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# Equidistance to equiproximity

Shristi Karki

Global geopolitics is all topsy-turvy, the old order is falling apart and new strategic alliances are taking shape. And in Nepal, Prime Minister Balendra Shah must steer his ship of state through uncharted seas.

For five months since taking office, he has kept to himself — either due to a lack of confidence or as a deliberate paradigm shift in foreign policy intended to force Nepal's giant neighbours and the international community to take it more seriously.

This has had the unintended consequence of aligning the interests of Beijing and New Delhi towards Kathmandu. Nepal watchers in both capitals have been scratching their heads trying to figure how to get a handle on what makes Prime Minister Shah tick.

American policy under President Trump had already brought about a Sino-Indian rapprochement of sorts, and there are suspicions in conspiracy-minded circles in Delhi and Beijing that what happened in Nepal last year was a US-inspired colour revolution in their backyard.

Whatever the truth, the message must have finally got through to advisers in the PMO that

the prime minister's opaque style of functioning was turning initial confusion in the international community about erratic behaviour into outright concern.

### FUMBLES

A series of fumbles on the domestic front in handling communal violence in the Tarai, alleviating economic hardships, and growing dissent within his own RSP had already put Prime Minister Shah on the defensive — evidenced by his recent 'I am all alone' Facebook post.

Suddenly, the gates were flung open and the prime minister met individually for the first time with the Indian, Chinese and American ambassadors back-to-back this week. We'd have liked to be a fly on the wall at Singha Darbar, but all we have to go on are bland official statements about 'taking bilateral relations to new heights'.

Even that is something. That we have to heave a sigh of relief when a Prime Minister of Nepal does something that is perfectly normal and within his terms of reference, is itself telling.

Indian Ambassador Naveen Srivastava is said to have discussed a possible visit by his Foreign Minister, S Jaishankar, to Kathmandu to officially invite Prime Minister Shah to India on his first visit abroad. An Indian

spokesman, however, refused to confirm this.

Chinese Ambassador Zhang Maoming, meanwhile, could have tried to gauge the nature of Nepal's regime change and seek assurances that its perceived pro-West tilt will not harm Beijing's concerns about Tibetan nationalists in a future Dalai Lama transition.

The Chinese have acted to stop what they see as the pro-Tibet antecedents of some RSP youth leaders, and in the past weeks have leaned on the Foreign Ministry to cancel a conference on Tibetan culture at Kathmandu University (page 4).

"Kathmandu must transition from 'equidistance' to 'strategic multi-alignment' or 'equiproximity'," University of Hong Kong professor Brian Wong told Nepali Times in an interview (page 3). "When Beijing, New Delhi, or Washington come knocking, Nepal's bureaucratic apparatus must possess the forensic ability to say: Here is what we accept, here are the conditionalities we reject, and here is how it

optimises our sovereign interests."

Nepal's foreign policy at present is pulled in two opposite directions. On one side are Shah's close advisers in the PMO, and on the other are career diplomats with Foreign Minister Shishir Khanal. The two power centres are still deadlocked this week over the appointment of 12 new ambassadors to key countries, including India, China, the US and UK.

RSP chair Rabi Lamichhane has been representing the government because of Prime Minister Shah's aversion to direct diplomacy. He is set to visit Beijing later this month on invitation from Chinese leadership — his second after the June trip to India in which he got a rose petal welcome and an audience Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

International relations has entered a post-ideological era in which pragmatism and balancing national interests guide policy. Nepal's standing in the world will now depend on whether its ruling party and government understand this, and stop working at cross-purposes. ■

**"Nepal must transition to strategic multi-alignment"**

PAGE 3

**Geopolitical convention season in Nepal**

PAGE 4



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# Protect journalism to protect the planet

Climate denial and democratic backsliding are both driven by the same politics

Editorial

Kunda Dixit

The global decline in press freedom is undermining action to protect nature at a time when reliable information is more urgent than ever. But far-right populism and democratic backsliding are increasingly undermining journalism.

The collapse of the media industry’s business model has already muted in-depth reporting on climate impact and scrutiny of environmental policy. Journalists also face pressure from corporate interests and their political patrons.

All this as the planet itself is in the throes of the triple environmental calamity of global warming, biodiversity loss, and pollution. This coincides with other crises happening in parallel — democratic decay, suppression of press freedom, and social media disinformation.

The solution lies in more effective global coordination and better domestic enforcement of environmental protection. Prerequisites for that are a just international order and accountable leadership which are not possible without a rules-based democratic order and an independent press.

WORLD TRENDS

As the most recent UNESCO World Trends Report pointed out, freedom of the press and an open society are crucial for climate action. Not just journalists, but journalism itself needs to be protected because without it, democracy



does not stand a chance.

Across the world elected authoritarians have become fossil fools, undermining democratic institutions and rolling back climate safeguards. There are also outliers like China which may not be democratic in the classical sense, but is leading the way globally in the energy transition to renewables.

A survey last year of people in 77 countries showed that 80% of those polled support government action on climate change. Three-fourths of environmental journalists say their work has impact, but nearly a third faced threats for their reporting, and 60% suffered psychological distress.

Another survey of 468 climate scientists

by Global Witness found that 39% had suffered online abuse. In Australia, many climate researchers had simply stopped sharing findings on social media. Science is being silenced.

Big Tech platforms have subverted the role free media is supposed to play in a democracy. Social media may allow solidarity-building across activist groups, but it is a double-edge sword that fans denial, fake news and trolling.

This is making it difficult to raise awareness about climate issues and solutions. Digital platforms have been designed specifically to profit from algorithms pushing content to monetise engagement in the attention economy. But Big Tech has shown little interest in self-regulation — it profits too much from lies and conspiracies.

This is most apparent in the way the algorithms are designed to handle content about climate change. A few deniers are programmed to be allowed disproportionate exposure, while rational voices are suppressed.

Climate denial content on social media globally doubled between 2021 and 2024. However, while ‘old denial’ that rejected climate change outright declined, it is increasingly replaced by ‘new denial’.

With super storms, droughts, heat waves, wildfires and melting icecaps now so common, ‘new denial’ grudgingly accepts that climate change is real but falsely argues that it is part of the natural warming cycle, that there is nothing wrong if planet gets ‘a bit warmer’, or that investment in renewable energy is unnecessary when we can keep “drill baby drill”.

The messenger is to blame. Online

platforms amplify sensationalism, conspiracy theories and denialist content because that is how they make money. The algorithms harden opinion — either making users more hardline or preaching to the converted.

“Eroding press freedom, self-censorship by journalists, and weaker accountability mechanisms have reduced the media’s capacity to investigate environmental issues and hold governments and corporations to account,” said Catalina Botero, a Colombian activist and lawyer, at a recent Festival Gabo conference in Bogota.

Disinformation and denialism were tactics once used by Big Tobacco to suppress research that proved the link between smoking and lung cancer. Cigarette multinationals deliberately discredited journalists, paid pseudo-scientists to sow doubt, and bought public relations. Sound familiar? Petroleum companies today are using the same playbook.

It is getting late for global and state-level action to avert worsening climate calamities. That information can only come from an independent media and an online ecosystem that is not weaponised by deniers.



World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development: Journalism Shaping a World At Peace Global Report 2022/2025 UNESCO, Paris 2025

## Trending Online

### Purity and popularity of paubha

by Shuvani Singh Kathmandu is preserving its paubha artform. Part of this community are artists Lok Chitrakar, Shankha Narayan Shrestha, and Shankar Kumar Joshi, who have an ongoing exhibition. Story on nepalitimes.com



Most reached and shared on Facebook

### Dekendra Thapa would be 55

by Yaggya Raj Thapa Journalist Dekendra Thapa's case is one of the rare instances in Nepal where a war crime was investigated and punished under criminal law. Read the story on our website.

Most popular on X



### Roads don't last the rains

by Ranjan Bhatta Monsoon road failures in Nepal aren't just natural disasters, they're governance failures driven by short-term political incentives and poor project oversight. Read analysis online.

Most commented

### Paying homage to Banaras

by Pinak Shrestha An ongoing exhibition, Homage to Banaras, brings together two generations of Nepali artists whose lives have been shaped by this city and its history. Details on the website.

Most visited online page

## Letters

### NEPAL ROADS

This is a serious situation needing the government's serious commitment and oversight in order to improve roads ('Nepal's roads don't last the rains', Ranjan Bhatta, #1323). I do hope the Balen government pays utmost attention to this.

Bishow Parajuli

Political incentives certainly outweigh engineering logic when it comes to municipal roads. However, the article ignores the billion-dollar highways funded by international banks. The Mugling-Narayanghat highway debacle proves that the problem runs far deeper.

Sudip Khaniya

Nepal has some of the most shoddily built roads in the world. Anyone with a digger thinks they

are an engineer. Maybe focus on maintaining the existing ones rather than destroying what is left (not much) of Nepal's pristine regions.

David Abramski

Ranjan Bhatta raises important issues in this article. I offer another perspective. Procurement and accountability matter, and there is another critical question: When, where and how much road construction actually produces a net public benefit in Nepal's extraordinarily steep and fragile terrain? I'm also cautious about assuming that the most heavily engineered road is necessarily the most economically or environmentally rational one. The issue that deserves more attention is construction phasing and temporary erosion and drainage control.

Andrew Rasmussen

Japanese people have much more severe climate and weather

conditions and have solved infrastructural problems. Learn from them.

Dmitry Schiptsov

### SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Laws for sexual assault and sexual harassment (SASH) in Nepal are appalling ('Nepal needs to overhaul its rape laws', Ayusha Chalise, #1322).

Dhawa Lama

### TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

Stark failure of the 'justice' system and indictment of a political system that protects those guilty of war crimes ('Dekendra Thapa would be 55', Yaggya Raj Thapa, #1323).

David Seddon

### DRONE REGULATIONS

Typical. Nepali bureaucrats always treat everyone like criminals ('Nepal can benefit by relaxing drone rules', Shuvani

Singh, page 5). That's their standard modus operandi.

AirlineGuy

If Nepal makes registration easy, people will register. Like everything in Nepal, the current system is so poorly managed and inconvenient, no one registers their drones.

Christophe Noel

We know Nepal needs to take some risks. But imagine drones buzzing everywhere in a tourism-centric nation. We need to investigate the financial risk appetite first.

Zwon L. Ninglekhu

Do the same as other developed countries. Clear regulations. Ask the EU to support Nepal in drafting the necessary regulations.

Giancarlo Cattaneo

## Online Package



### CRAFTING HERITAGE

Riti Studio with its all-women team handcrafts beeswax candles, incense sticks, and ceramics, and strives to preserve Nepal's craft traditions. Watch video on our YouTube channel.



### ONE DOG AT A TIME

Sunita Pradhan Limbu feeds the community dogs in her neighbourhood out of affection for the animals, expecting nothing in return except love. Subscribe for multimedia content.

## 1,000 Words



ONLINE KHABAR

**BUNKING CLASS:** Parliament saw a near empty House on Tuesday, and the Speaker had to adjourn debate on several pending bills due to lack of quorum. Of the 182 seats, 120 were not occupied as MPs stayed away. Most notable by their absence were representatives from the ruling RSP. Ashika Tamang of the RSP posted on Facebook that she was not surprised so many MPs were absent because she found the proceedings 'lengthy and boring'.



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# “Nepal must transition to strategic multi-alignment”

Brian Wong is assistant professor in Philosophy at the University of Hong Kong whose research examines the intersection of geopolitics, political and moral philosophy, and technology, with particular interests in the ethics and dynamics of authoritarian regimes and their foreign policies. Nepali Times interviewed him ahead of his keynote to Nepal-China 101 organised by Nepal Economic Forum in Kathmandu on 17 August.

**Nepali Times: Nepal would like to see itself as landlinked, and not landlocked. What is the possibility of the country being an economic bridge between China and India?**

**Brian Wong:** Both China and India are regional powers with significant interests in what their leaderships may perceive to be their respective spheres of influence. India's 'Neighbourhood First Policy' and China's 'Belt and Road Strategy' have been framed by many observers as thus inevitably clashing.

I would suggest that in lieu of reading these two powers' control and presence as absolute and exclusive, we can perhaps take a leaf from a modified Mandala model, whereby Nepal engages with both great powers whilst retaining its own autonomy. The frame that we should adopt should be tripartite-winning win/win/win for Kathmandu, Beijing, and New Delhi.

Given the sensitivity around the Himalaya between China and India, I would suggest that Nepal should perhaps see itself as less of a bridge, as a relatively neutral 'whisperer' — in the same way Singapore is, in the words of Ambassador Walter Woon, for China and the US, between China and India. A 'buffer' is perhaps too passive a term. A more appropriate concept would be to position Nepal as the cradle of talents who can speak across the Himalaya, as emphatic communicators and astute watchers of the Sino-Indian relationship.

**Nepal would like to hitch its wagons to the Chinese and Indian economic engines, but somehow it is not working out.**

Clarity is key. Clarity about interests — where lie the country's core priorities and commitments. How can it set about tackling its porous customs border and de-centralised



(or, at times, defective) trade monitoring and taxation regime, to ensure that goods and services flowing in and out of the country are properly accounted for, with the corresponding dividends accruing to the people and not the selective few? How can it crack down upon those who evade taxes or smuggle goods across the border? How can it develop a niche and specialised manufacturing sector without the ability to fall back on a huge labour dividend, in an era of rapid automation? These are urgent questions that demand answering and operationalisation.

Then there is clarity about expectations, wants, and objectives. Nepal must communicate clearly to Beijing and New Delhi what its own redlines and vital non-negotiable interests are. It must then set out areas where bargaining and bartering is possible, and where tradeoffs are convenient towards Pareto-optimising across the board.

The [Nepal Economic] Forum report is both astute and on-point: it's about linking concrete and specific wants to particular asks, and emphasising to the establishments on the two sides that if they want a more proactive and vigorous Nepal government, they should respect Nepal's right to not choose -- and to court both Beijing and New Delhi alike.

Furthermore, Nepal must also diversify. I spend a lot of time in ASEAN, and there is immense potential and energy emerging from advanced manufacturing and semiconductor supply chains, through to renewable energy

and digital services/e-commerce. Nepal should leverage and artfully harness its human capital, through sending promising and public-service-minded scholars abroad — with the demand that they come back and serve.

**What are the areas that Nepal could take advantage from China's phenomenal economic advance?**

Rather than merely serving as a passive recipient of infrastructural financing which can inadvertently foster asymmetrical dependencies, Nepal must strategically identify sectors where China's economic metamorphosis aligns with its own domestic capacity building. The foremost is in the digital economy and telecommunication.

Nepal can leapfrog traditional developmental stages by integrating advanced Chinese 5G infrastructure, e-commerce architectures, and digital payment systems. How can Nepal empower its youth to participate in the global gig economy if it lacks robust, affordable broadband?

China is the world's leading producer of solar photovoltaics and possesses vast expertise in hydroelectric engineering. Under the framework of the Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network, Kathmandu should negotiate aggressively for technology transfer in harnessing its immense, underexploited hydropower potential.

Finally, Nepal should pivot its tourism strategy from volume to value, targeting the burgeoning, affluent Chinese middle class.

This requires developing high-end, ecologically sustainable hospitality sectors. By upgrading aviation infrastructure and coupling it with targeted digital marketing on WeChat and CTrip (Xiecheng), Nepal can capture a lucrative demographic without compromising its ecological redlines.

**Nepal's foreign policy has historically been guided by the doctrine of equidistance between its two giant neighbours. But there is also the United States that it has to contend with.**

Equidistance, whilst historically a useful heuristic, perhaps implies a static, almost mathematical rigidity that is frankly ill-suited for today's fluid, multipolar geopolitics. As we introduce the United States into this calculus, particularly given Washington's Indo-Pacific Strategy and initiatives like the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact, Nepal apparently finds itself navigating a broader theatre of global great power competition. To grapple with this complexity, Kathmandu must transition from 'equidistance' to 'strategic multi-alignment' or 'equiproximity'. This means evaluating foreign engagements not based on ideological alignment, but on strict, case-by-case pragmatism.

The successful, albeit much debated, ratification of the \$500 million MCC compact in 2022 demonstrated that Nepal can accept vital American development aid whilst explicitly reaffirming its non-alignment and refusal to join any military alliance.

To maintain this delicate balance, Nepal must bolster its institutional capacity to scrutinise incoming investments and aid. When Beijing, New Delhi, or Washington come knocking, Nepal's bureaucratic apparatus must possess the forensic ability to say: "Here is what we accept, here are the conditionalities we reject, and here is how this project specifically optimises our sovereign interests." By acting as a transparent, rule-abiding, and predictable partner, and in refusing to play one superpower off the other, Nepal can carve out a sovereign space that commands respect from all three capitals.

**Being from Hong Kong, what role do you see the territory that has strong ties to Nepal play in economic growth and progress?**

Hong Kong presents a unique, under-explored value proposition for Kathmandu. The relationship is already anchored by a profound historical trust, forged by the generations of Gurkhas who helped build and secure Hong Kong, resulting in a vibrant, integrated Nepali diaspora in the city today. Hong Kong can serve as an important conduit and enabler of Nepal's developmental ambitions.

As an emerging premier green finance hub, Hong Kong is perfectly positioned to structure and issue green bonds for Nepal's infrastructure projects, attracting international institutional investors who might otherwise hesitate to navigate Nepal's domestic financial markets. Foreign corporations often cite legal unpredictability and dispute resolution as primary deterrents for FDI. By structuring joint ventures and international contracts with arbitration clauses seated in Hong Kong — leveraging its robust, internationally recognised common law framework — Nepal can significantly de-risk itself in the eyes of global investors. Ultimately, Hong Kong can act as a sophisticated, cosmopolitan conduit for capital and professional services, helping Nepal translate its raw potential into operationalised, world-class growth.

And central to all of this is the role of education. We need more scholarships, exchanges, dialogues, and high-level track-2/1.5s between China and Nepal, and Hong Kong can definitely play a role here. We have five of the top 100 universities in the world, per various international rankings.

An advertisement for Berger Silk Glamour Glow paint. The background is a deep blue with a subtle pattern. In the foreground, two large white tubs of paint are shown. The tub on the left is labeled 'SILK GLAMOR GLOW SUPER LUXURY EMULSION' and the tub on the right is labeled 'SILK LUXURY EMULSION'. To the right of the tubs, a woman in a long, flowing teal dress is sitting on the floor, looking towards the camera. The text 'Experience Luxury SILK Finish' is written in a large, elegant font across the top. In the top right corner, there is a logo for 'Berger' with the tagline 'Paint your imagination' and 'Since 1760'.



# Geopolitical convention season in Nepal

Cancellation of an academic conference on Tibet is a blow to the country's reputation as an open society

Shristi Karki

Suddenly, after nearly five months in office, Prime Minister Balendra Shah has come out of his cave to meet with business leaders, bankers and investors.

Then this week in a departure from his earlier practice of meeting diplomats in a group setting, he sat down for one-on-ones with Indian Ambassador Naveen Srivastava and Chinese Ambassador Zhang Maoming (pictured).

Diplomats representing Nepal's giant neighbours and Prime Minister Shah finally had the chance to size each other up. The previous meetings were collective and largely photo-ops.

All this set the stage for what looks like a geopolitical convention season in Nepal.

Last week, geopolitical experts, diplomats and policymakers from the region convened at an international conference titled 'China and South Asia in a Multipolar World,' organised by the Nepal Institute for International Cooperation and Engagement (NIICE) and the Center for South Asian Studies of China's Fudan University to discuss trilateral connectivity, security, and emerging challenges in the region.

"The key takeaway was that improved relations between India and China would help reduce geopolitical pressure on Nepal and create a more conducive environment to pursue an independent and balanced foreign policy," NIICE director Sumitra Karki told us.

India and China's capital



PHOTOS: PMO

investment, technology, and infrastructure capacity could enhance Nepal's hydropower potential, making energy one of the most promising areas for trilateral cooperation.

"Both India and China expect Nepal to benefit from the rise of their respective economies," says Karki. "Nepal should therefore pursue an equidistant and pragmatic foreign policy, deepen economic engagement with both countries, and avoid being drawn into great-power rivalry."

But dealing with China has been a geopolitical minefield for Nepal because of Beijing's sensitivity about pro-Tibet activities and its growing concern about American inroads in the region.

In July, the Dalai Lama's birthday celebration in Nepal saw the participation of faith leaders and foreign diplomats, drawing flak from pro-Chinese Nepali diplomats, ministers, and current lawmakers.

Amidst this heightened sensitivity, another Tibet-

focused international conference scheduled in Kathmandu this month was abruptly cancelled this week, ostensibly after pressure from the Chinese embassy.

The Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies (IATS), an academic convention that was being hosted by Kathmandu University (KU) was called off despite previous assurances by Home Minister Sudan Gurung that the event could proceed.

The Prime Minister's office denied ordering the cancellation, but it later emerged that Chief Secretary Govinda Bahadur Karki and Foreign Secretary Amrit Rai had bypassed the cabinet and overruled Nepal's security institutions to instruct KU to cancel the event after behind-the-scenes pressure from China.

## IN LIMBO

The last-minute cancellation left 700 participants, including 100 delegates from China itself,

in limbo. It drew flak from across academia and civil society both at home and internationally. KU eventually handed over its role to the IATS, and the conference will now be held virtually on the scheduled date.

This week, the IATS wrote a strongly-worded letter to Education Minister and government spokesperson Sasmit Pokharel saying there was no official communication regarding the cancellation of an academic event. It listed losses to participants, academic institutions, and businesses in Nepal.

"The consequences of a cancellation would also be detrimental to Tibetan and Himalayan studies, in which Nepal has so much academic expertise," said the letter from the IATS advisory board. "It is also likely to cause reputational damage to Nepal through negative press coverage, and will have longterm repercussions in terms of economy, tourism, and academic collaborations."

Indeed, the cancellation has

raised questions about Nepal's credibility and the space for open academic discussion, as well as negatively impact Nepal's status as an emerging regional hub for Himalayan studies and as one of the few open societies for free expression in South Asia.

"From a broader foreign policy perspective, this episode also highlights the practical constraints Nepal faces in managing relations with its powerful neighbours," notes Karki from NIICE. "Nepal remains committed to non-alignment, sovereign decision-making and an independent foreign policy, but it cannot afford to ignore the sensitivities and core concerns of either China or India."

Next week, the Nepal Economic Forum (NEF) is also set to release its report Nepal-China 101, a study of Nepal's economic engagement with China in the business and trade, renewable energy, and tourism sectors.

The keynote for that conference is by Brian Wong of University of Hong Kong, who told Nepali Times in an interview (page 3): "By acting as a transparent, rule-abiding, and predictable partner, and in refusing to play one superpower off the other in a zero-sum game, Nepal can carve out a sovereign space that commands respect from all three capitals."

Sumitra Karki agrees: "Nepal needs greater connectivity, investment, trade, technology and access to China. It should approach China from the perspective of its own national interest. Engaging China economically does not mean choosing China over India or any other partner." 🇳🇵

## BRIEFS

### NAIMA 2026

The ongoing NAIMA Mobility Expo 2026 has something for everyone. Toyota has special offers for customers booking cars including cash discounts of Rs0.3-2.1 million. One lucky couple can participate in Elite Explorers Kanya Kumari Drive' All customers who have booked a car will also get to participate in Community Drive, another initiative by Toyota.

NMB Bank Limited has introduced an EV financing offer starting at Base Rate + 0.5%, coinciding with NAIMA, to promote eco-friendly mobility with an attractive interest rate.



Two new EV models, Punch.ev and Tiago.ev were launched by Sipradi Trading which are priced at Rs3.39million and Rs2.28million respectively. Rajesh Prasad Giri of Sipradi says, "Our commitment to electric vehicles extends beyond just sales; we are also investing in robust infrastructure to instill greater confidence and convenience in EV usage for our customers."

Yadea Nepal launched three new models of electric scooters: YADEA G570, GT70, and GT80, all of which have battery warranty of three years and a special discount of Rs10,000 throughout the Expo. The ultraviolet x47 crossover motorcycle was also unveiled at NAIMA and is priced at Rs684,900.

NAIMA Mobility Expo ends on 16 August.



### Red Panda marathon

The third edition of Red Panda Marathon in Salleri in Solukhumbu will feature 48km marathon and, for the first time, a 5km community run. The marathon is organised by Red Panda Network (RPN) with support from Play for Nature and Himalayan Health and Environmental Services Solukhumbu (HHES).

### BYD campaign

Cimex Inc has launched its nationwide BYD Update to Care+ campaign through which customers can now access professional maintenance, intelligent connected-car services, and dependable ownership protection. Launched at BYD Service Centre in Guheshwori, the service is available throughout 13 centres nationwide.



### Dudh Khola

The lead bank investor for 65MW Dudh Khola Hydropower NMB has given the financial closure for the project. Co-financed by Sanima Bank along with investments from Mountain Energy Nepal Limited and Sitaram Timilsena and group, the total estimated cost of the project is Rs12.90 billion, of which Rs967 million will be covered by bank loans.

### Nepal Hyundai

Laxmi Intercontinental has introduced two new car models, the Made-in-Nepal Hyundai Venue and Venue N Line. The Made-in-Nepal Venue starts at Rs48,96,000 and is available in three variants: HX 2 (1,197cc Petrol), HX 5+ (1,197cc Petrol), and HX 5 DCT (998cc Petrol). The Venue N Line starts at Rs67,96,000.



### Indian assistance

Indian Embassy, Ministry of Land Management, Co-operatives, Federal Affairs and General Administration have jointly signed a MOU for 8 High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs) on education, health and agriculture worth of Rs803 million.

### Holiday Inn Resort

Suprabhath Roy Chowdhury has been appointed General Manager of Holiday Inn Resort Kathmandu, Budhanilkantha. With his extensive experience from South West Asia and India, he will focus on strengthening the resort's operations, guest experience and continued growth.



### Flame Awards Asia

Five Nepali agencies won 17 awards at the Flame Awards Asia 2026 held in New Delhi. Of the 13 Gold, three Silver and one Bronze, Outreach Nepal, Lemon and DigitalIn won the most honours.



### Ncell Cloudsuite

Ncell has launched Ncell Business Cloudsuite, a locally supported platform that brings domain registration and professional web hosting together in one place. Targeted at businesses, startups, entrepreneurs, educational institutions, they offer basic package at Rs1,000 per month and pro at Rs2,000.

### NADA auto show

The 18<sup>th</sup> edition of NADA Auto Show is scheduled for 25-30 August and is celebrating a golden jubilee this year with 200 stalls comprising 22 passenger vehicles, 16 light commercial vehicles and 12 two-wheelers.



# Nepal can benefit by relaxing drone rules

Strict UAV regulation sets back tourism promotion and frustrates content creators

Shuvani Singh

A Facebook post by trekking guide and digital creator Sanjib Chimourya has struck a nerve among Nepal’s growing community of drone videographers. His post is a litany of woes; obstacles are everywhere when trying to use drone clips of Nepal’s spectacular scenery to promote tourism. Outdated laws and irrational fears of misuse keep Nepal out of step with the rest of the world in the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). ‘I bought my drone with my own hard-earned money. I paid taxes. I paid registration fees. I invested in professional equipment because I wanted to show Nepal to the world. Instead, I was treated like a criminal,’ wrote Chimourya. Cinematographer Manish Maharjan, currently working on an international 14 Peaks, production says the deeper issue is an opaque system that makes little sense: “The process is too complicated, and no one is monitoring its opportunity cost. The system needs transformation. It is not practical.” As per the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN), even tiny drones under 250gm must be officially registered, a rule that did not exist before 2026. Operators are also banned from flying over crowds, temples, national parks, and heritage sites without a formal permit, which itself defeats the purpose of why most people deploy drones. The tens of thousands of



GARUDX

rupees in permit fees would still be worthwhile, but owners are sent from pillar to post to get them. Licenses take months and must be renewed annually. Nepali creators invest up to Rs100,000 on camera-equipped drones. On top of that comes a flying permit fee of \$10-\$50 plus 13% VAT, an area permit fee of over Rs10,000 for national parks, and yearly renewals. For smaller creators on limited budgets, the cost becomes unmanageable.

Drones are also not allowed to be flown to their intended sites, they must be transported via roads, adding to the cost. And Maharjan points out a particular absurdity: “Why do Nepali citizens have to pay in dollars?” Nepalis working on foreign projects or partnering with international organisations must register under foreign project rules and pay in hard currency. The process itself is a bureaucratic labyrinth. Operators must first apply to CAAN,

then acquire Ministry of Home Affairs clearance for commercial operations, gain local authority approval (which was only digitalised post-Covid), ask permission from the Department of Archaeology to shoot heritage sites or the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Reserves, and pay all fees before they even receive the permit. Just for Everest Base Camp, permits cost nearly \$5,000 on top of the National Park fee. The latest penalty structure, too, has shocked many recreational flyers and aspiring creators. A first-time offence can result in fines topping Rs25,000, a significant sum in a country where the average monthly income is Rs30,000. A fine like that could wipe out content creators who are just starting out. After the GenZ protests last September (where drone footage of the violence and arson became critical for news coverage) the bureaucratic hassle has eased slightly, with waiting lists becoming more mindful for local operators. But the underlying structure remains the same with no coordination between departments. **COLLATERAL DAMAGE** Nepali creators use drones to produce photo and video content that feeds into the Nepal Tourism Board. They are vital in presenting the appeal of Nepal to international media and in promoting domestic tourism on social media. Heritage sites and national parks are precisely the locations they need to film to attract tourists, but creators are barred from filming

any aerial footage of Nepal’s iconic locations such as Swayambunath, Darbar Squares, and all national parks without formal permits. The government’s inability to distinguish between surveillance and promotion makes it harder for drones to operate legally. The result is that many drone owners do not bother with permits at all. In recent years, Nepal has leaned heavily on individual content creators for promotional engagement. Thus, unsympathetic treatment of these creators is counterproductive to tourism. The official rationale behind these strict regulations includes security, privacy, and safety concerns in crowded and sensitive areas. But the rules are grounded in blanket bans instead of careful consideration. Chimourya’s post lays out an alternative: ‘Here’s a better idea: Require proper drone pilot training, issue drone pilot licenses, move permits online, reduce permit fees to something reasonable.’ Meanwhile, Maharjan proposes categorising different levels of projects and operators – separating movies, documentaries, content creators, and hobbyists – and issuing tiered licenses. A licensed pilot need not beg for permission to film a temple they have already proven they can safely navigate. And lower fees would prompt trust rather than suspicion. He says: “If regulations are improved, there will definitely be more drone operators which in turn has a positive multiplier effect on the economy.” 🇳🇵



SUBARU

# Hype Fades, Reliability Doesn't.



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NC leader Ganesh Man Singh, Manmohan Adhikari of the UML, Mangala Devi Singh, Shailaja Acharya, Sahana Pradhan, J N Asrit, Bishnu B Manadhar, and Tulsi Lal Amatya at the Khula Manch on 6 April 1990.



Local youth in Indrachok trying to take a severely injured Novel Khadka, a street vendor, to Bir Hospital during the 1990 People's Movement demonstrations.



Protesters at a victory rally heading towards Singha Darbar on 6 April 1990.



Ganesh Man Singh flanked by his wife Mangala Devi Singh, Kathmandu Mayor Prem Lal Singh, Ambassador Jayraj Acharya and his wife Usha, and Min Ratna Bajracharya after a UN Human Rights Award in New York in 1993.



Kathmandu Mayor Prem Lal Singh welcoming then-President of the People's Republic of China Jiang Zemin in 1996.



Durga Thapa, 22, as she leapt up during a victory rally on 9 April 1990 in Khula Manch to shout "Long live democracy!" Photographer Min Ratna Bajracharya had to climb a telephone pole to take this image. Bajracharya and Durga Thapa (inset) at an event 16 years later to commemorate the victims of the Maoist war at Maitighar Mandala in 2006.

DEEPAK BAJRACHARYA



A Nepal Telecom vehicle was torched in Thapathali during the height of the Maoist conflict in 2001.

# I-wit

On World Photography  
a look back at some of the  
Nepal's rece

**M**in Ratna Bajracharya is one of Nepal's leading news photographers, but was introduced to the craft by chance. Visiting Australia in 1985 at age 19, a friend gifted him a camera.

His first shot was of, what else, the Sydney Opera House. Thus began a life-long passion for photography that would take him to the frontlines of Nepal's recent history from the people's movements, the Maoist conflict to the royal massacre.

His very first published photograph in The Commoner was of those accused of shooting journalist Padam Thakurathi in 1987. Back then, photojournalism wasn't yet a profession, pictures had to be printed in darkrooms from negatives, then converted to expensive zinc blocks for grainy black-and-white reproduction on paper.

Bajracharya is 61, and the photo that really made him famous was one of student activist Durga Thapa as she leapt above the crowd during a victory rally after the 1990 People's Uprising, shouting, "Long live democracy." This could be called Nepal's first GenZ protest.

The iconic image captured the





# Business

phy Day on 19 August,  
the most iconic images of  
recent history

spirit of a country and people who had outgrown the absolute monarchy. Says Bajracharya: "In my career, I have learnt that photojournalism can be a powerful catalyst of change, usually for the better."

Bajracharya's career itself spans a revolution in technology from manual black-and-white film cameras to colour slides, the transition to digital, and now the age in which everyone with a mobile phone is a photographer. Bajracharya has never regarded the camera as a passive instrument, but as an agent of change.

He tells us: "AI is already transforming photography once again, and not necessarily for the better. There is no substitute for being there yourself to capture reality."

Bajracharya has also served as president of the Nepal Forum for Photojournalists (NFPJ), and inspired new generations of Nepali photographers. Training in photography technique is just half the story; it is even more important for photojournalists to ask what they want to achieve with the craft.

There is much knowledge to pass on about how photography casts light on the daily struggles of people in the shadows, but also serves as the eyewitness to the movers and shakers of history. 🇳🇵



A demonstration by the seven-party alliance in Ratna Park against King Gyanendra's direct rule in April 2006. Pictured here: Krishna Prasad Sitaula of Nepali Congress, Lila Mani Pokhrel of Janamorchha, and Subhas Nembang of UML, among others.



One of the last protests during the Second People's Movement against King Gyanendra's direct rule occurred in Kathmandu's Bhotahiti on 22 April 2006. As police charged protesters marching to the Royal Palace, a massive thunderstorm triggered a stampede as people ran for cover, abandoning their shoes.



Comedian duo Madan Krishna Shrestha and Hari Bansa Acharya performing a satire skit at the climax of pro-democracy protests on 24 April 2006.



The mass gathering at Khula Manch on 27 April 2006 after King Gyanendra restored Parliament and the ceasefire.



NC's Sher Bahadur Deuba addressed the crowd in Kathmandu as the pro-democracy movement gathered strength. Deuba went on to become prime minister five times. After his house was burnt down on 9 September 2025, he has been abroad and returned to Kathmandu this week.

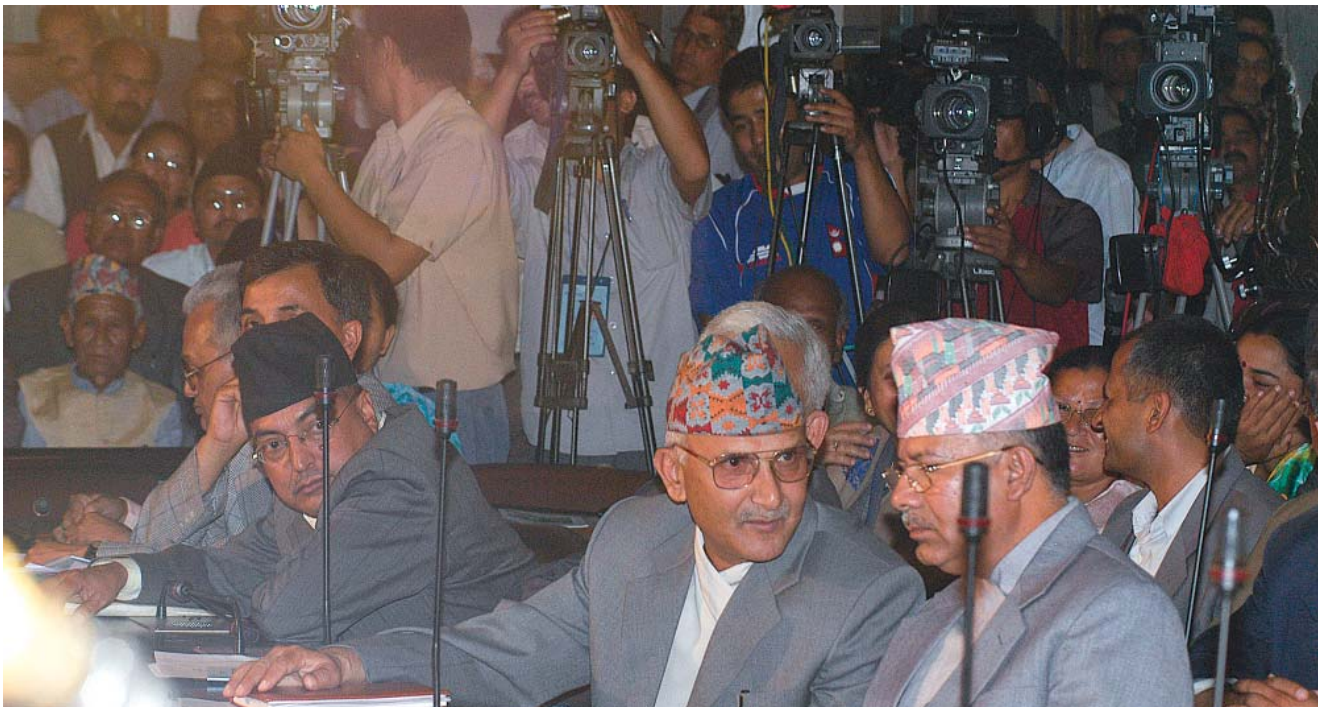


A vigil on 27 April 2006 in the memory of people killed and disappeared during the Maoist insurgency. By the end of the war, over 17,000 people were killed.



▲ The NC's Girija Prasad Koirala speaking in the restored Parliament inside Singha Darbar in 2006 after King Gyanendra stepped down.

House Speaker Subhas Nembang of the UML can be seen on right.



▶ Much younger UML leaders K P Oli and Madhav Kumar Nepal, both of whom became prime ministers later, in the opposition bench during the same parliamentary session.







Events



Sursing Waterfall Hike

Enjoy scenic views along the trails on a rejuvenating hike to the Sursing waterfall this weekend.  
15 August, Rs2,000, 5:45 am, Brikuti Mandap

Bird photo exhibition

See award-winning photographs on display from the National Bird Photo Contest 2026 Exhibition, organised by Bird Conservation Nepal. Entrance is free.  
Till 17 August, 11am-5pm, Nepal Art Council, Baber Mahal



Game Tournament

Play Bluff Momo, a bluff game by Tumlet. Winners will be awarded prizes. Join for a day of games, competition, connection, and music.  
22 August, Rs250, 2pm onwards, Dhokaima Cafe, Patan Dhoka

2 Hearts 1 Canvas

Sri Lankan artist couple, Dr Manoranjana Herath and Nilanthi Dilini Perrera put up their artworks on display.  
14 August-9 September, Kala Salon, Chhaya Center, Thamel



Area 13 Market

Visit the weekly Area 13 Market and enjoy live music, food stalls, games and more. They also have a night market every Wednesday. Support local businesses.  
Every Saturday, 2pm-8pm, Area 13, Chhauni

Poetry Event

Shabdakiri Saanjh is for those into poetry and literature. Join for an evening of poetry and stories.  
22 August, 4pm, Taragaon Next, Boudha



Music

Jazz Night

Moksh is set to screen La La Land as part of its Jazz night. Enjoy some jazz music after the movie ends.  
16 August, Rs1,000, 5:30pm, Moksh, Jhamsikhel

The Elephant Jam

Shaurya Bastola will be performing live to support two rescued elephants, Eva and Lhamo. Be part of this musical cause.  
15 August, 2pm onwards, Eden, Sanepa



Shaan in Nepal

Noted Bollywood singer Shaan will be live in Nepal next week. Sing along to his biggest hits throughout the night.  
22 August, Rs4,000, 9pm onwards, Club Nova, Thamel

Amit Jung and Gorkhey

Watch Amit Jung & Gorkhey and Thuma Souls perform and entertain the audience. Join for an evening with delicious food and drinks.  
16 August, 6pm, Shisha Lounge & Bar, Chaksibari, Thamel



Jessica Lynn @ KJC

American singer-songwriter Jessica Lynn joins Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory for Sound & Story: Songwriting & Music Composition. The half-day workshop will explore the creative process behind developing a song. Register at https://shorturl.at/6Sbsy.  
24 August, Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory



Getaway



Temple Tree Resort

Temple Tree is a boutique hotel that promises world-class services, a relaxing atmosphere, comfortable accommodations, and great food. The rooms are designed with Nepali culture and architecture in mind.  
Lakeside, Pokhara (61) 465819

Barahi Jungle Lodge

The first eco-jungle lodge in Chitwan directly overlooks Chitwan National Park. Spa, boutique guest rooms, individual and two-in-one private villas, including a suite with a private swimming pool.  
Megauli, Chitwan 9851331247



Club Himalaya

The hotel is a blend of natural and modern services. The accommodation is comfortable, cosy and the food is delicious. View the sunrise and sunset from the private balcony of each room.  
Nagarkot, (01) 6680080 / 6680083

Peacock Guest House

The guesthouse is a 700-year-old UNESCO heritage building that represents true Newa architecture. Take a stroll around the Old City of Bhaktapur, indulge in local cuisine and join the Himalayan Wood Carving Masterpieces Workshop.  
Dattatreya Square, Bhaktapur (01)6611829

Tiger Tops Karnali Lodge

The ongoing monsoon offer at Tiger Tops Karnali Lodge, includes bird watching, village walks and other amenities, excluding entry fees into the national park. Call for details about the package.  
Thakudwara, Bardia, 9851217265



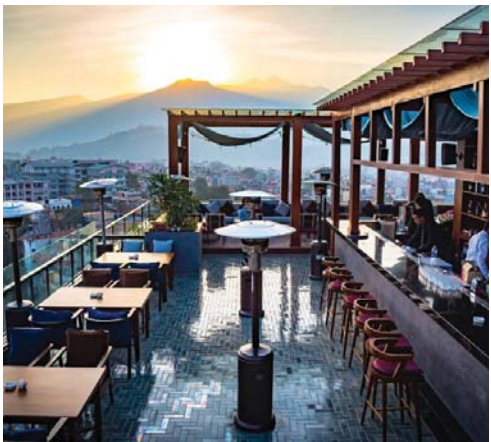
Dining

Delicatessen

Head to newly-launched deli in town. Enjoy artisanal bread, cheese and meat along with delicious sandwiches, and panini.  
Gyanmandala, Jhamsikhel

Canova Cafe Coffee

This casual cafe not only serves good and coffee but also a surprisingly light and flavourful masala dosa.  
Maitidevi, 9801023759



Akari & Koko

Vivanta Hotel's Asian-inspired fusion restaurant and bar serves an impressive assortment of East Asian dishes with modern twists. Try their sushi and pad thai.  
Jhamsikhel (01) 5525002

Jade

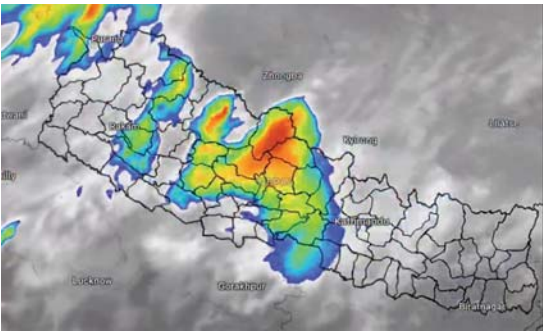
Take a gastronomic tour of China at Jade. The mapo tofu, sweet and sour chicken and chicken wontons are a must.  
The Park, Darbar Marg, 9802378440



La Casita

With a direct view of Boudhanath Stupa, La Casita is the ideal place for taking pictures and having some authentic tacos, burgers and tapas.  
Boudha (01) 4915645

Weekend Weather



No Let Up

After that slight breather this week, the monsoon is returning with more force this weekend and beyond, bringing an average of 20mm of rain daily, falling mostly towards late evening and night. Due to thermal activity, some showers may include lightning and thunder. July rainfall is more or less normal. Precipitation in the Tarai was deficient, but it is now back to weekly average.



Our Pick



Naseeruddin Shah's Ishar/Keenu is a 95-year-old man in his deathbed desperately longing for his ancestral hometown which is in present day Pakistan. Diljit Dosanjh plays his grandson Nirvair who sets out to uncover his grandfather's past for the latter's closure. The 2026 Hindi language romantic drama Main Vaapas Aaunga is a story of longing and belonging rooted in the 1947 partition-era migration. The movie also stars Sharvari, Vedang Raina, Banita Sandhu and others. Can be streamed on Netflix.

सामाजिक सञ्जाल प्रयोगमा सचेतता अपनाऔं

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



नेपाल सरकार  
विज्ञापन बोर्ड





Shikha Sharma

Jean-Paul Sartre's 1946 play, 'The Respectful Prostitute' is a commentary on racism and justice in America's Deep South. The French philosopher delved into existentialism, power, morality and oppression through characters and symbolism as literary devices. Now, the play finds resonance on a Kathmandu stage as Miss Menuka. Pavitra Khadka's adaptation does not merely translate Sartre into Nepali, it allows the play to breathe in a different social and political landscape while preserving its moral urgency. Social injustice and discrimination is the same story wherever in the world it is told. Khadka seamlessly grafts the plot into contemporary Nepal so that the French existential philosopher's questions belong here. It does not feel borrowed from France 80 years ago, but voices a reality of the here and now in Nepal today.

At first glance, Miss Menuka appears to be the story of a sex worker, but it quickly becomes evident that she is not the subject under examination. Society is. Menuka carries a label that invites instant judgement, yet she gradually becomes the play's moral centre. She is vulnerable, hesitant and aware of the consequences of speaking the truth, but she never loses her sense of dignity. The irony is unmistakable: the character whom society considers the least respectable emerges as the one with the greatest integrity. The male lead is equally compelling because the extraordinary villain appears so ordinary. He embodies the quiet confidence that privilege produces — the certainty that one's version of events will always be accepted. His authority rests less on truth than on the social structures that instinctively protect men of influence. Beneath his confidence lies fear: of accountability, of losing control, and of a truth that could unsettle the order from which he benefits. Khadka has added a man from the Tarai — Nepal's own 'Deep South'. Racial discrimination is central to the conflict in

# If Sartre spoke Nepali



PHOTOS: SHILPEE THEATRE

Miss Menuka is not just about a respectful sex worker, but exposes racism and injustice

Sartre's original play. In Miss Menuka, that tension is thoughtfully reimagined through the experiences of a Madhesi man. All this is ever more relevant today after the tragic violence in the Tarai and the continuing marginalisation of Nepal's plains by Kathmandu despite a federal Constitution designed to provide autonomy to the Madhes. His presence broadens the conversation beyond gender. Like Menuka, he is judged before he is heard. His accent and identity become enough to make him suspect. The play never says this outright, yet it quietly asks us how often we allow ethnicity, geography or social identity to determine credibility. Justice, it suggests, is rarely blind. It is often shaped by the prejudices we refuse to acknowledge. Each of the supporting characters represent a different response to power. Some manipulate it, some submit to it. Others remain silent because silence is safer than resistance. They reveal a difficult truth: injustice survives not only because powerful people abuse authority, but because ordinary people learn to live comfortably beside it.

**A FLAWED SOCIETY** The audience finds itself thinking less about the characters and more about the society they represent. We continue to believe appearances over truth, status over integrity and power over vulnerability. We continue to ask women to prove their innocence while allowing institutions to escape scrutiny. We continue to measure credibility through identity rather than honesty. Miss Menuka lingers long after the curtain falls. It is not asking whether Menuka deserves respect, it questions whether our understanding of respect has been flawed all along. The audience leaves the theatre wondering whether Nepal is any closer to answering some of the uncomfortable questions raised. Good adaptations preserve the original, great adaptations make it impossible to believe the story belongs somewhere else. Pavitra Khadka's Miss Menuka achieves that. 🇳🇵

Miss Menuka  
Directed by Pavitra Khadka  
Till 22 August  
Shilpee Theatre, Battispatali

# Depicting the human psyche in mixed media

Heritage, emotion, and identity in modern Nepali art

Shuvani Singh

Art is one of the few honest ways of expressing unspoken emotion. A line, colour, or shape can communicate what is hidden in the recesses of the human soul. Annapurna Art in Bhaktapur is currently hosting the provocative exhibition titled Chromatic Psyche that leans into this truth. It brings together nine Nepali artists, each offering a distinct perspective on the human psyche. Rupak Rai's Excavation series is an homage to Nepal's heritage. Using mixed media, he assembles motifs like chariots, Swayambunath, statues, stone carvings, temples — into compositions that feel unearthed. Excavator shapes recur and are deliberate symbols of digging into the past, or perhaps building over it. "I just assembled our cultural pieces, I can't call these completely mine," muses Rai. But the vision is completely his, posing an important question: Is traditional art threatened by modern advances? Ayush Thapa's Architecture of Curiosity is a standout for its conceptual clarity. Working with black ink on white paper, he depicts inquisitiveness as rabbits. Open windows evoke the act of opening eyes. Thapa explains: "The world is outside the window. If you look, you can even find god." It is a simple yet profound invitation to stay awake to the world beyond one's room. Thapa's works ask us to peer into



our inner selves to look outward again. Suchin Shrestha's Silent Duality is deeply personal, working in charcoal and acrylics with a restrained palette. Dramatic poses and firm gestures speak to internal fears, insecurities, and thoughts that get stuck in our throats. Hands claw through darkness, a powerful metaphor for resilience. "I'm trying to show what can't be expressed verbally through gestures, lines," Shrestha says. Indeed, the paintings name your grief before you do, the lines shaping amorphous anger. Shrestha's works feel startlingly personal and relatable. Pramila Bajracharya's Women

Expression series enriches the show with a feminist lens. The semi-abstract portraits use bold, vivid colours to depict assertive women. Their faces arrest viewers with direct, questioning stares, and command the space around them. These gazes carry the weight of all the courage and resilience of a woman's life, and the women claim their presence with authority. Manasi Bhatt offers two emotional registers. Silent Beggars portrays three mournful cows struggling in the streets of Nepal — abandoned after outliving their usefulness to their human owners. The Charms of Village Home, on the other hand, shifts to a softer, nostalgic warmth, capturing the

bucolic beauty of rural Nepal. Using the same brown, monochromatic acrylics and pen for both, Bhatt balances the struggle and tenderness that coexist. **NATURE OF IT ALL** Anmari Tamang's ceramic work Bebe is among the most provocative in the show. It is intentionally uncomfortable — an insect curled into the posture of a baby, its head like a human skull, and red eyes staring at the viewer make the piece deliberately unsettling, forcing us to contemplate our relationship with nature. Jeevan Rajopadhay and Sagar Manandhar bring abstraction and nature into the dialogue.

Rajopadhay's untitled works are lush with blues, greens, and yellows, as abstract as the mysteries of nature itself. Manandhar takes a more modern, geometric approach. Bold pinks, blues, and greens mimic the sounds and interactions of the artist's surroundings, amalgamating all sensory experiences into a single colorful visual experience. Finally, Suman Thapa's untitled works close the show with raw, unfiltered emotions that cannot be bound to a single feeling. Using oil pastels and charcoal in single, unerasable strokes, he captures the fleeting movements and phases of human life in ultramarine blue. They represent the openness and darkness of the human mind and the world around us. Chromatic Psyche, like many exhibitions does not just show what the artist sees, it turns its gaze back on the viewer, asking them to peer inwards. This small but rich exhibition is worth braving the traffic to Bhaktapur to visit. 🇳🇵

Chromatic Psyche  
Annapurna Art  
Radhe Radhe Bhaktapur  
Till 25 August



ANNAPURNA ART



# Nepal and Bhutan team up for seismic c

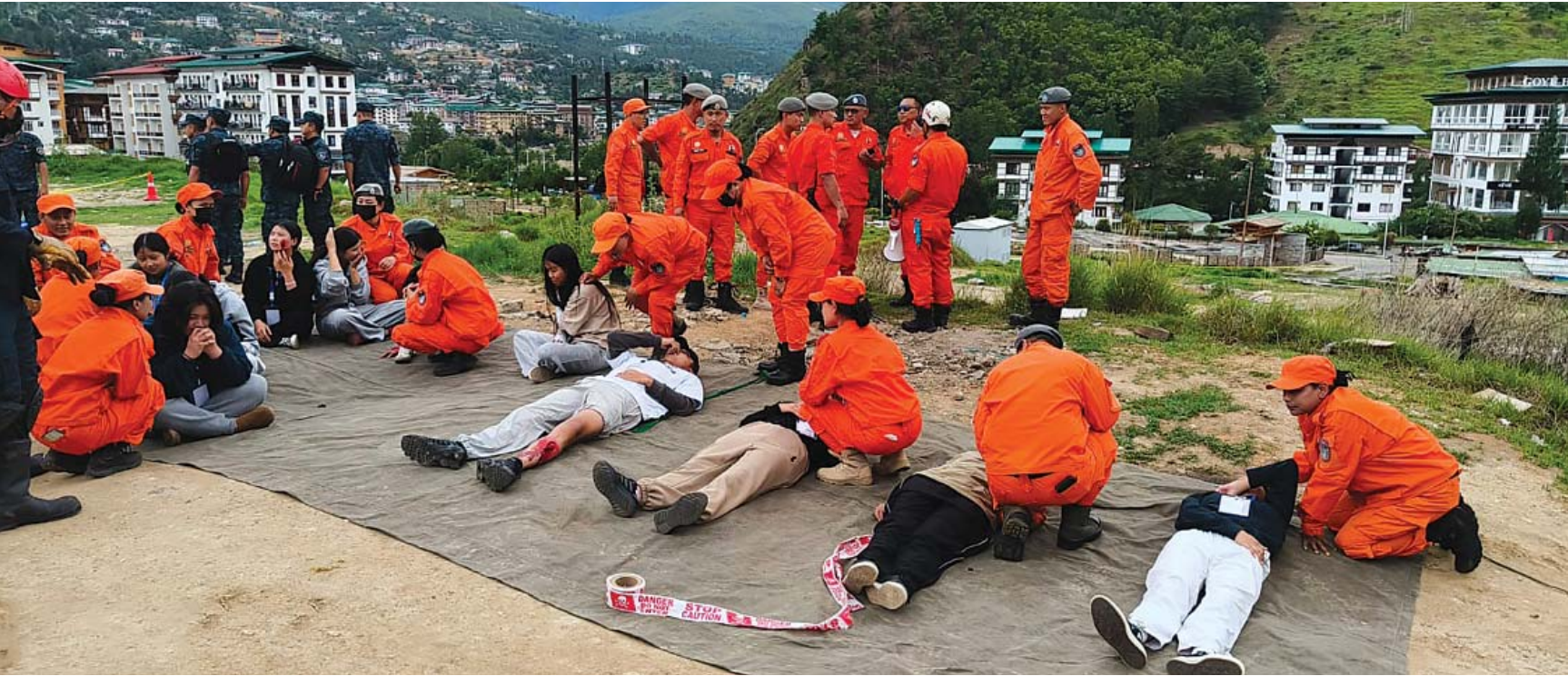
Himalayan countries at similar risk share earthquake preparedness expertise

Sonia Awale

Residents of the Bhutan capital recently woke up to sirens blaring, roadblocks, all three of the city’s bridges across the Thimphu Chu closed, and ambulances and fire engines rushing about. Those who had not paid attention to notices by the authorities could be forgiven for thinking this was a real disaster. And that was the whole point of it. The mock exercises included simulated house collapses and building fires to test both information flow, coordination, and decision-making for search and rescue after a high-intensity earthquake.

On hand to design and conduct the simulations were engineers and seismic experts from the National Society for Earthquake Technology (NSET) – Nepal which has wide experience in disaster preparedness and retrofitting projects back home.

The simulation showed that Bhutan was sorely lacking in search and rescue equipment and contingency planning. But at least they now know what to do. Nepali experts say they have to work hard to get successive governments in their own country to listen.



Surya Narayan Shrestha of NSET was impressed with the receptiveness of Bhutan’s officials, right from the prime minister down. He recalls: “After the simulation, Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay told us Bhutan had to learn from Nepal because we are closest to their context, and no other country was in a better position to teach them.”

Such open-minded frankness is rare in the South Asian context where officials and experts often think they know best. The Nepal-Bhutan cooperation was supported by the New Delhi-based Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) of which Nepal is a member, and NSET was selected to

support the Thimphu Earthquake Contingency Plan.

NSET helped Bhutan design the strategy in two phases: first to formulate decisions, information flow and coordination mechanisms before a disaster strikes. The second phase consisted of field-based exercises and simulations to analyse how those plans work in practice for search and rescue.

**SEISMIC RISK**

The 7.4M earthquake in Colombia this week, which followed another deadly temblor in Venezuela last month, was a wakeup call for both Nepal and Bhutan which share similar seismic risk. All four countries can learn from each other

to be prepared with building code enforcement, national contingency plans, disaster drills, search and rescue experience.

At one point during the simulation in Thimphu, some sites had modern concrete cutters, while others did not. NSET’s Shrestha remembers the Bhutan search and rescue units wanted to know what they should do. “We asked them what they would do in a real disaster, and gave them a hint: perhaps call for urgent international assistance,” he said.

The authorities had chosen the largest referral hospital in Thimphu and two primary health care centres to create a mass casualty scenario. They factored in a sequence in

which emergency medical staff could not reach the hospital either because they had their own family emergencies, or the roads were blocked by landslides, and the hospitals were themselves without power.

The simulation team also assessed the structural integrity of infrastructure, including 11 bridges, one hospital, an electricity terminal, the telecom network, and a food supply warehouse.

The entire simulation took four hours, involving 500 people in various roles, while the Nepali team spent nearly a year planning to execute the two simulation phases. Prime Minister Tobgay, officially the commander of the disaster

# Nepal-New Zealand earthquake c

Lisa Choegygal

The main streets of Kathmandu were surprisingly clear on the late April morning as we made our way to the office of the Minister of Urban Development in response to his urgent call.

Only a few days after the massive earthquake that had rocked Nepal in 2015, the debris of broken walls and fallen electricity lines littered the roadside, but most buildings were still intact.

A small aftershock, undetectable from the car, brought people hastening out of their homes, the fear and uncertainty of the past catastrophic days etched onto their faces. With me was a New Zealand government official who had just arrived from Wellington to join the consular team which had gathered from the High Commission in New Delhi and beyond to support the crisis response.

Minister Narayan Khadka, flushed from the stress of his role, rose from his chair as we were ushered into the Singha Darbar office, his desk backed by a limp Nepali flag. The Minister had missed the earthquake, having just returned from representing Nepal at the ANZAC centenary at Gallipoli in Turkey on the same day. (He was outraged that Prince Charles had allegedly forgotten to recognise the Gurkha sacrifice on that ill-fated peninsula, and I had trouble getting him back on topic).

“You need New Zealanders



The gathering of Richard Sharpe's former colleagues and admirers included engineers from government, academia and consultants in Kathmandu in May 2026.

PHOTOS: LISA CHOEGYAL



Examples of the strengthening applied to mitigate earthquake damage were tailored to Nepal's specific building styles in 1993.

to help your Nepali engineers?” I prompted him. “Yes of course,” the Minister was impatient. “So many Nepalis were trained by your Kiwi guys, and they tell me that Richard Sharpe wrote our earthquake building code guidelines more than 20 years ago. We need to request your urgent help with earthquake expertise to support our Nepali seismic specialists to assess the structural safety of our buildings, both public and private. Our engineers need a team of experts from New Zealand, preferably including Richard, to come here as soon as possible.”

New Zealand’s location on the rim of the Pacific Ring of Fire ensures that the country is expert on earthquakes, constant seismic activity, mitigation techniques and geodetic disruption. Minister Khadka was referring to an influential UNDP project in the early 1990s led by Richard Sharpe that resulted in the creation of Nepal’s building code guidelines, educational exchanges with New Zealand universities, and eventually the formation of Kathmandu’s highly regarded core institution, the National Society for Earthquake Technology Nepal (NSET).

In Nepal, earthquake expertise today is rooted in the experience gained by this game-changing project. In much the same way that Edmund Hillary and Everest forever link Nepal and New Zealand, it is less well-known that earthquakes are another powerful strand of the relationship. This reputation rests firmly on the shoulders of one man, Richard Sharpe.

After some preparatory visits, in 1991 Richard settled into an office in Baber Mahal next to the Director General of Buildings. His not inconsiderable task was seismic hazard mapping and risk

assessment in order to prepare and implement a National Building Code.

He writes: ‘We provided much more than just the design-for-earthquake aspects. The development of alternative building materials and technologies included an inventory of 55 typical houses throughout Nepal.’

Richard’s team of Nepali specialists set to work on the building code, tailored to Nepal’s specific conditions. Most homes were self-built or locally constructed without masons or engineers, so the code included mandatory rules-of-thumb for common building types



# contingency



response team, was also present and King Jigme was kept updated on the exercise.

The outcome of the simulations was analysed, and NSET made a series of recommendations, one of which proposed that Bhutan establish at least one six-person earthquake first responder rescue squad for every ward of 15,000–20,000 people.

Bhutan hasn't experienced a major earthquake in decades, and sits astride the eastern Himalaya seismic gap. This means tectonic stress has accumulated and could be released at any time. Thimphu has a population of 121,000, and the NSET estimates that 3,000 of the 13,700 houses will face severe

damage in the event of a quake of more than 7 magnitude, resulting in 3,000 potential casualties if it hits at night.

Interestingly, NSET's pre-2015 projection for Kathmandu Valley indicated it was even more vulnerable. The 2015 earthquake was 7.8 magnitude and killed nearly 10,000 people, but seismologists say it did not fully release tectonic tension in central Nepal.

Yet, the irony is that while Nepali experts guide other vulnerable countries, Nepal itself lacks a detailed contingency plan.

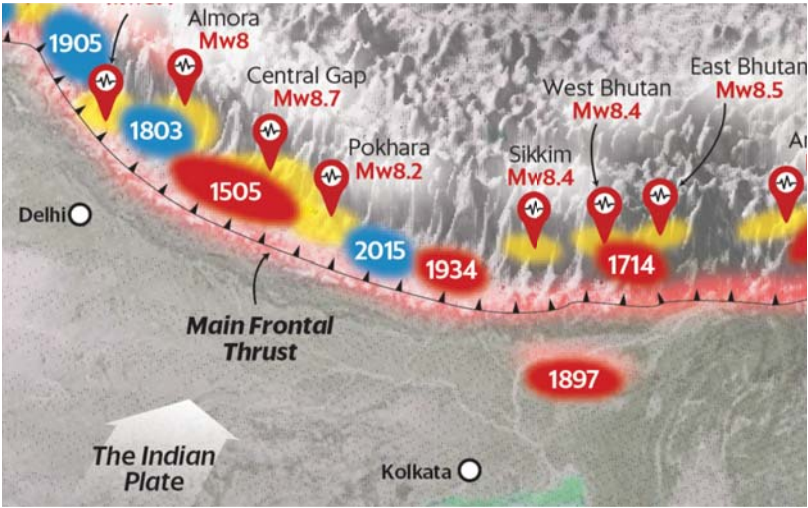
"Bhutan learned from us. But what can we learn from them?" asks Shrestha, adding that Nepal needs the same political commitment from the highest levels, rigorous planning and simulation that NSET helped carry out in Thimphu.

To be sure, NSET did help develop a National Disaster Response Framework before the 2015 earthquake that listed the responsibilities of different agencies. But it was only on paper, lacking a strategic implementation plan with sufficient political ownership.

"We have drills but they are more theoretical and do not answer vital questions such as open space, pre-positioned emergency supplies," says NSET founder Amod Mani Dixit (see adjoining article). "What sets Nepal apart from Bhutan is political commitment." Nepal's disaster preparedness has improved since 2015, there are more trained people within the security forces, and better equipment. But these are still inadequate to deal with a Himalayan-scale megaquake.



ALL PHOTOS: NSET NEPAL



Thule Rai was Nepal's seniormost search and rescue officer in the Nepal Police and was on NSET's team in Bhutan. He says of Nepal's lack of planning pre-2015: "The general thought at the time was why invest in something that is going to happen in the

future. But Bhutan was the first to have a simulated contingency plan in the Subcontinent. In Nepal, our plans are on paper and we barely test them."

That is where the simulation is important because it fills in gaps and sorts out problems in a real-life

scenario, using designated officials to resolve them.

Back in 2002, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) conducted a study on earthquake mitigation in Kathmandu Valley, evaluating structural risks and projecting heavy casualties by using the 1934 8.3M eastern Nepal earthquake as a matrix.

It has been 25 years, and that report has just gathered dust despite being updated in 2018. The National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act 2017 did try to bring risk reduction, preparedness, response as well as search and rescue all under one umbrella, but coordination between line agencies remains the biggest hurdle.

Lack of political will for inter-agency contingency collaboration is possibly Nepal's biggest problem. Says Surya Narayan Shrestha: "We have awareness and knowledge but no coordination. We have some of the best institutions working in disaster preparedness such as the Armed Police Force, Nepal Police, Red Cross but they are all scattered. That is what we could learn from Bhutan." 🇳🇵

# connection

Both seismically active, the two countries cooperated in preparedness and building codes



The first training workshop was held in Dharan in 1993 for government inspectors.

and detailed guidelines for less formal structures.

The code also had to have relevance for professionally designed modern buildings and new high rises. It soon became apparent that the bulk of government officials and inspectors lacked the capacity to effectively implement its recommendations, so the team went back to basics.

The first training program was held in Dharan in 1993. Amod Dixit, one of his team who went on to establish NSET, explained that a cultural sea-change was required in both government and local thought

processes.

He said, "What was so inspirational about Richard Sharpe was that he encouraged us to work out the Nepal-specific solutions for ourselves, never dictating them to us. Under his leadership we grew in confidence, but without his insights and experience we would never have got there."

**MANTRA**

Richard Sharpe's mantra was the opposite to donor dependency and recognised his colleagues' skill. "You Nepali engineers can do it yourself, and we will support and

guide you," he used to say.

In the final weeks of the building code project, Richard worked with the Nepal team to form a learned society to maintain the momentum, and they did. Funding was found and NSET was born, its statute based on that of the New Zealand Society for Earthquake Engineering.

In 2010, I was amongst the audience who attended a major conference with international earthquake specialists brought together by NSET and the United Nations beneath the chandeliers of the Yak & Yeti Hotel in Kathmandu.

The Kiwi television personality Bob Parker, now Mayor of Christchurch, was invited as keynote speaker.

Dramatically retelling the city's story of how they survived a recent Magnitude 7.1 earthquake with zero fatalities, the charismatic Mayor Bob electrified the gathering by banging his lectern for the 40 seconds of its duration. It seemed like forever. Not long after he returned home, Christchurch was not so lucky. A second major shock killed 185 people on 22 February 2011, devastating the city.

Richard Sharpe led the Kiwi structural engineering team

which responded in 2015 to the Minister's request. He was back in Kathmandu in May to speak at a seminar with support from the Asia New Zealand Foundation. I met him at a lunch hosted by his acolytes, engineers from government, academia and consultancy spheres, now distinguished grey old men who had shaped Nepal and who continue to hold him in the highest esteem.

In an elegant navy jacket, Richard blushed his way through the laudatory speeches as we helped ourselves to the buffet. Despite his embarrassment at the accolades, Richard's passion and knowledge were irrepressible as we discussed various funding opportunities for NSET to retrofit and base isolate remote hospitals, schools and other public buildings such as the Supreme Court and Singha Darbar to withstand future hazards. NSET has recently been sharing its expertise in Bhutan and beyond. (See adjoining article)

"There is a very interesting situation right now whereby India has withdrawn the recent revision of its earthquake code because of a public outcry over perceived costs," he said. "This update proposed to use the same techniques and approaches that Nepal adopted over thirty years ago in our project to set the design forces and seismic zoning. You could say that India is catching up to Nepal." 🇳🇵

Lisa Choegyal is New Zealand's Honorary Consul in Nepal.