

How vaccine myths are spreading in India

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The video begins with a hit song from Bobby in which Rishi Kapoor and Dimple Kapadia croon 'Pehle tum, pehle tum'. Cut to a shot of a grim-looking man named Biswaroop Roy Chowdhury who says the lyrics describe the attitude of doctors when it comes to the Covid vaccine in India. He goes on to list alleged adverse reactions of vaccines. "If anyone influences you to take the vaccine, he is part of a group that wants to end your life and property. Save yourself and your loved ones," he declares.

This is one of the most widely circulated videos in anti-vaccine groups (or anti-vaxxers as they are known) on Facebook and messaging app Telegram. Over the last few months, Chowdhury, who says he has a PhD in diabetes from a university in Zambia, has put out several videos claiming that the Covid-19 vaccines are a strategy for population control and dubbing it just a flu. After his YouTube and social media channels were banned, he now shares these videos on his personal website and Telegram groups with thousands of followers.

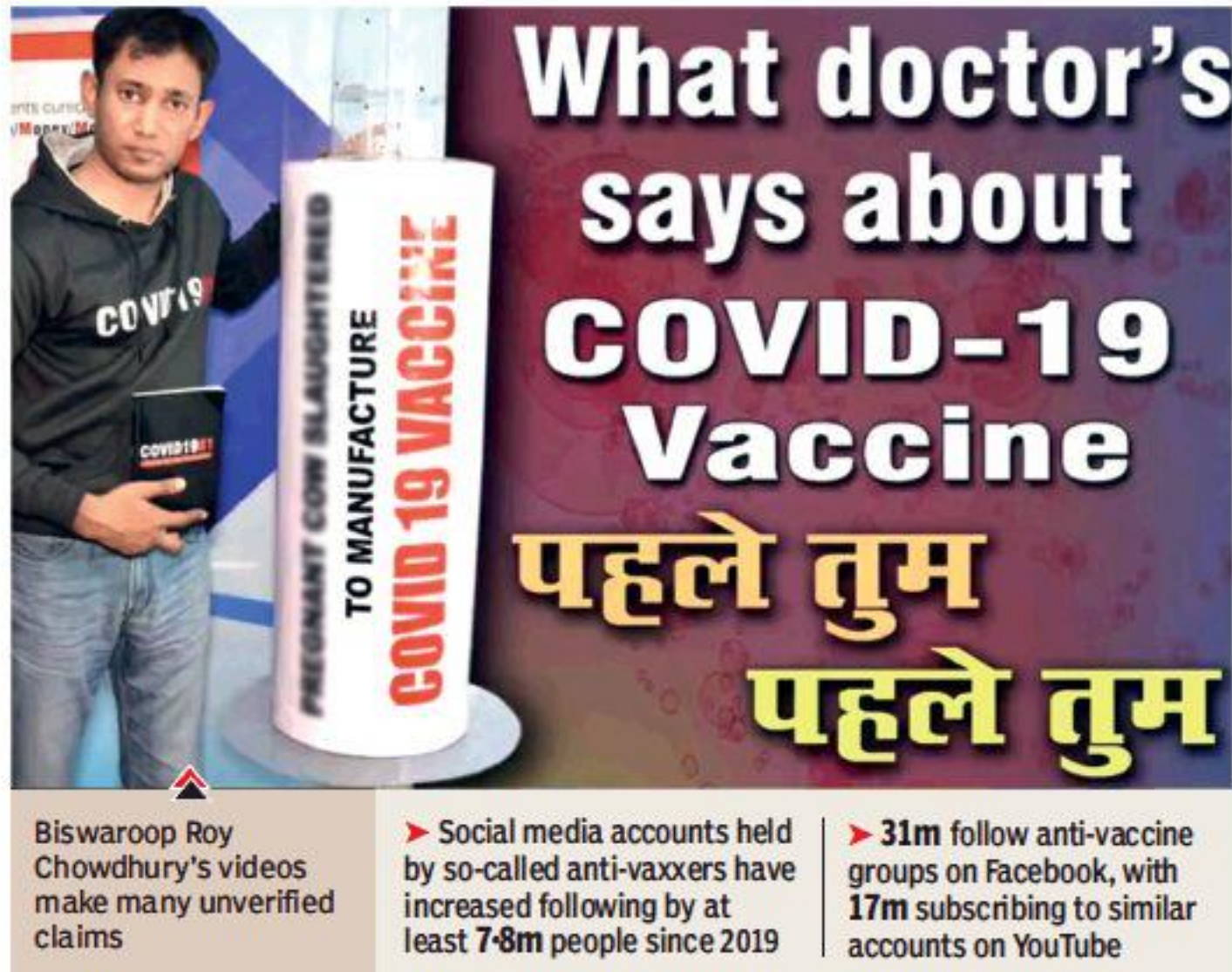
Syed Nazakat, founder of fact-checking platforms DataLeads and Health Analytics Asia, which is working with doctors in 18

There are groups in India who discredit vaccines, mostly due to religious beliefs or their interest in alternative medicine

— SYED NAZAKAT
FOUNDER OF HEALTH ANALYTICS ASIA

Asian countries to fact-check health and COVID-19 related content, says they have noticed conspiracy theories related to vaccinations in full swing. "Unlike Europe and the US where the anti-vaccine lobby is big, powerful and organised, there are splinter interest groups in India who discredit vaccines, mostly due to religious beliefs or their interest in alternative medicine. A lot of homeopaths and naturopaths are behind this anti-vaccine rhetoric."

While India's anti-vaccine movement is small, social media has connected many skeptics. Their posts are often amplified by Facebook, Telegram and WhatsApp groups.



Aware of the problem, social networks like Facebook and YouTube say they are removing debunked claims about vaccines.

When TOI spoke to Chowdhury, he described Covid as a "scam" and a "Wall Street pandemic". "Vaccines are not needed for anyone but only for financial gains at the cost of making people sick." He added that his seven-year-old daughter hasn't been vaccinated except for a BCG vaccine given by the hospital without his permission.

Nazakat says much of the misleading content about vaccines goes unnoticed because it is in local languages. "The main target of the anti-vaccine community is the MMR vaccine, which protects against measles, mumps and rubella. Last year, parents of more than 240,000 children in a southern state refused to get their children MMR vaccine after a fake message circulated on WhatsApp and Facebook claimed that the vaccine can harm children," he says. "The immunisation drive was stalled for nearly two months."

Many can't distinguish between real information and false claims. Pune-based nutritionist Mugdha Pradhan is convinced that vaccines contain toxins. "My daughter was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, which worsened after she received the H1N1 vaccine in

2014." What about the new Covid vaccine? "Nobody in my family is getting it. It is not tried and tested enough and we don't want to be guinea pigs," says the 42-year-old.

Like Pradhan, Mumbai-based sales and marketing professional Nisha Koiri, 47, says no one in her family will take the Covid vaccine because "it is so dangerous". Koiri began questioning vaccines after being diagnosed with breast cancer in 2016. Instead of a mastectomy and chemotherapy, she opted for naturopathy and dietary changes such as turning vegan. She says she's now healthy and her cancer has stopped growing. In 2018, when her daughter's school asked her to take a MMR vaccine, Koiri refused, along with parents of seven other children in her class. She says her sister-in-law too refused her daughter's booster MMR dose. "Vaccines are artificial — they are not medicines but drugs," she believes.

This lack of trust is what India had to overcome to finally eradicate polio in 2014. Many in the Muslim community thought the vaccine was a plot to make them infertile. But with the help of clerics and community leaders who appeared on local TV channels to make appeals, people were persuaded to drop their resistance. But in this internet age, there's no inoculation against misinformation.

Not everyone is cheering the Covid vaccine rollout. A small but growing bunch of Indian anti-vaxxers is circulating misinformation on social media

HOAXES BUSTED



Raghavan Varadarajan, prof at the Molecular Biophysics Unit, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore helps clear some misgivings

MYTH: Vaccines contain harmful heavy metals such as mercury and aluminium
RV: Some vaccines have aluminium salts as adjuvants (additives that boost the immune response) but not the metal. Some mostly older vaccines had very small amounts of a compound with anti-microbial properties called thimerosal that contains mercury. Both have been used in many vaccines and there is no evidence of harm. Covid vaccines don't contain thimerosal.

MYTH: Vaccines contain pig and monkey tissues, or human fetal tissues
RV: They don't contain any pig and monkey tissue or human fetal tissue.

MYTH: Vaccines can compromise health of children, eg MMR vaccines are linked to autism
RV: Vaccines are very low-cost, life-savers for children. The benefit to risk ratio for them is extremely high. Many studies have shown that there is no link between MMR vaccines and autism.

MYTH: Like flu, Covid virus would have already mutated by the time vaccines roll out
RV: Mutation rate in influenza is much higher than in SARS CoV-2 virus. There is a specific mutation that has occurred in the surface protein of the virus so far, but there is no evidence it will lower the efficacy of any vaccine being tested.

MYTH: Covid vaccines are not safe because they were developed so fast
RV: The trials happened quickly but there is no evidence that safety was compromised. There may be rare side effects in a small fraction that may not be captured in a Phase 3 trial, this will only be evident once the vaccine has been licensed and widely deployed. This shouldn't be seen as a barrier to vaccination as the benefits to society as a whole far outweigh the risks.

MYTH: The mRNA vaccine has the ability to interfere with human DNA once injected
RV: This is the first time mRNA vaccines are being tested on humans but in clinical trials there haven't been any danger signals. The mRNA being put in the body is making the same proteins that are made in a viral infection. Vaccination is much safer than the infection itself.

Shway shwaying my way to the Bollywood wives' club, or not

Maximising my stay in Chandigarh's winter with saag, home-churned butter, juicy radish and some ridiculous Punjabi songs, I told my over-enthusiastic mother who wanted to know if I wanted another makkli ki roti to 'shway shway'. "Are you telling me to shoo away?" she asked, looking offended. But what do you do when you are slightly, actually obsessively, hungover with the latest series of Bollywood wives? I was oscillating between two worlds. One, that I watched on Netflix and the other that I was living in my home in the capital of Punjab where endless songs were being played of Punjabi girls wanting something or the other from the boys. From jutti and earrings to kurtis and lehengas, there is nothing that these proud owners of beamer cars can't afford to buy for their damsels. Of course, the songs are sung and composed by boys who assume that almost all girls are gold diggers or perhaps they like having girls pleading with them for gifts.

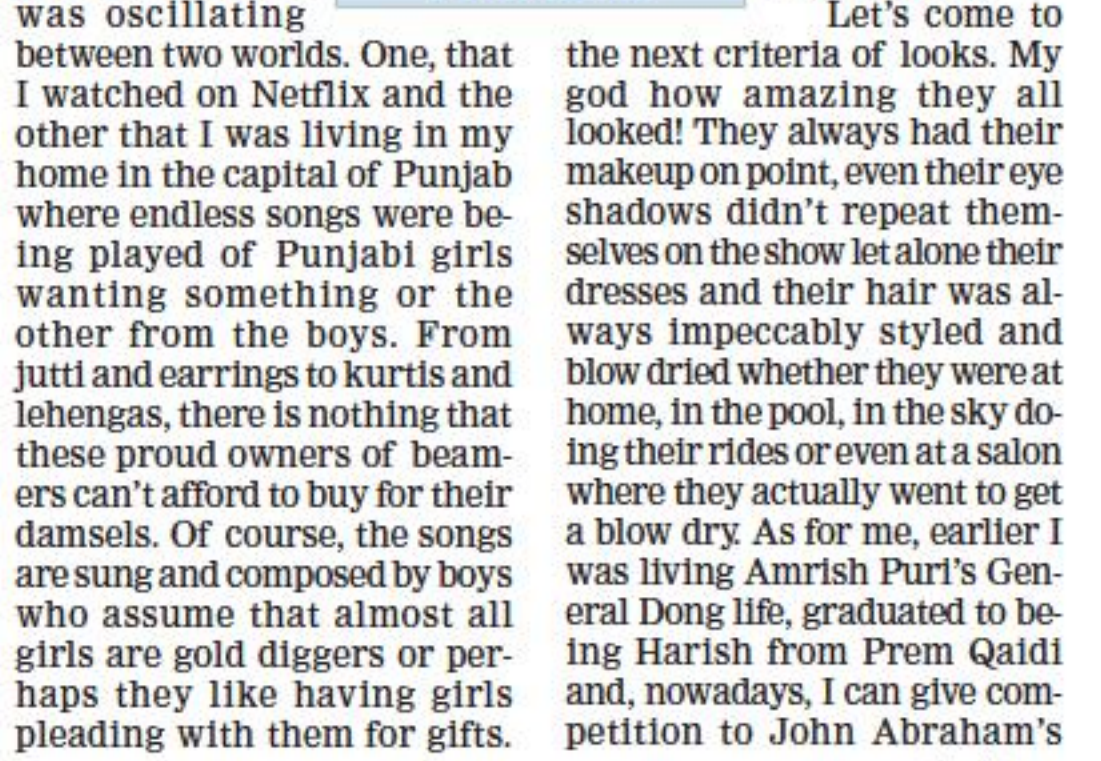


UNFILTERED
TAHIRA KASHYAP
KHURANA

I know people who forget to pay bills, or carry their bags but forgetting their babies? Who does that? Sadly and embarrassingly I did and, worst of all, I hadn't forgotten my handbag.

Let's come to the next criteria of looks. My god how amazing they all looked! They always had their makeup on point, even their eye shadows didn't repeat themselves on the show let alone their dresses and their hair was always impeccably styled and blow dried whether they were at home, in the pool, in the sky doing their rides or even at a salon where they actually went to get a blow dry. As for me, earlier I was living Amrith Puri's General Dong life, graduated to being Harish from Prem Qaidi and, nowadays, I can give competition to John Abraham's

Chad Crowe



Trying to control my rage over these despicable lyrics while having lunch with my folks, the only word that comes from my mouth is "twats". My parents really thought I had lost the plot. They didn't even bother asking me where I suddenly acquired this vocabulary. I mean they had experienced this before with a younger me. I was 12 and my cousins from the States came visiting. After two days of hanging out with them, water turned into wa-errr, park (with a silent r) went to pa-rrrrk (with a super enunciated r) and kaddu went to... what is kaddu? I only know about pumpkin and Halloween. A week after they were gone, I was back to "Mummy, roti nai banayti?"

So you can well imagine my major FOMO attacks about the fabulous Bollywood wives. After much pondering on whether I will ever be able to be a part of this club, I tried to figure this out in an organised step-by-step manner. First step, of course, is the accents and as much as I want to root for women, I still couldn't place these anywhere on the globe. The best part is that they acknowledge it and are unapologetic about it, which has me rooting for them again. Though I start feeling out of league already, I focus on the next eligibility criterion which is planning. Their travel plan to Doha was made in a salon with one of them already in Paris, and after the hard work of discussing their trip, they had a girls' night out that very evening. This was too much planning which again isn't one of my core strengths. The proof of which was when I dropped my two kids to school at 7.30am after having fed them breakfast and dressing them immaculately in their crisp school uniform on a public holiday. And if that's not enough, I have done the most atrocious thing ever. I was a new mom, and took my

Their clothes and makeup was always on point, and their hair was blow dried even at a salon where they actually went to get a blow dry. As for me, earlier I was Amrith Puri's General Dong life, graduated to Harish from Prem Qaidi and, nowadays, I can give competition to John Abraham's dhoom machale look

dhoom machale look. So clearly I lost out in this department too. Feeling a wee bit despondent, my hopeless reverie was broken by another obnoxious Punjabi song where the singer blames the girl wearing palazzos for deliberately attracting attention by looking beautiful and challenges her to protect herself without him. Ufff these lyrics put a full stop to my ruminations about the two worlds. I realised no matter how many digs we take at these Bollywood wives the fact is they are progressive, confident women who are unapologetic about their dreams, aspirations and existence. A far cry from being damsels in distress. And that's awesome. As for my other world, Punjab, which is where my roots are, I embrace my culture wholeheartedly and am extremely proud of it but there is something I want to tell these sexist Punjabi singers and composers who romanticise misogyny in complete Maheep style: "Shway shway, a@#\$%&#!, f@#\$ you twats."

In laptop age, these writers still love longhand

Did you know that Obama drafted his 700-page-plus memoir with pen and paper? And he's not the only author who feels that when words matter, machines don't cut it

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Handwritten manuscripts hold many secrets and insights. Take Marcel Proust's lined notebooks that contained absent-minded doodles, surrealist artworks and his dogged revisions. Or the notebooks in which Virginia Woolf drafted Mrs Dalloway, writing on the margins an affirmation of sorts: "A delicious idea comes to me that I will write anything I want to write". Ernest Hemingway's handwriting was described as boyish, reflecting a disdain for punctuation and capital letters, with his sentences often ending with an X.

In an age where keyboards are mightier than the pen, literary texts written in longhand might seem like relics of the past but many writers still swear by the process. Barack Obama's The Promised Land — all 751 pages — was written entirely in longhand because as he says, "a computer gives even my roughest drafts too smooth a gloss and lends half-baked thoughts the mark of tidiness." Many Indian writers have also cultivated this habit, not because they're Luddites, but because they prefer it.

Novelist Anita Nair says her thoughts flow better in longhand.

I write using a fountain pen, so my standard process is that I fill the ink in the morning and I write until it dries out

— ANITA NAIR
Novelist



Oral historian and author Aanchal Malhotra has written her upcoming novel in longhand. She feels that it's more personal "like it's closer to my brain somehow"

"I write using a fountain pen, so my standard process is that I fill the ink in the morning and I write until it dries out," says Nair, who has written all of her novels, as well as poetry and non-fiction works in longhand. "It's more fluid and I think that has to do with the action itself. When you're keying it in or even using a touchscreen, there's a staccato motion, which is jerky," she says, adding that writing with pen and paper takes away the ability to just erase the words one typed, and fosters careful thought.

This aspect of greater deliberation is also important for poet and author Jerry Pinto, whose habit of writing in longhand soon became a conscious choice. "In the beginning it was because I would get ideas at inopportune places and times like bus-rides, and late at night. At that time, one would then have to type them up with carbon copies and hand the stories in. It was almost as much labour to type as to hand-write," he says. "When the computer came along I was frightened at the speed at which I could type. I felt this was not a good thing because I was using unnecessary words and long sentences. So I started working with paper and pen." Pinto calls it his version of the Slow Cooking movement — "I want my thoughts simmered; I want my ideas marinated."

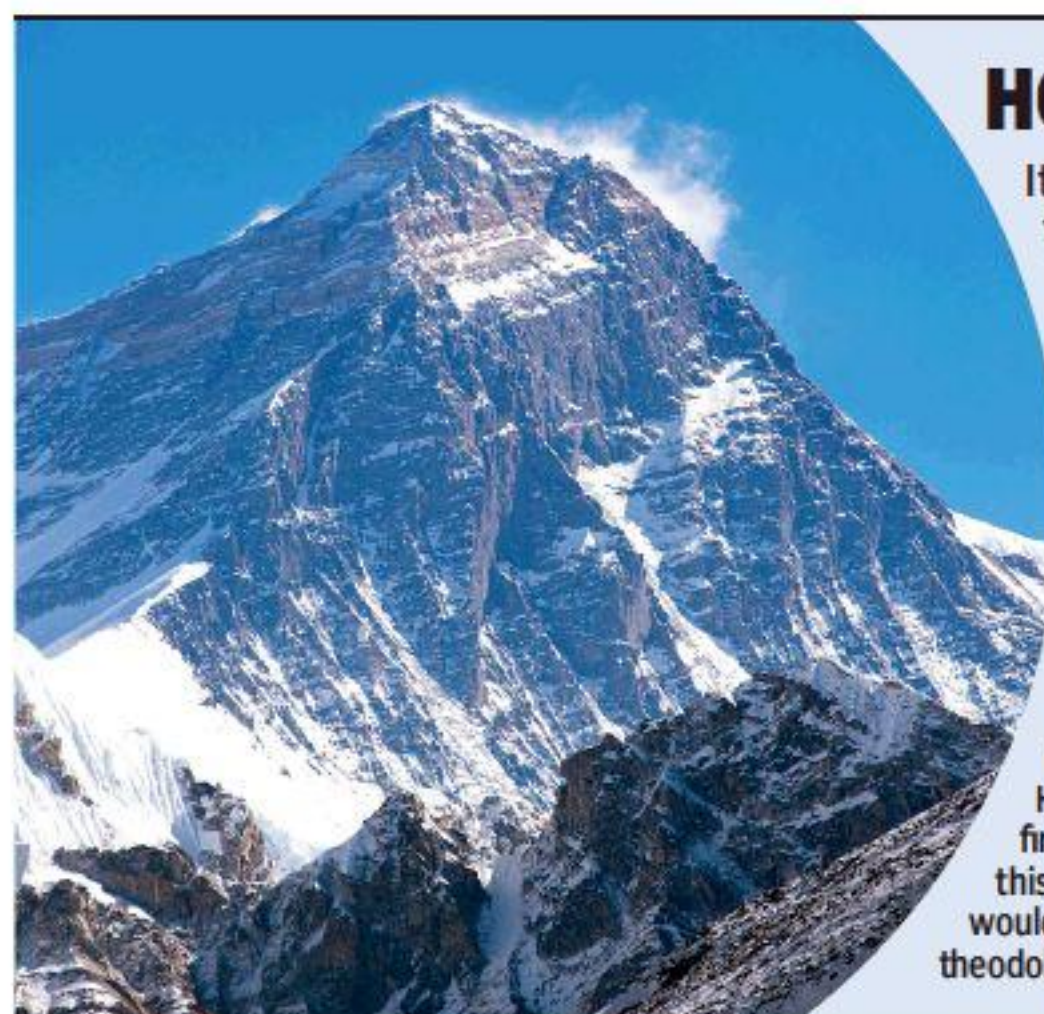
Meanwhile, Amit Chaudhuri writes his novels and poems in a generic student's notebook which he has used for years because the spacing and density of words on the page are just right. "I write it down longhand and after I've written down a paragraph, I return to it. For me, the basic unit of writing isn't even a sentence, it's a paragraph. I have to take out sentences, maybe add something until I find this paragraph is working and has come to some kind of life." It's only after this that the author and poet keys it in on a computer. When writing poems, however, he has the unusual habit of starting with the last page "as if it's an afterthought".

Oral historian and author Aanchal Malhotra only began to write in longhand in 2017 when she began working on her first novel. At first, it was a way to differentiate her fiction from her non-fiction, yet now much of her writing is being shaped in her Moleskine notebooks. "I find it a lot more comfortable writing things down, like it's closer to my brain somehow," says the 30-year-old Delhi-based author.

Writer Anil Dharker never learnt to type. "My first job in journalism was as an editor. Before that, I was doing various things like engineering and heading the National Film Development Corporation where I always had a secretary to type for me," he says. The ritual persists — Dharker writes down the novel or column and his assistant types it in. Editing takes place on a computer when a deadline looms, or he prints out the typed version and makes revisions by hand. This process, including the choice of pen used, is shared by Jeffrey Archer whom Dharker was recently in conversation with at the Tata Lit Live list.

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Dharker doesn't like the impersonality of a keyboard. "This laptop may belong to you but this keyboard is the same as every other keyboard," he says. "With pen and paper, it is your own very individual handwriting that is not replicable. There is something so personal about it."



HOW MOUNT EVEREST GOT TALLER

It's official. Mount Everest is now 8,848.86m. That's 86cm higher than the mountain's previously recognised height. A look at the challenges of measuring a mountain

Where did 8,848 come from?

● Everest height was first calculated at 8,840m in 1956 by a team led by British surveyor Sir George Everest, the man whom the mountain was named after. An Indian survey in 1953 readjusted the height to 8,848m following Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay's first ever survey of the peak. In this pre-satellite era, surveyors would lug around a device called the theodolite to measure its height



Why did they measure Everest again

● Some geologists suggested that the devastating 2015 earthquake may have impacted Everest's height by making its snow cap shrink. Others argued that the plate tectonic collision that has been occurring for the last 40 to 50 million years as the Indian plate pushes into the Eurasian plate could have increased the height. So both Nepal and China decided to ascertain its true height

Peak confusion over estimates

● China believed that the mountain should be measured according to its rock height, while Nepal went by snowcap and thus came up with a taller estimate. The issue got mired in politics till surveyors from both countries coordinated and finally agreed on the new height of 8,848.86m



How Nepal went about it

● 2 years' training for Nepalese surveyors since this was the first time they were measuring Everest themselves.
● 300 Nepali surveyors were on the job — some walking, others overhead on helicopters
● 1 toe lost as Nepal's lead surveyor Khimlal Gautam had frostbite while installing GPS equipment on the summit
● 250km sequence of line-of-sight stations built to triangulate an accurate height

Sources: BBC, National Geographic, France 24