

Sustainability of community radios in Nepal

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Abstract

Radio broadcasting in Nepal began in 1951 with state-owned Radio Nepal, but the democratic opening after 1990 spurred the growth of community radios as non-profit, community-owned platforms. The launch of Radio Sagarmatha in 1997 marked the start of South Asia's community radio movement, positioning these radios as vital tools for civic engagement, cultural preservation, and social transformation.

Today, community radios face sustainability challenges. Against this backdrop, this study employs a qualitative design, combining a desk review with in-depth interviews with seven key informants, including radio station managers, board members, journalists, and representatives of the Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (ACORAB). Findings reveal a declining number of active stations, widespread dormancy, staff shortages, weak governance, falling content quality, financial instability, and limited digital adoption. Advertising revenues have shifted online, donor support has declined, and government engagement remains inconsistent and politicized.

Despite these constraints, community radios retain both symbolic and practical significance. The study concludes that sustaining these

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stations demands urgent policy and programmatic interventions to strengthen financial viability, governance, and digital integration, ensuring their continued role as platforms for empowerment, participation, and social justice.

Keywords: *Community radio, Nepal, sustainability, governance, digital transition, civic participation*

Introduction / Background

Radio broadcasting in Nepal began in 1951 with the launch of Radio Nepal, the state-owned broadcaster (Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, 1983). For decades, it was the only voice on the airwaves—centralized, government-controlled, and distant from rural realities. It offered news and entertainment but left little room for local languages, community concerns, or grassroots participation.

Everything changed after the 1990 People's Movement. Democracy opened the airwaves, creating space for non-government broadcasters. This shift laid the foundation for community radio—a medium built to serve ordinary people rather than commercial or political interests (Dahal, 2020).

The breakthrough came in 1997 with the establishment of Radio Sagarmatha in Kathmandu, the first community radio station in Nepal and South Asia (Onta, 2009). For the first time, the public heard a station independent of state control, driven by public interest. Radio Sagarmatha proved that radio could amplify local voices, strengthen democracy, and highlight development issues. It quickly inspired communities nationwide.

By the early 2000s, community radios spread rapidly across rural and semi-urban Nepal. Local ownership, donor support, and grassroots passion fueled their growth. Unlike state or commercial broadcasters, these stations spoke in local languages and tackled everyday concerns—agriculture, health, education, disaster preparedness, and human rights (Mainali, 2007). For many villages,

they became a lifeline where literacy was low and newspapers or TV were scarce.

To support this wave, the Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (ACORAB) was formed in 2002. As a non-profit umbrella organization, ACORAB provided training, advocacy, and institutional backing. Community radios proved their true strength during the 2006 People's Movement (Jana Andolan II). At a time when mainstream media was restricted, they broadcast independent news and mobilized people at the grassroots. They emerged as trusted voices of democracy and played a vital role in the peace-building process, cementing their place as agents of social transformation.

Through the 2010s, community radios expanded their scope. They broadcast in over 70 languages and covered themes from good governance and human rights to climate change, disaster preparedness, and cultural preservation. They gave a platform to indigenous groups, Dalits, Madhesis, women, and marginalized voices, ensuring Nepal's diversity was reflected on the airwaves.

Today, Nepal has nearly 320 community radio stations. The radios remain non-profit, non-partisan, and community-owned, standing apart from commercial and state broadcasters. For rural Nepal, where literacy barriers and digital divides persist, community radios are still a reliable medium. More than just information providers, they have experience of serving as a platform for dialogue, conflict resolution, and empowerment.

Objectives of the study

- To assess the current status of community radios in Nepal, with a particular focus on their organizational, financial, and technological sustainability.
- To analyze the evolving role of community radios, comparing their present functions with their historical contributions to democratization, development, and social transformation.

- To identify the key challenges that influence the sustainability of community radios in Nepal within the changing media and communication landscape.
- To generate evidence-based recommendations for policies, institutional frameworks, and programmatic interventions that can strengthen the long-term sustainability of community radios in Nepal.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to critically explore the sustainability of community radios in Nepal. A desk study served as the primary method, involving an extensive review of secondary sources such as policy documents, published reports, scholarly articles, and organizational records related to community radios. This review provided historical and contextual insights into the evolution of community radio in Nepal.

To complement the desk study, primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with seven key informants. The interviewees included community radio station managers, practicing radio journalists, and a representative of the Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (ACORAB). These interviews offered first-hand perspectives on the current status of community radios, the challenges they face, and potential opportunities for sustainability.

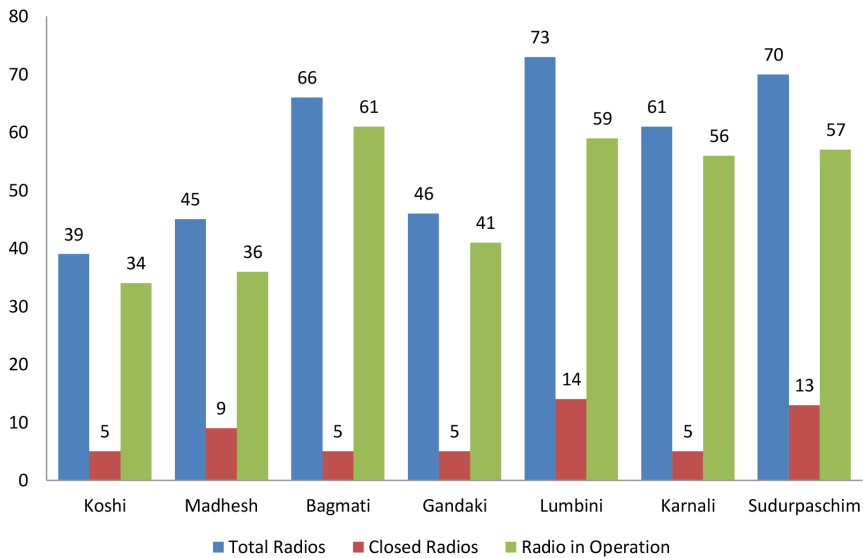
Key findings

A. Present state of community radios in Nepal, in relation to sustainability

Community radios in Nepal are facing a steady decline, with only a limited number of stations managing to revive operations in certain provinces. While these revivals show resilience within the sector, they remain exceptions rather than a broader trend. Persistent

financial, technical, and human resource challenges continue to limit stability.

Closure of Community Radios Reported in March 2023



Source: ACORAB, Nepal

Across Nepal, there were 400 community radios², of which 56 ceased operations and 344 remained active as of March, 2023, according to a publication entitled *Samudayeek Radioby* ACORAB.

In Koshi Province, 5 out of 39 community radios had shut down (खवास, 2023, p. 112). In Madhesh Province, 9 out of 45 radios were no longer operational, the highest closure rate among provinces at 20 percent (यादव, 2023, p. 113). The economic downturn triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with insufficient skilled manpower and weak program quality, contributed to reduce listener engagement. Additional stressors—including unhealthy

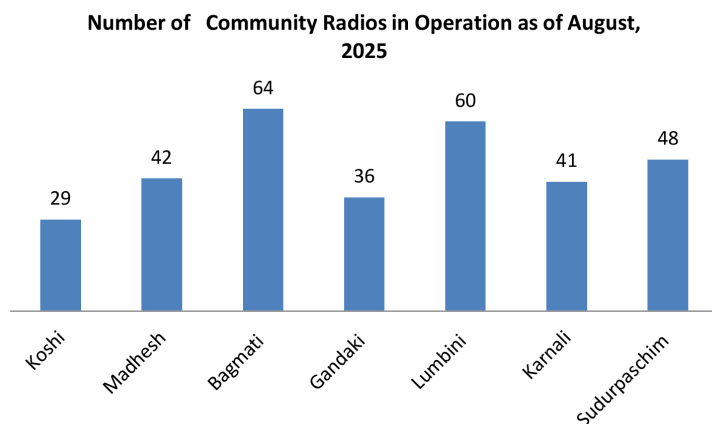
2 This data includes the total number of community radios, covering both ACORAB members and non-members.

competition in the advertising market, commission demands from local governments, and provincial plans to operate their own FM stations – further exacerbated the crisis.

In Bagmati Province, 5 out of 66 radios (7.58 percent) had gone off-air (श्रेष्ठ, 2023, p. 114), while in Gandaki Province, 5 out of 46 radios (10.87 percent) ceased operations. In Lumbini Province, 14 out of 73 radios (19.18 percent) discontinued broadcasting. Even the remaining stations faced financial constraints, declining program quality, and outmigration of trained radio professionals (खराल, 2023, p. 116).

In Karnali Province, 5 out of 61 radios (8.20 percent) had closed (थापा, 2023, p. 117). Across provinces, license renewal fees, royalty payments, and cumbersome regulatory processes posed significant challenges. In Sudurpaschim Province, 13 out of 70 radios (18.57 percent) had gone off-air, with weak financial management, limited skilled manpower, regulatory hurdles, advertising competition, and the growing influence of social media intensifying the operational crisis (खड्का, 2023, p. 117).

Numbers of Community Radio as of August, 2025



Source: ACORAB

According to ACORAB's latest data, 320 community radios are operational across Nepal as of August 2025. The distribution, however, is uneven: Bagmati hosts the highest number with 64 stations, followed by Lumbini (60) and Sudurpaschim (48). Madhesh (42), Karnali (41), and Gandaki (36) fall in the mid-range, while Koshi records the lowest presence with 29 stations.

Looking at broader trends, although the total number of community radios in Nepal has been declining every year, the number of stations in operation shows fluctuations. For instance, despite an overall declining trend in most provinces, Bagmati Province has experienced both revivals and closures, resulting in a slight increase in the number of community radio stations compared to 2023. ACORAB notes that "the revival and closure of radio stations are ongoing, and fluctuations in the number of operational stations are observed; however, the overall number continues to decrease."

According to ACORAB, the revival of certain stations is largely attributed to factors such as tax discounts and renewed efforts by community radio managers to restart operations. While these developments demonstrate the resilience and determination of community radio managers, ACORAB emphasizes that such revivals do not necessarily indicate true sustainability of the sector.

Actual closure rates likely higher than reported

Key informants suggest that the officially reported numbers of closed community radio stations in Nepal likely under-report the true extent of closures. Several respondents noted that some community radio stations exist on paper but are functionally inactive. One KII respondent explained, "I have visited remote districts where the so-called active stations barely broadcast even once a week. Some stations have their equipment locked in the studio, staffs have left, but no one declares the station closed officially. They hold on to the license and the name, sometimes waiting for donors, sometimes just to protect the prestige of the station within the community." Another

participant highlighted the social dimension of the issue: “In many communities, having a radio station is a matter of pride. Admitting it is closed is like admitting failure, so they avoid officially declaring closure even if nothing is broadcast.”

The hope for future revival also encourages community radios to maintain a façade of activity. Several informants observed that some stations retain their licenses with the intention of resuming operations if funding or technical support becomes available. As one key informant explained, “The community keep the licenses and occasionally turn on the transmitter, just enough to show activity. They are waiting for any opportunity to restart fully, which keeps them officially ‘alive’ but practically dormant.”

B. Community radios then and now: The changing impact of community radios

Community radios in Nepal have historically played a transformative role in promoting local voices, fostering civic engagement, and addressing social inequalities. Programs such as *HamroLumbini* enabled communities to actively participate in content creation, addressing issues like the expansion of the World Heritage Site, environmental concerns, local culture, religion, and the economy, while including perspectives from women, farmers, lower-caste individuals, and religious groups, such as Buddhist monks, Hindu priests, and Muslims (Martin & Wilmore, 2010). In peace-building, stations like Radio Swagatam in Dhanusha and Radio Jagaran in Rupandehi mediated communal and caste-based conflicts, transforming divisive tensions into constructive dialogue and practical compromises (Basnet, 2024). Community radios also preserved and promoted indigenous cultures and languages: For example, Radio Udayapur provided a platform for Danuwar, Tharu, Majhi, Musahar, Newar, and Magar communities to share traditions, stories, and rituals, while stations like Namo Buddha FM, Newa FM, Gurbaba FM, Chomolungma FM, and Ruvaru FM broadcast in

multiple local languages, supporting cultural heritage, oral language preservation, and regional music. Addressing social inequalities, programs raising voice of *Dalit* communities on Community Radio Khalanga empowered marginalized communities to discuss caste-based discrimination, while stations such as Community Radio Karnali FM promoted gender equality by highlighting equitable sharing of domestic responsibilities and challenging patriarchal norms. Women-led initiatives at Radio Mukti, Radio DidiBahini, and Radio Udayapur further enabled rural women to acquire skills and leadership experience, while public service programs, including distance learning by Radio Madanpokhara and emergency health campaigns by Radio Rapti, demonstrated the medium's capacity to deliver education, vital services, and community-driven interventions, establishing community radios as pillars of social cohesion, cultural preservation, and local empowerment.

In contrast, the current role of community radios has weakened considerably across most areas, with notable exceptions in Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and certain emergency broadcasts. Many stations now rely heavily on pre-recorded music or syndicated content from Kathmandu, with programming decisions concentrated in the hands of a few, resulting in minimal community engagement.

C. Challenges

Challenges: Financial sustainability of community radios

- a. **Radio as a non-liquid and unsellable asset:** Community radio stations in Nepal were established with community contributions, personal donations and in-kind support. Despite community's contribution, these stations are no longer perceived as marketable or transferable assets. Even management willing to give away their stations for free to operate, have struggled to find parties interested in taking over operations. One respondent expressed their frustration:

“There is no recognition of radio as a transferable asset. We cannot sell it, nor can we discard it.” Another added, “We thought someone from another community would take over, but no one wants the responsibility or the financial burden.”

- b. Loss of traditional advertisers:** Community radios once relied heavily on local advertisers, including schools, cooperatives, and small businesses. Respondents noted that now advertisers have migrated to digital platforms like Facebook, X, and TikTok, which promise broader reach and faster engagement. One station manager recounted: “Earlier, local businesses advertised even to sell goats or buffaloes. Now they post it on Facebook.”
- c. Declining advertisement rates:** Key informants highlighted that the rates for advertisements have fallen sharply. Whereas a 30-second slot could once fetch NPR 5,000, today it often earns less than half, and in some cases, advertisements are aired for free in the hope of fostering goodwill or future partnerships. A station manager explained: “The same airtime that fetched NRs. 5000 earlier now brings nothing—or less than half—and still gets negotiated down.”
- d. Unfair practices and exploitation:** Internal mismanagement has compounded the revenue crisis. There are few cases where marketing staff personally profited from advertiser transactions, using services like hotel stays or tailored clothing for them rather than channeling funds to the station. One key informant noted: “The person stayed in hotels for free and tailored clothes for himself instead of collecting payments for the radio.” This not only reduced income but also created mistrust within the team and the community.
- e. External support: Limited and unsustainable:** Some community radios have received short-term financial or technical support from development organizations, often tied to specific projects or campaigns. While initially beneficial, key informants

emphasized that such support is rarely sustained. One station manager of a community radio states: “There was support, but it was never long-lasting. Now even donors have moved on particularly following the USAID cut.” Informants also indicated that the lack of continuous external assistance leaves stations vulnerable to financial shocks, and reliance on unpredictable project-based funding hampers strategic planning.

- f. **Operational costs and debt burden:** High operational costs, including rent, electricity, equipment maintenance, and staff salaries, remain a major challenge. Informants shared that many stations struggle to cover basic expenses, with some closing while still in debt. The Chairperson of a radio station described the ongoing financial strain: “Even after closure, we owe a year’s rent and are avoiding calls from the landlord.” Another informant added: “I offered the radio’s furniture to a money lender, but they didn’t accept it. They just want cash, which we don’t have.”
- g. **Over-saturation and lack of regulatory safeguards:** Key informants criticized the uncontrolled distribution of community radio licenses, noting that it has saturated the market and diluted advertising opportunities. Stations now compete for limited local advertisers and audience attention. One respondent explained: “With fewer radios, we could have negotiated with local and provincial governments more effectively.”

Challenges: Community engagement and ownership

- a. **Loss of local ownership and community engagement:** One of the most pressing challenges undermining the sustainability of community radios in Nepal is the erosion of local ownership and community participation. Community radios were initially envisioned as platforms that empowered local voices, fostered dialogue, and promoted social cohesion. However, over time, active engagement from listeners, content contributors, and

advertisers has significantly declined, weakening the stations' connection with the communities they serve. As one key informant reflected:

"There's no connection with the listeners or local groups like there used to be. People don't contribute content, they don't participate in decision-making, and even advertisers prefer other platforms. That's why sustainability is gone"

This decline in participation has translated into reduced relevance, lower audience loyalty, and diminished financial support from local stakeholders, directly threatening the long-term viability of community radios.

- b. Issues related to inclusivity and cultural relevance:** Another critical issue is the lack of inclusivity in governance and programming. In many cases, management structures are dominated by local elites or politically affiliated actors, which undermines equitable decision-making and compromises the representation of diverse community voices. This has further limited cultural relevance and editorial independence. A station manager noted:

"The role of local government is basically partial. It favors particular stations and ignores others. Funding, advertisements, and project partnerships are given based on political alignment and personal relationships rather than merit. Independent stations like ours are left to struggle, and it affects both editorial freedom and our long-term survival."

This skewed governance reduces community trust and diminishes opportunities for local participation, directly impacting sustainability.

- c. Decline in content quality and local relevance:** Community radios once thrived on locally produced culturally relevant content that resonated with listeners of all ages. Phone-in

programs, live shows, and interactive segments were central to audience engagement. Today, however, many stations rely on relayed content from Kathmandu. Community radios were initially envisioned as platforms to empower local voices, foster dialogue, and promote social cohesion. Over time, however, active engagement from listeners, content contributors, and advertisers has steadily declined, weakening the stations' connection with the communities they serve. "Except for playing music, what we're doing is relaying programs from Kathmandu. This doesn't interest local people. That's why local ownership is lost, and sustainability is questioned," a key informant who is a radio journalist said.

This sentiment was echoed by another former station manager: *"I was a station manager in Nuwakot. I had a phone-in program, and people loved it. I was like a celebrity. But now, that program is gone. Even if we air it, people won't respond. Even if they do, no one listens to them."*

The generational disconnect has further compounded the problem. While older audiences remain loyal, younger listeners increasingly turn to digital media, leaving community radios struggling to retain relevance. As one informant explained: *"The friend of the elder generation was the radio. There were programs for them. Now, most community radios just play songs from morning to evening with some filler programs in the middle."*

- d. Audience fragmentation and competition with digital media:** Digital platforms, including YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, and online TV, have diverted both audiences and advertisers away from traditional community radios. Despite technical limitations or reliability issues, these platforms attract younger listeners, leaving radios struggling to maintain engagement. "We truly were not able to compete with online TV, YouTube and social media platforms. Although they were not reliable, they

attracted the audience more than we did,” a respondent said. Geographical disparities exacerbate the problem: urban stations generate some income and maintain modest audience bases, whereas rural and remote stations face severe challenges.

Challenges: Organizational and institutional sustainability

a. Lack of policies and weak implementation

Community radios in Nepal face critical challenges related to operational management and human resource capacity. Many stations lack essential organizational policies such as Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI), safeguarding, and workplace harassment policies. Even where policies like human resources or procurement exist, they are often poorly implemented. Further, governance systems in many community radios have weakened over time. Boards meet irregularly, and transparency is minimal. Misuse of funds and internal mismanagement undermine trust and credibility.

b. Human resource and volunteer sustainability

Outmigration and skill drain: Many trained staff have migrated abroad or moved to national media in search of better salaries and professional growth, leaving stations with reduced capacity. “Many who worked in radio once have migrated abroad. I feel radio gave them exposure and confidence to explore alternatives for income. Once they saw the possibilities, they left,” according to key informants.

Reliance on volunteers and staff shortages: Most stations now operate with minimal staff—often 2 to 4 members—or are run solely by station managers, occasionally assisted by student volunteers. Radio journalists from Kathmandu said, “Earlier we used to have 5 to 20 staff, even in district radios. But now many community radios rely on just 2 to 4 staff members. Some radios are solely run by station managers. If lucky, a few school

students help as volunteers. We can't afford to bring in trained professionals."

Decline in content quality and editorial standards: Due to staff shortages and lack of training, content creation has deteriorated. Gatekeeping and editorial rigor have declined, resulting in raw, unverified information being broadcast. "Earlier, we had strong gatekeeping and editorial standards. These days, raw information just gets aired—no filtering, no editing, no professionalism," according to key informants.

Challenges: Technical and digital adaptation

- a. **Technical infrastructure and maintenance:** Community radios in Nepal face significant challenges in maintaining reliable technical infrastructure, which directly impacts their sustainability. Rural radios are struggling to find qualified technicians. Even when technicians are available, the stations often cannot afford competitive payments, resulting in prolonged technical breakdowns. A manager from a rural station explained:

"We suffer because we don't have access to technical people. They prefer to live in urban areas. When something breaks down, it takes time and money to bring them in—and we can't pay them well."

The disparity between urban and rural radios is pronounced. While stations in Kathmandu and other urban centers are relatively better equipped and financially stable, remote stations frequently operate with under-resourced infrastructure. As a key informant highlighted:

"Yes, radios in Kathmandu and other urban areas are somehow managing. But those in remote areas are truly suffering."

b. Digital integration and audience shift

The slow adoption of digital platforms further undermines community radios' sustainability. Limited capacity to leverage online streaming, social media, and other digital tools has constrained audience expansion and the ability to attract advertisers. Key informants unanimously emphasized the overwhelming influence of digital media platforms—such as YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, and online TV—on both listenership and revenue. Younger audiences have migrated to these platforms for their interactive and on-demand features, reducing engagement with traditional radio broadcasts. One station manager noted:

"We couldn't compete with YouTube and social media. Even if they were unreliable, people went to them."

D. Recommendations for sustainability of community radios in Nepal

Ensuring the sustainability of community radios in Nepal requires a comprehensive approach that addresses financial, organizational, and community-related challenges. Stations can diversify revenue streams through local advertising, community contributions, sponsorships, and small-scale project funding, reducing reliance on any single source of income, while transparent accounting and robust financial oversight help prevent misuse and rebuild trust with listeners and advertisers. Some stations may consider relocating to underserved towns or municipalities to access new audiences and resources, and collaborative arrangements, such as mergers or content-sharing, can lower operational costs and optimize limited resources. At the same time, actively involving local communities in program planning, content creation, and station governance ensures relevance and responsiveness. Reflecting linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic diversity in programming allows all voices

to be heard, while reintroducing interactive formats such as phone-ins, live shows, and listener-driven segments strengthens audience loyalty and fosters a sense of ownership. Training managers, technical staff, and volunteers is crucial to maintain content quality, editorial standards, and operational efficiency, and retaining volunteers through recognition, skill-development opportunities, or small incentives ensures continuity. Transparent, community-inclusive governance structures further safeguard editorial independence and institutional credibility, reinforcing trust among both listeners and stakeholders.

Investments in technical infrastructure and digital adaptation are equally vital for long-term sustainability. Reliable equipment, regular maintenance, and partnerships with local technicians ensure uninterrupted broadcasting, particularly in rural areas, while expanding digital presence through social media, online streaming, and podcasts helps stations reach younger audiences and attract advertisers. Sharing high-quality content across stations with similar languages, regions, or themes reduces production costs and enhances programming quality. Strategic planning and a long-term vision enable stations to align programming with local needs, cultural contexts, and socio-economic realities, while continuous monitoring of audience feedback allows content to adapt to community expectations and strengthen social bonds. Advocacy with government and development partners is necessary to secure regulatory clarity, technical support, and sustainable financial backing, and upholding credibility through accurate, inclusive, and culturally sensitive broadcasting ensures that community radios continue to serve as platforms for social engagement, education, and empowerment, maintaining their historic role as vital instruments of local participation, cultural preservation, and community development.

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Annex- I

List of Key Informants

SN	Name of Respondents	Affiliation
1	SharmilaUpreti	Radio Trishuli, Nuwakot
2	UjjwalPrasad Baral	Radio Sahara, Sindhuli
3	DipakThokra	Radio Rasuwa, Rasuwa
4	ArjunGiri	ACORAB
5	Tula Adhikari	ACORAB
6	SiromaniDhungana	ACORAB
7	Gita Chimoriya	Freelance Radio Journal- ist, Kathmandu