

VARIETY

HEROES AROUND US

'Worried I will infect my family'

An ambulance driver who loves his profession fears for the safety of his family



Nehal S Gurung/THM

KATHMANDU: As an ambulance driver, witnessing emergencies on a daily basis is nothing new for 41-year-old Mune Basnet.

Basnet who came to Kathmandu in 1997 from Nepalgunj, started working as an ambulance driver in 2001. Describing the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak as "tragic," Basnet says there are heightened levels of anxiety for drivers like him.

"We are working rigorously. Though we are given personal protective equipment (PPE), it is not convenient or of good quality. Additionally, the closed space inside the vehicle makes it difficult to drive with the PPE," he shared.

As an ambulance driver for Kathmandu District Red Cross Society, in a day he ferries more than half-a-dozen critically unwell people to

hospitals all across the Valley. "In this situation, we don't know who might be the infected one. There is a risk and fear with every patient," he says.

And Basnet informs that there have been no measures taken so far to disinfect the vehicle (ambulance). "We have not received any kind of assistance and support regarding how we can make the ambulance safe," he reveals.

"Problems do not end here. There is no health insurance for drivers nor sufficient salary. We get around Rs 15,000 a month and that's okay. But if the authorities concerned (government) had at least provided us with health insurance, it would have been of great relief in this situation," he says.

What's making him even more worried is the fear that he might infect his wife and two children, if he

happens to get infected. "I don't feel like going home, but I have to. I always fear what if I contract the virus unknowingly. I even planned to live separately but due to my economic condition, it's impossible to do so."

Meanwhile, his neighbours look at him with doubt, "which is even more disheartening. In this situation, people don't tend to understand our sacrifices."

Despite the harsh circumstances, Basnet finds an inner peace being associated with his profession.

"I get to save lives. I can feel the pain and success story (cure) of the patients. And that gives me the energy to hold the steering wheel of my ambulance tightly."

Sharing the reason why he chose the very profession, he reminisces, "In 1985, my father suffered from a serious kidney problem. We took him to Nepalgunj from Kohalpur, carrying in *khatiya* as there were no ambulance facilities. Sometimes we used to take him to the hospital in truck or tractor too. It was a pitiful situation. That situation made me become an ambulance driver."

He adds, "I have had many opportunities to leave this job but I chose to continue to help people in need. And I wish to be in this profession, always." He understands the present situation is not a good one. "I worked continuously during the People's Movement, the violence created after Nepalis were killed in Iraq and earthquake (2015). But this time, it is risky as I am absolutely terrified that I might infect my family," he shares anxiously.

Nonetheless, Basnet is determined to do his best and he expects people to help him in his endeavor. Urging people to stay at home, he says, "We (ambulance drivers) are working in this fearful situation, and all we seek is motivation and an environment to contribute efficiently. We would like to appeal to the government and public to look into ways to enhance our work." — Raju Upadeg

Helping flatten coronavirus curve in sign language

NSL interpreters help deaf community understand COVID-19



Shaurya Kshatri Kathmandu

On April 7, Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli addressed the nation sharing the updates on the national situation of COVID-19. Joining him on the corner of the television screen was Nepali Sign Language (NSL) interpreter Shilu Sharma disseminating his words to thousands of hearing-impaired across the nation. The move was hailed by the deaf community, many of who took to the social media expressing their gratitude in seeing an interpreter present in PM's address for the first time during this crisis and lockdown.

Ever since the pandemic, deaf associations across the country have been voicing their concern over a lack of accessible briefings in media. NSL interpretation was neither available during PM Oli's March 20 address nor during President Bidyula Devi Bhandari's address to the nation on April 3.

The National Federation of the Deaf Nepal (NFDN) along with region-specific associations like Koshi Association of the Deaf, Kailali Association of the Deaf have been updating NSL interpretation of daily Public Service Announcements (PSA) from Ministry of



Health and Population (MoHP) and several other organisations. MoHP started using NSL interpreter in its daily media briefing on COVID-19 from April 9. But getting information to the deaf and people with hearing loss hasn't been easy, especially in a pandemic when information is constantly changing. NFDN is worried about those unable to read and those dispersed in remote villages of the country.

"When even those gifted with sight and sound haven't been particularly receptive of the crisis with many even ignoring the lockdown, there are numerous hearing-impaired individuals who still aren't aware of what's happening," remarks Sana Khimbaja, interpreter at NFDN.

Biratnagar-based journalist Jeena Jung Karki, presents a remarkable example of this, who in her 15-second-long video shows the reality of one deaf individual. "If you have ever attended at Biratnagar Bazaar, you have probably heard about Utkam *dai*, purports Karki. "Right now, Utkam *dai* doesn't know much about the situation, save for the fact that he isn't supposed to go outside. He doesn't clearly understand what the disease is or why have people been dying."

As per a 2013 directive of the government, every national television channel is re-

quired to broadcast news in sign language at least once a day. "That isn't right in the case," remarks Dinesh Shrestha, of National Association of the Sign Language Interpreters Nepal (NASLI). As per him, private media firms couldn't even be bothered, "however now, given the global crisis, there have been few improvements in PSA being broadcast in NSL." Since mid-February, government-owned NTV has begun to broadcast news in sign language every day at 7:00 am.

Sharma, who has been an interpreter for the last 22 years and is working in NTV, since last month or so has been keeping busy with additional stops to her day. "Prior to this NTV used to broadcast sign language news only a

week on Saturday at 1:00 pm," she informs and adds, "During the outset of the pandemic, I didn't know international sign language for COVID-19." Now in her videos, she mimics the shape of the virus — the sign, an open hand over a fist, reminiscent of the circular shell and protruding spikes of the virus.

NSL interpreters like Sharma are the sole source of mass communication for several deaf individuals. Interpreters as per NASLI, there aren't many professionals catering that service. There are only 20 to 50 professional interpreters as per NASLI and one of the reasons for this is because there is no nationally-recognised certification for NSL interpreters.

POTPOURRI

BLONDIE Dean Young and Denis Lebrun



HAGAR Chris Browne



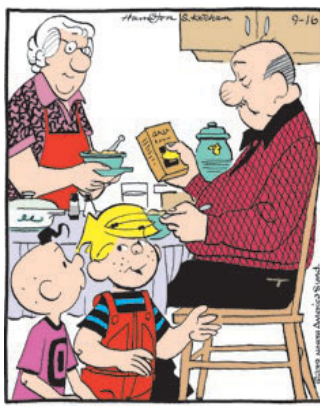
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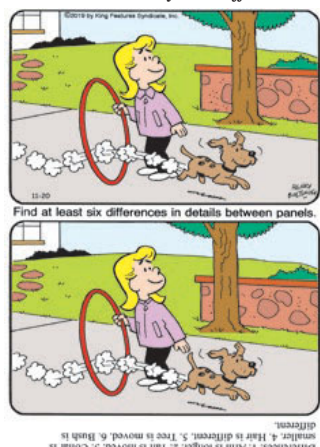
BEAU PEEP Andrew Christine and Roger Kettle



DENNIS Hank Ketcham



HOCUS FOCUS Henry Boltinoff



YOUR LUCK

HAPPY BIRTHDAY: This year, you will feel a higher energy level and responsibilities will be easier to cope with. This indicates overall happiness and appreciation from those you care for. There will be chances to get ahead financially. If single, relationships are evolving. Be receptive to changes in your single status. If attached, put the love and well-being of a loved one first and all will be well. Your love bond deepens. LEW wants to spend too much money.

A baby born today has a Sun in Aries and a Moon in Scorpio until 4:35 p.m. when the Moon enters Sagittarius.

ARIES (March 21-April 19): Things could get emotionally intense before the day is over. This is particularly true if you facing issues related to shared belongings. Use the day for expansion, reflection and concluding projects. Tonight: Catch up with old friends. Keep a tight heart. ***

TAURUS (April 20-May 20): Romance is highlighted. This is a great day to schedule an adventurous encounter with that special person. Your friend is apt to be feeling as excited and enthusiastic about the day as you are. Feed your creative juices. Indulge in music and art. Tonight: Relax. ***

GEMINI (May 21-June 20): You seek perfection in all you do today. But this shows you down, and you might find colleagues speeding ahead while you are stuck checking details on your project. Cease that worrying, and go at your own natural pace. Tonight: Date night. ***

CANCER (June 21-July 22): It's a great day for a creative project. You clearly have a romantic vision. You might be somewhat possessive of loved ones and children. Your communication skills are vital now. Talk over your feelings with someone you trust. Tonight: At home. Make it easy. ***

LEO (July 23-Aug 22): Spend time with your family and other loved ones. Stick close to home and work there if possible. Attend to a home-repair project in your spare time. You might be dealing with parents. You feel a tie to your roots. Tonight: Let your imagination fly. ***

VIRGO (Aug 23-Sept 22): You are busy keeping your mind occupied with new information. Maintain conscious control of your emotions when communicating. Your thinking is usually influenced by the past. A short trip works to your benefit today. Tonight: Make a meal for those you care about. ***

LIBRA (Sept 23-Oct 22): You studiously look for new ways of making money. Be aware that change will be stressful. Take care of yourself, especially any health issues. Your feelings and thoughts are aligned. Tonight: Treat yourself and loved ones to an expensively made dinner. ***

SCORPIO (Oct 23-Nov 21): It's all about your health and emotional self today. It's okay to be selfish now. Take care of yourself, especially any health issues. Your feelings and thoughts are aligned. Tonight: Treat yourself and loved ones to an expensively made dinner. ***

SAGITTARIUS (Nov 22-Dec 21): It is a good day to work quietly behind the scenes. Hide your moodiness from others. Take time to reflect and meditate. Unconscious attitudes can be difficult. The past, even your childhood, affects you today. Tonight: As you live it. ***

CAPRICORN (Dec 22-Jan 19): Unexpected occurrences are coming your way today. They will be positive, but they might rattle you. Unusual insights come up as a project reaches fruition. Be aware that people around you might be acting erratically. Tonight: It's going to be a nutty night. Hide out. ***

AQUARIUS (Jan 20-Feb 18): Professional concerns are the focus of the day. Business is highlighted. You make new advances in your career. You are more open and accessible but take care to avoid emotional displays, especially in public. Tonight: Gather a few friends together and make merry. ***

PISCES (Feb 19-March 20): You are a dreamer and thinker. Your mind is active and you feel fearless and yearn for new experience. You feel a need to get away and break from the usual routine. You might create positive change through your ideas. Tonight: Network online. ***

Born today: Actor Max Von Sydow (1929), actor Omar Sharif (1932), author Paul Theroux (1941) By Jacqueline Bigar The Stars Show the Area of Day You'll Have: 5 Dynamic; 4 Positive; 3 Average; 2 So-so; 1 Difficult.

Note: Bigar's Stars is based on the degree of your sun at birth. The sign name is simply a label astrologers put on a set of degrees for convenience. For best results, readers should refer to the dates following each sign.