

# Face value

What are Nepalis and Indians supposed to look like? Search me!



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I often carry my passport these days in Delhi whenever I go out. Not that a Nepali needs to have one to enter India unless the entry is by air. No one asks for a passport here, not even those Intelligence Bureau sleuths whom I bump into occasionally at gatherings and interactive programmes where they, like me, go to cover the event. They are nice and they know that I am a Nepali. The problem often comes when I interact with ordinary Indians who are preoccupied with certain perceptions about the general look of the Nepali people.

"But you don't look like a Nepali," many Indians whom I meet on the streets and talk to tell me in bewilderment.

"Is that so? What do I look like?"

"Well, you look like us," they say. "You are an Indian."

Others will be more specific. "So you are a Kashmiri?" they ask me when I am bearded. Some guess I am an Israeli vacationing in India. In Madhurai's Meenakshi Temple last month, after asking me if I wanted "hashish, good quality", a tout went on to name all the European countries he knew of so that if I could tell him where I was from, he could offer me the same in "my" language. At the Taj Mahal two months ago, an auto driver refused to believe me despite my vigorous attempts to prove my Nepali nationality. "No, sir," he would say, "aap Nepali nahi ho. Nepali jaise dikhte nahi ho." (You are not a Nepali. You don't look like a Nepali.)

Only a person with a flat nose and, I hate to use the word here but I must, "chinky" eyes, passes as a Nepali for many Indians. When they say I don't look like a Nepali, they are looking at my long, bahunish nose and almost almond-shaped, big, deep and "awaken" eyes. They are also considering my skin colour which is relatively fair. Going by their reactions and comments, I have come to the conclusion that only those with Mongolian features are considered Nepali in India.

When I hear the same from educated Indians like journalists, software professionals, bank employees and university students, I seriously try to explain to them the diverse nature of Nepali society that lives at different altitudes, eats varieties of foods, speaks many languages and sport different looks.

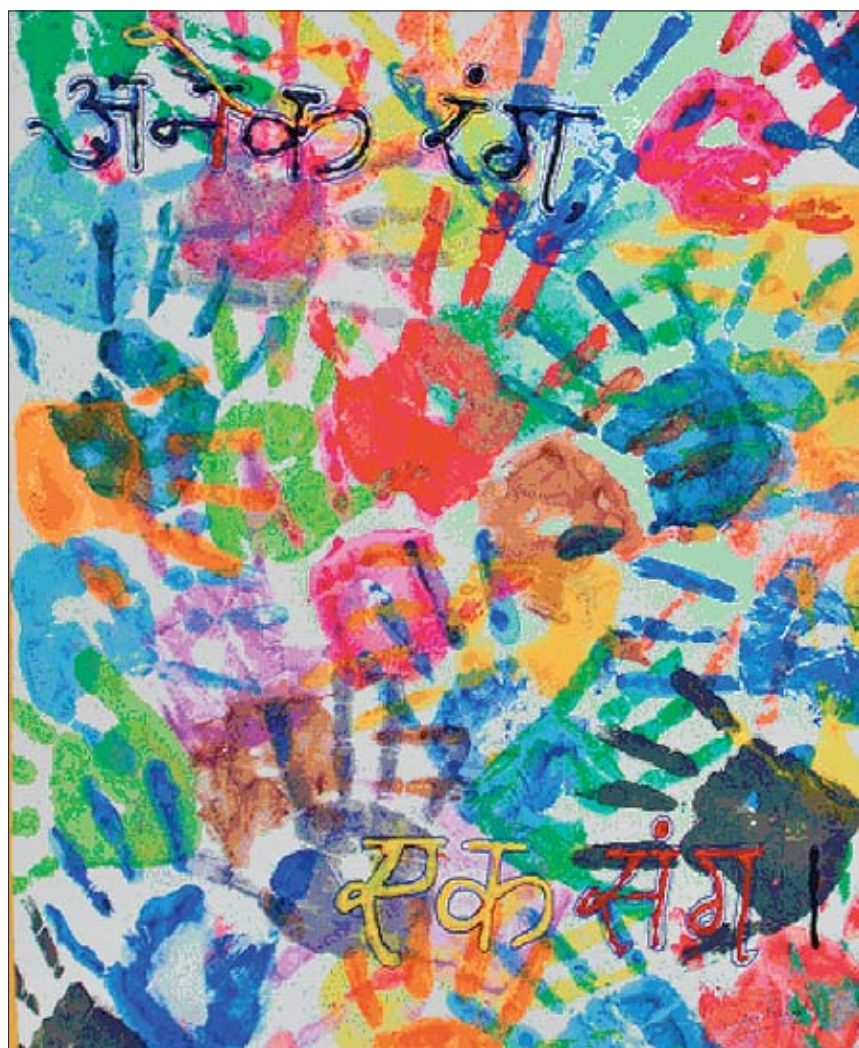
I think the perception varies from place to place. Filipinos, for example, think otherwise. "My Filipino friends always asked me how come I look Chinese when Nepalis are supposed to look like Indians," said a friend of mine who recently returned to Nepal from the Philippines where she had gone to study. Milan Rai of Khotang, 19 years old, came to Delhi two weeks ago to study Chartered Accountancy. He smiles when Indians talk about him with his Nepali friends in Hindi thinking that he doesn't understand the language before trying to

overcharge him. "Ye toh Chini hey." (He is a Chinese.) We also have some mistaken perceptions about Indians in Nepal. Many of us think Indians with a fair skin can only be found in Bollywood movies and there are probably only two such people: Salman Khan and Aishwarya Rai. (No other intentions in putting these two names together here.)

The Indian perception that "only a Mongolian can be a Nepali" might not be as problematic to India as the one that considers all Mongolians in India as Nepalis. (When I say Mongolians, I also include the bona fide citizens of Mongolia living in India apart from the millions of Indians from India's northeast with Mongolian features.) Just as I do not like being called an Indian, many Indians with Mongolian features feel rejected when they are mistaken as Nepalis (meaning non-Indians) by the so

'See, I am an Indian like you'. Then he added, "I am a victim of racism." (Northeast India includes the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Tripura.)

There were numerous reports in the media recently with headlines like "India Is Racist, And Happy About It" that not only proved Lalthanhawla's statements but also brought to light the plight of Mongolian-looking Indians in cities like Delhi that is primarily dominated by the so-called mainstream Indians. "Last year, as I was shopping in one of Delhi's posh markets, a man came up to me and said, 'Hi baby!'," wrote Monalisa S. Arthur, a journalist and a Mongolian woman from India's northeast, in *The Hindustan Times*. "When I ignored him and kept walking, he snarled, 'Bloody chinky', and left."



called "mainstream" Indians. Saying, "Sorry, I am not an Indian" is vastly different from, say, screaming, "Hello, I am an Indian, just like you, a bona fide citizen of this country." Who likes to face a situation in which they have to prove their nationality everyday to every Ram and Shyam? When I write this I am aware about similar situations faced by many Nepalis in the Tarai. I believe no Nepali should have to endure the experience of Pu Lalthanhawla.

"In India, people ask me if I am an Indian," said Pu Lalthanhawla, chief minister of the Indian state of Mizoram, five weeks ago in Singapore when the issue of racism was being intensely debated in India while Indian students were being attacked in Australia on racial lines. "When I go to south [India], people ask me... if I am from Nepal or elsewhere. They forget that the northeast is part of India... I have told many,

She described how difficult it was for people of the northeast to be accepted as Indians in Delhi. "Most times I fight back when I am teased so that the same person will think twice before harassing another 'chinky'," wrote Monalisa who said she wasn't accepted in the city despite having lived there for 17 years. "Until the situation changes, some men will always consider us cheap and available; and Delhi will never be home, just a place where we work."

PS: "Chinky" is one of the many new words that I have learned since I came to India last year. One dictionary defines it as "(ethnic slur), a person of Chinese descent". Assamese poet and columnist Samir Tanti was quoted as saying, "Calling someone 'chinky' (referring to small eyes) is racial in nature. I know all northeasterners are known as chinky in Delhi and other parts of India."

## Need to talk



Prawin Adhikari

"Of course, everything is expensive now. But that is because I am poor. Much poorer than I used to be." He lies. He accents his lie with a crisp hundred rupees note folded like a tent. Under it is a still-smoldering stub of Shikhar. Whenever he has to project disinterested authority he bunches his moustache up to the nostrils, perhaps to smell in it the smoke and spice of an afternoon break from slapping dry cement to sewer-joints of damp bricks. A gold ring looks back at him, a blind Cyclops, its heart of stone lost long ago, the stem bent out of shape to cling to a finger thickened with labour. He sips his raksi through the mustache, wipes the dampness to the tips of his mustache, smacks his mouth and pushes the lips in a porcine pucker to smell the mustache. He must sense that my attention is wavering, because he starts again.

"The flood of 2050 ruined me. I was a good shopkeeper. Good merchant. Sahu in Bhairahawa gave me three lakhs, four lakhs in credit. But the flood came, and that was the end of my prosperity. Lakshmi swam away in that flood — that is what I tell people. The flood got everybody, but the poor remained poor, the farmers lost one crop. I had three truck loads of merchandise in a go-down. Water reached the light bulbs, that is how high it came. Three days earlier I had received a shipment of sugar. Sugar! In a flood! Like that!" A clap of hands: palms sliding over each other. Gone!

"I used to do one lakh thirty thousand rupees is sales daily. Can you imagine that much money? I guess you could. Now everybody has one lakh rupees. Even this shop cost one lakh rupees, Rabi says. Didn't you say, Rabi? Fridge, gas, liquor, table, chairs, everything. But the flood took everything from me, everything. I became one like a mad man, left home, left my family. I haven't been back ever since. Even now, sahus from Narayanghat, Birgunj, they say — if you settle down, if you do your work, we'll give two lakh, three lakh in credit. They still come to my family because I still owe money. Thirteen bigha land, a go-down full of soap, rice, dal, sugar: flood took everything."

He sees nobody is listening anymore. In the reprieve he grants, a Sherpa woman starts talking in her sing-song, impenetrable accent. "Sherpa people can't make food taste very good, but they are very clean, very clean," she says. The shop used to belong to her sister in law, who got her papers to go to "Fuddans," so Rabi, a Rai, owns it now. The Sherpa woman doesn't seem to approve. "It tastes alright, tastes of *kodo*, so it is alright. But what kind of a Sherpa restaurant doesn't have *tongba*?"

"You knew the people who owned this restaurant?" Niru Pokharel, whose cousin has an examination in a few days and who is quite lost in the big city where she has been for just a week now, smiles at the Sherpa woman, who gives Niru a brief history of the establishment: her sister in law bought it from another Sherpa family from Solu, their neighbor, and before that it was

owned by the Gurung family that lives above the shop. There is never enough water here, and it is too far from Samakhushi Chowk for it to be profitable. It should have been closer to the chowk."

"With this style, style of management, this standard and service, it should have been outside the hospital, and then," says the businessman from his corner, finishing his sentence with a quick jerk of his neck to draw an exclamation with his chin. "It is alright," says Niru, who grew up with Rabi in Morang, "Babu is a hard working boy. He will make the place work." Rabi is indeed personable, recognizes faces, has a very polite, very friendly approach. When he learns that the one-armed man is also a Rai from around his area, he doesn't hesitate to call the customer into the kitchen, pull up a stool for the man, and start chatting about the Eastern Hills. The one-armed man pulls his sleeve over the missing appendage and shoves the sleeve under his backpack. They talk, calling each other Sainla dai, their Nepali a mellifluous contrast to the rough, confrontational cadence of Nepali spoken around Tanahun.

"So you are really a writer?" Niru sits at the table, not bothering to clear the next table where a teenager girl is whispering into the ears of a seven year old boy, both of them talking rapidly in English, conspiring about their next culinary folly: sukuti? Sekuwa? Buff Chowmin? The dark corners of the cheap bhatti around the corner seem to these children an escape rarely permitted

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by the family: the half-plate of momo shared between aunt and nephew a tastier treat than the canned/foiled sweetmeats their relatives in America can send. "So you are really a writer?" Niru asks. Nobody believes me when I say I am a writer. So I don't tell her I am also writing movies, because she wouldn't believe that.

"Not that I know much, but you know how it is, I have tried, not stories, I don't think I could do stories, but poems. No, not poems, exactly, because I think it is hard to write poems, but ghazals, yes, ghazals. I dabble in ghazals."

She beams. Waits for me to say something, but I nod instead. What does one say to a nineteen year old woman who dabbles in ghazals? "So, you are still a student?" I ask.

"Of life," she beams again. This is precious. She is a student of life. I feel she is accusing me of hypocrisy, of fronting. *I am a student of life*. How tedious that is as an idea. "Back home, in Morang, there is an FM station where I have two hours every week and people tell me I have a very good voice. So I thought I would try here, in Kathmandu, but without contacts and relatives, it is impossible," she says. "It is just, just too big, too many people, too big a city." She is not exasperated. "But, I like reading more than I like writing, even though I do dabble in ghazals."

"You will return, won't you?" she stands by the door, holding her phone. I nod. "Maybe I will read your name in the papers some day," she says. I shrug. "It made me happy to talk to an actual writer," she says, but I don't wait to indulge such bullshit. It is cold outside, the rain having poured furiously first, and then steadily chilled the air with a persistent, pleasant drizzle. Now the air is damp, but not particularly wet. Businessman is furiously sucking on another Shikhar, hunched up by the newly laid sewer walls, slapping cement dust onto the wet walls to seal it. He looks up at me, but I don't think he recognizes me anymore. He sniffs at his mustache once more.

## letters to the editor

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### Jumli apples

I was overjoyed to learn that the Kathmandu market is going to be flooded with Jumli apples ("Long wait for Jumli apples over," Aug. 6, Page 4). I still have juicy taste of Jumli apple on the tip of my tongue, way back from my field trip to Jumla on a rural development project about twenty years ago. People, whoever used to fly to Jumla, used to stuff their bags with apples and get frustrated for not being able to pack in more.

For apple plantation, Jumla is one of the most suitable places in terms of its climatic and geographical structure. The local people were trained to stock the harvested apples in the specially-designed wooden racks for longer use. However, tons of apples used to rot in the field due to storage and market problem. Thanks to District Agriculture Office (DAO) for its initiation, after a long time, to subsidise the packaging and transportation costs to bring the organically grown apples to Kathmandu market. Valley residents will be fortunate to get the juicy Jumli apples at an affordable price.

Rai Biren Bangdel  
Maharajgunj

### No more arms

Defence Minister Bidhya Bhandari has cast serious doubts over the future of the peace process by hinting at possible import of lethal arms for Nepal Army from India ("New Delhi positive on arms supply," Aug. 7, Page 1). Nepal does not need any more weapons in the middle of the peace process. Instead of military hardware, Nepal should have asked for assistance for those dying with diarrhoea in the Mid West.

Khem Regmi  
By email

### Chaotic city roads

It was reckless driving that cost six innocent pedestrians their lives in the car accident at Ratnapark, Kathmandu on Wednesday ("Absconding driver surrenders," Aug. 7, Page 1). But it is more than likely that the police, which is now promising 'maximum punishment' for the perpetrator, will try to hush things up when the news gets out of headlines. No one will know what punishment was actually meted out to the culprit or about the dirty

politics and money games that will be played behind the scenes to secure his release.

This was a case involving reckless driving by the owner of a private vehicle, but the drivers of public vehicles are known to be no more careful even while driving in broad daylight. They cause many road accidents and create unnecessary jams. But the traffic police, instead of taking action against the errant drivers, seems happy to look on from the sidelines. Their much-publicised traffic campaigns will be useless unless traffic rules can be strictly enforced and added provisions put in place to severely punish traffic violators.

Amit Pyakurel  
By email

The tragic accident on Wednesday not only brings to light the consequences of drunk driving, but also highlights the irresponsibility of the culprit's parents in letting a young boy without license to drive while he was heavily under the influence of alcohol. Sometimes, a little push from parents might be enough to prevent their children from landing in big trouble. All the parents of young children

should take a serious note of this accident.

Ishwor Timilsina  
By email

### On English

By putting forth the examples of George Orwell, David Abercrombie, Hisila Yami, Pashupati Shumsher Rana and Sher Bahadur Deuba, Abhi Subedi seems to be trying a little too hard to prove the indispensability of English language in modern Nepal ("The lure of English," Aug. 5, Page 6). My views correspond more with another personality Subedi quotes, Dr K.I. Singh, who saw English language as "the legacy of power and hegemony."

Countries like China, South Korea and Japan all arrived at their current levels of development even while maintaining their distance from the English language. English is so popular because it was the language of the British who colonised huge swathes of land and because of the prevailing American cultural hegemony. Going by this logic, Nepalis might be more interested in learning Mandarin in the days to come as China gets closer and closer to superpower status and

tries to colonise the less powerful countries culturally, economically and linguistically. At the end of the day, English is just a language. It is a means, not the end. There is no point going gaga over it.

Chakra Bahadur BM  
Shree Jan Sewa H.S.S, Rangsi, Rolpa

### Exemplary Gurung

I would like to extend my heartfelt greetings to Dhan Gurung, the first person of Nepali-origin to be elected councillor in the United Kingdom ("Gurung wants to host Nepal," Aug. 5, Page 12). I was highly impressed to learn that Gurung is eager to host the entire Nepali contingent for the 2012 London Olympics. It is great news for Nepali sportspersons as well as sports fans that Gurung has volunteered to provide not only accommodation and food for the entire team but also necessary training and healthcare facilities. Gurung exemplifies the saying: Where there is will, there is a way. I hope he inspires Nepalis to take our responsibility towards our country seriously.

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