.

Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, a French anthropologist at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS) in Paris, and a scholar who has produced one of the most sustained accounts of the Maoist insurgency's cultural dimensions, has documented this from her fieldwork in Achham.

The Maoists asked Damai bards in western Nepal to replace the apostrophe 'O King' with 'Hey Comrade'. Some could not. The form was built around the address to the royal patron, and without it the recitation came apart. They chose silence.

The Maoist leadership understood its own project in these terms. Interviewed in 2000, the party's chairman, Prachanda, said that "a whole cultural revolution was going on among the people. Questions of marriage, questions of love, questions of family, questions of relations between people. All of these things were being turned upside down and changed in the rural areas."

This was not cultural change as a byproduct of political change. It was, as Lecomte-Tilouine identifies in one of her essays, a cultural revolution in the technical sense: a structured program for unmaking the symbolic infrastructure of the old state and replacing it with a revolutionary alternative.

The burning of the Dullu Darbar was one of the most significant single acts in this campaign, but the pattern it represented was geographically coherent and repeatable.

The attack on Achham, in



Sudurpashchim Province, gives the clearest picture of what that destruction looked like in practice. On 13 February 2002, the sixth anniversary of the beginning of the 'People's War', approximately 2,500 Maoist guerrillas stormed Mangelsen, the district headquarters, bombing government buildings and executing officials and security personnel.

According to a report in Nepali Times the following week, they killed all 57 soldiers in the Mangalsen garrison, along with 77 policemen and five civilians, in what was the single most damaging strike by the Maoists up to that point.

The Mangalsen Darbar, a three-storey, 30-room palace built around 150 years earlier by the Achham king Tikabhuk Shah and



RAMESWAR BOHARA / A PEOPLE WAR

his son Dal Bahadur Shah in the style of Kathmandu's Hanuman Dhoka Darbar, was caught up in the bombardment and severely damaged.

The Galkot Darbar in Baglung sits at the other end of the evidentiary spectrum. After Bharatbam's death in the early 1980s, the palace passed to his son Madhavbam Malla, a schoolteacher who lived there with his family and maintained the building.

In 2002, Maoists killed Madhavbam and forced his family to flee to Kathmandu. Maoist cadres also looted historical documents from the palace. Their fate is unknown, and they are almost certainly gone forever. Unlike a ruined wall, their absence leaves no visible trace.

Iconoclasm works precisely because it is irreversible. What the doctrine could not account for was the kind of significance the Dullu Darbar held beyond its feudal associations. When it burnt, it took with it proof of a past that had already been systematically neglected.

Lecomte-Tilouine returned to Dullu in the spring of 2003, a year after the palace was burnt, having first done fieldwork there in 2000. The account she gathered of what had happened in Dullu during the intervening years came through a villager she calls Shyam, a Kshatriya man in his mid-forties, not a political activist, interviewed by a trusted local intermediary.

Shyam opens not with the palace but with music. The Maoists had banned traditional music in Dullu: the deuda songs,

the damaha drum, instruments that accompanied weddings and funerals.

"When they heard music somewhere, they would immediately turn up, encircle [the musicians] and ask them: 'Why are you playing music?'" This, Shyam says, was where the fire started within the entire population.

What follows in his account is a confrontation between two incompatible cosmologies. The Maoists organised a ceremony of social reversal, forcing dominant-caste people to eat food cooked by oppressed-caste people, climbing step by step through the caste hierarchy – from the Badis to the Damais to the Kamis to the Kshatriyas – seeking to dismantle the logic of caste pollution through enforced ritual transgression.

When they reached the dhamis, dominant-caste ritual mediums through whom deities speak, 35 of them began simultaneously to be possessed. They put stones in their mouths, chewed on them and spat them out. The Maoists, Shyam says simply, were surprised. They gave up.

Later, Maoist cadres seized a dhami and cut his sacred lock of hair, which a dhami never cuts, and confiscated the metal statues from his temple. The stated purpose was ideological: to demonstrate publicly that there is no godly power.

The villagers' interpretation ran in an entirely different direction. They concluded that the Maoists had taken the lock of hair for the gold and silver rings devotees had tied into it, and had



AMAR SUNAR / RAJDHANI

WAR RELICS: (clockwise) Surya Bahadir Shahi was 13 when he was injured by a socket bomb hurled at a rally in Dullu of Dailekh in December 2004.

The Dullu Darbar before Maoists burned it down in 2002.

What remains of the historic palace in Dullu 24 years later.



SUSHAN BHATTARAI

taken the statues out of greed. This misreading is a measure of the chasm between the Maoists' cultural program and the people they were claiming to liberate. The Maoists were performing the destruction of superstition. The villagers were watching petty theft.

In 2004, Dullu rose up in revolt against the Maoists, much to their shock and chagrin. The trigger was forced labour on a Maoist road project, plus the cumulative weight of years of violence by the party, the deeper cause was the cultural attacks set out above. The uprising was civilian-led, largely driven by women, and it spread from Dullu across 13 neighbouring village wards within weeks.

Afterwards, the Maoist Dailekh District Committee published a formal repentance text in Janadesh, the party's weekly newspaper, confessing its mistakes in the district. Among the listed errors: 'insisting that religion, culture, traditions, festivals and food, etc. be not contrary to Marxist rules'. The repentance was practical rather than moral: the committee specified that action in the religious and cultural field should be avoided because "it weakens the People's War".

Not because destroying the dhamis' locks of hair was wrong. Because it was counterproductive. This is the document that tells you most clearly what the cultural program was: not an excess, not a local misreading of central policy, but a program applied consistently enough that the district committee had to formally enumerate its mistakes.

POST-CONFLICT NARRATIVE

The mixed reception of the palace's burning in Dullu is what the post-conflict national narrative has most thoroughly erased. My own interviews over the past year produced testimony that mirrors what Lecomte-Tilouine found.

A former schoolgirl who was

12 years old in 2002 described watching an older Dalit neighbour at the edge of the crowd weeping, and not being able to tell, for a long time, whether the tears were of grief or something else.

"He kept saying, 'Now it is gone,'" she told me. "He meant the rule of it. The shape of the thing." For those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy the palace had always represented exclusion, its destruction carried a genuine charge of liberation.

A former schoolteacher broadly sympathetic to the Maoists at the time, now spoke with the clarity of long retrospection: "We all knew the palace represented the old power. That part was true. But what they burnt was also our proof that there was once a great kingdom here, that the Nepali language came from here, that this place mattered. They burnt the proof."

This phrase, "they burnt the proof", names something that scholarship has not yet adequately grappled with. Political iconoclasm is, by definition, selective: it targets the symbols of the enemy, not one's own. But the Dullu Darbar was not only a symbol of feudal authority.

It stood on the site of a medieval capital whose history the Nepali state had spent a century marginalising – a history that belonged, in some real sense, to the very communities in whose name the Maoists claimed to act. And yet what burnt was irreplaceable.

The CPA signed in November 2006 ended the fighting, committing both the government and the Maoists to establishing a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

The commission took nine years to constitute. Its mandate, as defined in the 2014 TRC Act, covers 'grave violation of human rights'. It does not extend to the damaha drum that was not played at a funeral in Achham in 2003, or the manuscripts that were taken

from the Galkot Darbar and have not been seen since.

The Supreme Court ordered a Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons in 2007, but the government did not establish it until 2015. In the decade since, the commission has verified a list of 2,514 disappeared persons but has completed no investigations nor determined the exact fate of so much as a single victim.

The Maoists, having renounced armed struggle and entered mainstream politics, won the first election after the war. The leaders who authorised the burning of the Dullu Darbar went to Parliament, to the cabinet, to prime ministership. The palace remained a ruin.

The heritage violence of the civil war has never been named as such in Nepal's post-conflict settlement. Because the Maoist movement understood its own iconoclasm as constitutive rather than incidental, that framing has held: what was burnt and looted and smashed has been absorbed into the story of a justified struggle. It has not been named as destruction. It has not been mourned.

The schoolteacher who walked me up the hillside did not want to be recorded. In Dullu, retrospective disillusionment takes a specific form: not monarchist nostalgia, not rejection of the republic that emerged from the war, but a particular grief over cultural loss compounded by the post-conflict state's indifference.

The ruins of the Dullu Darbar are legible as ruins. They tell a story about power and violence and selective memory that is available to anyone who makes the journey here, who stands before the solitary surviving wall and tries to read in it the dimensions of what used to stand there. 🇳🇵

This piece was originally published in Himal Southasian on 26 May 2026. A longer version of this piece can be found online.



Three Nepali photographers exhibit in Italy

Kishor Sharma, Uma Bista, and Sagar Chhetri showcase their images in prestigious gallery



KISHOR SHARMA

An exhibition titled *Nepal Today: In the Forest, In the Villages* is being held in Italy, showcasing the work of three noted Nepali photographers: Kishor Sharma, Uma Bista, and Sagar Chhetri. The two-month-long exhibition in the town of Lonato del Garda near Venice was curated by Filippo Maggia and will be open to the public through 30 August.

Kishor Sharma's contribution, *Living in the Mist* (pictured above, left), is the product of six years

of close documentation of the nomadic Raute community and their way of life. Also published as a photo book, the work offers a rare glimpse into the Rautes' resistance to absorption into the modern world, prompting reflection on the possibility of alternative and autonomous modes of living.

His book *Living in the Mist* was reviewed in this paper in 2023 under the title *Imagine No Possessions*. One of Sharma's photographs of the Raute is the

cover image of the book *Nepal Today: In the Forest, In the Villages* (pictured, right). That book features some of the photos from the exhibition and is published by Silvana Editoriale.

LANGUAGE OF IMAGES

Writes Maggia in the book: 'While in the West photography seems to have lost its way amid the endless proliferation of images since the advent of the digital era, photographic practice across the



UMA BISTA

Global South remains widespread and supported by research and production centres of international standing'.

He adds: 'Uma Bista, Sagar Chhetri, and Kishor Sharma (are) united by their engagement with social, political, and gender-related issues. Their projects reflect the transformations currently reshaping Nepal, where the language of images foregrounds the social responsibility of the photographer, going far beyond traditional reportage and documentary inquiry.'

In *Our Songs from the Forest* (pictured, above) Uma Bista follows young women from Achham district who are living under Chhaupadi — a practice that confines women to cowsheds during menstruation, branding

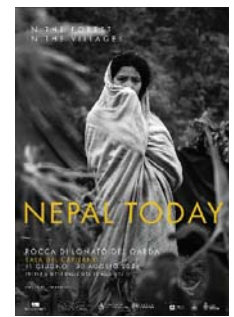
them impure and untouchable. Despite being outlawed in 2005 and criminalised in 2018, the tradition persists, upheld by fears of ostracism and divine retribution.

Our Songs from the Forest was exhibited by Bista in 2019 in Kathmandu, and it was reviewed in *Nepali Times* at the time by Nayantara Gurung Kakshapati.

Sagar Chhetri's work *Eclipse* examines the complex and often contested identity of the people of Madesh and delves into how this border region has served as a crucible of political grievance and has been at the heart of one of his generation's most significant struggles for identity and recognition.

Filippo Maggia writes: 'Focusing solely on photography, Nepal presents itself as a country rich in young artists exploring themes such as gender dynamics, memory and identity, postcolonial heritage, politics, society, religion, and culture. The current generation of contemporary artists is perhaps the first to have ever existed in Nepal, and their work reveals a solid artistic background and a great proactive energy, powerful content, and bold forms of expression, despite the lack of public and private facilities.'

The project has received support from the Italian Ministry of Culture under its *Strategia Fotografia 2025* program. 🇮🇹



Nepal Today: In the Forest, In the Villages Till 30 August Lonato del Garda, Brescia, Italy




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