



*The small community of Cheskkam, where the larger proportion of the Khumbu porters live.*

The last 12 months has been a total disaster not only for Nepal but for the rest of the world. For Nepal, tourism is the backbone of employment and income generating activities for the mountain communities. Commercially, everyone from the big agencies to the one-man porter operations have suffered but in real terms, individuals, families and communities have all felt the financial impact of the pandemic. After the first lockdown in April 2020 1.5 million people left Kathmandu to return to their village communities. As 2020 progressed everyone was trying to stay positive and looking forward to the 2021 season and an opportunity to turn the page. News was fed to the media from the Tourism Ministry that people were signing up for treks and mountaineering expeditions for the Spring 2021 season, however, many of the shop owners from Thamel did not return from their homes, shutters stayed down and the streets and hotels remained deserted as winter closed in. The lockdown protocols began to evaporate and people were beginning to move around but business remained, certainly in the tourism sector, at zero level.

The New Year came and January seemed to bring a more positive attitude to the community. There seemed to be a sudden development frenzy with buildings being knocked down, sites being redeveloped, shops and hotels being refurbished and roads being resurfaced. We even had traffic lights installed at all the major road junctions. Maybe, just maybe, the rumours of an increase in the numbers of tourists booking trips were more than just rumours. Only time would tell!

Fearing a loss of income not only in the tourism sector but also in the national economy a lot of pressure was exerted on the government to open the Spring season for mountain tourism, and especially for those wishing to go to Everest. The government went with the flow and the expedition season began. The number of corona cases rapidly increased in India and with an open India / Nepal border it was surely only a matter of time before Nepal suffered the same fate. With Delhi being on most country's black list of flights hundreds of migrant workers from India headed into Nepal for visas and flights onto other destinations.



*Reflections of Rara lake*

## **Politics**

Recently there has been many interparty 'spats' over power-sharing and alleged mishandling of various domestic political affairs. Nepal plunged into deeper political crisis on 20<sup>th</sup> December 2020 after President Bhandari dissolved the House at the request of PM Oli and announced that fresh elections would take place on April 30<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> May amidst the ongoing pandemic. Oli's move to dissolve the House sparked protests from a large section of the NCP led by his political rival 'Prachanda', however, in February, the high court reinstated the dissolved House. On the 11<sup>th</sup> May 2021 President, Bidhya Devi Bhandari called all parties to form a new government by 13<sup>th</sup> May, the announcement was made upon Oli losing the vote of confidence, after the Nepal Communist Party Maoist Centre led by Pushpakamal Dahal 'Prachanda' withdrew its support, reducing the government to a minority. Prominent leaders, including Deuba and Prachanda, blamed Oli for his failure to tackle the surge in COVID-19 cases over previous few weeks. They said 'corruption and scandals' had blocked the supply of the timely delivery of vaccines from India. Despite the earlier vote of no-confidence no one party had sufficient votes to nominate a leader and so, by default Oli, walked back into the PM's role but only on the premise that he could muster a clear majority before the end of May.

The Government has been in constant denial over the health of the nation declaring both in the press and on international news channels that there was no evidence of Covid-19 at Everest Base Camp and that the Government had the national pandemic situation under control. This was despite the number of cases designated as being 'positive' having risen to above 9000 a day and with the country running out of oxygen and hospital beds.



Annapurna 4 as seen from Pokhara in the setting sun

### **On the Mountains**

There were many who vigorously opposed opening Nepal for tourism, however, and no doubt under increasing financial pressure, the Government backed down. The doors were open and the tourists arrived and Nepal saw an immediate rise in Covid-19 positive cases. As the tourists arrived it became obvious that the larger majority were signed up for commercial expeditions while the trekking sector fell far short of the expected numbers.

Getting a visa was complicated and often confusing, independent trekkers were banned as a result of the visa application process which had to be completed through a registered agent. The health protocols were constantly changing and all concerned seemed in a daze as to what to recommend to tourists, never-the-less the tourists arrived, including some from countries that had already imposed stringent foreign travel bans. It appeared than now things were turning into a free-for-all. Although there were quarantine regulations there was no monitoring and tourists who were in quarantine could be clearly seen wondering around the streets of Thamel and Pokhara. Many tourists were heading directly out of Kathmandu and into the trekking regions assuming they would be safer in the mountains, but, seeming oblivious to the fact that there could well be positive cases in their group. It was questioned on many occasions that even with negative PCR tests and quarantine how could people be sure that the Nepalese staff were not corona-positive?

As spring moved into the mountains the industry started to gather momentum and then sadly, almost a year to the day, the Nepal Government introduce another national lockdown, roads were closed and flight carriers, both domestic and international were also grounded up to the end of May 2021 but by then Everest Base Camp was full with a record number of 408 expedition permits having been issued by the government. As in 2020, panic spread among



Dhaulagiri from Muktinath

the relatively few foreign trekkers that were already in Nepal and their agents, with many groups being trapped outside Kathmandu, and who were potentially faced with having to arrange a five-day quarantine spell on their return to the capital city before a new PCR test allowed them to continue on their onward journey.

It was not long before Everest ER, the HRA supervised medical centre temporarily installed at Base Camp was reporting a higher than usual number of 'AMS' cases in newly arriving expedition members. There is a close similarity between the symptoms of the virus and AMS, both being respiratory issues however, there were no official government facilities at EBC to actually test for the virus so all clients were registered as having pneumonia or other chest issues, although several expeditions had brought their own rapid testing swabs and equipment to use throughout their expedition.

There has been a lot mentioned in the media questioning the commercial exploits on Everest at this moment in time, whether the expeditions should continue or not and the amount of oxygen that is consumed by the clients and if that would be better used in hospitals in Kathmandu. Two very good blogs that go into greater detail and are well worth reading 'The Sad Peak of Human Thoughtlessness' a blog by Matthew Dieumegard-Thornton

<https://www.matthewdthornton.com/blog/the-sad-peak-of-human-thoughtlessness/>

and 'Everest and COVID-19: What's going on and should they still be climbing?' Mark Horrell's blog [https://www.ukclimbing.com/articles/opinions/everest\\_and\\_covid-19\\_whats\\_going\\_on\\_and\\_should\\_they\\_still\\_be\\_climbing](https://www.ukclimbing.com/articles/opinions/everest_and_covid-19_whats_going_on_and_should_they_still_be_climbing)



Kutumsang looking eastwards to the Jungal Himal

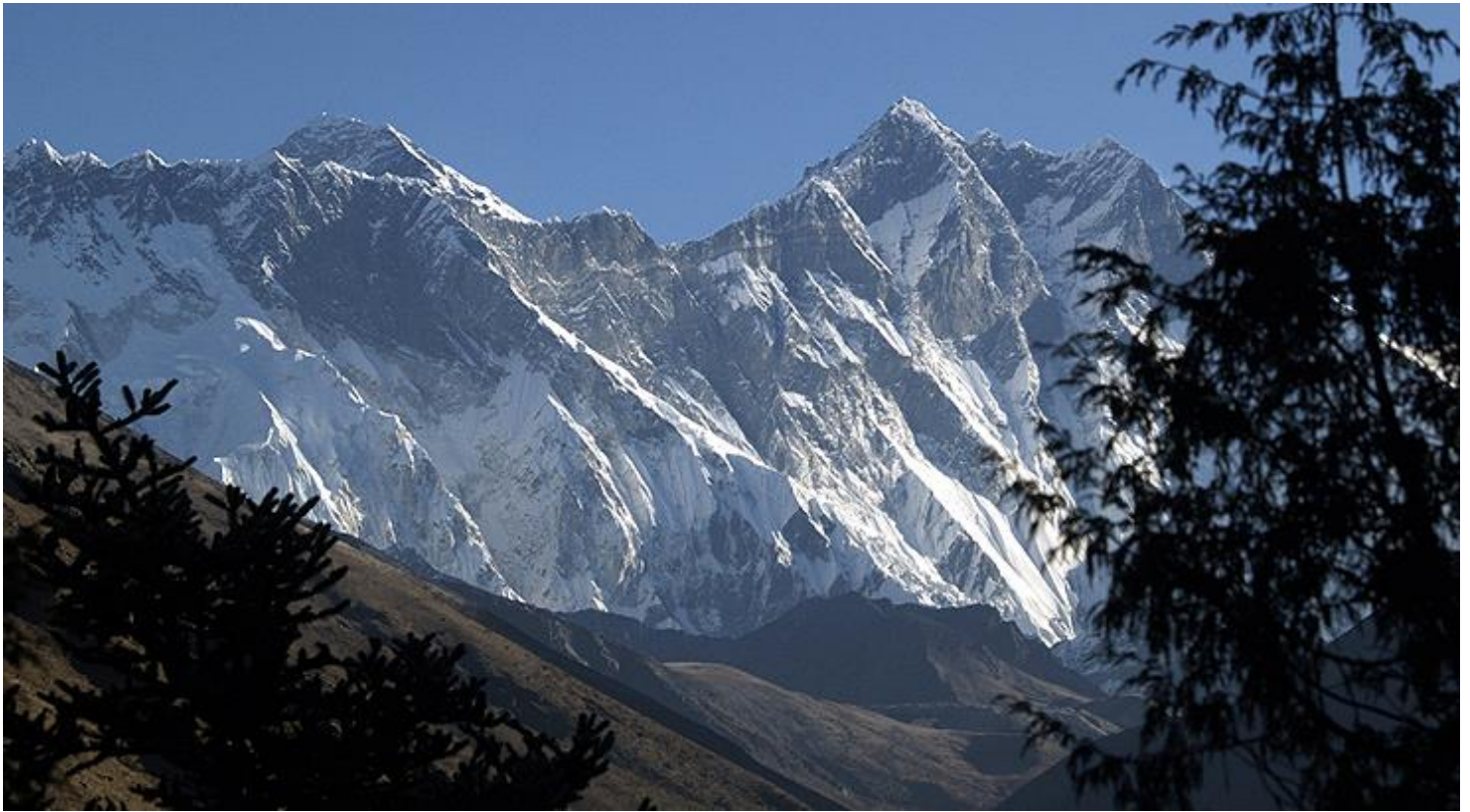
The first expedition to summit in 2021 was the Royal Bahrain team that had been on Manaslu during the lockdown of 2020. At base camp the situation was getting serious and yet the government still denied the fact that the virus had reached Everest despite many helicopter-evacuated clients being tested positive once back in Kathmandu. The government had collected 4.2 million US \$ from Everest activities and as the per outcome in 2015 after the earthquake, when Everest was closed, the government had to allow Everest permits to run over the next four years, there would be tremendous financial implications if Everest was to be declared closed again this year.

One of the first expeditions to be withdraw from Everest was the Austrian Lukas Furtenback Everest Expedition. Lukus had taken this step on very sound health considerations exercising sound leadership. He must be congratulated for his humane decision. He gave a frank interview including his perspective on the activities going on around base camp this season.



You can hear it here, just press the play button

There have been several events this season so far that have called into question the ethics employed on the big mountain expeditions and the direction present day expeditions seem to be going.



Everest and Lhotse South Face from Tengboche

## **Ethics**

Mountaineering, as we know it today, was born out of the Industrial Revolution when the developing Upper-Middle class was looking at a way to carve out its own identity in the changing social order of the day. At that time 'sport' was seen as being below the social status of the Upper Class while above the level of the Working Class, 'sport' therefore was an ideal vehicle on which to build an identity. The concept of serious and constructed leisure time resulted in all the major sporting associations being established in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, The Cricket Association, early 1800, The Alpine Club 1857, The Football Association 1863, The Royal Yachting Association 1875, The Lawn Tennis Association 1888 and The Climbers' Club 1898. Of all of the associations listed above, those connected to the mountains, were the only organisations that did not develop rules. The climbers and mountaineers were both Judge and Jury as well as the participants and what was generally reported was accepted as the truth, although there were a few anomalies, but there again there was not often the chance to misconstrued the truth, you either climbed it or you didn't.

As the decades passed the landscape changed, more and more people became involved in the activity and while in general, leading activists knew each other, new faces slowly emerged on the scene. However, all this changed in the 60s and 70s in the Alps and then in 1990s in the Himalaya when through a variety of different avenues, access was opened up to the high peaks. In the Himalaya commercial expeditions were born and through these clients had an opportunity to reach high places which had previously been out of reach for many. All of a sudden people started to draw up wish lists. Initially, the only expedition peak on offer was



The north side of Annapurna 1

Everest. Although the main 8000m peaks of Nepal had all been climbed by different expeditions by 1960 and all fourteen 8000m peaks in the world summited by 1964 there were still other challenges to be had. Messner was the first mountaineer to climb all fourteen 8000m peaks, and subsequently went onto claim several other 'firsts'. However, now with the advent of commercially put-together expeditions other windows were opened and opened to a wider audience.

Over the three decades of commercial expeditions many people have not only summited Everest and other 8000m Himalayan peaks but the commercial operators have developed their products and taken on board the expectation of potential clients. Climbing 8000m peaks will never be easy or cheap but a new business model has been developed by the leading operator in Nepal; to make the ascent as safe and as easy as possible, provide super-deluxe camping facilities, reduce the time on the mountain as much as possible and to include other facilities, for example helicopter services.

Over the winter of 2020/2021 the last 8000m summit to have a winter ascent. K2, was climbed and the whole mountain scene was basically overseen by a Nepalese company, Seven Summits Treks (SST). This expedition provided the last piece of the jigsaw that enable SST to put the final shine on their mountaineering product. Annapurna was the first 8000m peak to be climbed in 1950, it is also regarded as the most dangerous 8000m peak. In March 2021 SST ran a commercial expedition to Annapurna and they employed all their business skills, elite Sherpa high altitude manpower, top level equipment and their company helicopter to service the expedition.

The tactics SST employed in this business model were to recruit a large client contingent, 68 clients summited Annapurna on the 16<sup>th</sup> April, to reduce the difficulty and to increase the safety margins, ropes were fixed up the route including over the easier sections to aid a



Along the trail to EBC

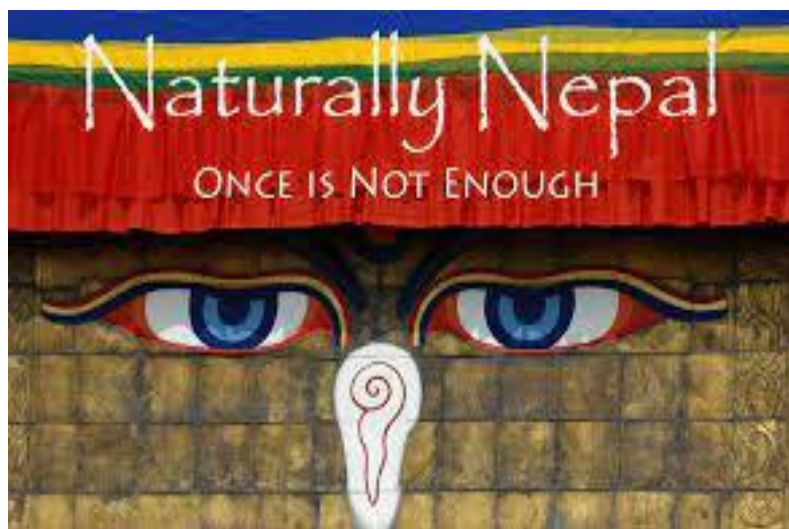
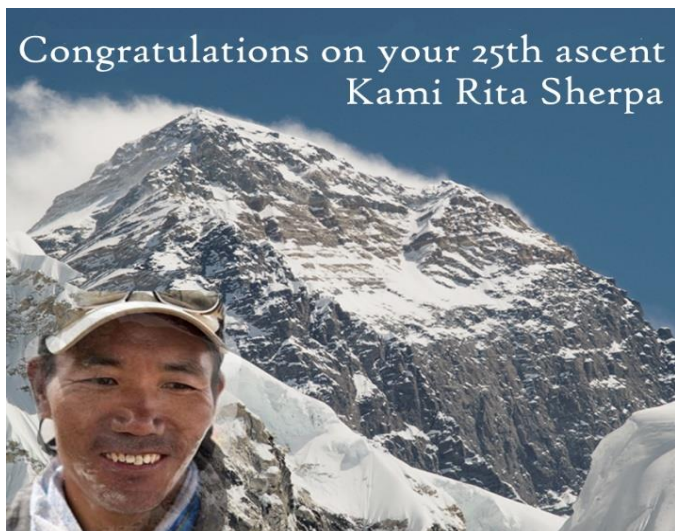
speedy ascent and reduce the time clients spent in the danger zone. This under estimated use of rope use caused the ascent to come to a halt at Camp 4, however, the company helicopter flew in with an additional 800m of rope, more oxygen and other supplies. From then the summit was reached and all descended to Base Camp.

It has long been the practice on Everest to include Lhotse in the itinerary. This 'two for one' approach was a big 'pull' for some clients and so SST transferred this model to Annapurna where they also offered Dhaulagiri in the package if clients wanted to ascent two 8000m peaks in one season, although not exactly for the price of one. Helicopter transfers were included, as were a few days rest in Pokhara. One client suffering from mild frostbite during the summit bid, decided, as the route from Camp 3 down to Camp 2 is long and hard going, to call the helicopter into Camp 3, from where he was heli-evaced to Kathmandu had his frostbite treated, and then flew back to Pokhara to join the Dhaulagiri team that were to be airlifted up to Dhaulagiri Base Camp.

Needless to say, this action has caused the raising of eyebrows in certain sections of the mountaineering community.

However, the 'ethics of mountaineering' have long been debated since the 'sport' began. In the 1950s to reach the Khumbu early expeditions trekked in from near Dharan in eastern Nepal taking five weeks to reach the Khumbu. Sir John Hunt and the successful 1953 Everest Expedition took 17 days to trek to Thyangboche from Kathmandu. Today, it takes only nine days trekking to reach Gorak Shep from Lukla (plus acclimatisation days). With every advancement in accessibility the journey becomes shorter.





In 2011 Nepal had a tourism logo 'Once is not enough'. Well, it certainly wasn't for Kami Rita Sherpa who on the 7<sup>th</sup> May made his 25<sup>th</sup> ascent, plus the additional .86cms of Everest!

In the 1920s there was a lot of discussion about the ethics of using oxygen on Mallory and Irvine's fateful final attempt to climb Everest in 1924, the new technology was eventually used with the permission of the organizing committee. Their clothing, tweed jackets and, by today's standards, rather crude double boots were considered as the best at that time.

The climbers in 1924 were on their own, there was no back-up and the chance of rescue was very slim. In 1992 the first commercially run expedition to Everest took place. Today ropes are fixed, large numbers of porters are used to establish luxury base camps and helicopters are on stand-by to drop additional supplies, provide a taxi service and to aid rescue missions.

Ropes were fixed on the Matterhorn around 1980, Gondolas, chair lifts, GPS, sat-phones are now all common place on mountains all over the world. Should this new business model give cause for concern? Is it mountaineering or a derivative of the activity? Should we now record these ascents differently, they are certainly not in the style adopted by Hunt or Messner!

The Himalayan Data Base, established by Elizabeth Hawley, covers all expeditions from 1905 through to date to more than 465 significant peaks in Nepal. Also included are expeditions to both sides of border peaks such as Everest, Cho Oyu, Makalu and Kangchenjunga as well as to some smaller border peaks. Data on expeditions to trekking peaks are included for early attempts, first ascents and major accidents. In today's world is it now time for the Data Base to record the style of ascent, solo expeditions, private expeditions, commercial expeditions, fixed rope ascents, helicopter assisted ascents and maybe in the not-too-distant future, helicopter ascents! Is it right to include those people who ascend mountains on commercial expeditions with all the modern styles and support alongside those ascents made before 1990?

The ethical debate will go on as long as big mountains are being ascended but, now we are in a changing world where the 'mountain tourists', Messner's words, have different expectations and demands and the suppliers have different logistics at their disposal to meet those demands. The single-handed round the world yachtsman uses a completely different vessel today to that used by Robin Knox-Johnson, is it the same sport? We are not in a position to



resist this change but is this a situation where clients know what is potentially available and businessmen, who happen to be mountaineers are in a position to deliver. Can it be argued that in sports like football, cricket, sailing, tennis the participants still require the same skill set even though the equipment is from the modern era, but do todays clients still require the same skill set as those practiced by previous generations?

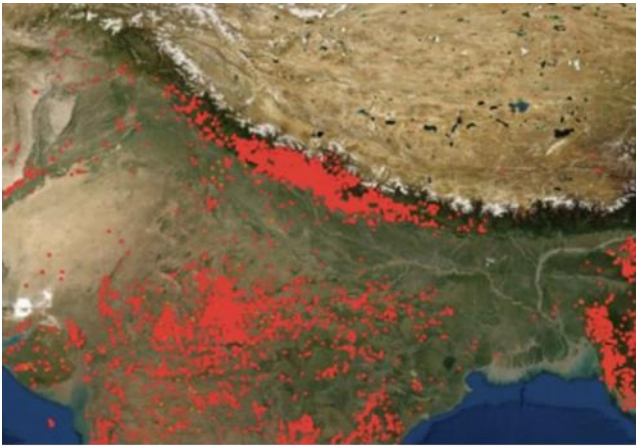
### **Pollution, the Environment and Weather**

I decided to go and check on my 'plant a tree' project... all seems to be growing nicely! However, Sarita on the other hand decided to try her hand at a bit of rooftop agriculture, also all growing nicely.



Coming along nicely, spinach, peppers, chilis, strawberries, capsicum, pumpkin, lettuce, blueberry, cucumber, tomato, eggplant, coquette and in the garden beans and of course our avocados.

However, over the last six or so weeks Kathmandu has been suffering from incredible smoke pollution emanating from wild fires in the Terai and middle hill regions of Nepal complicated by the stubble burning of the fields in northern India. Luckily, Nepal had a few days of low winds and a bit of rain that seemed to have cleared the air and maybe dampened the fires a bit. But we did have fire risks closer to home, on the slopes of Shivapuri, the south facing hills of the Katmandu northern valley rim.



The fire situation in Nepal and specifically on Shivapuri Kathmandu

At one point the pollution was at such a high level of risk that the government closed the schools and colleges.

These local fires were extinguished by Simrik Air using water from the Melamche water project and a local swimming pool backed up by the army on the ground.

Cyclone Tauktae had an impact on the weather in Nepal over the few days, 15 – 21<sup>st</sup> May and strong weather warnings were sent out, including to climbers on the higher peaks of Nepal along with the advice to return to Base Camp until the situation improved. At the moment

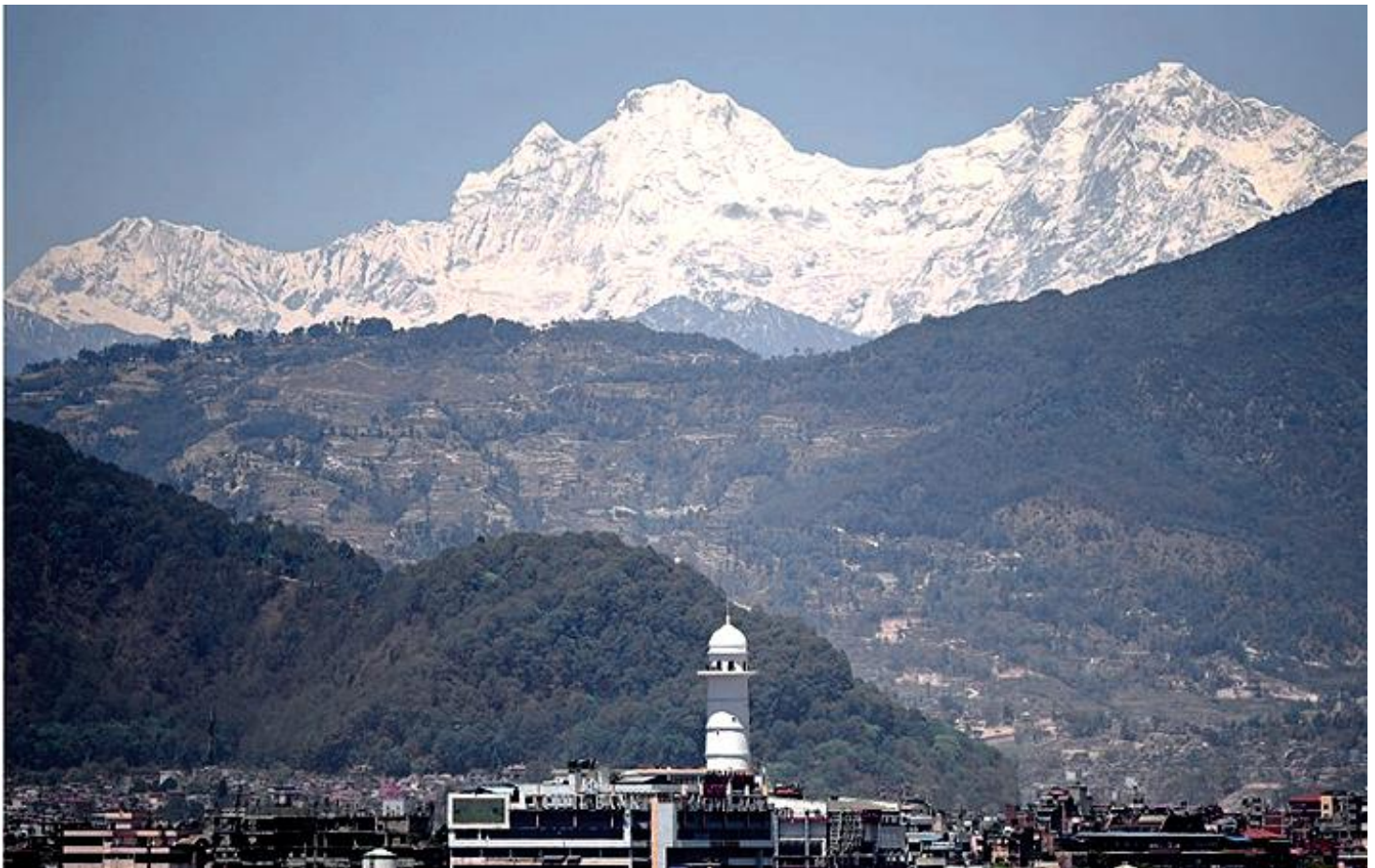
there are several teams high on Everest getting ready for their summit push in an anticipated weather window around the 22<sup>nd</sup>- 26<sup>th</sup> May.

On a personal note, Sarita and I and all the family are keeping safe, Sarita has had her two vaccine jabs, of the Chinese variety while I have had my first one of the Oxford Indian produced one. However, with the situation in India now the export of this brand has stopped.

Sadly, we have lost a few friends, our thoughts go out to their families. Nepal is not in a position to deal with this situation which is now counting more positive cases per capita than India. Keep safe everyone, until the next time!

*Sarita Wadhvani*  
*Sarita*

18<sup>th</sup> May 2021.



A view not seen from Kathmandu over the last 6 years, the rebuilt Minaret or Bhismen Tower which collapsed during the 2015 earthquake image Angad Dhakal collection.