



NEPAL PRIDE. A participant poses as hundreds of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transvestites parade through the streets during Gaijatra in Kathmandu, Nepal. The Hindu festival to remember the dead is gleefully overtaken each year by the country's gay community in Nepal, a socially conservative Hindu-majority nation. (AP Photo/Bikram Rai)

Nepal gay community parades for same-sex marriage

By Binaj Gurubacharya
The Associated Press

KATHMANDU, Nepal — Tooting horns and ringing chimes, hundreds of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transvestites paraded through Nepal's capital for the colorful celebration of *Gaijatra*, a Hindu festival to remember the dead that is gleefully overtaken each year by the country's gay community.

In this socially conservative Hindu-majority nation, the festival was traditionally the only day people felt free to cross-dress. But social norms are changing fast as the fledgling Himalayan democracy emerges from centuries of religious monarchy.

A government committee is recommending same-sex marriage be guaranteed in a new constitution — an unprecedented move that would give gay and lesbian couples the right to adopt, buy joint property, open joint bank accounts, and inherit from one another. All of the country's political parties have already backed the idea, and many within the small gay community hope the new constitution can be passed this year.

"When we gather again next year, we hope we are able to celebrate the new law,"

said 28-year-old Bipin Lamichane, who wants to marry the partner he has lived with for five years. But changing laws may be easier than changing minds in a country where arranged marriage is still the norm, and up to a decade ago homosexuals were routinely jailed for up to three months on accusations of "unnatural sex."

"Sometimes even if we get laws in writing, there is a big problem of implementation," Lamichane said. "There is still more that needs done."

Bhakti Shah, who was fired from the army in 2007 when officers suspected her relationship with another enlisted woman, is still hiding their partnership from landlords and neighbors.

"People still think we are two friends or sisters sharing an apartment," Shah said. "How can we tell everyone we are a couple when we don't have anything in paper to back it?"

New legal rights and status would give Shah and others the documentation they need to prove a union. Hindu priest Laxman Acharya said he expected most Nepalese to accept the change, given their cultural diversity and youth; the median age in Nepal is 21, and some 35 percent of

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Indian leader warms ties during Nepal visit

By Binaj Gurubacharya
The Associated Press

KATHMANDU, Nepal — Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi wooed his country's tiny Himalayan neighbor, Nepal, during a two-day visit aimed at boosting ties with a country that India has long ignored and where China already has a strong presence.

In the first visit by an Indian prime minister in 17 years, Modi addressed parliament, speaking briefly in the Nepali language, and stopped to meet delighted crowds. He offered \$1 billion in low-interest development loans and visited a revered Hindu shrine.

While China has built power plants, highways, an airport, and telecommunication facilities, and given airplanes to Nepal, India has made promises in the past but has not always delivered.

Analysts said the visit hit many of the right notes.

"This was the most successful trip by any Indian leader to Nepal," said Dhurba Hari Adhikary, an independent analyst.

"There has been a big gap of 17 years, so people here in Nepal felt they were not being considered a good friend for quite a while," Adhikary said. "This gap has been breached."

Thousands of people lined the road to cheer as Modi's motorcade passed. At one point, he stopped his armored car to get out and shake hands with the onlookers. The footage, recorded by people on their cellphones, was quickly posted on social media sites.

Modi met with the prime minister, the president, and other leaders, and visited Pashupatinath, a temple for the Hindu God Shiva.

Modi, a devout Hindu, offered prayers and presented the temple with 5,500 pounds of sandalwood worth 30 million rupees (\$306,000) to be used for rituals.

In his speech at the Constituent Assembly, he promised to aid Nepal's economy and offered \$1 billion in loans for development, including hydropower plants in the energy-starved Himalayan nation.



INDIAN OUTREACH. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi waves to the crowd after offering prayers at the Pashupatinath Hindu Temple in Kathmandu, Nepal. Modi arrived in Nepal to meet with top leaders, offer prayers at the revered Hindu temple, and address parliament. (AP Photo/Kiran Panday)

Millions of people in Nepal face up to 12 hours of power outages each day because of an inadequate number of power plants.

"After hearing his speech in parliament I have become Modi's fan. I am convinced he will regard us in Nepal as equal partners and not treat us like someone inferior as past Indian leaders did," said Shyam Karki, a garment trader who often visits India.

There was some disappointment, however, that a proposed electricity trading agreement between India and Nepal did not materialize.

No reason was given for the delay, but officials said there was still work to be done on the details.

"It was disappointing that India did not even want to discuss the power trading agreement draft that Nepal had sent during Modi's visit," said Ameet Dhakal, editor of the popular online news portal Setopati.

U.S. immigration activist's movie premieres in Manila

By Teresa Cerrojano
The Associated Press

MANILA, The Philippines — An autobiographical documentary by one of America's best known immigrants living in the U.S. illegally opened an independent film festival in his home country of the Philippines to applause, laughter, and tears.

Pulitzer-Prize-winning journalist and immigration activist Jose Antonio Vargas' mother received a certificate of recognition on his behalf at the 10th Cinemalaya film festival in Manila.

"It's my third time to watch it, but I still can't stop myself from crying," said Emelie Salinas, Vargas' 56-year-old mother, who attended with her two other children and other relatives.

Documented was written, directed, and produced by Vargas, who has worked for *The Huffington Post*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and the *Philadelphia Daily News*, and was part of a *Washington Post* team that won a Pulitzer in 2008 for its report on the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings.

The 90-minute film tells of Vargas' 1993 journey to America as a 12-year-old unaccompanied immigrant to join his grandparents, and his painful 21-year separation from his mother.

In 2011, after wrestling with fear, he decided to come out with his secret and to campaign for a citizenship path for more than 11 million other "undocumented"



immigrants, 1.3 million of whom are Asians. Hundreds of thousands of them were brought to America as children, and, like Vargas, are trapped in their illegal status.

Vargas, 33, founded the campaign "Define American," speaking all over the United States on the plight of immigrants who entered the country illegally, and testifying at a U.S. congressional hearing last year on immigration reform.

Last month, he was detained by Border Patrol agents at McAllen airport in Texas, but was released several hours

PHILIPPINE PREMIERE. Emelie Salinas, the mother of Pulitzer-Prize-winning journalist and immigration activist Jose Antonio Vargas, poses for a picture at the Cultural Center of the Philippines, holding a certificate of recognition of her son's autobiographical movie, *Documented*, which recently premiered in Manila, the Philippines. The documentary film by one of America's best known immigrants living in the U.S. illegally opened an independent film festival in his home country of the Philippines to applause, laughter, and tears. (AP Photo/Teresa Cerrojano)

later because he was not considered a security threat. The incident was widely reported by media and Vargas' supporters rallied for his release.

"Here in America, where people like me are called illegal, this film is an act of civil disobedience," Vargas said in a taped message played before the Manila premier of his film at the Cultural Center of the Philippines.

He said that because he did not have the proper documents, he could not join the audience in Manila, which included his family, which he has not seen for 21 years. But the premier of his movie at the festival, he added, "proves the power of film" because "movies travel in all languages, bridging cultures ... and people."

Filipino netizens have been tweeting kudos to Vargas, with one describing the film as "enlightening, entertaining, heartbreaking."

Vargas' sister Czarina said she was happy about the audience's positive reaction to the film.

"It is overwhelming that they liked the movie," said Czarina, a 23-year-old nurse. "It is such an uncomfortable issue, but I am so thankful that they appreciated it and I did not see any negative reactions from the people."

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