Future on track

Many Nepalis probably do not even know that Nepal has a Department of Railways. Set up a few years ago, it is now coming up to be an important government agency charged with surveying the alignment of the proposed East-West Railway and two cross-border railway lines linking Ilam, Tang and Janakpur to India.

After years of inaction, the imminent arrival of the Qinghai-Xizang railway to Kerung on the Nepal-Tibet border by 2020, and the dispatch of the first container train with Nepal-bound cargo from Lanzhou to Kerung last month, seem to have stirred everyone into action. The Indians, in particular, appear to be keen to revive the railway projects they want to be involved with, including the East-West Railway.

The Chinese decision to make Kerung the new trans-Himalayan gateway instead of Kodari appears to be linked to Rasuwa Gadi having a gentler gradient for track-laying. After the earthquake and Indian blockade, the Kerung-Rasuwa Gadi border is bustling. The Nepal government is expediting infrastructure on the Nepal side so it will be ready when the train arrives in four years.

The government is widening the Golchhi-Rasuwa Gadi Highway and building a multi-storey border office and dry port in Rasuwa. It is hoped that the road will ultimately pave the way for a railway corridor between India and China through Nepal. During his visit to Beijing in March, Prime Minister KP Oli urged China to help build a rail network. The China Railway Construction Corporation has approached the Nepal government to carry out a feasibility study for a train to link Rasuwa Gadi with Kathmandu, Pokhara and Lumbini, for which the Finance Minister announced a feasibility study in his budget speech last month. Mohan Baisnet of the Inter-Ministerial Transport Development Board said: “The Rasuwa Gadi customs office, dry port, rail and all other projects are being built with a view that Nepal can be a trade transit point between India and China in future.”

Meanwhile, the Ilam, Tang and Janakpur rail projects will be the first of several cross-border train links at Kakarvitta, Bharatpur and Nepalganj to the Indian railway network. Rajeshwar Man Singh of the Department of Railways told us: “The project was delayed by the blockade, but we have now begun building the railway embankments.”

After a prolonged debate over whether the East-West railway should be built through Chitwan National Park, the Department has finally settled on an alternative route that would circumvent the sanctuary.
If Baburam Bhattarai musters the courage to admit mistakes, his New Force party would be on a much surer footing

For most Nepalis the high-profile launch of Baburam Bhattarai’s Naya Shakti (New Force) party resembled the unveiling of a new brand of cosmetics. Indeed, some of the full-page jacket ads in national dailies on Sunday morning were followed the next day by similar false covers promoting a new detergent.

The irony of it was that both were make-over exercises. The washing powder in question (coincidentally also named ‘Shakti’) was taking on a new name. And the New Force party was trying to airbrush away its association with Baburam Bhattarai’s violent past.

Ever since he split off from the Maoists, Bhattarai himself has been repositioning his public image from a proponent of political violence to a benign technocrat. For someone who had told us in an interview in 2001 — while conducting a war in Nepal from a New Delhi suburb — that the Khmer Rouge genocide was ‘western media propaganda’, he has done rather well for himself. Bhattarai’s metamorphosis, as with several of his comrades, has meant deliberately (and conveniently) forgetting words and actions from the past.

Good thing we have Google. His Maoist party has now broken up into no fewer than four pieces, although Pushpa Kamal Dahal has managed to reunite some of the splinter groups under the newly renamed CPN-Maoist Centre. A loony fringe led by Comrade Biplav has been trying to ban taxi drivers alive and torching telecom towers across the land.

But the real reason Bhattarai’s Naya Shakti resembles a new detergent is its new auditorium, complete with a high-energy DJ and a flat-screen TV. The irony of it was that both were makeover exercises.

As Prime Minister from 2011 to 2013, Bhattarai engaged in public relations gimmicks — like driving around in a ‘Made in Nepal’ Mustang car, travelling in economy class in public relations gimmicks — like driving around in a ‘Made in Nepal’ Mustang car, travelling in economy class — and seemed willing to believe that Baburam Bhattarai had changed his spots. The urban middle class, which is the New Force’s target vote bank, is fed up with the current crop of politicians, all of whom goofed up multiple times when given the chance to set things right.

We do not want to write Baburam Bhattarai off just because of his past, or because he has been less than transparent about who bankrolled his expensive party inauguration. Let’s wait and see what he will do. If it looks like he can fulfil even half of the promises he has made about economic transformation in the next 25 years, it will have been an achievement. In fact, this is not a difficult target, assuming there is integrity, efficiency and accountability in government, but that is perhaps asking too much.

Bhattarai has unveiled a do-able blueprint: unleash job creation with an all-out campaign for infrastructure development, reduce圪tutmisation, and create economic multipliers once the hydropower, highway, irrigation and transportation projects are completed.

Still, Bhattarai is haunted by the ghosts of his past, and bullied by the stigma of being seen as an Indian puppet, his unwillingness to recant some of his more bizarre justifications of murder and mayhem in the name of revolution, and the vainglorious reputation his wife has earned for herself. Will it be any different and if it is good for a born-again Maoist to renounce beliefs once held dear, or admit mistakes and apologise. But if Bhattarai could muster the courage for all that, his party would be on a much surer footing.
MEET
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Mt Everest needs a government health warning

Inexperienced climbers crowded the world’s highest mountain this spring, leading to congestion and fatalities

Climbing Mount Everest is no longer the domain of seasoned climbers. Affluent, inexperienced climbers have been seeking to ‘conquer’ the world’s highest mountain, and with the appeal of recent Hollywood movies it is likely that more novices will continue to attempt to scale Everest.

This spring’s climbing season that ended two weeks ago was the first time there were expeditions on the mountain after the deadly avalanche and earthquake in 2014 and 2015. Over 400 climbers reached the summit, and there were six fatalities that could have been avoided.

There are several lessons we must learn from this year’s expeditions:

- A strong mountaineer with good technical skills in the Alps — where the highest mountain is less than 5,000 m — may not fare well on Everest (8,848 m). Climbers must note that the acclimatisation of the human body to high altitudes is not completely dependent on gradual ascent. The physiological make-up of the individual, which is essentially genetic, also plays an important role. Over-representation of HIF (Hypoxia Inducible Factor) protein, which may be crucial ‘messengers’ in adaptation, in people of Tibetan origin like the Sherpas may be an important reason why they are such strong, agile high-altitude climbers.

- A novice alpinist attempting Mt Everest should therefore scale one of the many trekking peaks of 6,000 m to gauge individual physiology at an extreme altitude. This would be time well spent before attempting to go up the world’s highest peak, and may not only help the individual climber but also boost Nepal’s mountain tourism as climbers turn their attention to other peaks in the Himalayas.

- Some mountaineers died this year because they did not reach the summit of Everest early enough in the day. As statistics from the British Medical Journal of climbers from 1982 to 2006 reveal, most deaths of Western climbers occurred during descent on both the North and South routes. Many climbers who reach the top very late in the day are extremely exhausted and may be suffering from high-altitude cerebrovascular edema (HACE), a deadly form of mountain sickness. To avoid a late ascent of the mountain, astute climbers have followed a “turnaround time” of 2 pm while climbing Mt Everest.

- Climbers consistently underestimate the arduous task of descent, hence the fatalities. The figure also shows that many of the Sherpas who succumbed to falls or avalanches while carrying loads to higher camps did so while ascending in the icefall area.

- Many climbers want to climb Mt Everest without supplemental oxygen, either because they want to do the ‘pure’ thing or want to be ‘cool’, or a bit of both. There is data to show that climbing an 8,000 m peak without supplemental oxygen is more likely to result in death than with it. Breathing bottled oxygen is protective for the brain especially when important decisions have to be made in the oxygen-depleted atmosphere. The amount of oxygen at the top of Mt Everest is only one-third of the normal amount at sea level. In addition, mountaineers are exerting themselves, making it even more challenging to adapt to the decreased amount of oxygen. Data indicates that there may be long-term brain injuries inflicted by hypoxia post-8,000 m in climbs without supplemental oxygen.

There are clearly many other lessons, and the three points above are certainly not new, but many of today’s climbers may be unaware of them. The Nepalese government — specifically the Ministry of Tourism — can take a simple and innovative step by providing these recommendations to those who apply for permits. It may be even better if the mountaineers signed a non-legally binding informed consent form attesting that they have read and understood the information.

Obviously, climbers are free to choose whether to follow the guidelines, but this simple gesture will show that the government of Nepal is serious about, and proactively helping in, maintaining safety in Everest climbs.

Buddha Basnyat, M.D., is President of the International Society for Mountain Medicine and Medical Director of the Himalaya Rescue Association.

THE WELL WILL NOT LAST FOREVER
Overpumping will deplete ground water, but rainwater harvesting is sustainable

Nepal Times
Service is paramount

During a visit to Kathmandu last week, Qatar Airways Vice President for South Asia Vincent Bernard Coste spoke to Nepali Times about the carrier’s achievements on the Nepal route and future plans.

Nepali Times: Qatar Airways has been flying to Kathmandu for two decades, how has the ride been so far?

Vincent Bernard Coste: Qatar Airways is performing exceptionally well in Nepal with three flights a day to and from Kathmandu. The airline is well-positioned to serve Nepal with flights in the morning, evening and night from Kathmandu, with one-stop connections via Doha to more than 150 destinations across the world for business or leisure.

You are the number one carrier operating in Nepal in terms of passenger volume. As the market leader, what are your priorities?

Qatar Airways’ priority has always been to provide excellent standards of service to all our passengers. Testimony to this is the fact that we won Skytrax’s ‘Airlines of the Year’ award this year, and also three times in total. Our advantage is that we offer a combination of value-for-money fares with award-winning service and superior, modern aircraft.

We offer Nepali travellers the best possible product in the local market: renowned hospitality onboard, among the youngest fleets in the sky, award-winning cuisine, and one of the most spacious cabins in both Business and Economy classes.

What are the challenges you face on the Doha-Kathmandu route?

We did face a few in Nepal during the time of the earthquake and then the shortage in aviation fuel, which impacted our operations to some extent. Qatar Airways maintains a very robust relationship with the airport authorities and the Civil Aviation officials of Nepal, and due to their support Qatar Airways was the first commercial airline to touchdown at Tribhuvan International Airport following the first earthquake.

We were able to continue our relief efforts in Nepal for an extended period of time, providing dedicated freighter aircraft to transport much-needed relief aid to those in need, including medicine, food, water, generators and even volunteers.

There have been complaints about delayed baggage delivery at Kathmandu Airport, have you raised this with the local ground handlers?

Qatar Airways has been working closely with the airport authorities in Kathmandu to improve the luggage delivery process at the airport. Qatar Airways is very particular about delivering its

five-star service excellence for our passengers both on board and on the ground.

What are you doing to cut transit times in Doha?

Doha is a leisure destination and commercial hub in the Middle East, and the number of leisure and business passengers to Doha is continuously growing, but it is still exceeded by the number

of travellers transiting through Doha. During the 2015/16 financial year, the airline carried over 30 million passengers via Hamad International Airport, its hub there. As we have three flights operating at different times from Kathmandu, passengers have the flexibility to book flights with the least transit time.

And what future plans for the Kathmandu route?

The Kathmandu route has evolved significantly in the last decade, with the air traffic growing manifold. For travellers from Nepal, there is significant traffic in various categories, especially in the Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) traffic, followed by business and leisure travellers to Europe, America and the Middle East.

In a short span of time, Qatar Airways has grown to over 150 destinations worldwide. The airline is expanding strategically and Nepal is a vital part of our growth and expansion plans in the subcontinent.
Trouble in the alliance

Once more, a clash of personalities among leaders undermines the Madhes movement

Madhesi and Janajati leaders are on a relay hunger strike in Kathmandu, while the Prime Minister has sent another official letter inviting them for negotiations. And, predictably, differences have surfaced among the leadership of the Federal Alliance.

MAKING IT PLAIN

Navin Jha

The main reason for the dissunity is the infamous and chronic personality clash between the leaders. But there are also ideological underpinnings about which way the agitation should now go.

The Tarai Madhes Loktantrik Party (TMLP) boycotted the relay hunger strike started by the Federal Alliance two weeks ago at the Khula Manch in Kathmandu. The party is preparing for its first convention, and said its leaders were too busy to fast. Insiders tell me the real reason is that the TMLP and the Sadbhavana Party leaders are unhappy with the leadership role played by the leader of the Madhesi Front, Upen德拉 Yadav.

They don’t agree with the coordinator role he is playing in the Federal Alliance, which groups parties in the Madhesi and Janajati movements. Last year, the top stakeholders of the Madhesi Front had said they would lead the movement by rotation, but Yadav is accused of having unilaterally taken the decision to go it alone when the TMLP and Sadbhavana leaders were outstation.

To a certain extent this is also a clash of egos between various leaders, and it has demoralised the rank and file of the Madhesi cadre as well as the people of the plains. Although the agitation last year and the brutal crackdown of the state had raised the Madhesi parties together and forged unity among them, public sentiment is once more turning against them.

The mainstream parties in Kathmandu will be tempted to take advantage of this dissunity with the Madhesi leadership; however, they would do well to remember that if these senior and moderate leaders lose their support, there are younger and more radical elements waiting at the fringes. Rajendra Mahato hinted at this on Tuesday when he said the agitation could turn violent if the peaceful protests did not work.

Madhesi leaders are also disunited because they want to safeguard their own class and caste vote banks in the Tarai. They have their eyes on the next general elections, and perhaps even provincial elections. The Madhesi people and some intellectuals have moved on, but the leaders are still trapped in their mindset for short term power.

The weary unity among the top leaders ironically comes at a time when a social media campaign to ‘Say Sorry’ has gone viral, as some privileged Madhesi apologists to the marginalized caste groups for generations of exploitation. The campaign has received a groundswell of support in the plains, but the Madhesi leaders in Kathmandu seem oblivious. At this rate, the leaders will soon find the rug being pulled out from underneath them.

All eyes are on the TMLP leader Mahat Thakur—the most senior and respected among the Madhesi leaders—to take the initiative to bring the various interest groups together. His party is going into its first convention next week, and that could be the forum where he can announce a bold step for unity. The convention is important for Thakur’s political future, not just as a leader of his own party, but also for the leadership of the Madhes and as a leader with national stature.
As we mentioned last week, the true indication of the arrival of the southwest monsoon in Nepal is that the wind direction will change from westerly to south-easterly. That has not happened yet, except briefly on Thursday. We will still see high-level winds blowing from the west over the weekend. But by Monday the east wind will be strong enough to make the monsoon reach Kathmandu.

We will still see thunderstorm cells passing from west to east over the weekend. But by Monday the east wind will win the tug-of-war over the westerlies, and bring us the first monsoon pulse characterised by prolonged day-long drizzles, high humidity and rain without lightning storms.

KATHMANDU
KATHMANDU

TEAM QUEST’S LABIM

Not just a mall, but an ecosystem

SMRITI BASNET

When Rajesh Siddhi, Bhaskar Dhungana and Nabin Uddin (pic, left to right) revamped and launched the standalone movie theatre QFX by Nepal, in Kathmandu over a decade ago, little did they envision that they would one day go so far as to build a mall. Years of experience, knowledge of the market and the added challenge of introducing something unique to the retail scene in Nepal compelled the trio to try their hand at mall development.

People want a complete lifestyle experience. Eating, shopping, entertainment — all these go hand in hand. That’s why our mall is designed to cater to these dates, said Bhaskar Dhungana, one of the owners of Team Quest, the company that built LABIM mall after acquiring Lalitpur Rishul Bazar, a previously derelict mall in Pulchok.

Spread over 200,000 square feet in the heart of Lalitpur city, LABIM epitomises the sophistication of a modern-day mall with its blend of contemporary and classic architecture, open spaces and a large gleaming sun roof.

“We want to create an ambience where people, even from outside Patan, will make the effort to come. Our goal is that LABIM becomes a destination,” said Rajesh Siddhi.

To cater to the needs and desires of urban consumers, the four-storey complex boasts a wide array of well-crafted and sought-after brands — North Face, Timberland, US Polo, Converse, Lego are all instantly recognisable — along with a make-up salon and electronics stores. Rundhouse, Balli Memo and Croma Cafe are among the restaurants stationed on the second floor, while kiosks for eateries like Himalayan Pizza and Rajeko Sekure populate the open area on the ground floor. QFX cinemas, with those theatres with silver screens, 4K projectors and an average seating capacity of 180 each, draw crowds to the topmost floor.

“We hand-picked all the tenants, and took great care in terms of strategic placement in all aspects,” said Nabin Uddin, who emphasised the importance of having the right tenant mix to ensure success. “All lots have been rented out.”

“We have tried to encapsulate the feel of the streets of Durbar Marg with an open mall concept. People should feel they are strolling on the streets rather than inside a mall,” explained Gribendra Munakarni who oversees marketing and sales at Team Quest.

This atmosphere is enhanced through the airy contours of the structure and natural light filtering through the sun roof. Besides being a practical and cost-saving innovation, the design also takes into account how city dwellers value outdoor rather than enclosed spaces.

Despite added costs due to the earthquake and blockade, and the likelihood that it will take some years to break even, the developers are hopeful for LABIM’s future. “We don’t necessarily need to be conservative, sometimes new schemes do work,” said Siddhi.

In fact, almost a month-and-a-half after its opening, signs are already looking up. Uddin claims that customer response has been positive and the mall is gaining popularity. However, far from being complacent, the proprietors intend to introduce various events to ensure customer engagement throughout the year.

Said Dhungana: “The priority is to keep interest alive. Fresh ideas are a must, and we plan to constantly present novel attractions and happenings in LABIM mall.”

SMRITI BASNET
Three years ago at Dasain, Suprina’s entire family had gathered for the festival when she got her period for the first time.

The 11-year-old fourth-grader had heard whispers about “that time of the month” from female family members, but had not expected it so soon and did not really know what to do. For the next 11 days she was confined to a room and was not allowed to look at male family members or perform any of the Dasain rituals. At school she was one of the first in her class to have her period, so she did not have any friends to ask about it. Her textbooks had no answers either.

Renu was in Grade 5 when she got her first period when she was 11, and was ill in bed when it started. “I thought there was something terribly wrong with me. I went to the bathroom and cried my eyes out,” she recalls.

Now 23 years old, Renu says her mother comforted her and told her what was happening. “I had heard about it before, but I didn’t think it would happen so soon,” she says. “If someone had told me exactly what to expect, it wouldn’t have been so traumatic.”

Notwithstanding taboos about talking openly about it and stigmatization of girls reaching puberty, and the superstitions that lead to the ostracization of young women, more and more girls in Nepal are getting their first period at an increasingly younger age. Neither families or society, nor the school system is prepared for this change.

“I have seen girls as young as nine start menstruating,” says Kathmandu-based gynaecologist Kushi Yangzo. A study in western Nepal six years ago found the average age of menarche among those surveyed to be about 12.8 years, while their mothers got their first periods when they were nearly 14.8 years old. The study also found girls in private schools, and those with more siblings, are reaching puberty earlier.

Precocious puberty is a worldwide problem, which scientists think may be caused by obesity in young girls, the spread of chemicals called endocrine disruptors found in pesticides and other chemicals in the foodchain, and even the stress induced in young daughters by broken families.

In Nepal, the decreasing age of menarche has exacerbated existing social problems. Because of cultural and social taboos associated with menstruation, girls are often caught off guard when they have their periods for the first time. In most families, it is not a subject that is discussed openly.

And in school the topic does not come up in the curriculum until Grade 6.

“By the time the word menstruation was mentioned in our textbook, many of my friends and I had been having our periods for two years,” recalls Suprina, who is now in Grade 7 at Champolev.
Higher Secondary School, “Even the textbook wasn’t of much help, it didn’t have any explanation.” Binita Pandey, who teaches Environment, Population and Health (EPH) in Grades 6 to 8 at Mahalakshmi Lower Secondary School in Naikphor, says that although information on sexual and reproductive health has been added to the course, the information on menstruation is still very skimpy.

“Menstruation is mentioned a few times in the Grade 6-7 curriculum but it isn’t until Grade 8 that students get to learn more. Even then it is easy about the biology of menstruation,” Pandey explains.

Hema Pant, who also teaches EPH in Grades 9 and 10 at Champadevi Higher Secondary School, says: “The textbook may say use sanitary napkins when you have periods but it doesn’t mention how frequently it should be changed.”

Upama Adhikary Tamang at Wateraid says: “Menstruation should be included as a separate chapter in the school curriculum.” The popular youth talk program on radio, Sethi Sangha Meals Kuru gets many queries from young women in the districts who want to know more about menstruation.

Binita Shrestha, who hosted the program 10 years ago, says: “In those days the questions related to basic information during the first period, but now it is more about health, hygiene and social stigma.”

At schools, students say they want more detailed and practical information on menstruation to be included in earlier grades so that girls can be better informed about upcoming changes in their bodies. “It will be better to have information like whether to use sanitary pads, how often they should be changed, and about infections,” says Lakmi, 14. “Since not everyone has access to the internet and not every parent is open about these issues, it would be helpful for us if we can learn from the textbooks.”

Another Grade 8 student, Kamala, says one problem is to convince family members to break away from superstitious rituals. “If the textbooks say that menstruation is a natural process and there is nothing to be ashamed of, maybe more girls will talk about it openly and can convince their parents to do so too. Right now the textbooks are not very practical.”

*Names have been changed
EVENTS

KIC Kids,
Music, gaming, magic and more for kids at KIC! Music classes taught by Spanish kids class specialists Alberta Divina and music teacher Shilpita Mudra. Every Monday and Wednesday, 8.30 am onwards, KMC Auditorium, 7F 18/10, Gurgaon, 011 4015 6611.

Basketball in wheelchairs, Cheer six male and female teams on as they participate in a wheelchair basketball league championship organized by INWCE, with the support of the Swiss Embassy and Turkish Airlines. 11 June, 8 am to 2.30 pm, Army Physical and Training Center, Lodhi Estate, 011-26533175, info.engagement@gmail.com or engagementpoo@gmail.com.

Fire and Ice, Home to some of the most delicious pizzas in town. Chor-mit, 011-4260180

Barista Lavaza, The valley's best European-inspired coffee culture serves excellent mochas and lattes. Don't forget to try their grilled chicken sandwich. Jawaharlal, 011-24091831, lavaza@napoly.com

Moondance Restaurant, One of the finest places in Kathmandu that you just can't miss, wash down its superb pizzas and lemon chicken with a glass of mojito. Lakeside Road, Pokhara, 066-4618035.

The Mix Tapes live, Enjoy a musical evening with bread and the Mix Tapes band as it performs its members' bucket-list songs. 17 June, 8 pm onwards, Sport Live Bar & Lounge, Jomsho, 011-4120007

Music day, A Music Titled Day with performances by Syrit K Mule, Kings Among Men, Mandala, SIMASE and other bands to celebrate Fête de la Musique (International Music Day). 21 June, 4 pm onwards, Alliance Française, Tripureshwor, 011-4240022.

DINING

Manny's Eatery and Bar, Special lunch packages for a quick snack or filling lunch. Jawaharlal, 011-24091831, laxman@napoly.com

GETAWAY

GETAWAY

Waterfront Resort, This new family resort by Hotel Ink, whether it be birdwatching, paragliding, horse riding, mountain biking or boating, Lakeside, Pokhara, 066-462370, www.waterfrontresort.com

Mamallay Wellness Centre, A spa and wellness centre made from Village Hotel for a relaxed mind and healthy body. Buskhunth, open all week, 011-6000066, www.honelytravelers.com

Shangri-La Village Resort, Escape the heat this summer with a two-night, three-day package at Shangri-La Village Resort in Pokhara, Gokulpokhari, Pokhara, 065-240072, Rs 1,800 per person plus taxes (excluding one Coca-Cola product).

MUSIC

The Café, Nepali South Indian culinary delights prepared by Chef Arun Prasad and enjoy cuisines from across Kerala, Chennai, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. 19 to 30 June, 6.30 to 10.30 pm, The Café, Hyatt Regency, Boudha, Rs 2,000 per person plus taxes (excluding one Coca-Cola product)

Art exhibitions, Mark your calendars for Umesh Dhakal’s exhibition of artworks titled ‘Invention in Tradition’. 18 to 30 June, Siddharth Art Gallery, Boller Mial, Rewalsar, 011-4236680/436399

Miss Motivation, Kripa Joshi

KIC Kids, Music, gaming, magic and more for kids at KIC! Music classes taught by Spanish kids class specialists Alberta Divina and music teacher Shilpita Mudra. Every Monday and Wednesday, 8.30 am onwards, KMC Auditorium, 7F 18/10, Gurgaon, 011 4015 6611.

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Götzt Haggmüller feted

Noted Austrian architect Götzt Haggmüller, who has been involved in heritage restoration in Kathmandu Valley for the past 40 years, was awarded the Cross of Honour for Science and Art. First Class by his native country.

Haggmüller was conferred the medal on Tuesday by Austrian Chargé d’Affaires Georg Zehetner at the Patan Museum, which Haggmüller himself helped design and restore with support from the Austrian government. 

“It is an honour to receive this distinction, especially in this location which we designed in various stages over many years, and sometimes with considerable difficulty,” Haggmüller said.

Haggmüller was trained as an architect in Vienna, was actively involved in preservation of cultural heritage all over the world, including in Angkor Wat in Cambodia and Luxor Phrasing in Laos. He has called Nepal home since 1979 and has been involved in the restoration of Bhaktapur, Patan Museum, and the Garden of Dreams in Kathmandu.

“I am happy to add this decoration to the other one I received, from King Birendra just before he died in 2001,” Haggmüller said.

The Austrian Cross of Honour for Science and Art, First Class pays tribute to Austrians and foreign figures who have ‘distinguished themselves and

HONOURED: Austrian restoration architect Götzt Haggmüller (left) receiving the Cross of Honour for Science and Art from Austrian Chargé d’Affaires Georg Zehetner at the Patan Museum on Tuesday.

...continued. He has his eyes, ears and nose close to the ground when he travels. He lots chance take him places, and wait for serendipitous meetings in surprising places like the 2.7 km-wide Iguazu Falls straddling Brazil and Argentina. He talks about the Toa of hitchhiking, discovering prehistoric cave paintings, the treasures of the Silk road, and running into people on the road who have since become lifelong friends.

Ghate was destined to travel from a young age, when he first took a flying boat with his father who worked for the United Nations. He hitchhiked around Spain as a teenager, and ventured further afield as he got older and when he worked for the Asian Development Bank in Manila. His interest in microfinance took him all over the world: on a paddle-boat named called ‘Rocket’ in Bangladesh, and exploring the Sri Lankan highlands.

Says Ghate: “One doesn’t need to be particularly rich to travel, or young. You just need to have the will and be young at heart.”

Shreejana Shrestha
MUST SEE
Sophia Pande

Bham’s film is a move towards portraying aspects of Nepali life that are often neglected in mainstream narratives—the minute of village life and the marginalisation caused by the caste system that is rarely a focus for Nepal’s urban-centric cinema. Kalo Pothi is set in a small village in Muga in northwestern Nepal. At the time of the conflict, villages like these across the country were victimised by Maoists and state forces alike, the former with forced recruitment, the latter with often indiscriminate punitive action against those suspected of being in league with the insurgents.

Set against this backdrop of war, Kalo Pothi tells the story of an unusual friendship between two boys, Prakash (played beautifully by Khadka Raj Nepal), a Danai boy, and Kiran (Soumya Raj Pokhara), the grandson of the head of the village.

The rhythm of this story is gentle village life, and the cast of characters, prejudices and politics are all introduced, albeit slightly confusingly for a viewer who may be unfamiliar with the social dynamics of Nepal at that time.

Slowly the friendship between the two boys, their personalities, their hopes and fears, which in this case involve rearing the hen from the title of the film and selling her eggs to pay for cinema tickets, become the pulsing heart of the narrative. This is an engaging film, full of charm, heartbreaks small and big, and hilarious scenes that are written by someone who knows how to portray the rowdy, tender friendship between little boys, and the things they laugh at and bicker over. There are many things to love about Kalo Pothi, mainly its ability to make you care about the adorable little hero with a big heart who decides to name his beloved hen Karishma, after a famous movie star.

While this is not a perfect film (few are), it is a good one, evidenced by the reaction of the houseful of viewers who laughed through the funny bits, and remained suitably silent during the somber ones.

Sometimes, particularly in the beginning, the film appears amateurish, stumbling as it tries to introduce its setting and characters. By the interval, though, I was utterly engrossed, eager to get back to Prakash and Kiran’s quest to retrieve their hen amidst an increasing intensifying war that would undoubtedly take a toll in their adult lives, even as they struggle through their impoverished but innocent childhoods.

nepalitimes.com
Blame game in forestry

Pitamber Sigdel in Annapurna Post, 15 June

Nepal’s biggest forestry project — funded by the governments of Finland, Switzerland, and the UK — is ending next month, and neither the government nor the donors wants to renew it.

The Multi-Stakeholder Forestry Program (MSFP) was launched in 2013 for 10 years. But during the first four-year phase ending in mid-July, the discord between the government and the donors grew so severe that the Rs 16 billion project has been terminated midway.

This week, Forest Minister Agni Sapkota for the first time told journalists that the government did not want to extend the MSFP because the donors made the release of additional funds contingent upon the establishment of the National Forest Entity, a mechanism aimed at ensuring transparency.

But Sapkota alleged that the donors had an ulterior motive. “By forming this entity, the donors would be able to take back 83 per cent of the funding for their respective countries,” he said.

On the other hand, the donors say they pulled out of the MSFP because the government failed to curb irregularities. They also cite Nepal’s inefficient bureaucracy and the lack of positive results in the first phase as the reasons for halting the MSFP.

But when Swiss Ambassador to Nepal Urs Herren and top authorities from the UK met the Forest Minister recently, they put it more diplomatically: they withdrew funding for the MSFP because they wanted to speed up the pace of improvement in raising the area of its forests.

Blame game in forestry.

Misogynist message

Chakrabati Nepal retooling in Naya Patrika to Mitraka Poudel’s earlier opinion ‘Nepal, cursed by sons-in-law’, 15 June

Two things are clear in Mitraka Poudel’s article. First, he is annoyed by criticism of the new Constitution, and harbours no contempt for those who question it. Second, his enthusiastic Adviser to the Ministry of Information and Communications neglect this fact? When Nepali society has already accepted its daughters’ capability to make their own decisions, who gave Poudel the right to completely erase their identity and replace it with the identity of the sons-in-law?

Additionally, do women still have the right to choose their own life partners? Do they become traitors if they choose a foreigner? Do women need permission from the Foreign Ministry, or even from Poudel himself? Is a woman’s identity only defined by her uterus? And should the state monitor who a Nepali woman is in a relationship with, and forbid it in the case it does not agree? How is Poudel going to get this common sense? And what is the meaning then of publishing a writer’s malicious libelising when he doesn’t even understand these basic issues?

When the new Constitution was promulgated, Nepali politicians relegated women to more or less by saying that the child of a foreign father and a Nepali mother is not a Nepali citizen. Some of them even advised Nepali women against marrying a foreigner. The state’s discriminatory and prejudiced policy has left hundreds of thousands of Nepali women’s children deprived of citizenship. Consequently, women are humiliated and their dignity is trampled upon. They are subjected to allegations. The fact that this still happens shows how the Nepali state views the status of women. On the other hand, let us investigate who these government entities (bureaucracy) are, who have deprived mothers and their children from their inalienable right to citizenship while selling citizenship to others for large sums of money. Are there any federal sons-in-law? Have such objectionable statements ever been published when sons bring home foreign daughters-in-law? You actually support treason. But what about those who are involved in illegal activities behind the veil of party politics? Are they foreign sons-in-law or our own sons? Are you able to call out your own sons and write about their activities? It’s clear that this foreign son-in-law is a beggar the writer has maintained, and invented to try to deprive women of their rights.

This article has no objective other than to control and subjugate women, and such unethical wrongdoing is hard to stomach when it is published in a newspaper.

Never too late

Sajana Bural in Himal Khalegapatrika, 12-18 June

Having completed her Bachelor’s degree in Architecture and City Planning at the renowned Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the USA, Ketika Srivivasan worked in Los Angeles for a year-and-a-half as an urban designer. However, her interests lay somewhere else.

“That is when I started taking acting classes,” said Srivivasan, who added, “I enjoyed it so much that I left my architecture job.”

She started her acting career in 2006, with roles in various theatre productions, advertisements and movies in Nepal. After working with One World Theatre, an English-language theatre company in Kathmandu, she left for her homeland India, to pursue a career in acting. “In the four years that I was there, I struggled and managed to learn a great deal,” said Srivivasan.

She acted in Telugu film Kalichekarn. Tamil film Andhithu Abooshamun, and Hindi movie Kurbaan, during her time there.

Srivivasan came back to Kathmandu in 2010, and after a brief hiatus she returned to the stage earlier this year as one of the leading actors in One World Theatre’s interpretation of the 2003 Twelfth Night play Anna in the Tropics in Kathmandu.

Apart from theatre performances, Srivivasan is currently directing, writing the script and acting in the web series ‘Stop Zindagi’ (FG denotes ‘Post Seismic’). Directed by Utpal Jha, the series explores the lives of a group of five youngsters, who belong to different castes and religions, after the April 2015 earthquake. Along with Srivivasan and Jha, the other actors are Rajkumar Pudasaini, Suja Joli and Kaisarya Jha.

Having garnered immense popularity on YouTube, the web series has been nominated as an entry in the Marseilles Web Fest (International Festival of Digital Series) to be held in France in October. Claiming it to be one of the most prestigious film festivals for web series, Srivivasan said: “I feel we have started something good.”
Nepal’s most important trade route with China via Kodari was damaged by last year’s earthquake. After the Indian blockade, Nepal repeatedly requested China at the highest level to reopen this route, but despite its assurances Beijing has not made moves to do so.

“The Kodari Highway is no longer obstructed by earthquake-triggered landslides, and our office at Tatopani is in operation, but the Chinese are not allowing the cargo trucks to cross over into Nepal,” said Dibya Raj Pokhrel, chief of the Department of Customs at Tatopani. At the moment, the contrast between the two sides of the border could not be more stark. While there is an imposing seven-storey block on the Chinese side of the Bhote Kosi River, there are only blue tin huts in Nepal.

To be outdone, the Department of Urban Development and Building Construction (DUBEC) has issued a tender notice to also build a seven-storey block to house the customs, immigration, quarantine and other offices.

“We want to be ready when the Chinese rail arrives in Kerung. When the Kathmandu-Kaswa Gadi road is expanded, the volume of trade through this border point will escalate and we will need a high-end integrated border checkpoint, so this building is for the future,” says Surya Prasad Sedai, Director of the Department of Customs.

The highway linking Guwalseni on the Phoksundo Highway to the Kaswa Gadi road is also being upgraded. The Nepali Army is already working to widen the 18 km dirt track from Mallung to Syabrubesi, the Department of Roads is upgrading the 45 km Guhichini-Mallung section, and the Chinese are getting ready to fix the last 17 km stretch from Syabrubesi to the border.

“An Environmental Impact Assessment is conducted in time and the necessary budget is allocated, we will open this track within two years,” says Major Sanjay KC who is in charge of the Nepali Army’s road taskforce. “We are confident it can be completed by the time the train arrives in Kerung.”

The alignment of the Mallung-Syabrubesi track was to follow the right bank of the Phoksundo, but China (as far as we know) decided to shift it to the left bank of the river to make sure it’s difficult to make any political statements from that side. That’s why China’s new railway line from Guwalseni to Jhapa is going to connect the new Kerung railway station to the existing one at Mallung. This move is expected to improve trade relations between Nepal and China.”

**COMING SOON**

The Tibet Train

China’s railway arrives in Kerung in 4 years, Nepal should get its border infrastructure in place by then

OM ASTHA RAI

China’s Qinghai-Tibet railway may not beat a bullet train, but the tracks are being laid down at breakneck speed and will be at the Nepal border in Rasuwa by 2020. On the Nepali side the highway and facilities are rudimentary, and the government hopes to upgrade the highway and construct a dry port. Work is underway to establish new transport connectivity between Nepal and China is the result of two disasters: the earthquake that damaged the Kodari border link, and the Indian blockade that woke up politicians in Kathmandu to the need to have an alternative trade access route. China has already extended the world’s highest railway line from Guwalseni to Jhapa to Xigazhe, and plans to bring it down to Kerung, which is only 25 km north of the Rasuwa Gadi border (see map). Last month, a freight train made the 2,500 km journey from Lhasa in central China to Xigazhe with 86 containers bound for Nepal. The containers were later transported to Kerung and on to Kathmandu by road.

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Why is Kodari still closed?

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In March, when Prime Minister KP Oli visited Beijing, Nepal and China signed a 10-point agreement on trade and transit. But why is Kodari still closed?

Nepal is reportedly worried that Kodari was a conduit for free-Tibet activists and wants to keep it sealed, preferring to make Kerung — where the movement of people is easier to control — the new entry point. Chinese officials cite the damage caused by the earthquake and the continuing danger of landslides as the reason for the closure of Kodari.

Last week, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) sent a letter to the Chinese government requesting the resumption of movement of people and goods through Kodari. Said MoFA’s Jhabindra Aryal: “We are still waiting for a response from China. We have proposed to set up a mechanism to deal backed-up cargo even if customs, immigration and quarantine offices cannot be restored immediately.”

Imitating nature

Nepal’s most modern printing facility, Jaspandama Press, now makes natural colours come alive with its state-of-the-art equipment.

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was shifted because there are four hydropower projects coming up on the river, including the 216MW Upper Trisuli-1 and the 60MW Trisuli-3A. The projects will all benefit from the infrastructure upgrades.

The construction of the new customs immigration-quarantine office is expected to cost more than Rs 450 million and to be finished by 2019. This building is coming up at the exact spot where last April’s earthquake set off a huge rockfall and buried the customs office, killing four persons.

“The mountains is still unstable so we are constructing a concrete buttress to protect the new building, which will be safe from rockfalls and landslides,” explained DUBC engineer Macha Kaji Mahatjan.

After the earthquake, the Rasuwa Gedi-Kerung checkpoint was closed for more than six months. Not only had the earthquake damaged the customs office but the road to Trisuli was blocked as a result of landslides. The earthquake also obstructed the Kodari checkpoint, which was at that time the busiest road crossing between Nepal and China.

It was the Indian blockade and the shortages of fuel and essential goods that injected a sense of urgency in Kathmandu to expedite reopening the road links to China. Kathmandu requested Beijing to help restart the border points. Beijing acted quickly to do so at the Rasuwa Gedi-Kerung border, but has so far kept Kodari sealed even though the earthquake damage there has been repaired.

As Nepal reeled under a severe fuel shortage, China’s symbolic donation of 1,000 tons of fuel was brought in through Rasuwa Gedi. Nepal traders also quickly switched to importing Chinese goods through this border point.

The Department of Customs — which collected only Rs 240 million in revenue at Rasuwa Gedi in 2015 — has already raised Rs 1.54 billion in taxes in the first five months of 2016 alone.

This trade is expected to soar once the train arrives at the border, and in preparation Nepal is also building a dry port at Timure, 3 km south of the border. The Ministry of Commerce and Supplies has set up the Inter-Modal Transport Development Board to build this dry point. Executive Director Laxman Basnet told us: “We have acquired the land and will begin construction by the end of 2016 and complete it in three years.”

The Board is looking at the Timure-dry port as being a customs point not only for Nepal, but for the entire South Asia region. The hope is that once the train arrives, Chinese goods bound for India and Bangladesh will also use this shortcut via Nepal. Shipments of Chinese goods to Nepal via Kolkata port can take up to 35 days, while it can reach Nepal in 10 days via Kerung.

More than 150 Chinese traders and tourists are crossing over into Nepal from the new border point every day. However, Nepali traders are still finding it difficult to cross over into China, and have to rely on local drivers from Rasuwa to transport goods from Kerung.

Says Ramesh Baral of the Nepal-China Businessman Association: “The Chinese give one-day entry passes to Rasuwa locals, but not to all Nepali traders. This is not good for free trade. It has to change.”
Coming and going

Since Nepal has now been voted multiple times as the World’s Top Adventure Tourism Destination, the government is looking for ways to increase the thrill of a Himalayan Horriday. That is why on certain airlines (which shall remain nameless because they might advertise with us in future) the inflight announcement goes something like this: “Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome on board, in case of sudden loss of cabin pressure, just pull oxygen mask, clothe your nose and mouth, and bleed normally. Please put your seats in an upright position, enjoy your complimentary turbulence, and be careful when opening the owl-headed rocker.”

The real excitement starts after landing, as the Ministry of Maritime and Tourism requires all inbound buccaneers to fill out Disembarkation Forms. Failure to do so results in an on-the-spot fine in cash or kind, of an amount not exceeding $100 (in unmarked $10 bills plus 10% VAT and 2% Tourist Tax handed under the counter), or retroactive defenestrination from an altitude of 85,000 feet over Waypoint Romeo, whichever comes first.

A Disembowelment Card is an important document that records for posterity who and how many people dared visit Nepal.

Our immigration forms are already the most inclusive on earth, in fact even more progressive than the draft of the new Constitution. But Arrival and Departure Cards are living documents and must change with the seasons. It is time to change ours:

The Ass