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'Nothing like this had ever happened here'

A dispute over religious flags and loudspeakers turned deadly in a Sunsari village with no history of Hindu-Muslim conflict – and exposed years of ignored warnings.

TUFAN NEUPANE & **PARBAT PORTEL**
KAPTANGANJ (SUNSARI), AUG 3



POST PHOTO: PARBAT PORTEL

Homes line a deserted road in Kaptanganj, Sunsari, during curfew hours on July 29, three days after communal violence erupted in the area.

Om Prakash Mehta was already in bed at around 9 pm on the evening of July 26. But as tensions began rising at the Kaptanganj Chowk, about 700 metres from his home, he watched videos on social media of his own friends at the scene, and decided to go there as well. His father, Krishnadev, tried to stop him, but he didn't listen.

At around 10 pm, Krishnadev called his 31-year-old son and asked him to come back quickly. "I'll be there soon," Om Prakash said, before ending the call. Right then, gunfire erupted at the chowk. Moments later, Krishnadev received a call from one of his son's friends. "Om Prakash has been shot," he was told.

By the time Krishnadev ran and arrived at the chowk, Om Prakash had already been placed in an ambulance and taken to the Neuro Hospital in Biratnagar. People there told him it wasn't very serious and that he'd recover.

Krishnadev changed his clothes and arrived at the hospital, about 25 kilometres east. By then, Om Prakash had been placed on a ventilator. Next morning, his relatives and neighbours told him that the treatment was going well, and he should go home and take care of his wife.

While Krishnadev was returning to Kaptanganj, news of Om Prakash's death began to spread on social media. His nephew, who was driving, broke the news on their way back.

"As soon as I heard it, I lost consciousness," Krishnadev recalled. The last time he saw Om Prakash was when he'd left his bed that night, ignoring his plea to stay back.

On the other side of the settlement, west of Om Prakash's house and about 100 metres south of Kaptanganj Chowk, lives 72-year-old Mohammad Tahir Miyan.

On the afternoon of July 27, a day after tensions began in town, a curfew had already been imposed in Kaptanganj. At around noon, an angry crowd of young men with bottles filled with petrol arrived at Tahir's house. "They began sprinkling petrol and set the house on fire," he said.

Those inside the house managed to escape, but two houses—belonging to his eldest and third sons—and a pile of straw were burned down.

"We had always lived like brothers," Tahir said, struggling to come to terms with what had just happened over the last 24 hours. Kaptanganj, located in Dewanganj Rural Municipality about one kilometre south of the Indian border, had no history of Hindu-Muslim violence. Om Prakash was killed in police firing. Tahir's house was destroyed by an enraged mob. The shared account of these two families from two different communities—Hindu and Muslim—is simple: "Nothing like this had ever happened here."

The dispute that began there eventually claimed three lives. Jay Prakash Mehta, 21, who was also from Kaptanganj, died four days later while undergoing treatment for a gunshot injury. Ganesh Yadav, 15, from Golbazar of Siraha, also died on July 30. Bystanders say he died in police firing. However, in an interview with Kantipur, Home Minister Sudan Gurung denied that the police shot Yadav.

Kantipur's field reporting, interviews with more than a dozen people, and a review of previous records suggest that the violence in Kaptanganj unfolded amid a wider pattern of simmering religious tensions in some parts of the Madhesh. In recent years, local disputes, social media amplification, political mobilisation, and repeated institutional failures have been contributing to escalation. This time, it had turned deadly.

The Armed Police Force, Nepal's border security and riot control force, had flagged the risk of growing communal violence some three years ago, especially in the Madhesh region. A senior APF official familiar with the report told Kantipur last week that the force had repeatedly briefed the political leadership on the risks posed by rising communal polarisation, but its recommendations were largely ignored.

The episode also highlights failures at multiple levels—local authorities that neglected early warning signs, security agencies that responded after violence had already broken out, and political actors who largely remained on the sidelines until there were casualties from the conflict.

Kathmandu, however, largely remained passive in the face of violence that broke out in Kaptanganj, with its immediate response limited to reshuffling of police and administrative officials. Curfew came into effect at 7 am on July 27.

In the days that followed, protests spread throughout Sunsari, then to Morang and later to Siraha, Saptari and Dhanusha. Security personnel were deployed in large numbers as local authorities imposed curfews, yet protesters defied the restrictions. As calls grew for Prime Minister Balendra Shah to address the nation and for Home Minister Gurung to visit the incident site, both leaders faced criticism for their response. Neither appeared in Parliament; Shah instead expressed grief over the deadly clashes on social media while Gurung remained in Kathmandu. Shah also skipped an all-party meeting called by his party chair Rabi Lamichhane to discuss the spread of violence across Madhesh.

Dewanganj Rural Municipality, one of the 12 local units in Sunsari district, lies about 25 kilometres south of the district headquarters, Inaruwa. According to the 2021 census, the municipality has a population of fewer than 40,000, with Hindus making up 86 percent and Muslims 14 percent.

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Hundreds of crisis-hit cooperatives remain outside refund scheme

An estimated 500 institutions across the country have stopped returning deposits even though they have not been officially classified as 'problematic'.



POST PHOTO: DEEPAK KC

Credit cooperative depositors stage a protest at Maitighar Mandala in Kathmandu last week accusing the government of unfairly prioritising smaller depositors.

YAGYA BANJADE
KATHMANDU, AUG 3

The government has begun returning savings to depositors of officially declared troubled cooperatives since mid-May, offering long-awaited relief to thousands of victims. Yet the move has done little to address the plight of depositors whose money remains trapped in hundreds of other crisis-hit cooperatives that have not been formally declared as "troubled" by the authorities.

Although the government has prioritised deposit refunds through the Problematic Cooperatives Management Committee for institutions formally declared troubled, victims and experts say the policy excludes a far larger number of cooperatives that have collapsed, whose operators have disappeared and whose members have been protesting for years with no clear path to recovering their savings.

The federal government has so far declared 23 cooperatives troubled, while Bagmati Province has listed five and Koshi Province one. However, organisations representing cooperatives victims estimate that more than 500 institutions across the country have stopped returning deposits even though they have not been officially classified as problematic. As a result, depositors of those institutions remain outside the government's refund programme.

Kushal KC, central president of the National Campaign for the Protection of Cooperative Depositors, said victims from 619 cooperatives are affiliated with the campaign and more than 500 of which are effectively in crisis.

"As of today, more than 500 cooperatives that have failed to return depositors' money have not been declared troubled. Many of their operators have absconded, yet the government says it will only refund deposits from officially declared troubled cooperatives," said KC. "The government has remained silent about the rest. It must introduce a policy that also guarantees refunds for depositors of these institutions."

Victims argue that the current refund process is neither comprehensive nor fair. Although the management committee says it has prioritised small depositors with savings of up to Rs10,000, many affected families say the distribution lacks transparency and clear criteria.

"Depositors are dissatisfied because the process has not been just. The available funds belong equally to all depositors. Whatever amount is recovered should be distributed proportionately instead of paying some people in full while others receive nothing," said KC.

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Nepal raises Susta embankment incident with India

Nepal's Delhi embassy says villagers built the temporary embankment as a last resort against flooding.

ANIL GIRI
KATHMANDU, AUG 3

The Nepali Embassy in New Delhi on Sunday formally raised with India's Ministry of External Affairs an incident in which Indian security personnel crossed into Nepali territory in Susta in Nawalparasi West and dismantled a mud embankment built by local villagers.

The embassy raised the issue on the same day of the incident.

"Our officials protested the way Indian security personnel dismantled the makeshift embankment," said a foreign ministry official, adding, "We told them that it was a last-resort effort by locals to mitigate flooding."

Susta and Kalapani are two major boundary disputes between Nepal and India, with both sides acknowledging them as contested areas.

In 2014, both sides agreed that the issue would be resolved through the mechanism involving foreign secretaries and the Boundary Working Group. However, in the past 12 years, no meeting at the foreign secretary level has been held to address the dispute.

According to two officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Indian side insisted that Susta and where the Nepali side is building the mud dam are disputed territories and that both sides had agreed to maintain the status quo.

A similar dispute erupted two months ago when India's SSB personnel halted the construction of a permanent flood-control embankment being built by the Nepal government in the same area. Following a minor scuffle at the time, officials from Nepal's Armed Police Force (AFP) and India's SSB reached an agreement to maintain the status quo, stating that Susta is a mutually agreed disputed area.

On Sunday also, the Indian side reiterated the same position, calling the area disputed and saying no new structure could be constructed there, according to the two officials.

Besides regular meetings between the security agencies, the chief district officer and district magistrate of the Indian side do sit regularly if any dispute arises along the border.

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Lessons from the past: Dialogue, consensus quelled communal tensions in Tarai-Madhesh

Starting with Dewanganj violence, the cost of delayed coordination was measured not only in lives lost but also in growing mistrust between communities and the widening of unrest beyond the violent incident.



POST PHOTO

Riot police and Nepali Army personnel are deployed at Golbazar in Siraha on Thursday during curfew after demonstrations spread across towns in Madhesh Province in the wake of the communal violence in Dewangunj. Police are seen tackling burning cardboard boxes hurled by protesters.

❍ **ARJUN SUBEDI** IN SUNSARI
& **AJIT TIWARI** IN JANAKPUR
AUG 3

The week-long communal tension triggered by the July 26 violent confrontation in Dewanganj Rural Municipality-3 of Sunsari has begun to subside after an agreement reached on Thursday night in the presence of the home minister.

This spate of violence once again highlights a lesson repeatedly drawn from similar crises across the Tarai-Madhesh that security interventions may restore order temporarily, but only dialogue and consensus ultimately provide a sustainable solution.

Following the agreement, the families of those killed received the bodies for funeral rites, authorities lifted the curfew and retained prohibitory orders, while a separate dispute in Siraha on Saturday was also resolved through an all-party understanding.

Political leaders, local governments, religious figures, security agencies and civil society groups have meanwhile organised rallies in Sunsari, Dhanusha and other districts, calling for harmony, restraint and communal unity after days of escalating tension.

The easing of the crisis has revived comparisons with previous communal flashpoints across the plains, where early coordination among local representatives, administrators, security agencies, political parties and community leaders prevented isolated disputes from spiralling into prolonged unrest. Local stakeholders conclude that in Dewanganj, the failure to establish effective coordination at the outset allowed what began as a minor dispute to escalate into a police shooting, the deaths of three people, and prolonged tensions.

Religious flags, idol immersion processions, religious marches and rumours circulating on social media have repeatedly sparked tensions between communities in various Tarai districts over the years. Yet earlier incidents in Harinagar, Bhutaha and Duhabi in Sunsari, Devpura Rupaitha in Dhanusha, Malangawa in Sarlahi and Parariya in Mahottari all reached resolution through negotiations involving political leaders, religious representatives, civil society and security agencies rather than policing alone.

"The earlier practice should have started on the very first day," said Gaffar Ansari Miya, chairman of Harinagar Rural Municipality in Sunsari. "Ultimately, we have returned to dialogue, consensus and an all-party approach. Had that process begun immediately, we would not have endured seven days of unrest, families refusing to receive bodies, and tensions spreading to other districts."

According to Miya, the cost of delayed coordination was measured not only in lives lost but also in growing mistrust between communities and the widening of unrest beyond the violent incident. Previous communal incidents in Sunsari followed a markedly different pattern. Local administrations, elected representatives, police officials and influential members of both communities maintained contact from the beginning, preventing protests from turning into prolonged violent conflict. One such case occurred during the Secondary Education Examination on April 4, 2024, when a local youth, Jiban Mehta, was assaulted at Balkrishna Secondary School in Harinagar-1. Clashes broke out between two groups, leaving two police officers and a local resident injured.

Authorities imposed prohibitory orders followed by an indefinite curfew, but sustained negotiations involving then-chief district officer Jay Narayan Acharya, Harinagar chair Miya, security officials and community leaders reached an agreement within days, restoring normalcy.

> Past incidents show political, social engagements quell communal strife in Nepal's plains.

A similar response followed the fatal shooting of Khursid Ansari in Bhutaha Bazaar in September, 2018. Motorcycle-borne assailants gunned down Ansari as he was returning from a school meeting. Although the area remained tense for two days, coordination among the then chief district officer, local representatives, police officials and community leaders prevented further escalation.

Likewise, after Mohammad Fida Hussain was shot dead in Duhabi, protesters kept his body on the road for three days while demanding the resignation of the home minister. The protest ended only after continuous engagement between district authorities, the local government and community representatives. Local observers note that in all three cases, communication began before tensions reached their peak, allowing grievances to be addressed before violence intensified.

According to locals, a crucial sequence broke down in Dewanganj. Although the nature of the latest dispute resembled the Harinagar incident two years earlier, effective coordination among the government, district administration, elected representatives and community leaders did not materialise during the critical early hours. The families of those killed refused to accept the bodies for six days, protests continued unabated and even funeral rites were delayed.

Superintendent Bipin Regmi, a former police chief in Sunsari, argues that stronger law enforcement at an earlier stage could also have prevented the situation from deteriorating. Timely legal action against those involved in activities of inflaming communal tensions, he said, might have stopped the crisis from creating a bigger security challenge.

The security response also came under scrutiny after federal lawmaker Lal Bikram Thapa publicly alleged on the morning of the incident that police had deliberately shot civilians. The remarks spread rapidly across social media before investigators had established the facts. Security officials believe such unverified claims fuelled public anger, complicated the investigation and deepened distrust in an already volatile environment. They argue that statements made during communally sensitive times can significantly influence public behaviour before evidence is available.

Experiences from Madhesh Province point to similar conclusions. Communal tensions occur quite frequently in several districts of Madhesh. Yet, despite police intervention, durable peace has consistently depended on negotiations involving political parties, elected representatives, security agencies, civil society organisations and religious leaders.

One such incident occurred in Devpura Rupaitha of Janakpurdham Sub-metropolitan City in September 2025, when a green flag hung from a roadside electricity pole sparked confrontation after a Ganesh idol immersion procession passed through the area. The locality remained tense for two days, during which security personnel used dozens of rounds of teargas canisters and warning shots to disperse crowds. Several security personnel were injured and a local resident sustained gunshot wounds. The situation came under control only after both communities agreed to maintain communal harmony through a negotiated settlement led by political leaders, local representatives and religious figures.

A similar pattern unfolded in Malangawa, the district headquarters of Sarlahi, in September 2023, when violence erupted during a Krishna Janmashtami idol immersion procession. Despite curfew, teargas and warning shots, the unrest subsided only after authorities formed an investigation committee led by the assistant chief district officer and pledged action based on its findings. Community leaders, elected representatives, human rights activists and religious figures subsequently organised harmony rallies that gradually restored public confidence.

A violent incident at Parariya of Mahottari in October 2022 is another example of this kind. The clashes broke out after a Kalash procession entered a Muslim-majority settlement. Authorities imposed a curfew before convening an all-party meeting that produced an eight-point agreement. The deal included legal action against those responsible, recommendations for compensation, treatment support for the injured and the formation of a high-level investigation team. Joint appeals by political parties and community leaders eventually calmed the situation.

Analysts say these incidents demonstrate that while security forces can immediately contain violence, only sustained dialogue can rebuild trust between communities. The all-party meetings, harmony rallies and joint appeals happening across Madhesh after the Dewanganj violence reflect the same conflict-resolution model that proved effective in previous crises.

Social analyst Roshan Janakpuri argues that restoring trust requires the active participation of every section of society. According to him, political parties, respected community figures and religious leaders must work together to counter growing mistrust and prevent outside actors from exploiting communal sensitivities. He says religious polarisation has increasingly been manipulated by individuals with little commitment to social harmony, making stronger vigilance and responsible political leadership essential.

Muslim community leader Asgar Ali also stresses that Janakpur's history reflects centuries of religious coexistence. He notes that Muslims settled in Janakpur during the construction of the Janaki and Ram temples and have long maintained respect for Hindu places of worship. "Janakpur is a meeting point of Hindu, Muslim and Jain communities," said Ali. "Nepal's strength lies in people of different faiths living together. Humanity must come before every other identity."

Retired Nepali Army officer Krishna Gisi, who previously headed the defence force's Mid-Eastern Division in Madhesh, has similarly urged immediate efforts to restore dialogue. Writing on social media, he warned that if unrest in the Tarai-Madhesh is not contained quickly, it could spread across the whole country. He called on religious leaders, social activists and public figures to jointly promote communal harmony while urging political parties to discourage supporters from participating in activities that inflame religious tensions.

Following the Dewanganj violence, local governments across Sunsari, Dhanusha and other districts have revived many of these earlier efforts. All-party meetings, harmony rallies and joint appeals have been organised to reassure communities and prevent further escalation.

Dhanusha Chief District Officer Prem Prasad Luintel said bringing religious leaders, political representatives, civil society members and security officials together had helped stop tensions from spreading.

Human rights activist Ramesh Bhattarai said the latest crisis has again demonstrated that security measures alone cannot resolve communal disputes. Lasting peace, he claims, depends equally on prompt dialogue, local leadership, political restraint and effective administrative coordination.

Many residents of Dewanganj told the government-formed investigation committee during a field visit that the situation would not have become so complicated had trust-building mechanisms been activated from the outset.

Bhupendra Thapa, joint secretary and coordinator for the investigation committee, said the report would examine not only how and when the Dewanganj protest came to an end but also what measures are needed to prevent similar incidents from escalating in the future. "Incidents of a similar nature have been recurring. Our task is not only to examine what happened in Dewanganj but also to identify the steps needed to prevent such tragic incidents from happening again."

King cobra sightings rise in Chitwan buffer zone settlements

Five king cobras and 17 cobras were rescued after they entered homes last fiscal year.

❍ **RAMESH KUMAR PAUDEL**
CHITWAN, AUG 3

An increasing number of highly venomous snakes entering settlements around Chitwan National Park has raised fresh concerns among conservationists, snake experts and local residents, prompting calls for stronger rescue systems and wider public awareness to reduce the risk of deadly snakebites.

Among the most alarming are king cobras and cobras, two of the world's most venomous snakes. Last fiscal year alone, park authorities rescued five king cobras and 17 cobras after they entered homes and settlements in the park's buffer zone.

On June 1, a king cobra entered a house at Barauli in ward 17 of Kawasoti Municipality in Nawalparasi East. The snake was rescued by park staff and released into a dense forest near the park headquarters at Kasara. Another king cobra was found in ward 10 of Kawasoti the following day.

According to snake expert Dev Prasad Pandey, a king cobra bite can be fatal unless treatment begins immediately. Even when victims survive, recovery often takes a long time. However, Pandey says, king cobras differ slightly from other venomous snakes because they do not always inject their full venom during a bite.

"There have not been many confirmed human deaths from king cobra bites in Nepal, partly because they often do not release all their venom," said Pandey, who completed his doctoral research on venomous snakes in Germany. "But the presence of king cobras and cobras in villages is a serious concern because these snakes are highly venomous and are easily noticed by people rather than hiding from them."

According to Pandey, cobra bites can become fatal if treatment does not begin within three to four hours.

Park records show that two king cobras were rescued from Kawasoti, two from Meghauli in Chitwan and one from Madi during the last fiscal year of 2025-26.

Abinash Thapa Magar, the park's information officer, said that the snakes had to be rescued after entering villages and residential compounds in the buffer zone. Besides king cobras, the park also rescued 17 cobras during the same period.

Manesh Limbu of Meghauli, Chitwan, has been rescuing snakes from villages for the past 15 years. A professional nature guide, he is increasingly called to rescue king cobras from distant settlements, including Madi.

"I have rescued one king cobra so far this year. Last year I rescued six," said Limbu. "People call whenever such snakes appear because they are frightened."

Limbu says his knowledge comes from years of working in forests and studying books by Indian snake specialists. He has bought rescue equipment costing between Rs15,000 and Rs20,000 with his own money.

"Even when I rescue king cobras or cobras, I do it entirely on a voluntary basis," he said. "I earn my living as a nature guide. Snake rescue is not something I do for income."

People sometimes reimburse his fuel expenses when he travels long distances. The largest king cobra he has rescued weighed 10.3 kilograms and measured 3.35 metres. "When people see such a huge snake inside their yard, they panic. The relief on their faces after the rescue is the biggest reward," he said.

Thapa Magar said park staff based at the Gharial Conservation Centre respond to reports of snakes and pythons entering settlements. The park also receives help from trained volunteers working through buffer zone forest user committees.

The park is now planning to strengthen its rescue programme with technical support from ranger Yam Raut, who has expertise in snakes.

"Rescue work requires training and proper equipment," said Thapa Magar. "We have not had a dedicated programme until now, but we plan to develop one."

Pandey welcomed the initiative but said Nepal still lacked a scientific rescue system. "People are doing rescue work with good intentions, but it needs to become more scientific," he said. "Rescuers must understand snake behaviour and ensure safe capture, transport and release in suitable habitats."

According to conservationists and snake experts, snakes usually enter villages between mid-February and mid-October. Pandey informed that forest fires and monsoon floods often force snakes out of forests into nearby settlements. He stressed that authorities should analyse why snakes move into villages and educate communities about seasonal risks and preventive measures.

> Experts say seasonal forest fires and floods are pushing more snakes towards settlements.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF MANESH LIMBU

Manesh Limbu (right), assisted by another man, rescues a king cobra in Meghauli in this undated photo.

Chitwan National Park, the country's first protected area, has long focused on conflict involving tigers, rhinos and wild elephants, which regularly enter settlements around the park.

The park launched compensation schemes, rapid response teams and awareness campaigns aimed at reducing human-wildlife conflict. Pandey believes venomous snakes deserve similar attention because they also pose a significant threat to human life. Last fiscal year, the park also rescued 87 pythons from buffer zone settlements. Although pythons are non-venomous, they are among the reptiles most frequently reported in villages.

Experts urge for better awareness, trained rescue teams, quicker medical response and closer cooperation between the park, local governments and communities are essential to reducing snakebite risks in Chitwan's buffer zone while ensuring the conservation of protected snake species.

Nepal raises SSB's dismantling of Susta earthen barrier with New Delhi

>> Continued from page 1

Dipak Nepal, the chief district officer of Nawalparasi West, told the Post that the situation was normal on Monday.

As soon as Nepali media reported the matter on Sunday, the Nepali Embassy in New Delhi took it up with the Indian side, seeking a prompt resolution. However, the Indian side called for restraint and said the issue should not be turned into a national agenda.

The dispute intensified after Nepal awarded a contract to construct a 132-metre flood-protection embankment along the Narayani River. According to local officials, the project could not proceed after the Indian side raised objections, leaving the entire stretch without permanent protection. They said Nepal has already completed embankment construction downstream of the 132-metre section, while the disputed stretch remains the only unprotected gap.

Since then, the exposed riverbank has continued to suffer severe erosion caused by the Narayani River. Local residents say they attempted to build temporary protective structures to mitigate the immediate risk of flooding, but those efforts were also halted, despite the works being carried out within Nepali territory and outside the disputed section.

Officials and local communities warn that the unprotected stretch has become one of the main entry points for monsoon floodwaters into Susta. They maintain that Nepal's objective in constructing the embankment is to protect its territory, farmland and settlements from river erosion and flooding. As Indian territory lies both upstream and downstream of this section of the river, some local officials also believe that coordinated embankment and river-training works on both sides would be necessary for effective flood management.

In the absence of protective measures, they say, riverbank erosion continues to reduce the area of Nepali land in Susta year after year.

On Sunday, according to locals, a group of Indian security personnel in plain clothes entered Nepali territory carrying spades and began digging up the mud embankment that villagers had recently built to reduce the risk of floodwaters from the Narayani river inundating the settlement.

Residents rushed to stop them, triggering a standoff before Nepal's Armed Police Force intervened to prevent the situation from escalating.

Later as per the past agreement, APF and SSB personnel quickly brought the situation under control.

On 8 December 1988 Nepal and India agreed to treat the Narayani River as a boundary river under the principle of a fixed boundary, according to former Director General Buddhi Narayan Shrestha. Under this principle, the boundary remains fixed as it existed when the Nepal-India boundary agreement was signed, he added.

"Fixed boundary principle applies to the demarcation of the riverine sector of Tarai lowlands. It requires identifying the river's course as it existed at the time of the agreement and demarcating the boundary by placing alternative pillars on both sides of the river, regardless of whether water or river channel exists there today. This principle was adopted as per the decision of Nepal government on 8 December 1988 and agreed upon by both countries," said Shrestha.

However, over the last several decades, the Narayani River has changed course, creating complications over land ownership and leading to competing claims in the area.

Rabindra Jaiswal, spokesperson for the Susta Protection Campaign, said villagers had constructed the temporary earthen embankment only after Indian authorities blocked them from building a permanent flood-control structure along the Narayani River.

While 16 border pillars mark most of the Nepal-India boundary in Nawalparasi West, there are no boundary pillars along the roughly 24-kilometre Susta stretch.

Instead, the two countries rely on natural features such as rivers and trees to mark the boundary. As a result disputes over land ownership and cultivation recur frequently. A silk cotton tree currently serves as the de facto boundary marker in part of the disputed area.

Residents say the changing course of the Narayani river over the decades has further complicated the border.

Sunday's incident followed a similar dispute on May 31, when India's SSB entered ward 5 of Susta Rural Municipality and objected to the construction of a permanent embankment being built by Nepal's Ministry of Energy, Water Resources and Irrigation.

According to Chief District Officer Nepal, the dispute centred on a new 132-metre section of embankment planned about 50 metres to the east of an existing structure, still within Nepali territory.

The project was initiated after then energy minister Kulman Ghising visited Susta about eight months ago and directed authorities to prioritise flood protection for the vulnerable settlement. Susta is bounded by the Narayani river to the north and west and India's Bihar state to the south and east. India maintains three SSB outposts near the area, while Nepal has an APF border post commanded by an inspector.

Residents say Indian authorities have repeatedly objected to Nepal's activities in the area, citing the absence of clearly demarcated border pillars. Two weeks ago, 52 residents led by Susta campaigner Munna Khan travelled to Kathmandu and staged a protest at Maitighar Mandala, demanding stronger state protection.

During a meeting with Home Minister Sudan Gurung, they urged the government to establish a Nepali Army security post in Susta, alleging years of harassment by Indian security personnel.

Following the meeting, the home ministry instructed the district administration to reinforce security in sensitive areas of Susta and to begin processing citizenship applications for eligible residents who lack citizenship documents.

A five-hour police raid—and nothing to show for it

A predawn police operation at industrialist Prakash Mundada's property on Monday uncovers nothing, with business leaders warning of damage to investor confidence.

PARBAT PORTEL
BIRATNAGAR, AUG 3

A five-hour police raid of the residence and office of prominent Biratnagar industrialist Prakash Mundada on Monday ended without any seizure, drawing sharp criticism from the business community and raising questions about the credibility of the intelligence that prompted the operation.

A large number of police officers entered Mundada's residence in ward 7 of Biratnagar Metropolitan City, acting on what officials described as 'special intelligence'. Superintendent of Police Kabit Katawal, chief of the District Police Office in Morang, personally led the operation, accompanied by officers from the district police office, ward police units and the Area Police Office in Rani.

Several senior officers, including Deputy Superintendents of Police Makendra Kumar Mishra, Santosh Shrestha and Lokendra Singh Guru, as well as Police Inspector Prabin Ghimire, took part in the search. More than a dozen police vehicles were deployed around Mundada's residence, while security personnel temporarily restricted movement in the surrounding area, including roads leading towards the District Administration Office and Golchha Chowk.

Despite an extensive search of the residence and the office that lasted around five-and-a-half hours, police failed to recover any illegal cash, gold, documents or other suspicious materials.

The operation has triggered concerns among industrialists and traders, who argue that such raids, carried out without producing any evidence, risk damaging the reputation of legitimate businesses and undermining confidence in law enforcement.

Pawan Sharada, Koshi Province chair of the Confederation of Nepalese Industries, condemned the operation, saying it had further weakened the morale of the private sector at a time when businesses were already facing economic difficulties.

"The state itself has terrorised industrialists and businesspeople," said Sharada. "Treating entrepreneurs as though they were terrorists is not only serious but also condemnable."

SP Katwal, however, defended the operation, saying police had acted solely on information received through official channels. "We received specific intelligence and carried out our duty accordingly. After thoroughly searching the house and office, nothing was found," said Katawal.



POST PHOTO

Police personnel outside Mundada's residence area as the search continued.

He added that the information had been submitted through official sources with specific names and details, requiring police to investigate. Similar searches are routinely conducted in other criminal investigations, he said.

Industrialist Mundada, a former president of the Morang Chamber of Commerce and Industry and operator of the Debenara Group, declined to comment extensively. "The police must have done what they believed was their duty," he said. "They searched our house but found nothing."

Police have not disclosed the source of the intelligence or the nature of the investigation. Officers only said they had received information suggesting that a large quantity of illegal cash and gold might have been stored at the property. They have not stated whether Mundada is under investigation in connection with any criminal offence.

The raid has prompted wider concern among business leaders over police procedures and the potential impact on investor confidence.

Nand Kishore Rathi, president of Morang Industry Organisation, questioned the necessity of carrying out the search before dawn. "The state certainly has the authority to conduct searches when there is suspicion," he said. "But arriving at four in the morning at the home of a respected business family has created unnecessary fear. The process could have been handled in a more measured way."

Hemanta Malla Thakuri, former chief of Central Investigation Bureau of Nepal Police, also stressed that police raids should be based on concrete and verifiable intelligence.

"Police have the authority to conduct raids, but there are established procedures," he said. "If information suggests illegal activities such as narcotics, there should be sufficient grounds to believe it is credible before launching such an operation. Acting merely on suspicion creates fear and can affect not only business confidence but the wider economy."

Debenara Group is one of Biratnagar's oldest and most prominent business houses. Its principal promoter is Prakash Mundada, a former president of the Morang Chamber of Commerce and Industry. According to people familiar with the group's history, the Mundada family has been engaged in trade and commerce from Biratnagar for more than a century.

The group has also invested in the aviation sector. It owns Sita Air and is reported to operate a fleet of around five helicopters. In addition, it has interests in the real estate sector, with property investments in Kathmandu, Pokhara and other major cities.

In manufacturing, the Debenara Group operates Himgiri Soap Industry in Biratnagar. It also owns the 'Baba' and 'Maruti' edible oil brands. The group has expanded into the education sector as well, running Delhi Public School and Star Engineering College in Biratnagar.

The Debenara Group is also regarded as one of Nepal's leading producers and exporters of silver jewellery. According to industrialists in Biratnagar, it is among the country's largest business houses engaged in manufacturing silver ornaments for export, with around one quintal of silver reportedly used each day in jewellery production.

Inside Kaptanganj:
How a religious flag dispute and a loudspeaker turned a border village deadly

>> Continued from page 1

This Maithili- and Magahi-speaking region is largely dependent on agriculture. Nearly two-thirds of households use firewood or cow dung cakes for cooking, while only one in 10 households uses LPG gas. Many young people have migrated to Gulf countries or Malaysia, leaving villages with a larger presence of elderly people, women, and teenagers.

The people who appeared on the streets after the night of July 26 were mostly teenagers and young who had only recently entered adulthood. Elderly and responsible members of both communities remain bewildered with what happened.

"How did something like this suddenly happen?" That is the question many are asking as things try to return to normal after a week.

The dispute that eventually erupted into violence last Sunday began about a month earlier. On June 28, the Muslim community celebrated Muharram on public land at Naya Hatiya Bazaar in Kaptanganj after receiving permission from the ward office.

"We have been observing Muharram for 50 years," said 36-year-old Jabir Alam, a goat and sheep trader. "Earlier there was a Shiva temple here. Now a Kali temple has been built, one temple after another. We do not have a fixed place, and we have celebrated wherever the local government gives us permission."

On the day of Muharram, the Muslim community planted 40–50 religious flags at the public site, along with Nepal's national flag. After the festival ended, two religious flags and the national flag remained there, according to Jabir, for another gathering scheduled after 40 days. They removed the rest themselves.

Before the next gathering after 40 days, Shrawan had begun—the month when Hindu devotees worship Shiva, undertake Bol Bam pilgrimages, and visit temples in large numbers. Hindu residents requested the ward office to take initiative to remove the flags placed near the Shiva temple.

"About ten days earlier, after there was a dispute over the flags, I myself went and said—if the flags are causing problems, we will remove them; let's not create a dispute," Jabir said. "But the ward chairman and rural municipality chairman did not pay any attention."

Shatrughan Prasad Mehta, former principal of the local Babuji Basic School, also points to the same failure by local authorities.

"The ward chairman gave land for celebrating Muharram," he said. "But afterwards, when our boys asked him not to leave the flags there, he paid no heed to the request."

On July 26, according to Manoj Kumar Pokharel, the local coordinator for human rights organisation INSEC, a group of youth removed the flags that had been placed there earlier and replaced them with new flags bearing images of Hanuman.



POST PHOTOS: PARBAT PORTEL

Krishnadev Mehta, second from right, and rest of the family of Om Prakash, who died on July 26.

That night, Hindu youths preparing for the Bol Bam pilgrimage the following day, gathered near the Shiva temple. They were playing songs on loudspeakers, including "Jai Shri Ram" and "Bol Bam ka Nara Hai, Baba Ek Sahara Hai."

They planned to travel about 40 kilometres northwest to the Koshi Barrage to collect holy water and return to offer it at the Shiva temple. The loudspeaker installed on a vehicle facing north was turned toward the south, where the Muslim settlement begins about 100 metres away.

According to people from the Hindu community, Muslim youths went there to object to the playing of those songs. People from the Muslim community, however, claim that the songs were played on loudspeakers at a very high volume toward the Muslim settlement located south of the Shiva temple, and that 8 to10 motorcycles with Indian number plates were repeatedly riding through the road, creating fear among them.

Soon, tensions escalated, a verbal confrontation began, followed by a physical clash. There is no single account of what happened next.

People from the Hindu community say that Muslim youths, who had come in greater numbers than the Hindu youths, started beating them and when they got beaten back, the Muslim youths themselves informed the police. Members of the Muslim community say they did not beat anyone but informed the police after sensing that the dispute could escalate.

Based on details gathered through their field investigation, INSEC's Pokharel said that the boys from the Hindu side were fewer in number. "Initially, they were beaten," he said. "Then some among them exaggerated the incident and sought support from the village."

By then, the police had arrived. "After the police told them to leave, the Muslim youths went home. But the Hindu youths refused to return, saying they had been beaten and wanted revenge," Pokharel said. "They tried to move toward the Muslim settlement, and then there was a clash with the police who tried to stop them."

Jabir's account is broadly consistent with Pokharel's version.

"The police stopped us in our own neighbourhood, and after that we did not go anywhere. The police stopped them from coming here from the north. During the pushing and shoving, they clashed with the police," he said. "There was no Hindu-Muslim fight. There was a clash between them and the police. Not a single person from the Muslim side was injured. There are only 50–60 Muslim households here, while they are in the hundreds. How can we survive by fighting them here?"

Although an incident like the one in Kaptanganj had not been seen before, a review of records from previous years shows that the surrounding region has had some history of tensions linked to religious disputes.

According to INSEC records, seven such incidents have been recorded in Sunsari alone—three in 2024, two in 2025, and two so far in 2026. Publicly available reports show that such incidents have occurred from Sunsari westward through Madhesh districts all the way to Nepalgunj.

Kantipur found records of at least 17 such incidents in the Terai over an eight-year period, from 2018/19 until now. Since this list is based only on incidents reported in the media, it represents the minimum number. These incidents occurred in districts ranging from Banke in the west, to Parsa in the centre, and Sunsari in the east. All of these are Terai-Madhesh districts bordering India.

The causes of these incidents also appear to be similar. Around two-thirds of the 17 incidents (11 cases) involved disputes during religious processions and idol immersions held during festivals: immersions related to Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati and Krishna Janmashtami; processions for Ram Navami and Hanuman Jayanti; Chhath and Kalash processions. In many of these cases, the administration had to impose curfews.

In recent years, social media has become a powerful channel through which local disputes are rapidly amplified and spread. Whether it was an insensitive Facebook post by a Hindu youth in Nepalgunj or an offensive comment against Hinduism by a Muslim youth in Rajbiraj—neither of which Kantipur is linking to or describing in detail—anger that often begins online has started spilling onto the streets.

Chandrakishore, a journalist and author who regularly writes about the Madhesh, believes that the growing access to social media has helped spread tensions rapidly.

"The person who was killed in Kaptanganj had gone to bed. After an allegation or rumour reached him through social media, he came running outside," he said. "These days videos appear immediately on social media. YouTubers livestream everything, and there is no time for filtering good and bad or right and wrong."

Incidents deliberately aimed at insulting and provoking another community have also become public. Last year, near the election period in Birgunj, police arrested three people carrying a pig's head and homemade bombs allegedly intended to be thrown inside a mosque. In Gaur, a dispute occurred after loudspeakers were used during a Hindu wedding procession while prayers were being conducted.

Muslims are Nepal's third-largest religious group. According to the 2021 census, Muslims make up 5.1 percent of the population. Most of them live in the Terai districts.

The United States Department of State's 2023 report on religious freedom included complaints from Muslim leaders advocating religious inclusion that they faced pressure from both government officials and the Hindu community.

Dinesh Shrestha, chairman of the Biratnagar chapter of North-South Collectives, a Madhesh-based think-tank, says such disputes that have recently become public are not isolated incidents occurring suddenly or by chance.

"There appears to be an organised effort to increase religious conflict in Nepal," he said, without identifying those whom he believed were responsible for fomenting such conflicts. "Whether it is incidents that happened elsewhere in the past or the current Kaptanganj incident—all of these have happened as part of that effort."

Jayaprakash Prasad Gupta, a former minister and the author of the book "Madhesh: Saamajik Samrachana ra Bibhed," points to the influence from across the border in India.

"In the past, Bihar had governments shaped by caste structures. Now there is BJP's Hindu-majoritarian politics," he said. "Nepal too has been becoming polarised under its direct influence."

Chandrakishore says that four trends seen in growing religious tensions in recent years are reflected in the Kaptanganj incident.

The first trend is the positioning taken by members of the same community elsewhere when an incident occurs in one place. "If something ordinary happens in Malangwa, immediately a procession comes out in Bhairahawa. Earlier, such matters would end locally; they did not spread elsewhere," he said.

The second trend is the unspoken competition seen in public religious activities in recent years. "If one person puts up one microphone, I have to put up four; if he breaks two swords, I have to break four; if he drives 25 motorcycles, I have to drive 50," he said.

The third trend, he says, is going in front of another community's place of worship and loudly raising one's own community's slogans as a direct challenge.

The fourth trend is how these conflicts are addressed. Earlier, political representatives played the central role in meetings aimed at reducing social tensions. That space, he says, has been replaced by representatives claiming to speak on the basis of religious identity.

"Suddenly, someone emerged as a Muslim leader, while someone else began attending meetings as a Hindu leader," he said. "If they had remained in political parties, they might have been ordinary party workers. But now they have become leaders."

Ram Rijan Yadav, who used to be active in the Janata Samajbadi Party, led by Upendra Yadav, says he has personally witnessed how religious politics from across the border has begun influencing Madhesh. Four years ago, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) had already built an organisation inside their party. "The 'Yadav boys' who were part of our party committees had already become associated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)," he said.

That growing religious polarisation is also visible in the symbols that have appeared across the public landscape.

At Kaptanganj Chowk and along the route west through Biratnagar, Itahari, Inaruwa and into Madhesh, the same image appears repeatedly—on flags, at intersections, outside shops, on rooftops and electricity poles.

The image is of Hanuman. But it is not the traditional depiction of the deity; it is an angry-looking version of Hanuman. The high-contrast image, featuring saffron and black colours and a tightened face, also appears as stickers placed on motorcycles and vehicles.

"The Hanuman I saw while growing up was peaceful," said Yadav. "For the last two or four years, I have started seeing images of a very angry Hanuman everywhere in Madhesh. The Bajrang Dal and Hindu nationalist groups have promoted this image," Yadav said.

The image is not rooted in Nepal's traditional religious iconography. According to reports in Indian media, the 'angry Hanuman' image was created in 2015 by Kerala-based graphic designer Karan Acharya. Reports say Acharya designed it for a local temple's Ganesh Chaturthi festival after friends asked him to create a Hanuman with "a different expression."

The saffron-and-black image soon became popular across India and later appeared in Nepal as well.

"Culturally and religiously, Hanuman's image is peaceful. What we have learned is that Hanuman represents knowledge, virtues and humility," Chandrakishore said. "But for political purposes, Hanumanji was made to appear angry."

Five days after violence began, the situation in Madhesh began gradually returning to normal following Prime Minister Balendra Shah's address to the nation, RSP leader Rabi Lamichhane's marathon meetings, the Home Minister's field visit, agreements with affected families, appeals by political parties for harmony, and continued dialogue among representatives of different communities at the local level.

But civil society activists warn that if rising religious suspicion among communities is not addressed, the tension may only appear to have subsided while remaining alive beneath the surface, waiting to flare up again.

Curfew has now been lifted in Kaptanganj. Army armoured vehicles stationed at intersections have been withdrawn. Yet, a sense of unease continues to linger over the village.

Both Om Prakash and Jay Prakash had left their homes after learning that tensions had intensified at Naya Hatiya. According to eyewitness Ramesh Kumar Mehta, the crowd became even more agitated after Om Prakash collapsed after being shot by the police.

"People were running in different directions. At that moment, Jay Prakash was also shot in the courtyard of the Shiva temple," Ramesh said.

In the courtyard of a small hut about 500 metres north of Naya Hatiya, Jay Prakash's auto-rickshaw has remained parked since the day of the incident.

In Om Prakash's father's room, the fan has remained still since Krishnadev left that night after his son was shot.

Tahir Miyan no longer has a house.



Tahir Miyan's house was burned down by an angry mob amid a curfew on July 27.



Armed Police Force personnel patrol Kaptanganj. In the foreground are burnt down motorcycles.

OPINION

OUR VIEW

Check religious outfits

As fluid networks stoke communal fires, Nepal's reactive security approach is no longer enough.

The recent unrest in Tarai-Madhesh, triggered by a communal clash in Devanganj, Sunsari, on July 26, has reminded Nepal of its vulnerability to religious friction. The Nepali state has historically relied upon coercive force to maintain fragile peace. Such reactive measures are insufficient to address the undercurrents currently threatening the nation's social fabric. It is now a matter of national urgency that the government initiates a rigorous and transparent investigation into the burgeoning influence and tactical operations of extremist religious outfits whose activities are increasingly linked to the propagation of religious hate in Nepal.

Nepal's modern political identity was built upon a foundation of secular mobilisation, which has long existed in a state of tension with a historically Hinduised state structure. This friction has been exacerbated over the last decade, as political actors began instrumentalising religion for mobilisation. The rise of a religion-centric power structure in neighbouring states has further catalysed the shift in Nepal, empowering the religious organisations to mobilise resources across the border and expand their networks.

The methodology of this expansion warrants intense scrutiny. Alarmingly, current trends indicate the adoption of fluid organisational structures as a deliberate strategy to evade accountability. Rather than operating through identifiable entities, various groups are rapidly formed under innocuous banners only to be dissolved or rebranded once their immediate objectives of spreading religious rhetoric are achieved. This tactic, likely imported from contemporary practices in neighbouring states, makes it nearly impossible for journalists, researchers, or auditors to track funding sources and institutional affiliations. The state, therefore, seems to be the only mechanism capable of tracing the external influence on such organisations.

The reported involvement of retired high-ranking security officials, including former generals, with these religious-political organisations is another concern for national security. The recruitment of such individuals provides radical networks with tactical knowledge required to manipulate community-level violence. Meanwhile, the security apparatus remains characterised by an institutionalised insensitivity and a command mentality that prioritises punishment over dialogue. When the state relies on the indiscriminate use of force, coupled with former high-level security officials joining radical networks, it enables radical networks to use violence to rattle the social fabric.

The current administration's failure to address the underlying causes of communal triggers is no longer tenable. The state's historical amnesia regarding the roots of communal violence allows radical groups like the Hindu Samrat Sena to benefit from a fragmented landscape while maintaining links to extremist ideologies.

A meaningful response to this crisis requires more than traditional nationalist rhetoric, temporary curfews, or solidarity rallies. The authorities must empower the civil society of regional hubs, such as Biratnagar and Janakpur, to conduct autonomous investigations into communal incidents rather than waiting for orders from a centralised and often distracted leadership in Kathmandu. There must also be a concerted effort to foster an informed and critical citizenship capable of engaging in dialogue before tensions spiral into violence. Concurrently, the security forces need to be trained extensively in conflict de-escalation.

The preservation of Nepal's secular identity demands that the state confront the opaque funding and fluid tactics of the organisations linked to extremist religious outfits. Failure to investigate these networks will only signal to the public—and to the international community—that the rule of law has been surrendered to the interests of imported religious radicalism.

THEIR VIEW

Act before dengue worsens

Government must establish a permanent central mosquito control authority.

We are deeply concerned by the sharp rise in dengue infections and deaths in July, which serve as a warning that we may witness another severe outbreak this year. According to the Directorate General of Health Services, 54 people have died and 15,310 have been hospitalised with dengue so far in 2026. Alarmingly, 36 of those deaths and more than 9,200 infections were recorded in July alone. Public health experts and entomologists warn that if breeding conditions remain favourable, infections may continue rising through August and September, and could even remain high until October. It is high time for authorities to move beyond their familiar and ineffective reactive approach and adopt a coordinated nationwide prevention strategy immediately.

Since the beginning of the year, this daily has repeatedly called on authorities to strengthen dengue prevention efforts before monsoon. The rise in infections and deaths shows that our calls went unheeded. Every year, mosquito control efforts intensify only after infections begin to rise sharply. By then, hospitals are already under immense pressure, while local authorities rush to eliminate mosquito breeding grounds. Recommendations by public health experts to conduct nationwide entomological surveys have also been ignored, leaving authorities without the data needed to identify Aedes mosquito breeding hotspots and prevent outbreaks before they escalate. Such a sluggish approach to dengue control is unacceptable when the disease has become a year-round public health threat.

Unfortunately, the government still relies on fragmented mosquito control measures, with different local authorities adopting different approaches to source reduction and larvicide use. Entomologists have long argued that countries with centralised vector control systems achieve far better results than those relying on decentralised management. However, the absence of a single authority for nationwide mosquito control remains one of Bangladesh's biggest weaknesses in tackling dengue. As transmission spreads across the country, the risk of preventable deaths also increases as many districts still lack the same diagnostic and treatment capacity as major cities.

The government must establish a permanent central mosquito control authority staffed by qualified entomologists and public health experts. Such a body should oversee nationwide surveillance, standardise mosquito control methods, coordinate source reduction campaigns, and ensure the active participation of local government institutions countrywide. Preventive interventions must begin well before the peak transmission season, not after hospitals start filling up with dengue patients. At the same time, healthcare facilities, particularly outside Dhaka, must be adequately prepared to diagnose and treat severe dengue cases. The authorities still have time to act, but that window is narrowing rapidly.

— The Daily Star (Bangladesh)/ANN

Nepal's problematic foreign policy

The concept of 'yam between two stones' may have been relevant historically, but it is no longer applicable.

LOK RAJ BARAL





AI GENERATED

The greatest problem among Nepali politicians is that they lose the opportunity at hand and indulge in blame games to hide their failures. This has happened since the dawn of democracy in 1951 and continues to this day. Most of the time, opportunities were squandered due to a lack of direction and attempts to falsify politics by pointing fingers at a foreign hand, making foreign policy a mobilising strategy to score domestic political gains, particularly at a time when the regime faced a survival crisis. In the post-1960 decades, the consolidation of power for individual aggrandisement and ambition sidetracked the development agenda.

Mixing unclarified concepts with the actual practice of foreign policy has not only obfuscated the issues but also misdirected the executioners. Many such concepts might have symbolic value, but symbols without substance hardly make any progress. Concepts such as the policy of equidistance might be theoretically correct, but they carry no meaning when applied to Nepal's relations with China and India.

The veritable Nepal-India relations cannot be equated with China, as mainland China is still a distant neighbour despite making Tibet its integral part. Facing south of the Himalayas, and sharing geographical, economic, cultural and humanitarian commonalities, Nepal continues to rely on India in many respects. Thus, even while asserting Nepal's nationalism and independence, the Nepali power elites have not attempted to dilute the structural relations defined by history as well as by the doctrine of necessity. For China, Nepal must maintain cordial relations without harming China's vital security interest pertaining to Tibet. Other dimensions are changing as circumstances demand, as has happened with trade and transit.

Concepts such as upgrading Nepal's landlocked status to land-linked status, as the Chinese President suggested during his visit to Nepal in 2019, and later promoted by other Nepali analysts, seem far-fetched, if not absurd. In the modern world, such a proposition can be implemented only with the priority to be given by China. And China is not likely to invest a huge amount to develop rail links without eyeing the Indian market, as the Nepali market is too small to fulfil Chinese economic objectives. If China and India fail to enter into some sort of an entente cordiale, and continue their longstanding border conflict along with undeclared competition for guaranteeing security to each other, Nepal can neither be a bridge between China and India nor would the Chinese be inclined to raise the level of development across the Himalayas.

It is assumed that China is not interested in resolving the border problem with India, as it believes it may continue to engage India in what the former foreign secretary of India, Vijay Gokhle, terms 'grey zone coercion' that neither ends the hostility nor goes in for a war. Indians also know that since China does not take India as its peer competitor in international politics, China would like to see India not be too close to the US, its principal competitor for hegemony in world politics. Nepal's importance lies in its location straddling between China (Tibet) and India, and not for other reasons.

Another concept, *dui dhunga bich ko tarul* (yam between two stones), might have had its validity in the past, but it is no longer so. Nepal's exposure to the outside world since the end of the Rana oligarchy has changed the dynamics on both the internal and external fronts. Internally, Nepal has passed through several political upheavals, including the transformation from monarchy to republic. Externally, it has established links with other distant countries across the globe, gaining a new status as a fully sovereign, independent country. Nevertheless, its geopolitical constraints cannot be overlooked when asserting national aspirations.

It has been argued today that the US is as influential as other immediate neighbours in steering Nepal's course of development. As a superpower, the US still exercises its leverage, making China and India uncomfortable with its increased role in their vicinity. Even otherwise, Nepal's scope of foreign policy has expanded to the extent of playing an important role in maintaining peace under the auspices of the UN.

The other buzzword is 'strategic autonomy' that carries little sense in the context of world politics. This concept is used to balance the two neighbours, particularly by taking advantage of their adversarial relationship. While consolidating the royal regime in the 1960s, King Mahendra used it between 1961-70, but later recanted his strategy, knowing that his manoeuvrability was over when India emerged as a regional power after playing a 'midwifery role' in creating the new republic of Bangladesh. King Birendra's policy failed when India didn't endorse his peace zone proposal despite the overwhelming support of other countries, including China. Nepal's decision to issue a new map incorporating Limpiadhura, Lipulekh and Kalapani seems to have been stuck following India's refusal to accept them as Nepali territory. Instead of using the *chuche naksha* as evidence for negotiations, Nepali political leaders rushed it to the Parliament to make it a constitutional organ.

Nepal's foreign policy initiatives have shrunk in recent years. The main reasons are uncalled-for mobilising rhetoric, miscalculation and a lack of objectivity in weighing the pros and cons of any decision taken at the whim of the leaders. Their failure to resist any pressure in making wrong decisions also produced unproductive results. The present Balendra Shah-led government is increasingly problematic in domestic politics and foreign policy. Since the prime minister's strange behaviour and style of governance do not match the letter and spirit of the multiparty parliamentary system, no one knows which system of government he is heading. There has been a trust deficit in Nepal's China and India policies, notwithstanding the foreign minister's visits to New Delhi and Beijing to restore the neighbours' confidence.

Baral is a professor of political science and former ambassador of Nepal to India.

The high cost of classroom silence

Our education system rewards complacency and subservience, while critical questioning is demonised and punished.

ANOUSHKA PANT





SHUTTERSTOCK

Nepalis have always taken pride in their perseverance, but that doesn't always sit right with me. There is a thin line between perseverance and complacency. Perseverance is acting to change a situation. What we usually do is shrug and say, "Eh, happens here all the time." Either our threshold for happiness is too low, or we have been taught to accept things as they are and to not question authority.

I hate it when people say that we do not deserve democracy. It is not a matter of deserving it as much as it is about learning to practice it. The definition of democracy as we know it—of the people, by the people and for the people—is much more than just conducting elections and voting. We put it into practice in our everyday lives and habits by asking the 'why's and getting answers. These habits are not innate to most people; they have to be learned somewhere. The idea of democracy is founded in education, which, as envisioned by Socrates, is critical thinking and questioning. Education then evolved towards grounding the questions in reason, facts and science. This important aspect of education is lost on us.

The comment I received on my first submission during my master's at the London School of Economics and Political Science was that it was too descriptive and not very analytical. I got another shot at the submission because the professor understood the education system in our part of the world, but the lesson has since stayed with me. The whole setting is so different from ours. I was surprised when I saw a classmate disagreeing with the professor in one of the lectures. Taking my astonishment up another notch, the professor did not even get mad! Instead, she engaged with the classmate constructively. The best part was that this was not a one-off incident; it was the norm. I am not saying that the Western world is perfect, but there are certainly a few lessons we could take from them.

My qualms with our education system are structural rather than personal, and it has little to do with the syllabus. What started as annoyance at how strict teachers were is something I understand differently now. We were expected to believe the teacher always knew best. Asking too many questions would label you a problem and not a problem solver. This might have been less of a problem if teaching was not still treated as a stopgap profession. The notion that someone gets into teaching because nothing else worked out for them makes it hard to find educators who are in it for the love of the game. Someone who doesn't like their job is obviously going to be irritated while at it. Add a dissenting student to that, and the classroom becomes a place to intimidate students into either silence or leaving the space altogether.

Because we were discouraged from speaking up in classrooms, we never built the muscle to question authority of any kind, including the state. So we rarely try to hold the government accountable. We mould ourselves around the imperfect system instead. There aren't many families in Nepal who have not pulled strings when they had the connections or the money. Long queue at the passport office? Make a call, or have some cash at your disposal, and you'll be inside within an hour. Every one of those calls is a small vote for keeping the queue broken.

It is only when things get truly bad that we come asking for accountability. Last September's uprising fits that pattern quite well. The youth demanded answers and actions from parties our parents had elected. But lest we forget, our parents had their own revolution too, demanding change and good governance. That movement is what gave power to the people we now call the 'old guard.'

So how did we end up in September after all of that?

Because a late convulsion is not the same thing as ongoing accountability. Our parents thought the fight ended when the revolution did, and democracy arrived. But that was the beginning of the fight. Democracy is a feedback loop, and it only works with a government that speaks to people rather than at them, meaning that the loop has to be fed continuously, not once a decade when things become unbearable.

In practice, that is duller than a revolution and much harder to sustain. It means reading a budget, knowing the plans and policies of the state, and talking about the implications of said plans and policies. It means doing things that may not always be exciting or interesting, and doing them even when they do not affect us personally.

Questioning a system is not the same as overthrowing it. Asking tough questions is the job of all citizens in a democracy, and the onus to answer them falls on the government. The government has to explain itself, correct course, and carry the cost of having been wrong, all while remaining the government. A system where the only available response to failure is collapse is not an accountable system but one that has run out of peaceful options, which is exactly what happens when nobody has been asking the small questions all along.

From the Nazis in Germany to the Taliban in Afghanistan, history is a testament to the fact that such regimes rely on destroying education and the educated to silence dissent and hold on to power. The tactics do not have to be as drastic as bombing schools or deeming education illegal. They can be as simple as gradually undermining the importance of education, defunding it, or just providing mediocre education overall.

Our education system, at its core, rewards complacency and subservience, while critical questioning is demonised and punished. This system of rewards and punishment then also extends into our professional and political lives. The most sustainable effort to save our democracy is to save our education system. It has already cost enough Nepali blood, sweat and tears—we cannot afford more of that. We cannot wait for our institutions to crumble before we take to the streets, because by the time an institution collapses, the damage is already inside it. Democracy is more than just a right we hold; it is a responsibility we perform by staying informed, by asking the right questions at the right time, and by staying vigilant even about the things that do not touch us directly.

Pant is a legal professional and lecturer of law at Kathmandu University School of Law.

FOREX

US Dollar	152.85
Euro	176.13
Pound Sterling	205.58
Swiss Franc	189
Australian Dollar	107.06
Canadian Dollar	108.85
Singapore Dollar	119.17
Japanese Yen (10)	9.73
Chinese Yuan	22.63
Saudi Arab Riyal	40.7
Qatari Riyal	41.93
Thai Bhat	4.58
UAE Dhiram	41.61
Malaysian Ringit	37.32
Korean Won (100)	10.7

Exchange rates fixed by Nepal Rastra Bank

BULLION PRICE PER TOLA

Fine Gold	Rs 284,000
Silver	Rs 4,350

SOURCE: FENEGOSIDA

BRIEFING

Oil prices fall nearly 5 percent after US announces Iran talks

TOKYO: Oil prices tumbled on Monday in early Asia trade after US President Donald Trump announced fresh talks with Iran to end the Middle East war and reopen the Strait of Hormuz. The war, which began in late February when the United States and Israel attacked Iran, has caused oil prices to swing sharply as it effectively closed the waterway, a vital route for global oil and gas supplies. At around 2250 GMT on Sunday, the price of a barrel of Brent North Sea, the benchmark international oil contract, for September delivery was down 4.69 percent at $83.81. Its American equivalent, West Texas Intermediate, fell 4.67 percent to $80.72. Trump said on Sunday that fresh negotiations with Iran will begin on Monday after holding off on major strikes against the Islamic republic to pursue a deal. "Now what we're doing is we're talking to them in the form of a negotiation. It begins tomorrow afternoon," he said.

Fresh rains boost paddy transplantation in Madhesh

Transplantation rate has reached 92.57 percent of Nepal's paddy fields, up from 83.93 percent a year ago. But yields will still depend on rainfall in the coming weeks.

SANGAM PRASAIN
KATHMANDU, AUG 3

A revival in monsoon rains has accelerated paddy transplantation by nearly 10 percentage points from last year's pace, raising hopes of increased output of Nepal's key summer-sown crop after a delayed onset of the monsoon and its slow advance across parts of the country.

Paddy transplantation has reached 92.57 percent of the country's 1.37 million hectares of available paddy fields as of Friday, according to data released by the Department of Agriculture. This means farmers have transplanted paddy on around 1.26 million hectares.

In the same period last year, the transplantation rate stood at 83.93 percent as of July 31.

The paddy transplantation rate in the perennially parched Madhesh province has risen by more than 33 percentage points from last year and crossed 90 percent as of Friday. Last year, below-average rainfall delayed transplantation in the province and affected both production and productivity in the country's national food basket.

Regular rainfall over the past week has sharply reduced the earlier transplantation deficit caused by below-normal rainfall.

In 2024, Nepal recorded one of the fastest paddy transplantation rates in many decades. By July 31, transplantation had reached 96 percent, courtesy of "above-normal rainfall".

Early transplantation has several advantages.

Agro-economists say early-transplanted paddy mostly escapes pest attacks, which reduces additional input costs, particularly for pesticides. It also allows farmers to prepare their fields for the next crop cycle on time.

"The most important part of early transplantation is that it increases the paddy areas," said agro expert Rajendra Uprety. "After transplantation, the next one-month period is critical for plant growth. If the rainfall is regular during the growth period, production will rise."

Nepali farmers typically transplant paddy in June and July following the spread of the monsoon. Poor monsoon, however, can force farmers to continue sowing paddy instead of transplanting seedlings even into early September.



POST PHOTO: RAMESH KUMAR PAUDEL

Farmers use a rice transplanter to plant rice seedlings in a paddy field in Chitwan in June 2024.

This year, the monsoon arrived six days late, on June 19, and its advance across key parts of western Nepal stalled for about two weeks, which delayed planting.

Regional forecasts by South Asian meteorologists had earlier suggested that Nepal was likely to receive below-normal monsoon rainfall this year and bring an end to three consecutive years of above-average precipitation. Monsoon rains are critical for Nepal's Rs6.6 trillion economy, providing nearly 80 percent of the water needed for agriculture while replenishing reservoirs and groundwater reserves.

With nearly half of the country's farmland lacking access to irrigation, agriculture remains heavily dependent on rainfall between June and September. The monsoon is therefore regarded as a key macroeconomic factor, closely watched by policymakers, investors and consumers.

Agriculture contributes about 24 percent to Nepal's GDP and provides employment to more than 60 percent of the population. As rural incomes largely depend on agricultural output, the strength of the monsoon has a direct impact on household spending and overall economic activity.

> Farmers remain concerned about the availability of urea as the time for top dressing approaches.

Experts warn that a combination of below-normal rainfall, fertiliser shortages and high fuel prices could place additional strain on Nepal's already fragile economy and pose a challenge for the new Rastriya Swatantra Party-led government, which has pledged to achieve annual economic growth of 7 percent and raise per capita income to at least $3,000.

Madhesh, the perennially parched province, has witnessed a sharp acceleration in transplantation, and has surpassed Koshi province, although it remained the second province with the lowest paddy transplantation rate as of July 31. According to the Department of Hydrology and Meteorology, Madhesh received 150 mm of rainfall on Sunday and many farmers completed their remaining paddy transplantation.

According to the Department of Agriculture, paddy has been transplanted in 90.72 percent of the 385,933 hectares of farmland available for paddy cultivation in Madhesh, the province with the largest paddy-growing area. During the same period last year, the transplantation rate had reached just 57.28 percent.

"We were waiting for rain before transplanting the seedlings. This month, we received good rainfall for three to four days, which allowed us to complete transplantation at a faster rate," said Ananta Prasad Sigdel, a farmer in Santapur village in Rautahat. "It rained heavily on Sunday. Almost all areas in my village are done with transplantation."

Sigdel, who owns 1.5 bigha (just over one hectare) of land, said rainfall in Kathmandu and other hill areas also increases water flow in the Bagmati River, a major source of irrigation for Madhesh, particularly Rautahat.

"We have heard it has been raining daily in Kathmandu and its surrounding hill districts, filling up rivers to irrigate Tarai lands," he said. Farmers, however, remain concerned about the availability of urea as the time for top dressing approaches.

The Tarai accounts for 71 percent of Nepal's total rice cultivation area, followed by the hills with 25 percent and the mountains with 4 percent.

According to the meteorological data, Nepal received around 40 percent of its average monsoon rainfall by the end of July, following widespread rains over the past few weeks, although some regions are still facing rainfall deficits.

The Department of Agriculture said paddy transplantation has been completed in Sudurpaschim province, reaching 99.79 percent of the 154,950 hectares of available paddy fields. Last year, the transplantation rate was 99.72 percent.

After Sudurpaschim, transplantation has reached 96.12 percent of the 114,524 hectares of paddy fields in Bagmati province, followed by 94.83 percent of the 301,372 hectares in Lumbini province.

In Karnali province, transplantation has reached 94.8 percent of the 43,290 hectares of available paddy fields. In Gandaki province, paddy transplantation has been completed on 92.13 percent of the 93,606 hectares available for cultivation.

Koshi province has the lowest transplantation rate, at 86.97 percent of its 276,386 hectares of paddy fields. The rate is around two percentage points lower than the transplantation rate recorded in the province during the same period last year.

Refunds cover only declared troubled cooperatives, leaving hundreds more excluded

>> Continued from page 1

He said the absence of publicly available standards has created confusion among victims and warned that if recovered assets ultimately prove insufficient, policymakers responsible for designing the distribution mechanism should bear responsibility.

Complaints received by the National Cooperatives Regulatory Authority also indicate that the problem extends well beyond the cooperatives formally recognised as troubled.

Keshav Raj Bhattarai, director of the authority, said the regulator has received 894 complaints against more than 800 cooperatives during the fiscal year 2025-26, with another five complaints already registered in the current fiscal year.

"Most complaints concern the failure to return deposits. Others involve excessive interest and penalties or the failure to release collateral even after borrowers have repaid their loans," said Bhattarai.

According to him, action has begun on around half of the complaints through requests for records, verification of documents and discussions with relevant institutions.

The authority has referred cases involving 33 cooperatives to other agencies for further legal action. It has also ordered the freezing of movable and immovable assets and imposed foreign travel restrictions on operators, committee members and employees associated with 17 cooperatives. Asset freezes and travel bans have already been completed in nine cases, while additional information has been sought from relevant agencies regarding 45 others.

Bhattarai said the authority had recommended in April that the government declare 16 cooperatives "troubled". However, the Ministry of Land Management, Cooperatives and Poverty Alleviation returned the proposal in June, asking the authority to complete procedures required under the Cooperatives Ordinance, including freezing assets and restricting foreign travel before making such declarations.

After completing those legal procedures, the authority submitted fresh recommendations covering nine cooperatives for declaration as troubled.

Former Supreme Court justice Gauri Bahadur Karki, who chaired the 2014 Commission of Inquiry on Problematic Savings and Credit Cooperatives, said the country's cooperatives crisis is deeper than the number of institutions officially declared troubled suggests.

"The declared institutions are not the only ones facing problems," said Karki. "Many more cooperatives have collected savings from the public and their operators have disappeared. Resolving the cooperative crisis has never become a genuine priority for successive governments."

The Karki-led commission had identified 130 problematic cooperatives more than a decade ago. Its report estimated that those institutions owed the public Rs11.41 billion, including principal and interest.

Karki said the report had warned the government years earlier that weak regulation and poor oversight were allowing widespread abuse of public savings, but effective reforms never followed. "The government must either demonstrate that there are no additional crisis-hit cooperatives beyond those already declared troubled or listen seriously to the thousands of victims protesting on the streets," he said.

According to Karki, people continue to be defrauded by cooperatives almost every year because regulatory failures remain unresolved. "In several cases, including the network associated with GB Rai, some cooperatives appear to have been established primarily to deceive depositors," he said. "Without effective supervision, operators freely misused public savings, and the state's response has remained inadequate."

Experts say the continuing collapse of savings and credit cooperatives reflects long-standing weaknesses in governance rather than isolated financial failures. Many institutions collected billions of rupees from ordinary citizens before becoming insolvent or their managers disappeared. Although no official nationwide estimate exists, victims' groups believe billions of rupees remain trapped in failed cooperatives, most of them savings and credit institutions, while some multi-purpose cooperatives also continued accepting deposits and issuing loans in practice despite operating under broader mandates.

Rs88 billion misappropriated by 40 cooperatives

Ramesh Prasad Pokharel, acting chairman of the National Cooperatives Federation, said there is still no official count of cooperatives unable to return public savings. Based on informal assessments, however, he estimates that around 300 cooperatives are already in serious difficulty, while many others are heading in the same direction.

"Those responsible for embezzling depositors' money must be compelled to repay it," said Pokharel. "The institutions should be identified and their own resources, assets and human resources used to recover loans and gradually return depositors' savings."

He argued that the current approach, under which the federal government and a few provincial governments first declare cooperatives troubled before initiating refunds, is unlikely to provide a sustainable solution.

"It would be more effective if the authorities worked directly from the offices of troubled cooperatives, using their own records and assets to recover loans and repay depositors," Pokharel said. "Trying to solve every problem from a single central office may only create further delays."

Ramesh Chaulagain, former expert member of the National Cooperatives Authority, also acknowledged that there is no verified figure for the number of crisis-hit cooperatives that have yet to be declared troubled ones.

"At present, only the 23 cooperatives declared troubled by the federal government and six others listed by Bagmati and Koshi provinces officially fall into that category," he said. "But complaints from across the country indicate that many more institutions have stopped returning members' savings."

Former National Cooperatives Federation chairman Minraj Kandel likewise estimated that around 200 cooperatives have failed to return deposits despite not being formally declared troubled. "The government currently has no mechanism to refund depositors of institutions that remain outside the official list," said Kandel.

Surya Bahadur Thapa, who chaired the parliamentary special committee on cooperative savings embezzlement, said his panel had investigated 40 cooperatives although its original mandate covered only 29 institutions.

"The committee found many more cooperatives that had misappropriated public savings than those officially declared troubled. Yet there is still no clear legal arrangement for returning the money of depositors in these institutions," said Thapa.

He said the committee had recommended adopting a system similar to that used by Nepal Rastra Bank when commercial banks become financially distressed.

"When a bank fails, the central bank assumes responsibility for management, recovers loans and protects depositors," said Thapa. "A similar framework should apply to cooperatives. If recovery proves impossible, liquidation should begin without unnecessary delay."

He questioned the effectiveness of the revolving fund proposed to finance refunds, arguing that loan recovery has remained weak. "The government has spoken loudly about returning savings, but progress has been limited," he said. "Most of what is happening now simply continues work initiated by the previous committee."

Minister for Land Management, Cooperatives and Poverty Alleviation Pratibha Rawal said the government has already begun refunding deposits in officially declared troubled cooperatives while preparing both short-term and long-term strategies for other cooperatives that have not yet received that status.

"The National Cooperatives Regulatory Authority is investigating complaints, collecting evidence and evaluating cooperatives that have failed to return deposits," said Rawal. "However, the authority does not have a mandate to refund money."

The minister said discussions are underway on whether responsibility to refund money should also be assigned to the Problematic Cooperatives Management Committee.

"The government has already started returning savings to declared troubled cooperatives. For cooperatives that are heading towards crisis, we are exploring several options to protect depositors," said Rawal. She acknowledged that legal proceedings have often recovered only a fraction of the assets needed to compensate victims.

"In many cases, assets have been hidden inside and outside Nepal," Rawal said. "The government is therefore working on long-term measures that take all these complexities into account."

The scale of cooperatives fraud is also reflected in police records. Over the past decade, police have arrested 669 people in connection with cooperatives funds embezzlement while 1,540 suspects remain absconding.

The arrests followed 258 complaints lodged by 24,224 victims. Police investigations have resulted in more than 100 criminal cases, with over 1,300 defendants facing prosecution. Courts have determined claims exceeding Rs2 billion in cases already filed. More than three dozen cases have ended in convictions, around 60 remain under trial and several others await decisions on appeals by government prosecutors.

Successive governments have repeatedly acknowledged problems in the cooperatives sector and formed committees to recommend reforms. Since 1967, at least 14 separate commissions or task forces have been formed. While some of their recommendations have been partially implemented, the underlying weaknesses remain unresolved.

As public confidence has declined, experts warn that the credibility of Nepal's cooperatives movement—and a significant pillar of the country's financial system—continues to erode.

A report by the parliamentary special committee led by CPN-UML lawmaker Thapa concluded that 40 cooperatives operating in major cities had liabilities of Rs87.89 billion, including Rs71.30 billion in public deposits. The report found that prospects of recovering loans, investments and non-banking assets were weak.

It also found that 13 of the 22 officially troubled cooperatives had illegally issued loans worth Rs21.38 billion, while 18 other controversial cooperatives had extended loans totalling Rs32.41 billion. Six of those cooperatives alone had provided loans worth Rs6.85 billion to individuals and entities linked to Gorkha Media Network.

The committee concluded that Rs655.4 million deposited by members of Suryadarshan Cooperative in Pokhara, Supreme Cooperative in Butwal, Sahara Cooperative in Chitwan, Sano Paila Cooperative in Birgunj and Swarnalaxmi Cooperative in Kathmandu had been diverted to Gorkha Media Network. None of those cooperatives has yet been declared officially troubled.

The Thapa-led committee recommended legal action against Gorkha Media chairman Gitendra Babu (GB) Rai, former managing director and former home minister Rabi Lamichhane, and operators Chhabilal Joshi and Kumar Ramtel. All four face charges of fraud, forgery, money laundering and organised crime. Rai remains absconding, while cases against Lamichhane, Joshi and Ramtel are pending before the courts.

Refunds begin only for officially declared troubled cooperatives

The Problematic Cooperatives Management Committee says it has returned or settled Rs710 million belonging to around 11,000 depositors since beginning the refund process in May. The amount includes Rs210 million paid in cash and Rs500 million settled through account adjustments.

According to the committee, it has refunded almost all verified deposits of up to Rs10,000, except for about 1,500 depositors of Shiva Shikhar Multipurpose Cooperative. It has also begun providing up to Rs25,000 every quarter for elderly depositors, single women and people suffering from life-threatening illnesses to help cover medical expenses.



POST PHOTO: DEEPAK KC

People who lost their savings to credit coopeatives demonstrate in Kathmandu demanding their money back, on July 27. The protesters oppose the government's decision to classify depositors as small and large, saying the distinction has left many of them without repayments while only small depositors have been paid.

Myanmar's detained former leader Suu Kyi has rare meeting with ICRC

ASSOCIATED PRESS
BANGKOK, AUG 3

Myanmar's detained former leader Aung San Suu Kyi met with the International Committee of the Red Cross' representative in the capital on Monday, the military-backed government said, a rare moment of contact with the outside world for the Nobel laureate who has been held out of public view since the military seized power in 2021.

Two photographs published with the announcement showed Suu Kyi shaking hands with Arnaud de Baecque, the ICRC's representative to Myanmar, and meeting with him in a wood-paneled room.

The Presidential Press and Information Bureau, which released the photographs, said the meeting was held Monday morning but did not disclose the location of the meeting or provide details about what was discussed.

The ICRC confirmed in a statement on Monday that one of its delegates visited Suu Kyi under its standards and procedures for visiting people deprived of liberty, and spoke with her in private, but it did not disclose details of the discussion.

The organization said it continues to engage with all relevant actors to maintain and expand its access to places of detention in Myanmar.

Two other photographs showed Suu Kyi cutting a pink birthday cake bearing the inscription, "Happy Birthday Aunty Suu," suggesting they may have been taken during a celebration for her 81st birthday in June. In the photos, Suu Kyi appeared relaxed and was smiling. She did not show any obvious signs of ill health, although her physical condition could not be independently assessed from the images.

The release came as calls are growing from other countries, including Myanmar's fellow members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, for access to or engagement with Suu Kyi as part of efforts to resolve the country's political crisis.

Kim Aris, her younger son living in London, and Myanmar democracy activists has been waging an online campaign named to demand evidence his mother is alive and well.

In a statement sent to the AP, Aris welcomed the reported ICRC visit, saying it could mark the first positive development concerning his mother in more than five years.

"This may be a first step, but it must not be the last," Aris said.

He thanked governments, the international community and supporters for standing with his family and backing his campaign to seek proof of his mother's well-being, while stressing that he had not yet received independent confirmation of her condition.

He said he hoped the visit would lead to direct family contact and her eventual release together with all political prisoners. Suu Kyi was detained Feb. 1, 2021, when the army seized power from her elected government. She has not been seen publicly since then, and the last official photo of her released was in April, when she was moved from prison to house arrest and her sentence was reduced as part of a prisoner amnesty for a Buddhist holiday.

How India's employment exams turned its 'cockroach' youth against Modi

A farmer's son fell short of an elite government job after attempts that burned through family savings, while a housekeeper's daughter saw her medical school hopes dashed. When their disillusionment collided with broader frustrations of India's middle class, tens of thousands took to the streets.

REUTERS
NEW DELHI, AUG 3



REUTERS

Thousands of protesters celebrated the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan in New Delhi on July 25. His departure after questions for a medical school exam were leaked was a rare concession by the Modi government.

Ashok Kumar knows that Narendra Modi changed his life for the better.

Ashok remembers, as a child, watching his farmer parents struggle to make ends meet – and how things changed after Modi became prime minister in 2014. His government expanded benefits like cheap cooking gas and direct farm subsidies, giving Ashok and his younger brother Abhishek hope for a better future. Their parents rewarded Modi with votes in three elections.

But last week, 25-year-old Ashok found himself demonstrating against Modi next to Jantar Mantar, an 18th-century astronomical observatory that anchors New Delhi's main protest site. The protests were spearheaded by the Cockroach Janta Party, a satirical movement that has become the voice of India's young and disaffected.

The unrest erupted after the government invalidated national medical exam test results for about 2 million students, including Abhishek, after discovering test questions had been leaked. In India, such standardized tests offer a pathway to the middle class. The world's most populous country rations access to thousands of public-sector jobs — diplomats and administrators, but also clerks and forest rangers — through gruelling exams for which students spend years and small fortunes preparing.

Success can be statistically harder than getting into Harvard, but the prize includes lifelong security, as well as pension and housing benefits unavailable in the private sector. Meanwhile, corporate job growth has slowed to 3% annually from 11% in the decade before 2020, according to Marcellus Investment Managers.

Since 2014, at least two dozen exams have had their results invalidated due to leaks, according to a Reuters review of public records and media reports. But this time, it sparked one of India's largest uprisings in decades. Tens of thousands took to the streets, in Delhi and elsewhere, to express their fury at the repeated mismanagement of an examination system that stands between the masses and an iron rice bowl, an Asian metaphor for job security. Four years ago, Ashok packed a small bag and moved a thousand kilometers away from his home state of Bihar. In Delhi, he earned a master's degree and enrolled in a test-cramming school, repeatedly trying but failing to crack elite civil service exams. His younger brother Abhishek later joined him to prepare for a similarly competitive medical-school exam.

Thousands of similarly disenchanted youth have joined demonstrations airing an array of grievances against Modi's Hindu nationalist government that are often obscured by India's world-beating growth figures. The complaints include widening economic inequality, high youth unemployment and an erosion of free speech rights, according to Reuters interviews with dozens of people during six days of protests. Indians under the age of 30 are three times as likely as the average citizen to be unemployed, government data show.

Students held up posters mocking in abusive language the septuagenarian Modi and his ministers, who govern a populace including some 900 million under the age of 35. They punctured the aura of inviolability around a strongman who has electorally crushed India's once powerful Congress party and, critics say, cowed its historically freewheeling media.

Modi's office didn't respond to a request for comment. It has previously pushed back against criticism of its economic stewardship, arguing that claims of an unemployment crisis are overblown and that macroeconomic fundamentals remain robust.

The people's party

The Cockroach Janta Party (or "people's party") takes its name from a disparaging remark made by India's chief justice earlier this year about unemployed youth. He later said his comments had been misconstrued.

On July 20, more than 50,000 attempted to march on parliament, according to some estimates. They were met with a violent police response but won sympathy from the many more following the protests online. The crowds, which by then spanned age groups and socioeconomic classes, swelled. Bollywood stars voiced support on social media.

"People are usually divided by religion, caste and language," said Ashok, showing off a bruise he said came from a police baton during a demonstration. "This was the first time they united around education." Delhi Police didn't respond to questions about its management of the protests. It has previously said that the demonstrations were policed professionally and that 118 officers were injured during the July 20 confrontation.

By the end of the week, the cockroaches had their scalp: Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, a primary protest target, had resigned. In a rare concession, Modi had bowed to demonstrators' demands.

Modi's government has since moved to tighten a law against exam leaks with harsher penalties. He also announced the creation of a panel to review the examination system in a video speaking directly to India's youth.

The government has additionally agreed to offer compensation to the families of students who died by suicide after exam papers were leaked, as well as to drop efforts to prosecute protesters.

Pradhan didn't return a request for comment.

Getting by on rice farming, buffalo milk

One of the world's great economic booms began in the 1990s, when India cast off decades of protectionism and welcomed global conglomerates. The country later developed leading companies of its own, providing back-office services to Wall Street and Silicon Valley. It has for some years been one of the world's fastest-growing major economies and now claims roughly half a billion middle-class citizens.

That prosperity, however, can seem distant in Ashok and Abhishek's home state of Bihar, India's poorest on a per capita basis.

Reuters reporters visited their family home in a remote corner of the eastern state, which depends on farming. They found a buffalo tethered in a courtyard littered with dung. The animal provides the milk their mother sells to supplement her husband's income from tending a rice plot.

The invalidation of the May medical school exam deflated 20-year-old Abhishek, who unsuccessfully attempted that test three times. "I thought becoming a doctor would help me get my mother some jewellery, a TV for the home," Abhishek said at the family home.

Instead, Abhishek found himself dreading asking his parents for money to replace the beaten-up flip-flops he was wearing.

"How much can I study?" he said. "I can't prepare this much again."

Ashok, the older brother, had decided as a teenager to pursue a civil service job. Working for the government is one of the few paths available for ambitious Biharis looking to flee the fields.

He started going to exam-cramming schools while living at home, sometimes studying by lantern light when the electricity went off. "I thought hard work alone would be enough," he recalled.

A series of cheating scandals – many in Bihar – disabused him of the notion. The state briefly became a fixture of global headlines in 2015, when photos of the relatives and friends of exam candidates scaling a building to sneak answers through windows were widely broadcast around the world.

"Cheats Climb High," one American news website wrote.

As recently as 2024, hundreds protested the alleged leak online of an exam for entry into the state's civil service. The Bihar government, which Modi's party helps lead, said there were only limited irregularities and certified the results.

That didn't help Ashok. He had fallen short of the cut-off to advance to the next round by just 10 points. He had taken the test while preparing for more competitive national exams, and came away embittered at the near-miss result.

Over the last four years, he has taken seven such tests, missing out each time. He estimates that he has spent more than $10,000, nearly all from the savings his father has scraped together.

Back in Ashok's claustrophobic Delhi rental room, the peeling plaster walls are adorned with posters, including one with an inspirational quote from the Hindu monk Swami Vivekananda: "Arise, awake, and stop not until your goal is achieved."

The sentiment, however, seems lost on him.

"The public examination system has largely collapsed," he said.

'For the future of the children'

Divya Unny is one of India's winners.

She was just a child when India set off on its journey of economic liberalization. By the time she was an adult, India had its own Vogue magazine, which she worked for before successfully pivoting into acting and directing. Her feminist short films have been watched by millions on YouTube.

But in July, the 41-year-old joined thousands of disillusioned "cockroaches" at Jantar Mantar. The crowds chanted "Inquilab Zindabad" — an anti-colonial slogan that means "Long live the Revolution." Michael Jackson's 1990s protest anthem "They Don't Care About Us" blared from loudspeakers.

Unny, who lives in the coastal city of Mumbai, had her gripes with the government. She complained that Indian film studios seemed to prioritize making Hindu-nationalist-themed movies. Wages hadn't kept up with prices, she said.

But Unny wasn't in Delhi primarily for herself. She had developed a sisterly rapport with Simran Singh, the 21-year-old daughter of her housekeeper Mamta Singh. Simran had fallen into a funk after taking the medical exam and seeing her results invalidated.

Wanting to help, but not sure how, the filmmaker took a 17-hour train ride with her husband and marched at Jantar Mantar, wearing her late mother's sari and a flower garland in her hair.

"We were just going to support something for the future of the children of this country," she said.

Unny's housekeeper, Mamta, had come to Mumbai from Bihar, like the Kumar brothers. She had moved to the city to enable bigger dreams for herself and Simran.

Until May's exam results were canceled, that bet appeared to be paying off. Her hours were long, but the wages enabled her to spend over $3,000 annually on test coaching for Simran. Her daughter was determined to live up to the expectations, dedicating herself to months of study and largely isolating herself from friends, Mamta said.

After the test, Simran expected that she would score higher than 500 points – likely enough to attend medical school. But soon after, Indian media started reporting suspected irregularities with the exam. Simran shut herself away for two days without eating, Mamta said.

Modi's government later announced the tests would be invalidated "in the interest of students." It also referred the leak to federal investigators, as it did in 2024, when questions for that year's exam were also prematurely released.

The government organized a retest in June, but this time Simran scored below expectations. Even before that, however, she had decided to abandon her medical dreams and opt for a less prestigious course of study.

"Today my daughter is 21," Mamta said. "After one year she'll be 22 and again the same thing will happen. Will we keep doing this our whole life? When will she live her life?"

Millions of Thais banish the booze for Buddhist Lent

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
SAMUT SAKHON, THAILAND, AUG 3

With her palms pressed together and her head bowed, Wassana Nak-umma vowed to give up alcohol for three months, joining millions of Thais in an abstinence campaign blending public health with spirituality.

The 42-year-old housewife, who took the pledge at a Buddhist temple in Samut Sakhon, west of Bangkok, admitted she used to be a "heavy drinker".

"I used to get so drunk that my kids had to clean up my vomit," she told AFP candidly.

But a concerned relative persuaded her to join a campaign to give up alcohol during Khao Phansa, a three-month period of reflection observed by Buddhists akin to Christian Lent.

"I still craved it. Whenever I saw people buying liquor or beer at stores, I would look at them and want to drink like them," she said.

"But I held back, telling myself it was only three months. After that three-month period, I realised, 'Hey, I can do this! Next year, I must do it again'."

That was in 2024. Wassana went back to drinking, but in moderation, and this week joined hundreds in Samut Sakhon to pledge abstinence for her third year.

Avoiding drugs and alcohol is a key precept of Buddhism.

But Thailand, where more than 90 percent of the population identify as Buddhist, has the third highest per capita consumption of alcohol in Asia, according to 2024 data from the World Health Organization (WHO).

It was to address this paradox that the so-called Buddhist Lent campaign began in 2003, and last year it claimed more than eight million adherents.



AFP/RSS

A poster is seen to encourage people to abstain from drinking alcohol for three months at the start of Buddhist Lent at a Buddhist temple in Samut Sakhon province on July 30

Spiritual anchor

The start of Khao Phansa on Thursday was a joyous affair in the rural province of Samut Sakhon, featuring offerings to monks and traditional dances.

Dozens of people also paraded through the village on "salengs"—scooters with sidecars used locally to transport coconuts—brandishing placards featuring images of healthy, smiling livers.

Phayom Raksa solemnly recited a pledge that touched on the teachings of the Buddha, and mentioned Thailand's king and the well-being of the nation.

The 66-year-old former coconut farmer stopped drinking entirely after participating in the campaign for the first time six years ago.

"My kids were ashamed of me—their dad got drunk every day and didn't care about them," he told AFP, saying that he also spent all his money on alcohol. But he now urged others to follow his example, saying: "I'd like everyone to try doing what I did—to think and look at positive things."

Abstinence campaigns have gathered ground in many countries in recent years, notably the trend to pursue a "Dry January" after Christmas and New Year's Eve excesses.

They are often linked to an increased focus on healthy behaviour.

But Ubolwan Kongsawang, a regional volunteer with Thialand's Stop Drinking Network, said the Buddhist Lent campaign provides a "spiritual anchor" that boosts motivation.

"When individuals take a pledge before a Buddha image, at a temple, or within their community, they feel bound to honour their word," she said.

'Beyond Lent'

Organisers of the campaign have revamped their messaging this year, emphasising how giving up or even cutting down alcohol consumption can result in improved health, better relationships—and crucially, save money.

"Our goal is not necessarily total abstinence for everyone," said Dr. Pongthep Wongwatcharapaiboon, director of the Thai Health Promotion Foundation, a government agency.

"Many reduce their consumption and discover the health benefits, which is already a success."

Thailand in December relaxed decades-old restrictions on selling alcohol in the afternoon, which were originally intended to stop government employees drinking on the job.

But it remains banned on religious public holidays and around elections.

One advertisement for the Buddhist Lent campaign focuses on the social pressure to drink, in a culture where alcohol is everywhere, from funerals to festivals.

"We are trying to transform the drinking culture itself, not just reduce individual consumption," says Teera Wacharaprannee, head of the Stop Drinking Network.

"Our strategy is to continue beyond Lent, supporting villages and communities to reduce alcohol in daily life."

Trump tells Iranians to make deal or surrender

Trump has called Iran 'duplicitous' for 'openly and proudly' saying it was not negotiating.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
WASHINGTON, AUG 3

President Donald Trump lashed out Monday after Iran denied it was in negotiations with the United States, declaring in an angry social media post that a US military blockade will continue until there is a "Deal, or Total surrender."

Calling Iran "duplicitous" for "openly and proudly" saying it was not negotiating, Trump wrote: "Whether Iran wants to admit it or not, we are, in fact, talking of a solution to a problem that they have caused, for decades."

Trump's statement on Truth Social came after Iran said there were no direct talks with Washington, as Trump had insisted there would be when he called off a threatened round of heavy bombing against Iran over the weekend, citing what he said were appeals from regional powers and Tehran.

The Iranian foreign ministry said Monday that the only talks it was holding were with Oman to discuss plans for sharing control over the Strait of Hormuz, a vital passage for the global energy trade.

Trump insisted Iran had asked for talks—"some would say 'beg'"—but was now giving "their usual blather" about controling Hormuz.

The strait, Trump insisted, "is already completely controlled by the United States Navy and our 'Blockade' or, as some say, 'The United States Wall of Steel!' Nothing gets through to Iran, unless we want it to, and nothing will get through, unless a Deal, or Total Surrender, is accomplished."

Trump launched a war, together with Israel, against Iran on February 28.

> **Iranian foreign ministry has said that the only talks it was holding were with Oman.**

Original goals included destruction of the country's nuclear industry, missiles and backing for a popular uprising against the government.

More than five months later, Iran remains able to fire missiles and drones at US and allied targets in the region, and retains its enriched uranium stockpiles.

Despite the US pressure, Iranian attacks on ships in Hormuz have severely impacted global energy trading, giving Tehran a strong new card in the standoff.

Nepal risk first-ever absence from SAFF Championship

Nepal's football crisis deepens as FIFA suspension threatens the country's first-ever absence from the SAFF Championship, prompting growing calls for government intervention.

NAYAK PAUDEL
KATHMANDU, AUG 3



AI-GENERATED IMAGE

There are two countries that have participated in all 14 editions of the SAFF Men's Championship to date—India and Nepal. That, however, might change this year. As Bangladesh are preparing to host the championship's 15th edition in November, Nepal could miss playing at the biggest South Asian footballing event for the first time in history.

Nepal's participation in South Asia's premier international football tournament hinges on a critical condition: FIFA must lift the current suspension on the All Nepal Football Association before the stipulated SAFF deadline on September 30.

If that doesn't happen, the beleaguered Nepali football would face another blow. Nepal have already missed out on five major football events this year.

Amid this, stakeholders have started pressuring the government—through social media—to help lift the FIFA suspension at the earliest.

"Honourable Prime Minister, today, the future of thousands of Nepali football players stands in jeopardy," Hari Khadka, ANFA's technical director, wrote on his Facebook on Sunday afternoon. "If a timely solution is not found, Nepal faces the grim reality of missing out on the upcoming SAFF Football Championship as well."

Khadka, who is Nepal's all-time joint highest goal scorer, added, "To safeguard years of hard work, dreams, and national pride of our athletes, I respectfully request you to consult with the concerned stakeholders, take the necessary initiatives, and foster an environment where Nepali players can step onto the pitch once again."

The South Asian Football Federation has shown extreme flexibility towards Nepal. "In the event that Nepal's FIFA suspension is lifted by September 30, Nepal will be included in the group of the hosts Bangladesh," SAFF announced during the draw ceremony for the SAFF Championship in Thimpu, Bhutan, on Saturday.

Bangladesh were drawn into Group A alongside Sri Lanka and Bhutan, while Group B comprises India, Pakistan and the Maldives.

But Nepal needs the FIFA suspension, which was imposed on June 24 citing continuous third-party interference, to be lifted. And it is only possible when the incumbent ANFA President Pankaj Bikram Nembang's plan for an early election is allowed to resume from the point it was stopped in Jhapa on March 26 after the government's intervention.

Nembang is allowed to host an early election, and it abides by FIFA and ANFA Statutes, the governing body of international football has stated multiple times. However, the National Sports Council (NSC) has had a separate opinion that ANFA can conduct its elections only after ensuring a fresh mandate at the district associations.

"It is not a fair election if there are the same voters, who helped Nembang win the previous election, at the district level," the NSC has been stressing.

Despite Nembang's four-year term ending only in mid-June, he had put forth the plan to organise it as early as February. "We cannot force district associations to conduct their elections before time because they are independent bodies," Kiran Rai, ANFA general secretary, has been defending Nembang's move.

With the two authorities—ANFA and NSC—at loggerheads, the NSC even had ANFA suspended for up to three months on March 25, two days before ANFA's election in Jhapa. It was later lifted following warnings of suspension from FIFA, but ANFA was still under state scrutiny.

It was only after the government disallowed ANFA representatives from flying abroad to participate in FIFA's Congress, Summit and World Cup that the international footballing body had enough and imposed the suspension.

FIFA's suspension means that Nepali football cannot exercise any of its membership rights. "Other member associations may not entertain sporting contact with a suspended member association," FIFA stated in a circular to all of its members.

As a result, Nepal could not participate in the AFC Women's Champions League 2026/27, AFC U17 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers and AFC U20 Asian Cup Qualifiers.

Had Nepal's suspension been lifted by August 1, Nepal, who were drawn in Group I alongside Mongolia, Guam and Northern Mariana Islands on May 28, could have had the opportunity to play in the U20 Qualifiers. Now, the fixtures are out, and Nepal are not listed in the group.

The Asian Football Confederation (AFC), on June 27, had written a letter to ANFA stating that the deadlines to lift the FIFA suspension in order to ensure participation at the Women's Champions League and U17 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers were on June 29 and July 13, respectively. As the suspension continued, Nepal were excluded.

However, Nepal had lost two other footballing events, long before the FIFA suspension, to the tussle between ANFA and NSC.

Firstly, a friendly between the men's teams of Nepal and Hong Kong scheduled for March 26 was cancelled after the NSC, as per ANFA, did not allow the use of Dasharath Stadium. The NSC, meanwhile, defended itself by making public permission letters provided to ANFA.



Secondly, Nepal women's team could not travel to Thailand in mid-April for the FIFA Series as ANFA withdrew from the tournament citing NSC's suspension. The women's team were training in a closed camp for the Series when they heard the bad news.

As they were denied participation in the FIFA Series, the women's team could not train properly during the closed camp for the SAFF Women's Championship, which Nepal played in Goa, India, from May 25.

"There were noises of FIFA suspension when the team was training. As they had missed the FIFA Series already, they were in continuous fear of missing the SAFF tournament as well," Nabin Neupane, the team's head coach, had told the Post earlier. "They were not focused on training. How could they even?"

Neupane also took to social media on Sunday and requested the government to take necessary steps to ensure the men's team did not lose the opportunity.

"Honourable Prime Minister, the SAFF Championship is like the World Cup to us. It is not merely a tournament—it is an opportunity tied to the dreams, hard work, and futures of thousands of Nepali players and coaches," Neupane, who is also a former national player, wrote. "Considering the future of Nepali footballers, please create a suitable environment to play."

Similarly, Nepal's captain Kiran Chemjong posted a photo of the teams divided into two groups for the SAFF Championship on his Facebook story. He then wrote, "As a proud Nepali footballer, seeing Nepal's name missing from the upcoming SAFF schedule is heartbreaking."

He added, "We have always fought for our country with pride, passion and hope," Chemjong continued. "We sincerely hope that the ban will be lifted soon and that Nepal will once again be on the pitch, representing our nation and making our people proud."

Manish Dangi, another national player, had also requested the same from the state.

The Post has been trying to reach out to Minister for Education and Sports Sasmit Pokharel and the ministry's spokesperson Shiva Kumar Sapkota for comments for weeks. However, they have not responded despite repetitive calls and messages.

Minister Pokharel had publicly stated a couple of weeks ago that the government was in communication with FIFA and AFC and had called their representatives for dialogue. He has not spoken about the issue since then.

The Post has also sought a response from FIFA on the matter through the formal channel for media.

19 national and international volleyball events announced for 2026/27 season

POST REPORT
KATHMANDU, AUG 3

The Nepal Volleyball Association has announced 19 events for the 2026/27 season through an official function in Kathmandu on Monday.

Making the calendar public, the NVA assured that the upcoming season would be bigger and better for Nepali volleyball. Of the 19 events, two are courses—a national referee course and a coaching course.

Meanwhile, the dates have not been announced for 16 of the 19 events.

Among the tournaments with the dates announced is the Nepal Volleyball League, a franchise league organised by Kedia Group in association with the NVA, which will be organised next month.

Similarly, Nepal will travel to Bhutan in September for the CAVA Beach Volleyball Tour.

Kathmandu will host the CAVA Women's Champions League from November 1 to 7.

The NVA plans to organise the 35th National Men's and 25th National Women's Volleyball Championship in Surkhet. It is the only domestic tournament confirmed to be organised outside Kathmandu.

As per the calendar, the NVA also seems to be planning to organise the 11th PM Cup NVA Volleyball League, the 7th Women's and 8th Men's National Beach Volleyball, a friendly volleyball tournament and the U18 Inter School Volleyball Tournament outside Kathmandu, as the venues were not disclosed.

Kathmandu, meanwhile, will also host the U19 Women's and Men's National Volleyball, Everest Women's Volleyball League (EWVL) and CAVA Challenge Cup (Men's).

Nepal's women's team will also be travelling to Japan for the 20th Asian Games in September, followed by another CAVA Beach Volleyball Tour in the Maldives.

The NVA has also announced a three-nations cup in Kathmandu, but the date and the participants are yet to be finalised.

"The dates have not been confirmed for most of the tournaments to make it feasible for other mofussil events as well," said Jitendra Bahadur Chand, NVA President. "But these events have been confirmed and will be hosted in a timely manner."

HOROSCOPE

ARIES (March 21-April 19)
Watch out for bad advice and emotionally charged conversations, dearest Aries. Ask questions to fill gaps of information if you're still drawing blanks.

TAURUS (April 20-May 20)
If you're going to follow your gut, at least give your visions a moment to marinate. A stabilising energy places firmer ground beneath your feet, making it a more auspicious time to launch ideas.

GEMINI (May 21-June 21)
The people around you could prove highly distracting, sweet Gemini. Focus on enriching details to stay grounded as morning unfolds, and don't get sidetracked by screens.

CANCER (June 22-July 22)
Resist the temptation to correct or insert yourself in other people's issues, especially if you don't feel completely confident in what you're about to say. Your reserved demeanor pays off this afternoon.

LEO (July 23-August 22)
Your vibrant imagination takes you on a journey this morning, dear Leo. Dreams grow increasingly vivid, inspiring you to pursue them boldly. These vibes are perfect for seizing opportunities to expand.

VIRGO (August 23-September 22)
Don't believe every whisper you hear this morning, dear Virgo. Gossip will seem more toxic and damaging than usual, so it's best not to involve yourself.

LIBRA (September 23-October 22)
Romantic connections hit an impasse this morning, dearest Libra. Disagreements around the future or irresponsible companions will have you questioning if love is enough to withstand the test of time.

SCORPIO (October 23-November 21)
Overstimulation is the byproduct of a mind hard at work, darling scorpion. Stay organised and try not to fixate on superfluous details, or you could trip yourself up.

SAGITTARIUS (November 22-December 21)
Trust your heart above all else, sweet archer, especially if someone seems invested in swaying your opinion. These vibes can seal or break bonds for good, helping you determine if you can fully accept your counterpart's shadow.

CAPRICORN (December 22-January 19)
It will be difficult to deny that certain relationships have become increasingly draining and less rewarding, dearest Capricorn. Address issues head-on and hold space for healthy interactions that center around acceptance and mutual support.

AQUARIUS (January 20-February 18)
Doing too much at once with little help from others will cause the mind to short circuit, beloved Aquarius. Delegate tasks and offer feedback when it's appropriate, but avoid distracting interactions.

PISCES (February 19-March 20)
You'll have no shortage of inspiration to pull from, but ideas won't take off if they're launched on impulse. Gather resources and energy this afternoon, trusting that your time will come soon enough.

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ACROSS
1 Bowl antenna
5 Video game maker
9 "That's — Friends Are For"
13 Norway's capital
14 Martini fruit
16 Sound system
17 Aspersion
18 Black bird
19 About (2 wds.)
20 Friendly
22 Seller
24 Last letter
25 Mud
26 Wear proudly
28 Get calmer (2 wds.)
32 Low cry
33 Worth
34 Contend
35 Insect
36 French painter Edgar —
37 Pie — — mode
38 — passim
39 Meet-and-greet event
40 Brit. money
41 Instructed
43 Appraises
45 Highway
46 Get it wrong
47 Strip of wood
50 Part
54 Hodgepodge
55 Fill with joy
57 Stringed instrument
59 Spare
60 Upholstered piece
61 Serf
62 Water barrier
63 Hit repeatedly
64 Pip

DOWN
1 — and don'ts
2 "La — Bonita"
3 Squalid place
4 Where sky meets land
5 Frozen treat
6 Israel's airline
7 Produce
8 — Maria
9 Complained
10 Back
11 Natural hairdo
12 Wedding cake part
15 Covetous
21 — Lingus
23 Perry's creator
25 Grinding tooth
26 — boom
27 Mend
28 Like a zoo animal
29 Egg-shaped
30 Shenanigans
31 At hand
32 Bulk
33 Annoyed
36 Grew wider
39 Earth's satellite
40 Struggles
42 Hunter constellation
43 Late
44 Skill
47 Auctioneer's cry
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49 Actor — Hemsworth
50 Except
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53 "— but the brave ..."
56 Back talk
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PREVIOUS PUZZLE SOLVED

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YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★☆☆☆

When a child becomes the caregiver

Psychologist Shristi Kharel explains how children who grow up managing their parents' emotions carry the weight of parentification.

JONY NEPAL
KATHMANDU



SHUTTERSTOCK

Some children learn to read the room before they learn to understand themselves. They know which tone in a parent's voice means trouble, when to stay quiet, when to step in and smooth things over. From the outside they look mature, dependable and wise beyond their years. But what goes unnoticed is the cost of a childhood spent managing others' emotions.

This is parentification. Shristi Kharel is a psychologist with over six years of experience in psychological counseling, psychosocial support, and mental health training. She currently serves as a Mental Health Counselor and Trainer at Mankaa Kura.

Kharel discusses the patterns and the reason this tendency goes unnoticed, or even celebrated.

How can we understand parentification through the idea of development happening in a natural sequence?

Many people are familiar with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which suggests that before we can focus on growth, confidence, or reaching our full potential, our more basic needs—such as safety, security, and belonging—must first be adequately met. While real life is often more complex than a simple hierarchy, the idea reminds us that healthy development is built step by step.

In many ways, childhood follows a similar principle.

A child's first developmental tasks are not to become the family's peacemaker or emotional caregiver. They are to experience safety, love, protection, comfort, play, curiosity, and the freedom to express emotions. Through these experiences, children gradually develop trust, emotional regulation, confidence, and eventually responsibility.

Responsibility is not the problem. Responsibility that arrives before emotional security is.

What leads a child to assume the role of a parent?

In my clinical practice, I have rarely seen a child consciously choose this role. Rather, it develops gradually in response to the family environment.

Sometimes a parent is emotionally overwhelmed by conflict, loss, financial stress, mental health difficulties, or relationship problems. Without intending to, they begin relying on their child for emotional comfort, advice, or mediation.

A child may hear, "Talk to your father for me", "You're the only one who understands me" or "Don't tell anyone what's happening at home."

At first, these may seem like small requests. But repeated over months or years, they quietly reshape the child's identity. Instead of experiencing childhood as a time to receive care, the child learns that their role is to provide it.

Parentification is not created because children are unusually mature; it often develops because the adults around them are unable, for various reasons, to consistently carry the emotional responsibilities that belong to adulthood.

If attachment is supposed to be built on a child trusting that their needs will be met, what happens when the child learns that their job is to meet the parent's needs instead?

Healthy attachment teaches a child one fundamental belief: "When I am distressed, someone will comfort me."

Parentification reverses this belief.

The child begins to think, "When someone else is distressed, it is my responsibility to comfort them." Over time, their own emotional needs become less visible—not only to others, but to themselves. They may stop asking for help because they learn that needing care feels selfish or burdensome.

As adults, many of these individuals tell me, "I don't know how to receive love." They feel far more comfortable giving than receiving because childhood taught them that relationships are maintained by meeting other people's needs first.

What kind of attachment and emotional pattern does a child who is constantly managing a parent's moods develop?

There is no single attachment pattern that develops in every child, because every family is different. However, many children who grow up managing a parent's emotions develop anxious or fearful patterns of attachment.

Their nervous system becomes highly sensitive to emotional changes. They constantly scan people's expressions, voices, and behaviours, trying to predict what might happen next.

As adults, they become excellent at understanding other people's emotions while struggling to identify their own. They may fear conflict, avoid disappointing others, and believe that keeping relationships stable is entirely their responsibility.

One experience I repeatedly witness in therapy is that many parentified individuals can explain their childhood very well, but they struggle to describe how they actually felt.

When I ask, "How did you feel when your parents fought?" I often hear responses such as "They were under a lot of stress","I should understand them","They loved me."

MENTAL WELLBEING

These answers explain the parents' experience, but they often avoid the child's own emotional reality.

Over time, many children learn that their sadness, fear, anger, or disappointment might make an already struggling parent feel worse. So instead of expressing emotions, they suppress them. This emotional disconnection can continue well into adulthood.

Is there a kind of person we culturally celebrate, 'the responsible eldest child' or the 'mature-beyond-their-years teenager', who may actually be a parentified child we have romanticised instead of supported?

Sometimes, yes.

Our culture often praises children who never complain, always help, never create problems, and seem unusually mature. These qualities can certainly reflect healthy development. However, as psychologists, we also ask another question: Did this maturity develop naturally, or was it necessary for survival?

I have met many adults who were praised throughout childhood for being 'strong'. Yet, in therapy, they quietly admit they never felt they had permission to be scared, needy, or vulnerable.

The child we admire for being exceptionally responsible may sometimes be the child who learned far too early that there was no room for their own childhood.

If a parent is emotionally unpredictable (calm one moment and volatile the next) what does that unpredictability teach a child's nervous system?

Children learn about safety through repeated experiences.

When a parent's emotional responses are unpredictable, the child's nervous system learns that safety can disappear without warning. Many children become hypervigilant. They monitor every facial expression, every change in tone, every shift in mood.

This adaptation may help them survive childhood, but later in life it appears as anxiety, people-pleasing, overthinking, difficulty relaxing, or constantly expecting that something will go wrong. Their nervous system remains prepared for danger even when they are finally in safe relationships.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SHRISTI KHAREL

Shristi Kharel

What does a parentified child often grow into? What might this look like in friendships, romantic relationships, or parenting?

Many parentified children become compassionate, dependable, and deeply caring adults. They are the friend everyone turns to, the partner who gives endlessly, the employee who carries everyone else's responsibilities, and the parent determined to never let their own children suffer.

These are genuine strengths.

Yet many also struggle to receive care themselves.

In therapy, I often hear statements like:

"I know my relationship isn't meeting my emotional needs, but I can't leave because I don't want to hurt them."

"I feel guilty whenever I say no."

"I don't know what I need anymore."

Their body may tell them that something feels wrong, while their mind insists that it is their responsibility to keep everyone else happy.

This inner conflict often traces back to childhood, when caring for others became more important than listening to themselves.

Can a parent be honest with a child about having a hard time without making it the child's burden?

Absolutely.

Children benefit from seeing that parents experience emotions. They do not need perfect parents—they need emotionally responsible ones.

There is a significant difference between saying, "I'm having a difficult day, but I'm taking care of it," and saying, "You're the only person who understands me. I don't know what I'd do without you."

The first teaches emotional openness with healthy boundaries.

The second unintentionally places adult emotional responsibility onto the child. Children can witness a parent's humanity without becoming responsible for carrying it.

If a parent recognises that they have been leaning on their child emotionally, what is the very first thing they should do differently?

The first step is not to become a perfect parent—it is to gently restore the natural direction of care.

Pause before asking your child to mediate conflicts, regulate your emotions, or become your confidant. Instead, seek emotional support from another adult—a partner, friend, family member, or mental health professional.

Then begin creating space for your child's emotional world.

Ask them, "How was your day?", "What are you feeling?", "Is there anything worrying you?"

And perhaps the most healing words a child can hear are these:

"You don't have to take care of me. I'm the adult. I'll take care of this. Your job is simply to be a child."

How Nepal's gym culture is growing beyond the young generation

Once associated with bodybuilders and intimidation, gyms are now attracting office workers and retirees.

RIVASH RIJAL
KATHMANDU



SHUTTERSTOCK

In recent years, the number of young people going to the gym has gone up significantly; this everyone knows. But it is not just a question of how many more people are working out, but also of who is working out. Gym-goers report a certain change in recent years in the weightlifting demographics.

It is not rare to see, during the late afternoon lull, retired folks on the treadmill or homemakers doing bicep curls and, in the evenings, to see 9-to-5 employees in their forties clocking into the gym after clocking out from work. What is behind this shift in the gym-goer demographic? Why are so many more uncles and aunties working out now?

"When I was growing up, people did not think of the gym the way they do now. Then, everyone in the gym seemed to already have massive backs and shoulders. When I told my mother I wanted to go to the gym, she told me it was a place for ruffians and extortionists. This is what people's understanding was at the time, and it was true in ways; the gym was a place where a certain type of person could be found. This perception scared people. It made it unlikely that most would go [to the gym]," says Sunil Moktan, a powerlifter turned EREPS (European Register of Exercise Professionals)-certified trainer at Visionova Recreation.

It is not a surprise, then, that more everyday people were not crazy about getting that pump.

"The gym is seen as unsafe. People see these heavy weights, plates and rods and think that it's not a good idea to try to lift something so heavy. But training is, of course, controlled and gradual. The lack of correct information makes things hard for us trainers," adds Rojen Shrestha, a former national dodgeball player turned powerlifter and trainer and is the other half of the two-man training operation at the gym.

"Social media definitely plays its part. Viewers see reels online of others working out. There are many fitness creators in Nepal pushing people to work out and explaining the benefits of doing so. That challenges traditional beliefs. It is not only Nepali creators. People have access to content from all over the world. Fitness content has always been big in the West, and as Nepali viewers see more of that, it changes who comes to workout," Shrestha says.

THE ACTIVE LIFE



PHOTO COURTESY OF SUNIL MOKTAN

Sunil Moktan (right) and Rojen Shrestha

Moktan adds, "Schools used to focus on education. That was the only thing that mattered – you had to study well. Now, most schools also focus on extracurricular activities and fitness as important things. If children come home with a certain idea, or if parents see what schools are focusing on, that helps to change people's perceptions too."

"Doctors are also to thank for the increase in older people going to the gym. Doctors will recommend their patients go to the gym to help them counteract loss of strength or if they have high cholesterol and other such things," Moktan said.

"The gym is a preventive thing. It helps reduce the risk of health complications. Doctors will send patients to the gym if something goes wrong, but medical professionals should be telling people to start working out so things don't get a chance to go wrong," he also added.

There are still ways in which working out at the gym is seen in a negative light.

"Parents will tell their kids that so-and-so's kid went to the gym and got injured in such-and-such way, so you shouldn't go. Another popular misconception is that working out at a young age will stop you from getting taller. There are many other misconceptions. It is not that everybody, suddenly, has adopted good sources of information. People have, but most have not," Shrestha said.

People's source of information repeatedly came up as the primary reason for the change in demographics but also the main problem in the industry.

"The gym has a lot of things that are new to a lot of people. For example, with diets, we recommend people eat a certain way so they can gain muscle. It is very common that our clients do not get enough protein. Clients do listen to us, but the people coming here are already better informed than most. It shows how well informed the average person might be," Shrestha said.

"It is our part of our job as well to make sure people are well informed and understand what they are doing and why. But we alone cannot change everyone's thinking. Other members of society whose voices are important need to also speak," concludes Moktan smilingly.

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