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In this picture Champa Devi Tuladhar knits during an interview with AFP in Kathmandu. — AFP photos



In this picture Dil Hera Tuladhar stitches a handmade shawl during an interview with AFP in Kathmandu.



In this picture jeweler Ratna Kaji Tamrakar makes silver jewelry in his workshop during an interview with AFP in Kathmandu.



Dil Hera Tuladhar stitches a handmade shawl during an interview with AFP in Kathmandu.

HANDMADE WITH LOVE: NEPALI TAKES GRANDMA'S SOCKS TO THE WORLD

Every winter, Lorina Sthapit and her cousins would warm their feet in woolen socks freshly knitted by their grandmother. As the brightly coloured pairs stacked up in her cupboard, the 32-year-old felt inspired to share the creations with the world-co-founding a crafts venture that not only sells such handmade products but also delves into the seldom-told lives of their mostly elderly female makers. "Each product has a story and historical and cultural value. We want to keep their legacy and skills alive for the future," Sthapit told AFP. "They grew up at a time when most things were handmade, not store-bought. So there is an amazing wealth of skills and experiences among people of that generation." Aji's—which means grandmother—was founded in 2018 by Sthapit, her sister Irina and husband Pursarth Tuladhar, selling a variety of products including knitwear, blankets and jewelry.

Through podcasts and blogs, Sthapit and the makers' grandchildren take listeners and readers on a nostalgic journey through the lives of the elderly artisans. The tales—from being married at just eight-years-old, battling to be given an education and raising five children as a single mother in the patriarchal society—shed light on Nepal's rich social and cultural history, but also its strict gendered social order.

Sharing stories

Born in Kathmandu in 1988, Sthapit found herself drawn to the Indian classical dance of Kathak—derived from the Sanskrit word kathaka, or storyteller. From just 18-years-old, she started to perform in national and international dance events. The gender studies graduate then taught a course in women's empowerment at Nepal's first women's college Padma Kanya Multiple Campus. A decade-long career in international development followed, including working for Oxfam and the United Nations' International Fund for Agricultural Development

(IFAD). She worked around the world from Uganda to Uzbekistan, but felt she wanted to make a difference in her home country. Undaunted by the male-dominated start-up world, Sthapit quit her NGO job to work full-time on Aji's.

She slowly cultivated loyal customers who shared their love for the products with others, eventually drawing the attention of the wider public and international clients. Aji's now has 30 elderly women and men working with them, using traditional Nepali techniques and materials. The crafts are sold at two stores in the Kathmandu valley and on the online marketplace Etsy. The company works closely with makers' children or grandchildren, in an effort to help the families develop closer bonds. Sthapit herself learnt that her grandmother was "more confident and bold than I thought". "It was as if this side of her was hidden and she has now found recognition and uncovered her bolder confident self," she said.

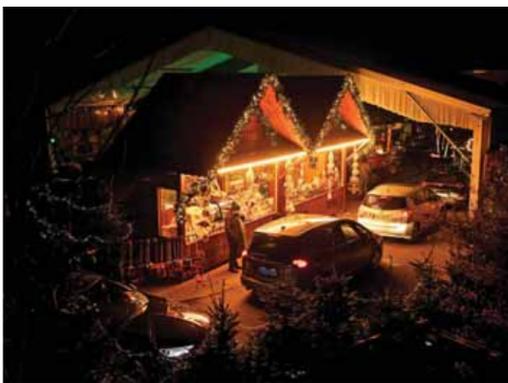
Empowering the elderly

Sthapit found the social enterprise had another benefit—it gave the artisans a sense of purpose. When she first told her grandmother, Champa Devi Tuladhar, that her socks were being snapped up, the 77-year-old's eyes lit up. "My grandmother really enjoys being busy and even forgets her joint pains when knitting," Sthapit said. Parents traditionally live with their children in Nepal with the elderly discouraged from working and earning.

But ageing populations have forced a global shift in attitudes to those aged 65 and older—in fashion catwalks have seen greater age diversity and models such as Jan de Villeneuve, and Elon Musk's mother Maye Musk, have made names for themselves as fashion stars in their 60s and 70s. Businesses pay greater attention to so-called "grey dollar" and older consumers, while studies have shown keeping active boosts older people's physical and mental well-being. Sthapit was emboldened by her

grandmother's joy about how popular her socks had become. "The excitement it brought in her life made me think of other grandparents who might enjoy creating things too," she said. Tuladhar herself has become an evangelist for staying active.

"Old people say that you shouldn't work but I really enjoy working... and also tell others to get involved," Tuladhar told AFP. Another craftswoman, Dil Hera Tuladhar, has sewn traditional blankets and shawls for years. But for the first time, she's started earning from them. "I had never made money in my life. It made me so happy and proud," the 85-year-old said. For Sthapit, the venture has grown much bigger than she envisaged. "We want to be able to help elders live a healthy, happy life, whether by promoting their creations... or sharing their stories. "It just gives them a lot of joy... That's what drives us." — AFP



People visit with their cars at a drive-in Christmas market in Landshut, southern Germany.



People visit with their cars at a drive in Christmas market in Landshut.—AFP Photos



Christmas sweets are offered in a sales booth at the drive in Christmas market in Landshut.



People visit with their cars at a drive in Christmas market in Landshut.—AFP Photos

Drive-ins, scattered huts: German Xmas markets find ways around virus

Chestnuts roasting, mulled wine steaming and music blaring from wooden chalets lined with artificial snow—the Landshut Christmas market in southern Germany has all the usual trimmings. But this year, visitors must enjoy the sights and smells of the traditional Christmas market from inside their cars due to precautions to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Every night after dark, several dozen vehicles roll into the Christmas market drive-in, their occupants cozy and socially distanced inside. Once through the gates, they must wait for an employee wearing a mask and a Christmas hat to knock on their window and offer them a menu of savory treats to choose from, such as crepes, sausages and roasted chestnuts. Orders placed, they can then drive on to the next hut offering sweets such as candy floss or gingerbread hearts.

"We take our inspiration from fast-food chains," smiles Patrick Schmidt, 31, market organizer and owner of the Zollhaus Landshut restaurant. "We wanted to recreate a bit of the Christmas atmosphere, even if it's more complicated this year." The market is a way of helping his business get through "a difficult time", he said.

Billions at stake

As Germany battles a second wave of coronavirus infections, leisure and sporting facilities have been ordered to close while restaurants and bars can only offer take-aways. The restrictions also include limits on social gatherings and have been a huge blow to Germany's 3,000 or so annual Christmas markets. The markets have been an annual fixture in Germany since the 15th century, when craftsmen and bakers were given special permission to ply their wares in town squares in the run-up to Christmas.

But many German cities have cancelled their Christmas markets entirely this year, despite the huge financial losses—the markets draw about 160 million visitors annually and bring in revenues of three to five billion euros (\$3.6 billion and \$5.9 billion), according to the BSM stallkeepers' industry association. To keep the spirit—and the economic benefits—of Christmas alive, cities across the country have come up with creative initiatives.

500 cars

In Berlin's Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf district, small clusters of huts have been spread across several streets, though food and drink cannot be consumed on site. The world-famous Nuremberg Christmas

market has been cancelled this year but managed to hold an online version of its traditional opening ceremony. And in north-western Germany, the town of Kalkar is also offering a drive-in Christmas market. The market in Landshut has been open since mid-November and is proving popular with locals, according to Schmidt. "Last Saturday we had 500 cars," he said.

And they're not just here for the mulled wine, served in thermos flasks to keep it warm—many are coming with the whole family in tow. "I'm here to support the restaurants, because I miss them," said Markus Renneke, 55, visiting the market with his wife. "And I think it's a great idea." Sandra, joined by her teenage daughter Laura, is here to enjoy that special Christmas market "atmosphere". "You have to put a bit of time aside and there are no stands selling anything but food, but that's OK," she said as a waitress arrived with two grilled sausages. Her daughter, "starving", cannot resist starting to tuck into her sausage before the final stop: the checkout. Once they've settled up, customers are free to return home basking in the glow of mulled wine—apart from the designated drivers, of course.—AFP

MYSTERIOUS MONOLITH IN US DESERT REPORTEDLY DISAPPEARS

A mysterious metal monolith found in the remote desert of the western United States, sparking a national guessing game over how it got there, has apparently disappeared, officials said. The Bureau of Land Management in Utah said Saturday it had received "credible reports" that the object had been removed "by an unknown party" on Friday evening. The bureau "did not remove the structure which is considered private property," it said in a statement. "We do not investigate crimes involving private property which are handled by the local sheriff's office."

The shiny, triangular pillar which protruded some 12 feet from the red rocks of southern Utah, was spotted on November 18 by baffled local officials counting bighorn sheep from the air. After landing their helicopter to investigate, Utah Department of Public Safety crew members found "a metal monolith installed in the ground" but "no obvious indication of who might have put the monolith there."

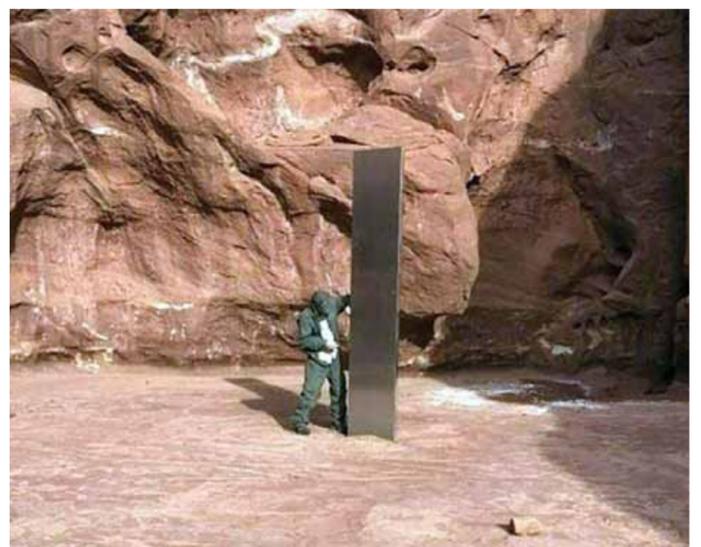
2020 'reset button'

News of the discovery quickly went viral, with many noting the object's similarity with strange alien monoliths that trigger huge leaps in human progress in Stanley Kubrick's classic sci-fi film "2001: A Space Odyssey." Others remarked on its discovery during a turbulent year that has seen the world gripped by the Covid-19 pandemic, and optimistically speculated it could have a different function entirely. "This is the

'reset' button for 2020. Can someone please press it quickly?" joked one Instagram user.

"Somebody took the time to use some type of concrete-cutting tool or something to really dig down, almost in the exact shape of the object, and embed it really well," Nick Street, a spokesman for the Department of Public Safety told the New York Times. "It's odd," he added. "There are roads close by, but to haul the materials to cut into the rock, and haul the metal, which is taller than 12 feet in sections—to do all that in that remote spot is definitely interesting." Some observers pointed out the object's resemblance to the avant-garde work of John McCracken, a US artist who lived for a time in nearby New Mexico, and died in 2011.

His son, Patrick McCracken, told the Times recently that his father had told him in 2002 that he would "like to leave his artwork in remote places to be discovered later." Although officials had refused to disclose the object's location out of fear that hordes of curious sight-seers would flock to the remote wilderness, some explorers had been able to track it down. Instagram user David Surber said he trekked to the monolith using coordinates posted on Reddit. "Apparently the monolith is gone," he posted later. "Nature returned back to her natural state I suppose. Something positive for people to rally behind in 2020." — AFP



This video grab image shows a mysterious metal monolith that was discovered in Utah after public safety officers spotted the object while conducting a routine wildlife mission. — AFP