



# Right of way

An introspective and empathetic leadership must prevail over politics of intimidation and performance

## Editorial

Shristi Karki

Ride hailing driver Ganesh Nepali had to pay traffic violation fines repeatedly. One afternoon last week, he could not take it anymore and set himself on fire. He died the next day.

The tragedy further sharpened the divide between supporters and opponents of Prime Minister Balendra Shah’s government. Critics pointed to the hefty hike in traffic fines, the insensitivity of the Metro Police and the lack of empathy from the government.

Instead, there was the usual blame game and crass comments about suicide from RSP supporters on social media. But what took the cake was the coordinated blockade of some media companies and businesses on Monday.

Supporters posted on social media that this was a symbolic demonstration so journalists realise ‘what it is like’ to park illegally. The mainstream press has been highlighting the government’s (mis)handling of Nepali’s self-immolation and repeated evictions of families from shelters.

Whoever gave the prime minister the idea that blocking gates of media companies was a good idea seem to have accurately predicted that there would be outrage in the press. They were right: high-decibel criticism of the move deflected attention away from Nepali’s suicide and eviction of the homeless.

Enforcement of traffic laws has become



stricter under the RSP government, with increased crackdowns on traffic infractions. In this space, we have argued that traffic laws cannot be legislated with penalties, but with education, discipline and better roads.

Media started investigating whom the cars belong to. As expected, they belonged to supporters of Prime Minister Shah. Curiously, his own party distanced itself

from the move, condemning intimidation of the press, and calling for an investigation.

However, a social media meme account with more than 600,000 followers known to be associated with the Prime Minister’s chief adviser Asim Shah threw its weight behind the intimidation tactic, posting: ‘Media houses that were crying about no parking laws being unfair are now having to issue press statements when they were inconvenienced for 5-6 hours.’

This has been taken as the latest indication of a widening rift within the RSP between Prime Minister Shah and party chair Rabi Lamichhane. There is growing disquiet among Cabinet members loyal to Lamichhane about the prime minister’s impulsive decisions and erratic behaviour. On Tuesday, the PM walked into Parliament session and walked out 20 minutes later.

Even supporters of the prime minister and the RSP have been posting misgivings about the government’s rash and spur of the moment decisions, saying this hurts credibility and could cost public support.

‘We can consider the government is involved (in blocking media gates),’ wrote political commentator Chandrakishore on social media. ‘This is a form of dictatorship where instead of tanks vehicles are parked at people’s doorstep in a way that leaves a silent message - We can come to your door next.’

### PERFORMATIVE POLITICS

Such heavy-handed, self-righteous, show-them tactics have become standard operating procedure in which performance on social

media is all that seems to count (page 5).

Last month Infrastructure Minister Sunil Lamsal said contractors should have their legs broken if they delay projects. Lamsal, a Shah loyalist, later clarified he meant that metaphorically. Then, the PMO reportedly called the police at 1AM ordering the arrest of Minister of Supplies Gauri Kumari Yadav, on suspicion that she leaked information on fuel price reduction to gas stations.

These events have also highlighted how corrosive the anti-mainstream media sentiment has become in Nepal. The media is not without its flaws, but intimidation and scare tactics have no place in a democracy.

The underlying cause of Ganesh Nepali’s frustration is the real structural crisis this government should address: unemployment, lack of social and financial protection in the gig economy, police high-handedness, an unjust justice system that lets off the powerful but punishes the poor for minor infractions.

These are signs of political dysfunction and need political solutions. This tragedy is symptomatic of sustained political, institutional and governance failures that continue to let young people down. And while shifting the blame is reckless, the fact that Ganesh Nepali took this tragic step after traffic penalty enforcement became more uncompromising must be taken seriously.

In 2023, after Prem Acharya also self-immolated himself outside Parliament, then mayor Balendra Shah wrote on social media: ‘Every level and organ of the state has failed in every way— his business, his despair, his protection, his plea for help’. 🇳🇵

## Trending Online

### Gurkha fought Argentinians, cheers for Messi

by Dirgha Raj Upadhyay  
In 1982, British Gurkha soldier Hem Shrestha fought against Argentina in the Falklands War. Now settled in the US, the 80-year-old cheered for Lionel Messi this World Cup. More on his journey online and on page 1.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

### Four wheels good, three wheels bad?

by Shristi Karki  
Starting this year, a bulk of Kathmandu’s electric three-wheelers will reach the end of their mandated 30-year lifespan. As mass decommissioning looms, the ban on new three-wheelers remains. Follow us for the latest updates.

Most popular on X



### The Himalaya as the next data centre arena

by Ayusha Chalise  
Data centres are being hyped as Nepal’s next gold rush. But before the country becomes a hub in someone else’s cloud, it is worth asking how much energy and water will they actually consume. Read column on our website.

Most commented

### Path to knowledge philanthropy in Nepal’s medicine

by Sushil Koirala  
Nepal needs knowledge philanthropy to make healthcare more effective. Hospitals must give doctors protected time to mentor, universities bring clinicians, and councils reward shared wisdom. Check out the analysis online.

Most visited online page

## Letters

### FALKLANDS & FOOTBALL

Sports and wars are different things (‘Gurkha now cheers for Messi’, Dirgha Raj Upadhyay, p1).

Junkiri Junkiri The Firefly

■ Gurkhas never saw action, they were deployed and the British spread propaganda that they were cannibals.

Bom Bahadur

■ I was on the battlefield towards the final days of the war. The 1st/7th Gurkha Rifles attacked Mt Tumbledown. A company was in front supported by the B and D companies. On the way two artillery shells dropped on our formation and injured Gauriman Limbu and another shell injured another corporal. I am the one who witnessed this and assisted medical team.

Rajendra Tamang Bomjan

■ Our military duty was to defend Britain but we have no enmity with Argentinians. Messi is our favourite player. We are now brothers and friends in peace.

Manbir Limbu

■ The Argentinians have songs that hate the British and Gurkhas.

Niraj Prasad Gorkhali

■ Unfortunately, Nepal’s always became the labourers of other countries; their heroic military power thus auctioned.

Ananda Path

### DATA CENTRES

Data centres would be the end of life in the Himalaya (‘The Himalaya as the next data centre arena’, Ayusha Chalise, #1319). You can never buy back the nature and peace destroyed. There is no price tag for these things.

Om Mani Padme Hum

■ Data centres might create jobs for Nepalis but the Himalaya will suffer big losses. They cause noise pollution. The used water is contaminated by chemicals and will no longer be suitable for drinking.

Rajesh Parajuli

■ It is not just water and power, data centres make a place uninhabitable.

Devendra Adhikari

■ The country which has major population and loadshedding talks about data centres. First ensure access to electricity and internet to the entire population and productive industry.

Kishor

■ Nepal has too many problems, data centres will aggravate existing problems

(‘How feasible for Nepal to get on data centre bandwagon?’, Vishad Raj Onta, #1319).

Varvāra H.

■ Remotely distributed modular MegaPod compute options are much less intrusive compared to huge data centers.

Michael Mastin

### CONSTITUTION

Let the leadership try and go through with the amendment and history will reward or punish them in due time (‘Making amends’, Sonia Awale, #1319).

Forester

### MEDIA BLOCKADE

Nepal has a vibrant and open media (‘Right of Way’, Editorial, page 2). Any steps to intimidate the media is against the spirit of democracy.

Bishow Parajuli

## Online Package



### FOOTBALL VS FOOD

A Nepali footballer’s lifestyle is not lavish, players do not train, are not paid adequately, and signed into underfunded clubs. A-division players speak about their experiences on YouTube.



### COMMUNICATION VIA CASSETTE

Ram Dhani Yadav was the first migrant to leave for the Gulf from his village of Chagariya in 1992. There were no mobiles, and those overseas communicated with family through cassette tapes. Subscribe for multimedia content.

## 1,000 Words



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES NEPAL / YOUTUBE

**FOLLOW THE LEADER:** RSP chair Rabi Lamichhane and Prime Minister Balendra Shah strode into an ongoing House session on Tuesday as RPP lawmaker Khusbu Oli was delivering remarks (right). This drew flak from opposition parties for violating parliamentary decorum. This screengrab from a live Parliament broadcast was shared by media, and seemed to show a subservient Lamichhane. Actually, he was gesturing to the Speaker. Both leaders walked out of the chamber together after 20 minutes.



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# Punishing women for speaking out

Cyber bullying, especially of female politicians, stifles critical voices and endangers democracy

Vishad Raj Onta

As Nepali women politicians and activists become more outspoken, they are being punished for it by an anonymous online community of hate mongers. Women are cyberbullied more than their male colleagues, and the comments are more vicious with threats of sexual violence.

This is not unique to Nepal, but the implications go beyond impacting on mental and physical well-being -- such trolling is a serious threat to democracy itself. “Any post that is critical of Balen or the Cabinet seems to trigger a lot of trolling,” observes lawyer and activist Tanuja Pandey, who was at the forefront of the GenZ protests last year. “Maybe these are supporters of the government, or the government itself. RSP does not get as much hate speech.”

On a recent Facebook post, Pandey posted ‘Gundaraj’ to criticise the decision to park cars at the gates of media houses in an attempt to intimidate journalists.

Her post was greeted by howls in the comment section, including from a profile that goes by the name Pallab Pahadi: ‘Congressman and INGO puppet Nepo Baby Pandey’.

That was one of the politer comments. Most trolling contains personal attacks and threats of violence. Critics of the government are immediately labelled as lackeys of old parties and subjected to digital lynching.

“The assumption is that we are opposition supporters: I get called a ‘purano-party jholay’ or a ‘parichalit’,” says political science student, psychologist and activist



Ansuda Poudel.

Jholay alludes to political sycophants and can mean anyone against PM Shah and RSP. ‘Parichalit’ refers to an operative. “This is democracy, and there has to be a space for different opinions,” says Poudel. “YouTube reporters want the most polarised content possible, and they often try to corner us with questions.”

Poudel recounts feeling scared at a rally, when a crowd suddenly turned on her as she was trying to rescue an injured protester from an aggressive reporter.

Pandey and Poudel both receive rape and death threats, through Messenger or SMS. Indigenous activist Pema Wangmo Lama now only answers unknown numbers after running them through the Truecaller app. As a female voice for indigenous rights, Lama receives even more online hate

with many even questioning her ‘Nepaliness’.

She says, “Trolls like to say that I don’t look Nepali, or my name does not sound Nepali, that I am Tibetan or Chinese, and I’m a foreign agent.”

Lama has dealt with this type of trolling since she was young, but social media has amplified hate speech. “It does make you question your belonging, and your drive to keep doing it,” she adds.

### MISOGYNY

Another tactic often used by trolls is to spread rumours suggesting that a woman is in a relationship with someone. Trolls now use AI to morph photos in nasty ways.

Nepal still suffers from patriarchal and majoritarian mores, and social media does not just reflect those values but magnifies them with its instantaneous reach driven by algorithms of the attention

economy.

While male leaders like Balendra Shah, Sudan Gurung, Rabi Lamichanne and others receive hero worship and are idolised, their styles emulated, women are disrespected every step of the way: from how they dress to marital status. Their opinions are dismissed as attention-seeking behaviour.

Lama estimates that the trolling is 50-50 from bots and real people. “Mass comments seem like a targeted thing, and the really nasty trolling I get is in my personal messages,” she adds.

Women are trolled even if they are with RSP. Critics of the prime minister often target his wife, Sabina

Kafle. Women ministers and MPs from the ruling party also get disproportionately more hate than their male colleagues.

Ansuda Poudel blames this on internalised misogyny in Nepali society: “They believe that they can say whatever they want, make death and rape threats and think that they can get away with it.”

The PMO is rumored to have a bot army to curate and control online narratives.

“There is also inorganic trolling from newly created accounts that target multiple women in the same way. A real person would not behave like this,” says Pandey, who gets texts from real people who tend to be somewhat politer. She adds many women got off social media completely.

“My friends and family members are hurt by it, and they ask me if perhaps it would be better to just not speak up.”

Poudel agrees: “My parents are politically aware, and while they are supportive they are also very scared for me. I have developed thick skin, but it still gets to me sometimes.”

Younger activists have complained of feeling unsafe because of personal threats, and parents worried for their safety pushing them to give up their advocacy on social media.

### LEGAL LIMITATIONS

Nepal does have laws against death and rape threats and online harassment, and the Cyber Bureau is supposed to investigate them.

Lama once reported rape threats made to an acquaintance on Discord. “They were very dismissive, and were not serious about taking down details,” she told us.

Instead, Police often blame victims, asking why they are activists in the first place, and if they have done anything to warrant such threats. Pandey and Poudel believe that this issue is best solved culturally, rather than digitally.

A good place to start would be for the political leadership to speak against it, and pressure Meta and other social media to take content moderation more seriously.

Female journalists are also trolled. Rama Parajuli at BBC Nepali Service once had a ‘Hate Page’ made about her. She says, “They would troll my voice, or the way I would ask questions.”

Khusbu Oli of the RPP, a former Miss Teen and model, faces heavy trolling. When Nepali Times approached her to comment, she did not want to talk about it “in the current situation”. Complaining about trolling seems to invite even more toxicity for women. 🇳🇵

## BRIEFS

### India-Nepal meeting

India and Nepal held their 13<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Joint Steering Committee on Power Sector Cooperation (JSC) in Pokhara on 15 July with Sarita Dawadi of Nepal's Ministry of Energy, Water Resources and irrigation and Pankaj Agarwal of the Indian Ministry of Power. The two sides also held a Joint Working Group on Power Sector cooperation, agreeing to increase Nepal's export of electricity to India to 1,650MW from the current 1,10MW through the 400KV cross border transmission line.

Meanwhile, the Indian Embassy and Likhu Pike Rural Municipality jointly laid the foundation stone for the Ngagyur Nyingma Palyul Dhongag Chholing Monastery in Solukhumbu. The project receives approximately Rs33 million from the Government of India.



### Aloft CSR

Aloft Kathmandu Thamel donated food, medicine and hygiene products to Om Disabled Child Care Home in Thamel, which cares for 35 children aged 3–16. This is part of the hotel's 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary corporate social responsibility initiative.

### Remittances up 38%

Nepal's remittance inflows rose 38.2% to a record Rs2.1208 trillion in the first 11 months of FY 2025/26. Nepal Rastra Bank said inflows reached Rs203.89 billion in April-May alone, up from Rs176.32 billion a year earlier. There were 367,211 new foreign labor approvals and 355,735 renewed permits.



### Churpi exports up

Nepal's Chhurpi dog chew exports grew 7% to Rs4.29 billions (2,733 tonnes) in the first 11 months of the last fiscal year, despite a 10% US tariff. The US remains the dominant market with 75% share, followed by Canada, UK, and Japan. Made from yak or cow milk in eastern Nepal, exports have held up as major US brands continue sourcing it as dog chew.

Meanwhile, following directives from the PMO, Dairy Development Corporation has improved raw milk quality standards after tests. Farmer payment times dropped from eight months to three. Sales have risen over 50%. Ghee exports and a new cheese plant are planned.

### Exports targets

The GoN has set a goal for exports of goods and services to make up 20% of the GDP within two years. Last fiscal year, exports reached 8.7% of GDP, up from 6.3% in 2021-22, but much of this growth came from re-exporting edible oils. Economists and exporters called the target unrealistic due to policy bottlenecks: high VAT on raw materials, suspended export incentives, rising logistics costs, and lack of facilities.

### Hydro wasted

The hydro sector is facing an undeclared “production holiday” this monsoon. Despite installed capacity reaching 4,300MW and additional 5,700MW under construction, inadequate infrastructure such as a transmission lines is forcing private producers to curtail generation leading to 900MW being spilled every day. The NEA is prioritising its own plants and has asked private projects to reduce output.

### Samsung Galaxy A27

Samsung Nepal's new Galaxy A27 5G targets young consumers with AI features and affordability. It has a 6.7” FHD+ Super AMOLED 120Hz display, Snapdragon 6 Gen 3 processor, 50MP main camera, and 5000mAh battery. AI features include Voice Transcription and Gemini/Perplexity integration. Prices start at Rs56,000, with 12/24-month EMI options and trade-in bonuses available.

### June Inflation

Nepal's consumer price inflation doubled to 5.22% in June, up from 2.72% a year earlier. Food and beverage inflation rose to 4.95%, while non-food and services climbed to 5.37%. Key drivers included sharp increases in fuel prices, fruits, oil and transport. Urban inflation (5.38%) outpaced rural (4.78%). Koshi province saw the highest inflation at 5.75%.



### Škoda Kushaq

Škoda Nepal, via MAW Vriddhi, launched its new Kushaq under the tagline Real Drivers Wanted. The automatic SUV is priced from Rs5.8 million and comes with rear-seat massage.

### Proton Guess the Price

Jagdamba Motors has opened bookings for the e.MAS 5 e-SUV with a campaign that lets customers predict the launch price. Five winners per variant get the car at their guessed price. The ranges that can be picked are Rs2.99–3.49 million for the Prime and Rs2..99–3.49 million for Premium.



### Mass sackings

The government is preparing a policy to eliminate 60,000 contract, temporary, and daily-wage employees across all government levels, replacing them with outsourced services via a public company or private contractors, to improve efficiency and cut costs. Affected roles include cleaners, drivers, and data enterers. Contract workers are protesting at the Finance Ministry.

### Airport work stalls

Taxiway extension and expansion at Kathmandu airport is stalled because high-grade aggregate supplies from Godavari quarries are cut because of a legal dispute between quarry operators and the Municipality. The dispute stems from unresolved tax/royalty claims against operators. About 90% of the airport expansion has been completed.

### PM meets hoteliers

Prime Minister Balendra Shah continued talks with various sectors with a collective meeting of members of the Hotel Association of Nepal (HAN) and assured them that his government was doing all it can to boost tourism and entrepreneurship. Nepal's hotels can accommodate 4 million guests a year, but gets less than half.

### Procurement rules

Nepal's amended Public Procurement Act passed on 2 July ends automatic contract awards based on lowest bid. Bids will be awarded after an evaluation process of performance and quality metrics. Federation of Contractors' Associations of Nepal welcomed the move.

# Face-to-face with Balen on Facebook

Prime Minister Balendra Shah's social media account is the most watched political stage in Nepal

Nobel Rimal

Open any Balendra Shah Facebook post. Before the caption even finishes loading, Facebook has already chosen the first voice users will see in the comments section.

Nearly 8 in 10 people read comments online, and comment engineering is the most effective form of narrative setting on social media. Researchers from the Center for Media Engagement national survey in the US manipulated the first comment under 100,000 posts and found that it sets the tone of every response after it.

Facebook knows this, which is why its ranking system elects one 'top comment' to stand at the head of each thread. We scraped that 'elected' comment from Balen's posts. It is the face Facebook has decided his fans should wear. Ironically, Facebook elected the comments that got Balendra Shah elected twice, first as mayor then as PM.

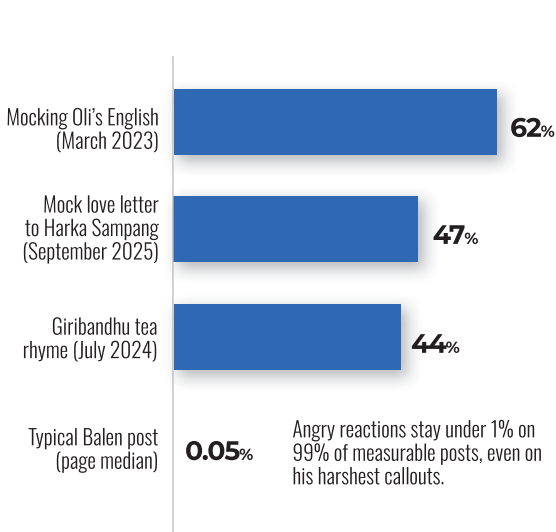
Under a reel from 21 June, that face says: 'If Balen thinks, I agree. If Balen speaks, I listen. If Balen orders, I obey.'

The prime minister did not write it. A Balenista performed it under his post, and 919 people liked that expression of devotion. Facebook's ranking system picked it out of thousands of comments and placed it first.

Balen's Facebook page is a stage with three performers on it: a politician who posts, an audience that performs, and a platform that arranges the scene and decides who stands where.

Nepali Times analysed his posts from January 2022 to June 2026 to see what each of the three has been doing. Because his audience exploded across those years, raw numbers can mislead us, so every post was measured against Balen's own median for that quarter and that format. That median is his baseline, and it moved from 747 comments per post in 2022 to 40,511 in 2026.

The audience's preference is pretty straightforward: posts that stage a conflict like open letters to ministers, accusations aimed at a named opponent, demands with 3-day deadlines draw 39% more comments and 66% more shares



**LOL:** Prime Minister's Balendra Shah's three most laughed-at posts each mock a named opponent, while the angry button stays untouched on 99% of his measurable posts. Online hostility appears as comedy.

than his ordinary output after accounting for period and format.

More than a quarter of the posts reach triple his baseline. Among governance posts, fewer than one in ten do.

While mayor, Balendra Shah posted against this grain. Governance updates filled 45% of his feed and performed below his own median. The great exception was the October 2023 Shram Bank employment video. It promised 15,000 trainings and 5,000 jobs a year, and it became the biggest post of his life with 3.78 million reactions and shares at 59 times his baseline.

Announce a concrete benefit at national scale and the audience does the distribution for free. Facebook is the megaphone he never has to pay for, and the crowd holds it to his mouth.

## CONFRONTATIONAL

Prime Minister Balendra Shah posts differently. Since March, governance content has fallen to 9% of his output. Personal posts have risen to 43%. Twenty-three posts is a thin sample, and the office plausibly changed what he is free to say.

The numbers still show a feed drifting toward what its audience rewarded all along: confrontation, shitposts, and aura-farming.

The reaction buttons record where feelings go. On Balen's page, anger goes nowhere. Median angry reactions sit dangerously low across all posts with reliable counts, on

his harshest callouts as much as his birthday wishes.

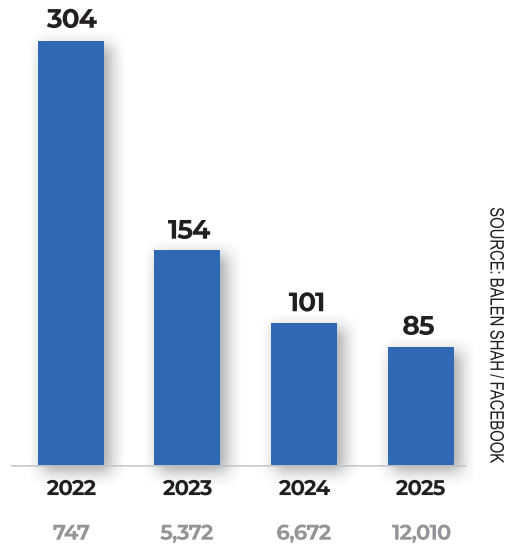
Laughter, though, has an aim. His haha-heaviest posts are all mockery of named targets: 62% haha on the exam jab at Oli's English, 47% on the mock love letter to Harka Sampang, 44% on 'यो समय गिरि बन्धु चियाको हो । काले काले मिलेर खाऊ भाले ।'

That last post explains nothing and assumes everything. Humour is end-to-end encrypted. The joke transmits in public and decodes only for people fluent in the Balen-adjacent meme economy, and the content that economy produces, remixes, and subtitles is some of the most incisive material we have for reading his brand. Decoding it is the membership card for the Balen fanbase.

British-Australian scholar Sara Ahmed, who studies how emotions move through public, argues that feelings do political work by circulating and sticking to figures outside the community. The data agrees with her.

On this page hostility only ever exits, landing on K P Oli, Harka Sampang, a minister, never in the house that hosts the joke. Balen names the target and Balenistas supply the laughter and the memes.

Balen posted 304 times in 2022, but only 52 times in the first six months of 2026. His brand was built on constant, unmediated presence, the mayor who answered ministers from his phone at any hour. The data cannot say why the presence thinned.



**LESS IS MORE:** As mayor, Balendra Shah never stopped posting, but as PM he publishes once a week, and the crowd shows up anyway, 40,000 comments at a time.

Maybe the prime minister's posts are filtered. Maybe the man who once posted because he wanted to now posts because it is useful to his politics.

The median post on Balen's profile drew 747 comments in 2022, it draws 40,511 now. In 2022, his top ten posts carried 70% of everything he got shared, which is the profile of an account living from viral spike to viral spike.

During the election campaign and since he was elected prime minister his half-year, that figure is 32%. The ordinary post now does the work a megahit used to. Whatever Balen publishes, at whatever frequency, the crowd arrives at scale. Scarcity in posting did not cost him attention, but concentrated it.

Open Balen's Facebook profile, and go back to one of his reels. Scroll through the comments and the reaction. Everyone in the social media stage triangle is doing his work for him.

The fan performs obedience for an audience of other fans. Balen supplies the scarcity of posting + the aura and, when he wants laughter, the target. Facebook decides which one performance greets every visitor, on all posts where it elected a top comment for us to scrape.

That selection is both the limit of our dataset and its subject. What the machine chose to stage, we can measure. Devotion up front. Laughter aimed at Oli.

## Methodology

Nepali Times analysed public Facebook posts published by Balendra Shah (facebook.com/balenOfficial) between 1 January 2022 and 24 June 2026, collected via the Apify Facebook Posts Scraper on 15 July 2026. Each record includes caption text, media format, reaction totals and per-reaction breakdowns, comment and share counts, video views where available, and one Facebook-selected top comment for 631 posts.

Because Balen's engagement grew sharply over the period (median comments per post rose from 747 in 2022 to 40,511 in the partial 2026 period), raw counts are not comparable across years. Each post was therefore measured against the median of posts from the same calendar quarter and media format. Claims in the article are phrased "after accounting for the period a post was published and its media format." The dataset contains no historical follower counts, so no claim is made about follower growth.

Data caveat: Facebook returned rounded reaction totals for a portion of older posts, including 204 records listed at exactly 10,000 reactions (Jan 2022–Sep 2024). Reaction-level findings exclude these 204 posts: comment and share counts show no rounding and carry the cross-year analysis.

Content categories (governance, conflict/adversarial, personal, internet-native) are exploratory keyword-based codings, manually spot-checked on the top outliers. Depending on strictness of definition, roughly three to four in ten posts stage a conflict or identifiable obstacle.

The Facebook-selected top comments are algorithmically elevated single comments, one per post. They show what the platform stages beneath each post, not a representative sample of audience opinion. Engagement measures visible attention, not voter support.

Anger that never lands. Somewhere below the fold sit the thousands of comments per post that Facebook ranked and buried, the doubts, the disappointed former fans, the jokes that flopped. The data holds one comment per post. The country holds the rest.

The page reads as his. The numbers read as the audience's. And the first voice users hear belongs to neither of them. 🇳🇵

Experience Luxury

# SILK Finish

# LANDS OF MILK AND HONEY

"I looked after cows in Nepal, then Saudi Arabia, and am now in a New Zealand dairy farm."

Janak Bastakoti

I was born in Gorkha to a farming family. My brother and I went to a nearby school where I was an average student.

On weekends, neighbours took turns to work on each others' land in a traditional 'parma' system. Most young men joined the military, others went abroad. They were trying to escape being forced to join the Maoist militia.

Those who went overseas would at first tell us not to migrate because of the hardships they faced. But later, as they adjusted to the work and started sending money home, they encouraged us to leave as well.

I got a job in Qatar, but lasted only two months. I was promised an office job, but was placed in outdoor construction. I quit, and ran out of money. I spent days just eating yoghurt.

Four of us decided to return to Nepal, where the recruiting agency refused to return the Rs90,000 fee I had paid. They did agree to send me to another country, and I was off to Dubai.

But there too I got an outdoor job painting. Luckily, with my



These are the 97<sup>th</sup> and 98<sup>th</sup> episodes of *Diaspora Diaries*, a *Nepali Times* series in collaboration with Migration Lab providing a platform to share experiences of living, working and studying abroad.



# Cleaning planes abroad to b

## Nepali returnee receives the Labour Ministry's Outstanding Entrepreneur

Lok Bahadur Rai

I was born in Morang in a simple family, and was the youngest of three brothers and two sisters. My father was in the Police.

In Grade 3, my parents switched me to an English language school, but I was put in UKG where my classmates were much younger. I already knew basic Nepali and how to add and subtract by then.

I made good friends but by Grade 5, I was conscious of being older than them. I switched to a government school again, and skipped to Grade 8. But I could not pass my Grade 10 exam, because I had stopped paying attention to my studies.

I wanted to enroll in the Indian Army. What else could I do? There were no jobs, and running a business was out of reach. I had good stamina and worked out quite hard to prepare for the Indian Army recruitment in Dharan, but I could not get in. I was too thin.

I tried once more in India, but failed the written test. I then returned to Nepal and started to prepare to migrate overseas. An agent from my village hooked me up with a job in Qatar through a recruiter.

I was neither happy nor sad about going abroad. I was going to earn money, and that was all that mattered. I recall seeing young men like me being tearfully seen off at Kathmandu airport by family members who draped garlands on them. I was alone when I left. I was not married, and my parents were back in the village.

This was back in 2007, and I earned



just QAR 1050 (\$390) per month cleaning airplanes – the toilets and the mess passengers left behind. How dirty a plane was depended on where it was flying in from, especially the toilets.

I started saving some money, but cleaning toilets made me feel poor. It was poverty that forced us to do such jobs.

I had trained as an electrician back in Nepal, and I had a knack for building and

fixing things. Although it was not my job, I could fix vacuum cleaners that were used in the plane cabins. I could change wires and dismantle them to make them work.

Soon, I was given more tasks, and later started driving electric carts in the terminal transporting passengers and staff. This meant I now had company accommodation where I became the general handyman for everyone. People called me to get lights fixed,

if someone was stuck in an elevator, if they were locked out of their rooms.

As a plane cabin cleaner, I felt like people looked down on me. But now as a fixer, they treated me better. Still, I was hurt that I did not get the promotion promised to me by a Filipino boss who committed suicide. A Pakistani replaced him, but he kept making excuses and never kept the promise.

So I found another job at the airport,





education I got office duties with the help of a fellow Nepali.

Outside or inside makes a big difference in the Gulf. The heat outdoors can reach 50 degrees, while air-conditioning makes it much easier indoor.

After the contract ended in 2015, I had decided to head home and get married. But two weeks before I was set to go back, the earthquake destroyed our home in Gorkha. Nepalis in Dubai got a day off to locate our family members and deal with the shock. I was relieved that my family was safe.

Back in Nepal, I settled down in Chitwan to start a dairy farm, but there were loans to repay, and I heard about an opportunity at Almarai in Saudi Arabia. We had heard good things about the dairy company where some people from my village also worked.

I wanted to get into dairy farming because that would also help me after I returned to Nepal. Trouble was, I got placed in the company's poultry unit which I did not enjoy much. But as luck would have it, a bird flu closed down the poultry farm. I got transferred to the company's dairy.

As I discovered, raising cows in Nepal and Saudi Arabia are very different propositions. Everything is mechanised there, and we did not have to worry about sales. In Nepal, even keeping 4-5 cows was a lot of work, feeding them and taking them out to graze. But in Saudi Arabia, just 20 of us were in charge of thousands of cattle.

#### SOFT CORNER

Everything was automated, including milking cows, and the harder you worked the more you earned. Cows have their own personality, and some are friendlier than others. I had a favourite one, who responded to me. They don't have names, only tags, and hers was 375. I had a soft corner for her.

When they got sick, we took care of the calves, we fed them. They become like your children. When one of them died, it would ruin our day. Both because you lost a calf you were attached to, but also for religious reasons as we regard them as sacred.

With my earnings in Dubai, I repaid my loans. I made good friends there from various countries in the work camp which had its own shops and facilities.

Since I had a laptop, co-workers used it to type out their CVs to apply to New Zealand. So I also applied, was interviewed through Skype and was accepted. A laptop is a good thing to have.

I had never heard of New Zealand. At first I thought it was the Netherlands. The major attraction was that I could take my family with me. English in New Zealand is a whole new dialect. I had forgotten the little English I had, and it took some time to get used to the Kiwi accent.

Livestock farming in New Zealand was also different from Saudi Arabia. Here, everything is natural : fresh water, grass, and the cows are smaller. There are 800 cattle and they grazed in open pasture, just like in Nepal. There were just five of us, including three Nepalis, taking care of them.

The salary is higher, education is free for my children, and there is a lively Nepali community. My eldest now speaks with the New Zealand twang, and I have to ask her to repeat what she is saying, although in the family we try to speak Nepali.

I also still struggle to understand my boss' English. For example, he once left me a text message saying: 'Do it in the arvo.' I had no idea what 'arvo' meant, I had to google it to find out it was slang for 'afternoon'.

I am proud of what I have achieved. I starting from nothing, and now have a house in New Zealand. I also want to eventually have my own dairy farm. It is an expensive dream, but thankfully the government here has a farmer soft loan program.

New Zealand's greenery and mountains remind me so much of Nepal that it almost feels like home. It is mini Nepal here, but I still miss my motherland, where I was raised, where I walked to school as a young boy.

Nepal is far away, and tickets are expensive to come and go as frequently as I would like for family reunions after my father passed away.

After Saudi Arabia, my plan was to start my own dairy farm in Chitwan. But that was not to be. Life had a different plan for me. 🇳🇵

# Beekeeping in Nepal

## Neer National Award



filling planes with water and pumping out the waste. The sludge from the toilets smelled horrific. But this job paid better, and with my savings I bought a house back home.

It helped that I worked in an airline, which meant that I could go home every six months. I had to pay only 10% of the ticket and got a seat if there were tickets available. On one of my frequent visits to Nepal, I got married. My daughter was born in 2013 while



I was in Qatar, and I got to see her when she was three months old.

#### TIME TO GO HOME

But my hypertension was giving me problems, and I was on medication. My night shifts affected my health and I just could not get proper sleep during the day. I decided it was time to go home after 14 years abroad.

But what would I do back in Nepal?

Starting a dairy farm seemed difficult. I was advised against getting into furniture because I would be starting from scratch. I had experimented with poultry farming and raised chicks in my room back in Qatar, but it started getting smelly and had to get rid of them after my room mates complained.

Long ago, I had attended a three-day beekeeping training in Nepal. A family member kept hives, and had made a

successful business selling honey worth Rs4 million a year. I realised that I had not earned that much money even while working in Qatar. That was all the convincing I needed to return to Nepal in 2020 and start with five bee colonies with an initial investment of just Rs9,000.

I learnt through hands-on experience and within a year, I had 31 hives from which I harvested 35 buckets of honey and eventually 70 buckets. At first, I struggled to sell the honey, but I kept going because I believed it would eventually work out.

Shopkeepers in the market questioned the quality of my honey, some even accused me of adulterating it. It was discouraging, but I did not give up. Gradually, I built trust and found a market for my product. Today, I supply dealers in Dharan, Biratnagar, and Damak, and sell honey worth up to Rs15,000 per day from 200 bee colonies.

My main responsibility is to protect the bees from predators such as hornets, birds, and lizards. Although bees are capable of defending themselves, they still need help. Hornets are the biggest threat, especially during the rainy season, when they are especially active and attack in groups.

I think beekeeping is not as labour-intensive as many other agriculture related activities. The bees do most of the work for you. They forage for their own food and maintain the hives and keep it clean – just like I used to clean planes back then. 🇳🇵



Events



World Cup final

All eyes are on the World Cup final between Argentina and Spain. Watch with friends and family as one team lifts the trophy to become the ultimate champions of world football.  
19 July, All over Kathmandu

Shabdakiri Saajh

Be part of Taragaon Next's Shabdakiri Saajh and immerse in a poetic evening of poetry and ghazals.  
18 July, 4pm, Taragaon Next, Boudha



Paubha Exhibition

Shankar Kumar Joshi and Shankha Narayan Shrestha exhibit a collection of traditional paubha paintings over the next month. Read review on nepalitimes.com  
15 July - 15 August, Sidhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal

Homage to Banaras

Homage to Banaras is an exhibition of mixed media works by students of Lalitkala Campus, created following their study visit to Banaras.  
19 July-8 August, 11am-5pm, Kathmandu Art Gallery, Baber Mahal

Return to the Roots

Return to the Roots is set to be a rounded experience with tribal music, fire rituals and monsoon dance. Join with loved ones.  
18 July, 5pm-6:30pm, Rs650, Gokarna Hillside Resort, Jagadol



Courtroom theatre

Catch some shows of शश-SSSS! इजलास जारी छ, the courtroom drama directed by Gunjan Dixit and written by Bijay Tendulkar.  
Till 25 July, 5:30pm (except Mondays), Mandala Theatre, Thapagaun

Yoga with puppies

Start your morning this weekend with some yoga and snuggling with cute puppies. Guaranteed dopamine rush.  
18 July, 9-11am, Rs1,699, Mind and Motion Pilates Studio, Jawlakhel



Music

Joon Band

Watch contemporary Nepali music band Joon live at Moksh this weekend, accompanied by good food and refreshing drinks.  
17 July, 7:30pm, Moksh, Jhamsikhel

Echoes of Heritage

Kuma Sagar is set to perform his crowd favourite hits at Twa Chhen for Echoes of Heritage, where culture, heritage and music come alive.  
25 July, 3pm onwards, Rs1,000, Twa Chhen, Basantapur



Nabin K Bhattarai & Atripta

Enjoy live music from Nabin K Bhattarai and Atripta Band, alongside the FIFA World Cup final live.  
19 July, 9pm onwards, Rs1,500, Le Sherpa, Panipokhari

Hip-Hop Mandal

Among the most significant hip hop festivals in Nepal, Hip hop Mandal will bring together rap artists, dancers, and aspiring musicians. Be part of the movement.  
25 July, 8pm onwards, Rs499, XO Club, Thamel



Mark Band

Enjoying a rhythmic musical performance by the Mark Band.  
17 July, 6pm-9pm, Hard Rock Cafe, Darbar Marg



Getaway



Riverside Springs Resort

This resort is about 100km from Kathmandu and on the way to Pokhara and Chitwan. It offers a vast swimming pool, exciting activities like horse-back riding and rafting, cosy rooms and attentive service.  
Kurintar (01) 5544263

The Pavilions Himalayas

Luxury eco resort with boutique villas, swimming pool, organic farm, restaurant lounge and bar. Head out for refreshing morning walks, therapeutic and relaxing day-ins, authentic gastronomical experience and quiet nights.  
Chisapani, Pokhara, 9856025997



Mystic Mountain

Situated amid the forest of Nagarkot, the resort is exquisitely built using ultra modern designs and world-class comfort.  
Nagarkot (01) 5913206

Meghauli Serai

Leave the worries behind and enter this luxurious safari lodge at the heart of Chitwan National Park. Overlooking the Rapti river, this lodge not only offers scenic views but accommodation that integrates local culture and art.  
Chitwan National Park, 9851218500

Chandragiri Hills

Chandragiri Resort sits atop lush green hills overlooking Kathmandu Valley. Catch glimpses of mountains, marvel at stunning sunsets and take a dip in their infinity pool this summer.  
Thankot (01) 5970796



Dining

Fire and Ice

One of the first pizzerias in Kathmandu, Fire and Ice offers genuine Napolitana pizza and dozens of variants to choose from. Try the paesane, a combination of mozzarella, spinach, courgette and bacon.  
Thamel (01) 4250210

Imago Dei Café

The menu Nourish by Imago Dei features a limited option for each weekday, yet thoughtfully created with a healthy balance of nutrition. Healthy food was never so good.  
Nag Pokhari (01) 4442464



Lhakpa's Chulo

Nepali dal bhat, Newari khaja, Swiss Rösti, Italian Risotto and Thai green curry. Lakpa's Chulo has a variety of cuisines to offer. Garlic chilli prawn at this cosy restaurant is to die for.  
Jhamsikhel (01) 5442986

Vino Bistro

Touted as the hub of French cheeses and imported wines in Nepal, Vino offers cheese platters, charcuterie, pastas and some of the best bruschetta, all paired with the perfect wine.  
Lazimpat (01) 4535982



Utpala Cafe

Utpala Cafe, a monastery restaurant, is perfect for anyone looking for healthy vegetarian options. With their buffet lunch, use of fresh produce and mouth-watering baked goods, this is one of the best eateries in Boudha.  
Boudha, 9810700763

Weekend Weather



| FRIDAY     | SATURDAY   | SUNDAY     | MONDAY     | TUESDAY    |
|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| 27°<br>21° | 27°<br>21° | 27°<br>21° | 26°<br>20° | 27°<br>20° |

Caution: More Rain

Despite its weak start, the monsoon is catching up with average precipitation level for July with another large low pressure trough over Nepal. In the rest of the Subcontinent, total rainfall is still below normal which is also true for the central Tarai. Within Kathmandu Valley, Phulchoki and Shivapuri on the rim getting substantially more precipitation than the city centre. This is why there has been flooding in the Bagmati's tributaries. The weekend and beyond will continue to have rainy nights, with hot and humid daytime weather in Kathmandu.

Our Pick



Christopher Nolan's 2026 adaptation of the Homeric epic, The Odyssey, follows Odysseus's journey as he voyages back to Ithaca after Greece's victory over Troy. The cunning king's story is adventurous, daunting, and all high-stakes as Odysseus battles monsters, gods, and his own mind. The Odyssey, written and directed by Nolan and starring A-Listers Matt Damon, Anne Hathaway, Zendaya, Tom Holland and Robert Pattinson is now in theatres near you.

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 चिड्छा 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

# Innovation does not just happen

It needs backup from education, institutions and policies to keep pace with talent and technology



COMMENT

Yugottam Koirala,  
Yugeshwor Koirala

Innovation is the buzzword in Nepal after Magsaysay-winner Mahabir Pun was appointed to head the RSP government's newly created Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation.

Formerly head of the National Innovation Centre, Pun served as Education Minister in the interim government. He is continuing his unconventional style of working by posting videos on social media of cooking inside his office in Singha Darbar and sleeping in the central government secretariat.

But that is not the only reason that these are interesting times in Nepal for anyone doing research, working on innovative ideas, or building something of their own within the country. Pun has stressed that research and innovation should directly impact the daily lives of Nepalis.

After decades of universities working as degree factories, rote learning that blunted the minds of discerning students, corruption driving away talent, the country finally has a government keen on making changes.

Minister Pun's appointment has signalled that time is ripe for conversations on matters of innovation. Even beyond the new ministry, there is much to be hopeful about.

There are new centres of learning like the Madan Bhandari University of Science and Technology in Chitlang, or the University of Nepal guided by leadership free from political interference and a vision to redefine Nepal's higher education.

There are also independent research centres already setting new standards for what can be done in Nepal. There is global recognition of Nepali talent in innovative technology.

Nepalis are also publishing impactful research, founding startups, and occupying influential positions in academia and



industry. These are all encouraging developments, and young Nepalis are sitting up to take notice.

For decades, students felt trapped between two less-than-ideal choices: remain in Nepal and sacrifice opportunities, or leave the country and sacrifice the chance to contribute to the nation's future.

Increasingly, that no longer seems to be the case. Technology has played a role in this shift. Research collaborations now span continents, entrepreneurs can build from almost anywhere.

Scientists routinely work across borders through virtual labs and international partnerships. As a result, those leaving to study or work overseas have started seeing their departure as an investment in skills, knowledge, and networks that can ultimately benefit Nepal.

**INNOVATIVE INVESTMENT**

These trends are what the Ministry of Innovation needs to invest in. Much of the current discussion is centred on calls for Nepal to raise its expenditure to levels seen in more developed economies. Far less attention has been paid to a more basic question: does Nepal

currently possess the capacity to reap returns on that investment?

This capacity is built through strong interactions between institutions, like including universities that produce high-quality research, firms willing to commercialise that new knowledge, and policies rewarding experimentation and risk-taking. Without these interactions, government funding risks becoming appropriation without any lasting impact.

Equally central to building such capacity are individuals who can question established knowledge and connect ideas across disciplines. Such skills are cultivated in the classroom, long before students enter labs or start companies.

For decades, Nepali education has continued to prioritise recall over inquiry, and conformity over mould-breaking. The responsibility to change this rests first with the education ministry. Educators deserve greater recognition, investment, and opportunities for professional development because they shape the country's innovation floor.

The content they teach, and

how they teach it, determines how future generations approach problem solving. But even when early-stage ideas and novel research do emerge, there need to be investors and supporting institutions — such as venture capital firms and incubators — willing to back them and engage with their inherent risk-reward dynamics.

Given weak private investment prospects with commercial mandates to support startups, government policy can play a role to shape investor-startup interactions.

In South Korea, for example, this takes the form of targeted initiatives such as its tech incubator program for startups (TIPS), where a private venture capital firm or accelerator investing in a promising pitch triggers a matching contribution from the government.

Yet even with world-class universities, mature industries, competitive firms, and one of the highest investments in the world, Korea continues to grapple with an aversion to entrepreneurial risk and a strong preference for stable employment.

This is a lesson important for Nepal. Creating an innovation ecosystem requires researchers and entrepreneurs to feel willing to take risks, pursue unconventional ideas, and fail freely.

In a developing context, focusing on relatable, everyday problems for which solutions are visibly needed can be an exercise in building broader social tolerance for such experimentation.

Economists describe these as market-creating innovations: products and services that are simple, affordable and accessible enough to serve people who were previously excluded. Such innovations improve lives while creating industries, generating employment, attracting investment and expanding the productive capacity of the economy itself.

Nepal has no shortage of areas needing precisely this kind of innovation. We need technologies that strengthen agricultural resilience and improve disaster forecasting for communities living under constant risk. Affordable water purification systems, renewable energy solutions, and accessible community health technologies are also largely untapped opportunities.

Also needed are pathways for the Nepali diaspora — scientists, entrepreneurs, and investors who have worked in leading innovation ecosystems — to collaborate and build ventures without prohibitive bureaucratic barriers.

For decades, Nepal's economy has depended heavily on remittances sent home by millions of Nepalis working abroad. But in 2025 the annual IT service export surpassed \$1 billion, proving there is a critical mass of globally competitive technical talent here. Whether we can transition from an economy that exports labour to one that exports ideas and technologies is the question.

Last year's youth-led political movement brought Nepal to this inflection point. What should come next is a different, but no less consequential movement to make innovation, research and knowledge creation central to the country's future. 🇳🇵

The authors are undergraduates studying biomedical engineering at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

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# MEGHALAYA'S TUNNELS OF NO RETURN

Nepali migrants risk lives in illegal coal mines in India for meagre earnings

S B Jero Rai in Khotang

Purnaram Magar and his younger brother Surendra did not have big dreams. All they wanted was to clear their debt, build the family home, and support their parents.

On 5 February 2026, as Nepal was gearing up for an election following the youth-led movement, the brothers were in Jaintia Hills in Meghalaya in northeast India digging for coal deep underground.

With them were other Nepalis also from Khotang district: Nara Bahadur Magar, 35 and Ratna Rai, 50. It was hot and dusty inside the illegal coal mine, the dark tunnel so narrow they could barely crawl through to shovel coal.

Suddenly, a dynamite explosion sent a cloud of fiery dust into the tunnel. All four were killed.

Five hundred kilometres away in Nepal, Khadga Bahadur Magar, 60, and his wife Tankakumari, 55, are still grieving their two sons. Their world has collapsed.

Purnaram had previously gone to Turkmenistan to alleviate the family's financial hardship, but ended up in debt. He wanted to apply for another overseas stint, and to pay for that, he decided on this coal mining job in India. He took his brother along, and promised his parents they would both be back soon.

The parents could not even afford to bring back the bodies of their sons. "We had to leave them in a foreign land because we had no money," a tearful Tankakumari told us at Khotang's Barah Pokhari shrine.

The local municipality has given the parents Rs50,000 each in the name of the two deceased sons. The family is also trying to get some

relief from the Indian government, but no luck so far. They live with their only surviving youngest son, who has a mental disability.

Nearby, the house of Nara Bahadur Magar is padlocked. He had gotten married just six months before leaving for Meghalaya. His wife has gone back to her parents' home after becoming a widow.

**DOUBLE TRAGEDY**

The family of Ratna Rai, who was among the four killed in the Meghalaya coal mine five months ago, recently suffered another devastating tragedy: his 28-year-old son Kumar, died in a motorcycle crash. Ratna Rai was supporting his wife, two daughters and two younger sons.

Nepalis from the eastern mountains have been digging — and dying — mining coal in India for decades. Prem Mani Rai, 69, of Barah Pokhari himself went to Meghalaya in the 1990s.

"We were 28 of us from here, one died in the mine, and two are still missing," Prem Rai recalls. "Almost everyone from our village has worked in those coal mines. Many have died or disappeared. Some never came back and now live in Meghalaya."

In Okhaldhunga district, 70-year-old Rana Bahadur Rai says people from eastern districts have been leaving for Shillong, Nagaland, and Assam to work as porters, woodcutters, and orange pickers for centuries.

"I myself went east with my brother Kaila. He dug for coal, but I was claustrophobic and worked in an orange orchard instead," he told us.

Bhogen Rai, a researcher from Khotang, says it was customary for

locals to go for seasonal work in the coal mines in winter, and return for the paddy planting season. "But the coal mines have proven to be a tunnel of no return for many," he adds. "My uncle went as a teenager 40 years ago and never came back. My 98-year-old grandmother is still waiting for her son."

Padmasari Rai, 76, has also been waiting for her son for 25 years. She lives alone in her thatch roof house. Her only son, Kamal, went to the mines with relatives in 2001, at age 22. Everyone returned except him.

"I tell anyone who goes there to look for Kamal and bring him back, but no one has found him," says Padmasari. "His father kept waiting for him until three years ago when he also left for god knows where. My son is not dead, he will return. And when he does, I can die in peace."

**RATHOLES**

Increasingly, young Nepali men and women are now going much farther than Assam or Meghalaya for work. Ward Chair Dhak Bahadur Karki says only those who cannot afford to pay recruiters now go to work in the coal mines.

"There are still those who go, hoping to earn enough to pay manpower agencies to find them jobs overseas, but some die there, others never return," adds Karki, who says the municipality is trying to dissuade people from risking their lives in India.

Meghalaya's illegal coal mines are just holes in the ground. A vertical shaft 60-70m deep connects to narrow tunnels just a metre wide in the coal seam. Because drilling machines do not fit in the tight

spaces, workers squeeze through like rodents, manually scooping coal into baskets and hauling them to the surface.

When it rains or if a spring bursts, the tunnels fill with water in an instant. There is no ventilation or emergency rescue system. The Indian government has banned such 'rathole' mines through the National Green Tribunal, citing their serious impact on the environment and human life.

But many illegal mines still operate in collusion with influential locals, politically protected mafia and government officials. Operators try to bury evidence when workers are killed — sometimes even with injured workers still inside. Families never receive any compensation or legal protection.

Karna Magar and Bam Magar were trapped inside a tunnel, and the operators tried to bury them in the mine instead of rescuing them. They were saved only because other Nepali workers protested.

Karna says the chief and the mine owner disappeared after the accident and he did not receive the rest of his payment. He and Bam were taken to hospital and treated with money donated by other Nepalis.

"There were 50 of us Nepalis, Indians, and Bangladeshis inside the mine when the accident happened, and about 30 of us died," Karna adds. "The Nepalis were from Khotang, Bhojpur and Udayapur."

The hard veins of coal have to be dynamited and workers inside must be informed beforehand for safety. Karna says there was no warning before the explosions.





PHOTOS: S B JERO RAI

“There was a big bang, a lot of vibration, then the coal caught fire and there was lots of smoke ... I don’t know what happened after that. When I regained consciousness, I was in hospital. The two injured people in the bed next to me died,” he recalls.

Now, Karna has sleepless nights because of his wounds, he loses his voice while speaking, and forgets the context. Bam is similarly traumatised and borrows money for medications. Like many others from Khotang, he used to go to Meghalaya every winter to



earn a few thousand rupees. This time, three of the five people who went with him died. He survived, but he is not sound, physically or mentally. And he has an elderly mother and three children at home to take care of.

Nepali workers are also exploited, discriminated against, and subjected to violence outside

the mines. On 7 July 2024, four workers, three of them Nepalis (Ravi Rai, 23, Santkumar Rai, 30 and Rajesh Rai, 26), were found dead with their hands and feet tied and their throats slit in Meghalaya. Local media reported that the workers were victims of a conflict between illegal coal mine operators and the drug mafia.

According to the 2021 census, Khotang has a population of 175,340 – a 15% decline from the last count in 2011. More than 80% of the absentees are young men.

Another 11,200 people have left Khotang for foreign employment — 6,440 are in the Gulf and 1,020 in India. Researcher Bhogen Rai estimates that half of those in India might be in the coal mines.

Khotang’s literacy rate is 68.85%, but of the 55,461 students who did Grades 1-5, only 15,115 graduated high school. This means a large number of locals who enter the labour market are dropouts, and are forced to take on menial jobs or become seasonal migrants.

Another reason for increasing migration is the adverse impact on farming due to erratic rainfall caused by the climate crisis. Three decades of rainfall measurements from DHM stations in Okhaldhunga and Khotang show that the eastern hills have experienced regular cycles of

**LIVES ON THE LINE:** (Clockwise from far left) Entrance to a rathole mine in Meghalaya where Nepali migrants work for meagre income.

Padmasari Rai from Okhaldhunga is still waiting for her only son, Kamal, who left to work for a coal mine 25 years ago.

Khadga Bahadur Magar and wife Tankakumari lost two of their sons in a coal mine explosion in Meghalaya earlier this year.

Karna Magar and Bam Magar were both injured in the same blast, and are still physically and mentally traumatised.

Opening of a coal mine in Meghalaya where the blast occurred on 5 February.

excess rainfall and severe drought, destroying crops.

How the Nepali state with its new government will address the underlying issues that drives this desperation is the big question. The answer will be to create rural jobs so that young men and women do not have to migrate.

“All three levels of government should focus on creating employment or knowledge-based businesses that keep young people busy in their villages,” says economist and political analyst Hari Roka.

“If the financial resources needed to start new jobs or knowledge were to flow from the banking and financial sectors, the rapid migration from the mountains would also be stopped to a large extent. But we need concrete policies, plans, and programs for that to happen.”

Reported with support from the Centre for Investigative Journalism-Nepal.

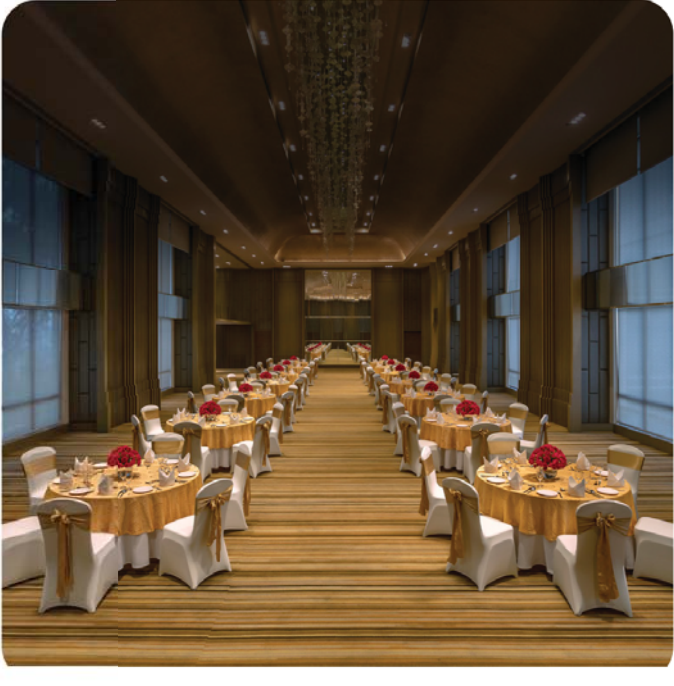
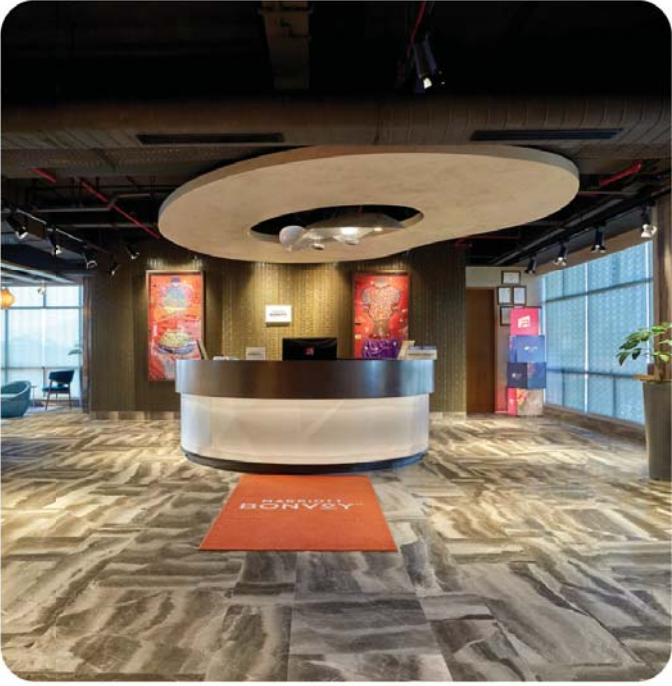
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