Sudden death

Ramita Shahi, 34, died in Saudi Arabia in October but her body only just arrived home on a flight that afternoon. Ramita has been grieving for three months since her death. She was among the 273 workers who died there. He travelled from his village in the Salyan district to Dammam in Saudi Arabia to work as a labourer. He wanted to earn enough to feed his family and educate his two children, who are enrolled in primary school back home.

There are nearly 2 million Nepali migrant workers in the Gulf and Malaysia, and another 2 million seasonal migrants in India. Between July 2014 and July 2015, 1083 of them died – most of them in Malaysia. More than half the deaths are due to what is called sudden unexpected death syndrome (SUDE). Their family members know they are dead, but the news is never official. A breakdown of the deaths last year shows that most migrant workers who died in Malaysia and Qatar die of SUDE, while in Saudi Arabia it is mostly due to hit-and-run accidents on highways.

Ramita Shahi’s supervisor told his family that he had died in his sleep, but a death certificate was not issued. The body was found in the casket, and his family was shocked to find out he had died of SUDE.

Hemanta’s family is waiting for the news of Ramita’s death. He was the sole breadwinner of the family.

Nearly 87,000 Nepali workers work in Saudi Arabia in 2015 for work last year. Hemanta was among the 273 who died there. He travelled from his village in the Salyan district to Dammam in Saudi Arabia to work as a labourer. He wanted to earn enough to feed his family and educate his two children, who are enrolled in primary school back home.

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The least that Nepal’s rulers must do is to ensure our workers abroad don’t have to die saving the country from economic collapse.

The new constitution was a failure because it did not address the needs of the Madhesi people (‘The endless transition’, Rubena Mahato, #786). Any half aware observer will know that this plays into the hands of Indian interests, as a stronger Madhesi electorate can enable India to exert its influence throughout Nepal. Nevertheless it was the Nepali politicians who failed in past decades to square this circle. Lacking any rational options, they chose to go against agreements made in 2007 as a consequence of the first Madhesi uprising. Whatever India’s role in the blockade, Nepal’s politicians handed them a golden opportunity. This testifies to their utter lack of political acumen.

Nobody loves big neighbours, ask Mexico about US or Uruguay about Brazil or Mongolia about China. But this doesn’t mean that these small countries start blaming their large neighbours for their own incompetencies.

Do you have anything to say about Nepal’s internal political failure to address this core problem that has resulted in the present crisis? Please don’t blame this one on India - Nepali near the border were protesting for a month prior to the constitution being promulgated, and in that duration 40 of them got killed by Nepal police - before India decided to intervene to stop the killings.

Nepal’s political system is a failure, no doubt. But to say that India has/does not have a hand in the current crises is lying to yourself. In the past, India had always got the political leaders in one room and hammered out the differences. Why not this time?

Whatever
Layered food is always a delight to the palate. I’m pretty convinced the reason lasagna, for example, is so yummy is because it is made up uniquely of layers of pasta and sauce. There is something about balance in layering and one can almost taste that balance when food is cooked right. Otherwise, there is almost no difference between an average bolognaise pasta bake and lasagna – in terms of ingredients—and yet it isn’t lasagna.

This actually came to mind when making an entirely different dish, baklava, earlier this week. Baklava is a dessert dish that is the Middle Eastern world’s equivalent to our own mithai. It is made up of wafer thin layers of phyllo pastry with fillings in between, drenched in butter, then baked to a crisp golden brown and then topped with sugar and honey syrup. They are cut up into these magnificent little diamonds, square and round shapes, perfect for pecking on.

Now, you might wonder why I am again writing about baked goods when the country is falling to pieces. Well, for one, it is a hobby people in search of sanity or stress relief might turn to in times of turmoil. But more than that, like all else, one cannot help but see striking similarities between the various things one is passionate about, in this case baklava and identity.

Many foods depend on a delicate balance of layers to really develop in taste and appeal. That is the thing about the great classics like the croissant or a trifle, the balance of the layers, which carry different flavours. The croissant comes in various flavours and in various shapes and sizes and yet we all know when a croissant is a croissant. It is the same with baklava too. What really makes it is the paper-thin in-tact layers that are neither soft nor hard once baked and neither too sweet nor bland. These are the fundamentals, which are the defining characteristics of the dish which are unchanged. The interesting thing is the baklava is different in different parts of the Middle East, and often the nuts used and flavours, shapes and sizes are different, and yet one can tell off-hand when you are being served baklava. That is because the defining identity of the dessert is unchanged regardless of where you go.

The balance of the layers, regardless of flavour or shape, is the magic to its identity. One might say it is rather similar to the notion of being Nepali, or the kind of Nepali identity we are in the need to forge. It seems the challenge in carving a Nepali identity which is identifiable as ‘Nepali’ and yet not all the same lies at the crux of the issue. Like the baklava, we want the different flavours, sizes, shapes and thickness, and also want to remain in the ‘baklava’ family without it being questioned, regardless of whether the filling is made of pistachios, almonds or desiccated coconut.

In fact, we want an obvious element to our ‘Nepaliness’ without it being monolithic, or synonymous with only one language, dress, religion, etc. We want to break away from the Panchayat and Mahendra era ‘Nepaliness’ without compromising on the essence of a binding identity altogether. And why wouldn’t that be desirable? Going by how well baklava has done in being united in its diversity, it seems definitely the best way forward. The management of diversity in such a way that the fundamentals remain unchanged is the key. Perhaps for Nepal, the best thing to start off with would be to identify the fundamentals, if there are any at all. 

@bidush
Nearly 1,800 people were killed in road traffic accidents all over Nepal in 2014-15. And although the Indian fuel blockade will bring down the figures for this year, it is sure to climb up again when the blockade is lifted. The reason for the high fatality rate is poorly maintained and risky mountain roads, overloading of vehicles, lack of road discipline and poor training of drivers. New Zealand, with much more traffic than Nepal in a similar land area, saw only 232 road fatalities in 2013. As low- or middle-income countries like Nepal motorise, often at the expense of road safety, growing road traffic fatality and associated losses to families and communities have become a matter of grave concern globally as delegates to an international conference on road safety in the Brazilian capital heard recently. Globally, over 1.35 million people were killed and millions injured in road traffic accidents in 2013, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO)’s Global Status Report on Road Safety 2015. And road accidents are the leading cause of death of young people between 18-29 years of age. Those getting killed are therefore often breadwinners.

As Nepal bears the brunt of blockade of the Indo-Nepal border, road traffic rules and safety issues are clearly being overlooked. But even at normal times, traffic rules are often violated and reckless driving is the norm rather than the exception.

The shortage of public transport caused by the fuel crisis has made overloaded vehicles common, and passenger busses from border towns often carry petrol, diesel and LPG cylinders on their roofs. On the evening of October 21, a bus carrying petrol and LPG cylinders crashed in Khaskhum of Banke along the East-West highway, killing at least 8 people. “It was like a scene of a bad paint crash,” a local official told BBC Nepal Service. “The overturned bus was badly burnt with several passengers inside.”

The WHO global status report on road safety cites Nepal’s crackdown on drunk-driving and helmet use by motorcycle drivers as two areas where the country has made progress. However, only drivers are required to use helmets, and often it is the pillion rider who is killed in an accident.

Dramatic fall in fatalities

As far-fetched as it may seem, the Indian blockade has a silver lining. Recent news items about the Indian blockade of Nepal have reported on the fatalities caused by the shortage of medicines. However, the fuel shortage has actually saved many lives because there are fewer vehicles on the highways.

Latest statistics from the Traffic Directorate of the Nepal Police and the Metropolitan Traffic Police Department (MTPD) in Kathmandu show a dramatic drop in the number of highway fatalities and traffic accidents since August.

“One of the reasons the number of accidents decreased is because there were simply fewer vehicles on the road,” Posh Raj Pokharel of the MTPD confirmed to Nepal Times.

In fact, there seems to be a clear correlation between the number of accidents in Kathmandu Valley and the number of diesel and petrol tankers entering the city. The average number of accidents is the capital in July-August was 440, but this had plummeted to 203 in October-November. There is a similar drop in highway accidents nationwide as well. From 857 road traffic accidents in July-August, the total dropped to 617 in September-October.

Despite the drop, however, police records show an increase in the number of people falling off vehicles and roofs of buses because of overcrowding. The tragic death of 36 passengers in an overcrowded bus in Rukwa highlighted the fact that people have been forced to get on the fewer numbers of public buses that are plying because of the fuel shortage.

At the peak of the fuel crisis from mid-September to mid-November only about 10 per cent of the urban and intracity public transportation system was functional. Traffic police relaxed the rules on travelling on roofs of buses and more than two people on motorcycles because there was so much demand.

Police have also been unable to stop crowded busses from the Tarai carrying plastic Jerry cans of black-market diesel and petrol and LPG cylinders on their roofs. Eight people were burnt to death when a bus caught fire in Banke on October after going off the highway and striking a tree. Most of the 33 passengers in the bus were carrying petrol. Passenger buses have been turned into petroleum tankers, and police admit that this is a disaster waiting to happen.

Now that petroleum supply has eased somewhat, and traffic is back to 75 per cent of normal levels, the number of accidents in Kathmandu Valley is rising again. MTPD has also started enforcing rules on more than two persons on motorcycles and rooftops.

“Before the fuel crisis, we were seeing 15 accidents a day in Kathmandu, but this went down by half when the crisis was at its worst. Now the number of accidents is going up again,” says Pokharel.

He adds: “The only way we can really bring down the numbers is if everyone including pedestrians, passengers and bus drivers and operators follow traffic rules.”

Sudha Shrestha
The WHO report points out that Nepal does not have a national seat-belt law, and the rule is applied only to the driver and not to the front and rear occupants. Not surprisingly, the country also doesn’t have a national child restraint law, neither is there any restriction on children sitting in the front seat. Although arbitrary fines are occasionally slapped, Nepal also doesn’t have a national law on mobile phone use while driving, says the report. For a country where highway crashes are as common, Nepal doesn’t have enough trauma care facilities along roads. Nor does Nepal have an emergency room surveillance system. There are no emergency access telephone numbers that are essential to saving lives during or after road traffic crash.

Of the country’s nearly 1.2 million total registered vehicles as of 2011, nearly 900,000 are motorised two or three wheelers. But there are no front impact standards, or electronic stability control, says the report, and airbags aren’t mandatory on new cars.

Worryingly, no data exists on deaths by road user category for Nepal. And little has been done to safeguard the needs of the pedestrians, cyclists, and motorcyclists – the most vulnerable road users.

The UN’s post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have set targets to halve deaths and injuries from road traffic crashes by 2020. Experts and officials agree that it will be extremely challenging for countries like Nepal to reduce road fatality rates and meet those targets within five years.

Ettiene Krug of WHO told reporters in Brussels: “The continuing inaction on road safety has to end.”

Surendra Phuyal is a journalist with BBC Nepali Service.

Declaring debentures
Everest Bank has recently signed an agreement with Nepal Stock Exchange for the listing of 600,000 units of 8% Debentures worth Rs 600 million. The debentures, which have a face value of Rs 1,000 each, will mature in 2028 and pay semi-annual interest. The agreement was signed by the CEOs of the two institutions.

Turning 16
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The inevitable unraveling

The loose alliance of the Madhesi Front is fracturing

I t was bound to happen, and it has. As the border blockade shows signs of easing and Indian support for the agitation wanes, fissures have opened up in the United Democratic Madhesi Front (UDMF).
What is surprising is not that there are disagreements between personalities heading the component parties in the Front, but that it took so long for the splits to emerge. There is a feeling among the Madhesi people that they have once more been cheated at the hands of these self-proclaimed messiahs.
After Shikharuwa Party Leader Rajendra Mahato was injured in protests in Bittagang last week he was flown to New Delhi’s most expensive private hospital for treatment. Mahato has been accused of exaggerating his injuries, using it for political grandstanding.
Mahato has often claimed that he represents the interests of ordinary Madhesis, and he has been constantly trying project himself as the most radical of the lot. Yet, even as he tries to identify with the cause of the Tarai proletariat, he has the lifestyle of Nepal’s political ne-erdoe.
From his hospital bed at Medanta, Mahato announced fresh protests in statements written out in Hindi in stationary without the party letterhead. Other leaders in the Madhesi Front, especially Upendra Yadav, have not tried to hide their misgivings about Mahato’s mischief, but they have to compete with his radicalism. “He is just feeding the people, he is faking his illness and going through this drama to gain cheap popularity,” Yadav told a party program in Janakpur over the weekend. In tea shops in Birgunj and among people huddled around cow dung fires in Janakpur, the talk is that the loose alliance of the Madhesi Front is fracturing.
The most enigmatic has been Bijoy Gachchadak of the Madhesi People’s Rights Forum-Democratic (MPRF-D) which was part of the Big Four alliance that mooted the constitution draft in August. But he fell off after the agitation in the Tarai spread and intensified. Gachchadak has been quiet. That many don’t even realise that he is Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Physical Infrastructure and Transport in the Oli government.
The last for power is no less among other leaders of the Madhesi Front. Upendra Yadav, Mahanta Thakur, Anil Jha have all bold senior government posts in the past, and the perception among the street majority in the plains is that they have amassed wealth and built villas in Kathmandu while the people of the Madhes live in grinding poverty.
As the fires in the Madhes ebb, anger that used to be directed at the rulers in Kathmandu is turning to the Madhes’ own self-appointed saviours. The nearly five month long agitation in which the Madhesi people suffered the most is now fizzling, and has left the people of the Tarai pondering what it is that they actually achieved.
Mahato has now said in so many words that he is no more associated with the Madhesi Front, which he regards as having sold out. The Madhesi parties have suffered frequent splits in the past, and almost always it is not over ideology but for plum posts in the central government.
They are the ones most guilty of appeasing wives, sisters and in-laws to proportional representation seats in the CA. Rajendra Mahato offered a PR seat to his better half. Anil Jha and Raj Kishore Yadav also made their wives CA members.
Mahanta Thakur made his daughter’s mother-in-law a CA member. Nepali politicians are in general notoriously irresponsible to their electorates, but the plumes-based parties taste the cake when it comes to lack of accountability.
The Tarai Madhes Democratic Party (TMDP) chair Mahanta Thakur has claimed that Madhes region fulfills all the parameters to be an independent state, and that a separate Tarai would be utopia. Even if it is an attempt to talk tough, these are irresponsible statements. Besides with the kind of nepotism, corruption and poor governance they have displayed, an independent Madhes is likely to be even poorer.
The Madhes movement was to build moral pressure on the Kathmandu government to amend the constitution. A child should be able to get citizenship by descent even if the mother is a non-Nepali. A cultivated citizen should be able to hold any constitutional, judicial and legislative post. Proportional representation for Madhes should be institutionalised in the constitution. Two new plains provinces should encompass the entire Tarai for the Madhes people.
As a Madhesi, I am sympathetic to most of these demands, but mainly I want the Nepali state to treat me fairly and with respect. We want equality, economic development, health, education and jobs. We need to attain these goals to also ensure that 60 innocent lives were not lost in vain. The Madhes unrest and accompanying Indian blockade have impoverished the poor while the middlemen are making a fortune. The time has now come for Madhesi leaders to carry the four-month-long agitation to the people who were made to suffer and die. Was it for genuine autonomy and respect, or was it so they could get into government?
As a world heritage site, Patan is one of the most visited tourist sites in Kathmandu. While three temples in the main square collapsed in last April’s earthquake the place retains its old world charm.

For long the town’s artisans have held the title of the most skilled craftsmen in the country and for good reason. The architectural beauty of Patan is unmatched, and even today bronze sculptures and wood carvers work in dimly-lit workshops, clipping away with a hammer and chisel to create high quality religious figurines.

From Awaile (guar), above is a craftsman-turned-businessman who opened his own showroom 12 years ago. Back then Malaysian tourists were his major customers, today it is Chinese mainlanders who make up 80 per cent of his clientele.

China today is the biggest importer of Nepali metal craft, and last year the Nepali handicraft industry earned 8.2 billion selling Buddha, Taras and Manjushri to the mainland. Metal craft makes up more than 20 per cent of Nepal’s total handicrafts export.

However, as with other businesses, handicraft owners have seen huge losses first with the drop in tourism after the earthquake and later with the fuel shortage caused by the Indian blockade.

I have received orders for bronze figures, but there’s no way I can continue selling them at normal rates,” Awaile says frustrated, “manufacturing cost has gone up because of the price of fuel and also due to shortage of workers.”

There are six other handicraft showrooms in the lane that houses Awaile’s shop, and all the owners have the same story.

An online handicraft store owned by Chinese businessmen this week rejected a customer’s order for ten pieces of 7-inch copper Sakyamuni Buddha statues because they were unable to guarantee the delivery date due to problems in Nepal.

On Taobao.com, the biggest e-commerce market in China, there are almost 1,200 outlets selling Nepali-made metal statues. Nepali handicrafts command a premium because they are made in the country where the Buddha was born.

But Nepali handicrafts now have to compete with cheaper mass-produced Chinese imitations.

A 5-inch gilt Tibetan Buddha statue imported from Nepal sells at RMB 650 (Rs 10,400) online, but a similar statue made in China is sold at RMB 299 (Rs 4,800). But even in the online photos it is easy to see that the Nepali-made statues have finer craftsmanship.

Even so, the delivery difficulties are pushing many Chinese traders to promote low-quality China-made statues back home.

“The Nepalis never deliver on time and customers always complain,” said one Chinese businessman.

Awaile used to receive orders for up to 1,500 Buddha statues from a single Chinese buyer, and he still gets similar inquiries but is just not able to produce so many so quickly. Another factor in the waning business is the downturn in the Chinese economy.
One of the side-effects of the Indian blockade is that the government in Kathmandu is trying to diversify its transportation links to the outside world, which means that it is finally getting serious about pushing the new international airport in Pokhara.

First envisaged 40 years ago, Pokhara’s new airport is being financed by the Chinese Exim Bank and although it got the go-ahead during the Maoist-led government in 2009, it wasn’t moving ahead as fast as hoped. Now, the only thing that remains to be done is to sign a loan agreement during Finance Minister Bishnu Poudel’s visit to Beijing next week.

“We are ready to start the project once the loan agreement is signed, there is no problem on Nepal side,” airport project director Pradeep Adhikari told Nepal Times. He added that the proposal is now with China’s Finance Ministry, and the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN) has been lobbying hard for the loan agreement to be expedited.

Chinese officials confirmed to Nepal Times that the project is “on track”. In 2014, China’s Exim Bank agreed to provide a soft loan of $213.95 million for the new airport which is situated 4 km east of the city. Located in Chhinchinda, the new airport will have a 2,500 m runway and will be able to accommodate Airbus 320s and Boeing 757s.

“The people of Pokhara are very supportive and they want the project to go ahead at any cost, and so do the Chinese,” Adhikari said. CAAN had been dealing with compensation for landowners, carrying out construction work like drainage structures, access road and finalising flight procedures for the new airport. Bidding for the project was held in 2012, and the contract was awarded to China CAMC Engineering Co Ltd and the Engineering Procurement and Construction (EPC) contract signed in 2014.

Biplab Paudel of the Hotel Association Nepal in Pokhara is impatient with the delays, and led protests and hunger strikes in 2013 to pressure the government to approve the new airport. He reckons India has been putting pressure on senior government officials in Kathmandu not to go ahead with the airport project.

After the new international airport comes into operation, the existing one will be turned into prime urban real estate and generate revenue for CAAN. “Our plan for the next few years is just to maintain the basic condition of the domestic airport because the government’s investment has shifted to the new one,” says Dilpa Baral of CAAN in Pokhara.

The new airport will handle domestic flights as well as direct links for tourists who want to bypass Kathmandu, and will also cater to passengers from central Nepal flying to the Gulf or Malaysia. The government wants to improve road infrastructure and urban planning in Pokhara to coincide with the opening of the new airport.
Learning to rebuild

When Zhulin Xiao, a student at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) walked into the front yard of First Love Nepal (FLN) Children Home in Bhakund Besti, 50 km east of Kathmandu, last week, she was immediately greeted by excited children.

Xiao had returned to the village four months after first volunteering for post-earthquake reconstruction with 16 other HKU students to rebuild classrooms at the Thakuri Primary School in collaboration with the Nepali NGO, Living Hope Nepal.

“International aid flooded Nepal after the earthquake but most relief workers left after a few months,” says Xiao, “we returned because we realised that Nepal still needs help to rebuild.”

Called Nepal Recovery Program, the HKU students also help teach at two secondary schools in Kavre. Says Sunj Shrestha, director of FLN Children Home: “The help from Hong Kong students is important not just for our children but also for the whole community especially because government aid is not forthcoming.”

The Hong Kong students believe that by rebuilding damaged structures and constructing new airy and bright classrooms, they will be leaving something tangible behind.

The program received 38 sign ups in a weeklong on-campus recruitment in Hong Kong in November and selected 17 members from various disciplines. The team includes two Indian architecture students at HKU, Gayathri Srikumar and Shivangi Das.

While in India, Das felt the Nepal earthquake in April, so when she learnt about the program she decided to come despite her family’s concern for her safety. “We felt a kind of a special connection with Nepal because it is a neighbour,” Das says.

The Hong Kong team raised Rs 650,000 in Hong Kong and used funding leftover from donations for the 2008 Sichuan earthquake for the Kavre project. It has also donated to Oxfam for its activities in Nepal.

Next week, after the classrooms reconstruction is done, the Hong Kong students will carry out a mentorship program as well as puberty and menstrual hygiene education. One of the Hong Kong students, Kroha Ho has got attached to the Nepali children. “They are just so simple, helpful, friendly and kind,” she says, “they may not have much but they are always willing to share and give love to each other.”

Shan Liang in Kavre
**Art market**
The Art market celebrates its first anniversary.
9 January, 11am to 8pm
The Silver House, Sonepat, Lalitpur.
angeli@zoo.in
maya@nayaab.com.np

**CAN Info-tech**
Don’t miss the year’s most exciting info-tech and entertainment conference.
20 January to 2 February, Bhairava Mondip, Exhibition Road

**Soalte Crowne Plaza**

**Organic farmers’ market**
Head to 1955 for organic vegetables, citrus, bread and lots of delicious goodies.
Every Saturday, 10am to noon.
1955 restaurant, Kompani, Kathmandu

**SparkXX Nepal**
Join a group of 15 entrepreneurs and take advantage of the support and connections to build your business.
9 to 17 April. Registration: sparkinternational.org/spark-nepal

**Nepal Literature Festival**
Watch out for one of the country’s biggest literary events, the Nepal Literature Festival. In the words of one of the curators, the festival is “designed to feed readers’ intellectual curiosity, penchant for analysis, musings and varied cultural interests.” In the past, the festival has hosted well-known personalities like Shashi Tharoor, Shobha De and Ted Koppel, and has held discussions on literature, art, theatre, film, business, economics and politics. This year, more than a hundred national and international authors will join the event. Among the top names are the prominent Indian journalist Barkha Dutt, celebrated author Uday Prakash and bestselling author Arvind Joshi. Over 10 interactive sessions will be held. Don’t miss out on celebrating literature, poetry, politics and more near the tranquil waters of Lake Phewa.
29 January to 2 February, Pokhara
www.nepalliteraturefestival.com

**Relax**
Yoga, detox and ayurveda treatment in a quiet corner of Kathmandu.
Mitrajaya Resort and Wellness Center, Pool Village Resort, Buddhakanchha
(01) 4735500, 9801066667

**Guitar Fest 2016**
A guitar competition for all music lovers. Auditions from 18 to 20 January.
Santoosh Art Academy, 394/1A/105 M

**Famous Farm**
Wake up to the sounds of chirping birds and a fresh morning breeze wafting through the earthy fields. Nawalpatan, Lalitpur
(01) 4366300/400207, info@famousfarm.com

**Temple Tree Resort and Spa**
A peaceful place to stay, complete with a swimming pool, massage parlour, and sauna. It’s hard to leave once you go in. Gaughat, Lalitpur
(01) 490819

**Haatihati Resort**
Climb to a Dhundi ghat in the morning for a royal view of Kathmandu Valley and jet down to the hotel for a relaxing evening. Pharping, Kathmandu
(01) 4711218

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**Donate a blanket**, Sunita Chal is organizing a ‘Donate a blanket’ campaign for victims of the earthquake in Gorkha, Dhading and Sindupalchok. Contribute to 500 pre-blanket.
info@frostmedic.com

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**Property rites**
Explore power struggles in this future-in-the-past avant-garde drama based on the play by Avis Hartline and performed by Ute, 15 students.
29 January, 6pm and 30 January, 6pm, Uteens School, Kathmandu, Lalitpur

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**Tribute to Bon Jovi**
Miracles will perform the ultimate tribute to Bon Jovi.
22 January, 7pm, Purple Haze Rock Bar, Thamel

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**Recalling 90s grunge**
All Stars, Sound Chambers Floors and Newz will conjure up the awesome 90s grunge.
20 February, 7pm, Purple Haze Rock Bar, Thamel

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OLD IS GOLD

For Mahendra Saky, owner of the Heranya Hotel in Kathmandu, the earthquake that shook central Nepal in April last year presented a stroke of luck rather than a slump in business. As the quake struck soon after the hotel opened in March, Saky feared losing guests amidst the uncertainty. Instead, he found himself with a full house. “It was luck,” he says, as the building was largely left undamaged. Once deemed safe, Heranya welcomed the flood of media personnel and relief workers into Kathmandu. “The earthquake provided the real boost I needed to get my business going.”

Built in 1936, the building was initially leased out as office space to international organizations like UNICEF, WHO, and the Peace Corps. In 1996, it was slated for demolition when Saky’s father purchased it and converted it into the family home. Ten months ago, when Saky renovated the building to open his hotel, he recognized its historical value and opted to retain its integrity instead of erecting a completely new building.

Derived from ‘Heranya’, Saky named his hotel Heranya as a tribute to his heritage. Meaning ‘golden’ in Sanskrit, ‘Heranya’ holds special significance to Saky, who spent a month serving as a custodian at the Heranya Varna Mahalabharat temple. He spent there, as well as years spent working abroad, helped deepen his sense of appreciation for his cultural roots. Right down to the décor, the emphasis on preserving the past is apparent. With floors made of wood panels recycled from the old palace windows, and rather beams made of planks taken from the original structure, the furnishings pay homage to the past. Saky, deliberately repurposed the old materials in order to retain the building’s character.

Keeping the inviting atmosphere alive today, Saky and his family make the effort to personally greet guests and interact with them. His son, the famous cinema actor Karma Saky, works as an all-around handyman and is an actor in the Theatre Village, a playhouse located within the same compound. For hotel owners like Saky, heritage hotels provide a way to preserve the past while generating a means to support the future. Commenting on both the economic and sentimental rationales for preserving buildings, Saky summed, “We have a rich 800-year history. It would be a waste to throw everything away in our rush towards modernity.”

Yu Wei Liew

Himalayan Beanz Coffee/Sara Bakery

First began frequencying this café-cum-bakery in April last year when the earthquake forced many restaurants to close shop temporarily. Opening just a day after the quake, the Himalayan Beanz Coffee/Sara Bakery proved itself to be a survivor and a haven for those seeking a sense of normalcy amidst the continuing chaos and aftershocks. It helped that the facility had backup power and reliable wifi connectivity.

Eight months later, Sara (as I like to call it) has become a personal favourite; it’s the place I invite friends to meet-up, a work space that remains mine as long as the coffee lasts, and a pick-me-up stop.

Usually my order is pretty simple: a cup of café latte (Rs 140) and an egg sandwich (Rs 210), two things that sate my caffeine and food cravings. But as restaurant reviews demand, a critic must try more from the menu, don a more critical lens, and use all her five senses to judge even the simplest dish.

And so I entered Sara this week, for what must have been my umpteenth time, with the goal of venturing beyond its coffee drinks. To start, I ordered the American Breakfast set (Rs 450); the other option was the English variant. I expected a generous plate of the archetypal meal. However, what was served were two slices of untoasted brown bread and measly serving of baked beans, scrambled eggs, a piece of fried sausage, and a cold potato patty. No coffee included.

The offering was disappointing for more than just its portion size. The beans cooked in tomato and sugar sauce tasted like they came straight out of a can. The eggs were not light and creamy as scrambled eggs are supposed to be, but terribly runny and overcooked. The patty had a bland grainy taste and the fried sausage, which my non-eating friend ate, was uncooked. Because I am a ‘resilient’ Nepali, I refrain from commenting on the cold bread because batati bhajia.

On a separate visit I tried Sara’s Veg Panini (Rs 210). The grilled sandwich came with the same side of radish and cabbage slaw, potato salad, and carrot pickle that is served with all other sandwiches. The dish was fulfilling albeit nothing to wax poetic about.

With no backup for wifi and electricity, the café has also ceased to be an ideal workspace during the current times of blockade and extreme loadshedding. The staff’s irritativeness is also slowly becoming an irritant. Regardless of who is on duty, the cashier always fails to inform a customer of a scheme that offers one, her seventh cup of coffee for free. The waiter usually takes half an hour to bring you a glass of water. Over time the barista and the wait staff have grown familiar, but sadly not friendly; smiles are quite elusive among the staff.

Despite the many flaws of this place I still visit it regularly. Like a lover in a bad relationship, well aware it would be better to search for a place that values and treats me right as a customer, but not finding the strength to break the attachment.

Munchuwa

How to get there: Himalayan Beanz Coffee/Sara Bakery is located on the ground floor of a commercial building, right beside the Jawalakhel Round.
For anyone who has ever wondered what it would be like to be stranded on an uninhabitable planet out in space, *The Martian* is essential viewing. The film portrays the dangers and beauties of space travel and is made by the great Ridley Scott, who has, inarguably (at least in the view of this critic) made some of the greatest science fiction films of our time.

The Martian which is adapted from a 2011 novel by Andy Weir, is a procedural along the lines of Vittorio De Sica’s *The Bicycle Thief* (1948) or Robert Bresson’s *A Man Escaped* (1956) in that it provides minute details of what it would be like to be stranded in space, or in this case, on Mars. Lest I sound ridiculously lofty in referencing the great European neo-realists - let me move onto the plot: Matt Damon who plays Mark Watney – one of the members of the Ares III manned mission to Mars – is left behind due to a series of very unfortunate incidents that leave his crew members thinking he is dead. With the Ares III crew on their way back to Earth on Hermes, their orbiting vessel, Watney regains consciousness to realise that his only chance of survival is to find a way to feed himself till the next Ares IV mission lands four years later, thousands of miles away from his current location.

Supported by a stellar cast (pardon the pun) including the likes of Jessica Chastain, Chiwetl Ejiofor, Kate Mara, and Jeff Daniels, *The Martian* is a riveting film that follows in the footsteps of the now classic Ron Howard film *Apollo 13* (1995), and of course, Alfonso Cuaron’s stomach churning *Gravity* (2013), giving those of us on Earth an inkling or more of what it might be like to be in space.
Dahal’s shocker

Editorial in Annapurna Post, 7 January

If and when a former Prime Minister senses a plot against national sovereignty and integrity, his foremost responsibility is to alert the state apparatus. But Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal has revealed information about just such a sinister plot through some of his trusted journalists instead of bringing it up in the National Security Council.

Dahal told a group of UPN (N) affiliated journalists this week at his Lalitpur residence that India is trying to cause Nepal to disintegrate by all possible means. He said India is using Madhesi leaders Upendra Yadav and Mohan Thakur to sow dissension in Terai districts from Nepal, adding that CR Kaut and Jay Krishna Goi are a part of this game plot.

Political leaders have lost much of their credibility of late, and their revelations, however shocking, hardly stump the people any more. Even so, what Dahal has chosen to reveal cannot be ignored. He has pointed fingers at leaders like Yadav and Thakur who have served the country to various capacities, and taken oath to defend national sovereignty.

Dahal also said that Indian Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar reminded them during his controversial visit to Kathmandu in September that the monarchy was overthrown at the behest of New Delhi. This more or less confirms what most Nepalis believe anyway. Indeed, Nepalis were not consulted about the abolition of the monarchy, and signatures of an Indian-brokered 12-point deal inserted New Delhi’s agenda into the agreement. This is why Nepal has remained unstable even after the end of peace process and promulgation of the new constitution.

Dahal has been a key player in the post-2006 developments. He needs to inform the people through Parliament about details of deals between his party, the government and India. Prime Minister KP Oli also needs to look into Dahal’s revelations and tell the truth to the people through Parliament.

Denied pardon

Tuladur Nepaur in Himalokabaru.com, 7 January

The Supreme Court (SC) has ordered the government to not implement its decision to pardon former leader Bhusan Bhandari Dhurghal.

In 2008 Dhurghal was convicted by the SC of murdering Ujjan Kumar Shrestha. However, the Bahun Madhyamanchal government recommended to the Office of President to pardon him in 2011. Subsequently, Ujjan’s elder sister filed a writ at the SC seeking nullification of the Dhurghal government’s decision. A constitutional bench headed by Chief Justice Kajal Shrestha on Thursday directed the defendant not to pardon Dhurghal, arguing that the sentence cannot be granted理由 in absence of clear legal provisions about clemency.

The bench included senior judges Sushil Karki, Badayunth Upadhyay, GOPAL Paranji and Dil Prakash Mishra also rejected clemency for Dhurghal on the grounds that he did not comply with the SCS verdict.

In 2004, the district court of Dhadinghur had ordered life imprisonment and confiscation of property of Dhurghal. He moved the appellate court in Janakpur, which overturned the district court’s verdict.

After waking out of the jail, Dhurghal was chosen by the UCPN (M) as a member of the First Constituent Assembly (CA).

Two years later, the SC overruled the appellate court’s decision but Dhurghal is still walking free. Ujjan’s family has demanded that he be jailed again.

The UCPN (M) has said that Ujjan was killed during the conflict and the case against Dhurghal must be dealt with by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). But Ujjan’s family has claimed that he was killed because he married a girl bringing to Dhurghal’s clan.

An overnight star

Nabin Aryal in Nepal, 29 December

Former national footballer Kom Bahadur Gajurel, 21, still remembers the day he became an overnight sensation in Nepal, almost 22 years ago. Gajurel was part of the national team that played against Kuwait in the 1992 Asian Games and scored the only goal for the Nepal side.

The game was held in Saudi Arabia. Both teams were goalless until the 74th minute, when Gajurel streaked forward and hit the ball straight into the goal, becoming the first Nepali to score a goal in an Asian Games match.

In 1996, he was 18 years old and at the airport. Although his teammates Ashok KC, Lee Bahadur Shakti and Gurnam Thapa were bigger stars, it was 18-year-old Gajurel who was greeted by a crowd at the airport. Although his teammates Ashok KC, Lee Bahadur Shakti and Gurnam Thapa were bigger stars, it was 18-year-old Gajurel who was greeted by a crowd at the airport.

As son of an ex-British Gurkha soldier who received the Victoria Cross, 18 was expected to follow in his father, Gaje Gajurel’s footsteps and join the Army. However, his passion lay elsewhere.

At 14 he was chosen to play in the Uttarakhand School-level football team. On his cousin’s instance he traveled to Nepal where he led the team to the semi-finals of a national tournament. His performance impressed many and he was selected to take part in the closed door sessions of the national football team.

Four months later he was selected by then national coach Rudy Gurung to represent Nepal internationally. Despite earlier discouragement Gajurel had been waiting for his turn to play when he made the historic goal. “He was very impressive and also grow emotionally,” recalls 18.

Unfortunately YB’s promising career was cut short by paralyticism of the same leg that helped him score the glorious goal. Till today 18 is the only Nepal footballer to have successfully scored a goal in the Asian Games.

An overnight star

Deepak Thakur in Nagrik, 6 January

Jharkhand Timilsina (pic. right) of Gainti in Lalitpur lost a finger while travelling on a hand-operated cable stretched across a river to reach her school in Manthali of Mahakupur. She is not the only one. Several of her friends and classmates had also met with similar accidents, and some even lost their lives when they fell off the precarious cable into the Sewano Best River.

On Monday a suspension bridge connecting Manthali and Gainti was inaugurated to the joy of villagers on both sides. The construction of the 130m-long suspension bridge began in 2013 with an investment of Rs 8.2 million. Twenty thousand villagers from Manthali and Gainti will benefit from the bridge.

In his first cabinet meeting Prime Minister KP Oli announced a decision to replace cable with 366 suspension bridges in two years at a cost of Rs 4 billion.

In 2010 five people fell into the Tribhuvan River when the cable they were hanging on to cross the river snapped mid-way. Soon after the tragedy an Investigation committee was formed which submitted a report outlining the dangers of cable crossings for children and identifying pieces to construct suspension footbridge.

Five out of 12 deaths in accidents are caused in cable mishaps, according to a government report. Khelbam has the highest number of cable river crossings, with 45. And there are 43 in Baglung, 42 in Jajarkot, 39 in Humla, 30 in Mugu and 11 in Kalikot.

An overnight star

"PM Oli’s first foreign visit will be to India".

Foreign Minister Kamal Thapa at a press conference on Wednesday

"PM Oli’s first foreign visit will be to India." - Foreign Minister Kamal Thapa at a press conference on Wednesday.

The government has so far not mentioned the first foreign visit of PM Oli. Sources in the government said that the PM has expressed interest to visit China first. But the sources said that the PM wanted to visit China after the visit of Indian PM to China. The foreign minister took this opportunity to convey the message to the media.

"I am not aware of any official meeting to discuss the visit. But when the Indian Prime Minister will visit in January, the PM will also visit India," the sources in the government said.

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Killed in the line of duty

Nepali migrant workers who return in coffins are too young and healthy to die

OM ASTHA RAI

Every day at Nepal’s only international airport in Kathmandu, migrant workers queuing up to board planes for jobs overseas have to watch as coffins are unloaded from the cargo holds of aircraft. On average, 1,500 Nepali workers fly out to the Gulf and Malaysia every day from Kathmandu Airport. And every day three bodies of dead migrant workers are air freighted back to Nepal.

Migrant workers are leaving to feed their families, educate their children, pay for the medical fees of aging parents. Most are cheated and abused, never earn what they are promised, are forced to return without savings and unable to pay back the loans they took to pay mid-Rama. Migrant workers don’t even come back alive.

Between July 2014 to July 2015, more than 500,000 Nepalis migrated to work in construction sites in the Gulf states and in palm oil plantations and factories in Malaysia. During the same period, more than 1,000 migrant workers arrived shrink-wrapped and stuffed into plywood boxes.

“The rate at which Nepali workers are dying abroad is alarming because they are too young to die,” says Ganesh Gurung, Nepal’s foremost expert on labor migration. “If young and healthy people die at this rate, we must find out why it is happening.”

Migrant workers who die abroad are not just young but also certified as healthy. Overseas contract workers must be between 18-45 and must also pass a medical test to be considered fit to work abroad. This is why public health experts find the high mortality rate surprising, especially considering that most are dying not from work-related incidents but sudden heart attacks at night.

Of the 1,002 Nepali migrant workers who died last year, 245 were said to have died in their sleep of Sudden Unexpected Death Syndrome (SUDS). They were fine, fit and slept like they always did, but never woke up. Much less numerous were deaths in traffic and work-related accidents and suicides.

Autopisies are rarely performed, and most SUDS deaths are classified as ‘heart attacks’ or ‘natural’ since airlines do not carry bodies unless the cause of death is stated in the death certificate. Insurance companies also do not compensate families of dead workers without death certificates clearly stating the cause.

“Without postmortem reports, it is difficult to believe what is written on death certificates,” says Gurung, “the employers could be hiding the actual cause.

Dying to work in Malaysia

Why a disproportionately high number of Nepali migrant workers are losing their lives in Malaysia

SONIA AWALE

Malaysia has the highest number of Nepali migrant workers overseas with 700,000 people employed in its plantations and factories. But the country also registers a disproportionate number of deaths of Nepalis.

Between July 2014 to July 2015, 455 Nepali workers died in Malaysia, according to figures from the Foreign Employment Promotion Board in Kathmandu, Qatar, which has 95,000 workers from Nepal, had relatively fewer deaths: 178. Nine Nepali migrant workers died every week in Malaysia between July-November last year, according to the Nepali Embassy here, most of them from what health experts call sudden unexpected death syndrome (SUDS).

“Just a few months back another Nepali worker simply dropped dead while working to work,” said Dilip Malla, 43, a security guard in the Damansara neighborhood of the Malaysian capital. “We later learnt it was a heart attack.”

Malaysian doctors and labour activists are puzzled at the abnormally high mortality rate from SUDS among Nepali overseas contract workers in Malaysia, disproportionately more deaths than Qatar, UAE and other Gulf countries.

Although research is sparse and autopsies are rarely performed on dead workers, factors could be hard work in hot and humid conditions, excessively air-conditioned living quarters, worry about low pay and family back home, as well as consumption of illicit alcohol. An additional anxiety here is reduced earnings due to the falling Ringgit.

The money Nepali migrant workers send home forms 40 per cent of Nepal’s total overseas remittances, and Nepali workers are paying with their lives.

Agtile Fernandez of the Malaysian labour rights group, Tenagatiga, says deaths of foreign workers are often overlooked despite the shocking figures. “We see high suicide rates and several cases of sudden death,” she said, “the government should be more transparent and in-depth research should be carried out. Unless that is done we won’t know why they are dying.”

A Malaysian government hospital doctor who treats migrant workers, and asked not to be named, said most sudden deaths are a result of cardiac arrest. “However I can’t say for certain what is causing them, we never carry out any detailed investigation,” she said.

Last year the Malaysian government decided to withdraw health subsidies and increased medical fees for non-nationals by 30 per cent. Public health experts here say this actually adds health risks to Malaikas, since many migrant workers also have TB or malaria.

Workers are also not aware of the precautions they need to take. Migrant workers mostly live in a climate in Malaysia compared to Nepal. “The Nepalis might not be used to such long hours of work, under heat but they aren’t given proper health and other training beforehand,” adds Fernandez.

Last January, a riot broke out at a plywood factory in Kedah when Nepali workers protested the death of a colleague who had difficulty breathing and died because he wasn’t taken to hospital in time. Protest ing workers were arrested, and five deported. A month earlier two Nepalis in the same factory had also died of SUDS.

In another case, more than 1,000 Nepali workers protested at the factory in Johor when a fellow worker died due to lack of health care last August. Some 50 workers were arrested and most of them were sent back to Nepal.

“To find out why this is happening, we must include a clause for mandatory post mortems for dead workers in labour agreements,” said Gurung.
Migration widows

Sister Ali was 18 when she got married to Saiman Yungang of Lam district. At 19 she gave birth to their first child. Shortly after, Yungang left to work in Malaysia to earn for his family’s upkeep. After his body was sent home in a coffin, he had been killed in a road accident.

Since his husband’s death, Ria, now 22, pictured, right, below with her mother-in-law, has spent much of her time commencing back and forth between Lam and Kathmandu. In order to make ends meet, this week she went to a marriage consultation in her home province, the current agency that needs to approve her insurance claim, rejected her application for the fifth time because of incomplete paperwork.

“Every time I try to file another paper it is missing, and I need to go back and get it published. That’s why I am in tears, there is no way to go back,” said Ria. “I’m still hopeful there is someone who will help me, but if I don’t have enough money to buy food.”

She wants to start a shop with the insurance money, and hopes she can manage to raise her son, ‘I will feel like going up to the cloud if the amount from insurance comes, but I can’t, I just need money’, she said.

The number of migrant workers dying abroad now averages three per day. Bending a new group of young widows in a country where the war had already left thousands without work.

Labor migration expert Seulki Gurng says, “The role of which young migrant workers are doing is resulting in an exponential growth in the number of young widows. The number of migration widows will soon surpass the number of workers.”

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The main points once again

Before we get into the nitty gritty of what is really happening in the country this week, let us look at the main points of the news.

Mahat Movements
Ex-Finance Minister Mahat is voted the best ex-Finance Minister in Asia and the World 2013 by The Banker. Don’t know quite how that works, if he is the best ex-Finance minister in the world, isn’t he already automatically the best Finance minister in Asia? And who is the Best Finance Minister Dead or Alive that Nepal Has Ever Had? Just so there is no ambiguity, The Banker should also confer Mr Mahat the additional award of Best Finance Minister in the Known Universe so we have it written in stone that there is none other like him.

Mumbo Jumbo Cabinet
Just when you thought the jumbo cabinet could not get any bigger comes news that the Oblu-garchy is crowd-sourcing the government with another expansion: to save itself from oblivion. Here is a prime minister who can thumb his nose at the leaders of the world’s second most populous nation, but he is so scared the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification of the Holy Spirit Association of World Christianity of Sun Myung Moon will turn against him, Prime Minister Oli, MoD and KLi all meet together in a neutral venue equidistant from Beijing and Delhi, like the International Space Station.

Blockade to continue
Wherever KPO goes first, the unofficial blockade is expected to officially continue till the unforeseeable future, according to unusually unreliable sources. They confirm that just as it was in 1989, the blockade will only be lifted after there is regime change in Kathmandu. Which means the Prime Minister has to either be reprimanded in his next life as a fruit bat, or he has to stand down, whichever comes first. PKD and the Kangress seem to have got the message and are already manoeuvring not to let KPO continue beyond 29 February (yes it’s a Big Leap Forward Year), bring the Madhesi parties into the fold and set up a government of national unity to go for early elections. PKD usually goes to BKK or KL to meet handlers, and that is where he is now awaiting further instructions.

Raxaul Mess
Everyone thought that after the Raxaul Mess that was feeding 1,000 Nepali agitators two square meals a day was closed, the blockade would be lifted. Then we thought it would be lifted after Sharma Aunty said the border would be open in a week, God willing. Don’t know which God she was referring to, but it doesn’t look like He was very willing. Then we thought the the border would open after Foreign Minster Kamal Thapa shook hands with Abhay Thakur, but to no such luck. The only conclusion the Ass can come to is that India’s chokehold will continue for two reasons: too much money is being made from smuggling diesel and gas by too many people on both sides of the border, and second, there is such intense competition in Kathmandu and New Delhi to take credit for lifting the blockade that the political forces still cancel each other out. NaMo wants to project himself as the one who brought the feeding Nepali sides together so he can be seen as the savour, and the one to lift the blockade that he himself was responsible for imposing. Here in Kathmandu KPO wants to deflect blame from the prolonged shortages by going to Delhi and having the blockade lifted. The Kangress want the blockade to continue and be lifted only when they get back to power. The blockade is the best thing that happened for the royalist ultra-nationalists because now they don’t have to work very hard to make Nepalis hate India. Everyone benefits from this siege, so why lift it?

And now for some International News.
North Korea has exploded a nuclear device, but we don’t know whether it was an Atomic Bomb, a Hydrogen Bomb or a Stux Bomb.

The Ass