BAD AIR

The suffocating rise in roadside dust in Kathmandu in recent months has had one important benefit: it raised public awareness about the Valley’s increasingly unbearable air pollution. The mass media’s exposure of the health hazard prompted the Supreme Court to direct the government to curb pollution, and a task force this week submitted a report to the National Planning Commission recommending urgent mitigation measures.

The dust is a result of road-digging to lay new water mains, delayed street-relining, and the practice of using the sidewalk for post-earthquake reconstruction. Although more visible, dust is less harmful to health than microscopic particles from vehicle tailpipes. Experts worry that wider roads will mean more cars, and worsening pollution.

“Widening roads without improving public transport system will increase pollution. Some roads, of course, need to be widened, not to accommodate more cars but to have bus lanes and sidewalks for pedestrians,” environmentalist Bhushan Tuladhar tells us in a Guest Editorial (page 3).

Diesel fuel levels in Kathmandu went down this winter because of 24-hour electricity and the drop in generator use. However, the concentration of toxic particles from vehicular emission is still several times higher than what WHO regards as safe.

Air pollution is just the symptom. The real disease is the lack of accountable local government because Nepal hasn’t had municipal and local elections for 20 years. Dirty politics makes dirty cities.

As the special coverage in this issue of Nepali Times proves, there is a direct correlation between better public transport and improved public health.

However, our undercover investigation of bus syndicates (page 14-18) shows that the transportation mafia has political backing and will stop at nothing to protect its monopoly.

Regulators cannot discipline operators because bus cartels are protected by the political cartel. Moral of the story: we must clean up our politics if we are to clean up our air.
POLLUTED POLITICS

Just when we thought the Valley’s urban environment couldn’t get any worse, Kathmandu has become ever more unliveable. The rivers are open sewers, their holy banks are garbage dumps, the dust is so thick it can’t be measured, there are epic traffic jams, roadside air quality fails the WHO test even when it is at its best, brick kilns and garbage burning choke residents. Yet, these are only symptoms. The real disease is dysfunctional governance. The city looks the way it does, and is as toxic as it is, because of the lack of accountability which in turn is a direct result of local elections not being held for two decades. Nepal is ruled by a political cartel that reigns through patronage and thugs/bands. Dirty politics makes dirty cities.

As the special coverage in this issue of Nepal Times proves, there is a direct correlation between better public transport and improved public health (page 8-9). Studies show a direct causal link between better public transport and better health. Hence, there is a direct causal link between better governance and better health.

The most visible pollution in Kathmandu these days is the dust from earthquakes, road widening, laying down water mains, and the practice of dumping construction material on the sidewalks. Even though it is a nuisance, dust is not as toxic as smoke from vehicles, brick kilns and garbage burning.

The trouble with road widening is not the dust. It is that there will be more vehicles spewing more fumes on those broader roads. Most of the story: we must clean up our politics if we are to clean up our air.

Public Transport = Public Health

Kathmandu Valley’s air pollution threat is mainly exacerbated by vehicular emissions, brick kilns and road-side dust. Of the suspended particulate matter in the air, the most dangerous is the very small the so-called dust particles which are a known carcinogen.

The fact that air pollution causes respiratory problems is fairly well known. What people are less aware of is how air pollution causes heart diseases and cancers. An increase in air pollution means that the population is exposed to more risk.

Kathmandu Valley’s air pollution levels are several times higher than what is deemed safe by the WHO. We need to clean up our air, and we need to start doing it right now.

The smog from brick kilns is a threat, but these are being disallowed as land potters’ dust. Dust is more of an irritant, and has been exacerbated by road construction and the leaching of new water mains. Much more serious is the threat posed by vehicular emissions. And the best way to save our lungs is to improve the bus services in the city. So, in that sense, investing in public transportation is actually an investment in public health.

Public transport should be the backbone of urban transport systems in any city and should carry at least half of all commuters. In Kathmandu buses at present carry only 26 percent of commuters.

Private car ownership is still fairly low in Kathmandu, but this is growing at 15 percent per year, and it is already competitive to the Valley’s annual population growth of 0.5 percent. Wider roads without upgrading the public transport system is counterproductive. In fact, it might just increase pollution by encouraging more people to buy cars. Some roads, of course, need to be widened not to accommodate more cars but to have bus lanes and space for people.

For example, the Ring Road is being widened to accommodate eight lanes but this will only make more cars on the road. The only way to reduce congestion on the Ring Road is to dedicate two of those lanes to buses. Once public buses begin to work past private cars, people will leave their cars and motorcycles at home and commute by public buses. This will then result in a people-centric rather than car-centric city.

Public buses will be the most feasible and realistic mass transit system for Kathmandu in the near future. We need a more efficient public transport network not just for commuters, but also for our health and the quality of life we aspire to have.
Love is the best journey

Happy Valentine’s Day
ON THE WAY UP
Kanak Mani Dixit

KTM to Thiruvananthapuram

A rushed trip to Kerala provides a treasure trove of ideas and updates

In Kathmandu, we are fixed, on New Delhi, that we forgot what Nepal can learn, not from the cuddled, self-important demographics of Kathmandu Hill, but from the contentious states of India. For example, the experiments in grassroots self-government in Rajasthan, or the political-contractor complex that has destroyed the river system of Sikkim and is proceeding to do the same in Arunachal.

There is need for Nepal planners to understand Kerala, batter southwards from us in the Subcontinent, a state that has achieved the most in human development indicators (population 3.5m, literacy 96%, life expectancy 77 years, sex ratio, 1,084:1,000). How Kerala got there has to do with a legacy of education and political mobilisation that goes far beyond the contribution of Marxism through the ruling CPI-M. Indeed we have more to learn from Kerala than urbanisation. The immediate empathy derives from the historical ties that bind Kathmandu Valley to the Malayan world. Since the mid-1400s, Lord Pushpindraksh has been served by Namshoddr Shakshim from northern Nepal as chief abbot. There is an alternative view that it was Tailung Shakhim, slightly further north.

Regardless, one thanks the Lord (Pushpindraksh) for his historical, ultra-nationalist attempt by the Moslem in their first bout of state power in 2009 to disconnect this link to South-of-the-Vindhyas and challenged and voided. This connection to the Southern deep south tells us something about medieval Kathmandu’s reach and power.

A meeting in Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum) last week provided opportunity to study Kerala’s progress and, simultaneously, how India is doing under the Modi juggernaut (from the Puri Jagannath). There is enough cause for worry when populism has hit such a peak that even to question the logic and implementation of demonetisation (of 500 and 1,000 notes) is liable to attract accusations of “anti-national”. In terms of progress, Kerala is the Indian province that has gone furthest with local government. In attendance were Anna Roy and Nck Dey, who pioneered the drafting as well as country-wide implementation of India’s Right to Information Act. In Nepal, we are still stuck with the ritualistic use of the right, or wrongly consider it so as an appendage of press freedom. Roy and Dey have moved on to fight for the right to work, right to minimum wage, much of it through watchdogging the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Kerala seems to be where these initiatives are best implemented.

Panchayati Raj local government institutions languish in large parts of India, whereas Kerala has moved to incorporate it into the governance structure. The apanchak; or elected village leader, has adequate staff, infrastructure and authority, and the public at large is highly motivated and knowledgeable on cost estimates, expenditures, bills and vouchers.

If only Kerala was not so far away, it would be good to fill two or three budases of Nepal’s best and brightest and trundle down the Malabar coast. For Kerala also provided a window perspective on the rest of India.

To refer to some examples, there was the fear of activists that the digital Asha universal ID card, for all its advantages, accelerate surveillance of citizens by state authorities. A panel of activists talked about judicial...
accountability in India, where there is a need to abolish the death penalty (on this, Nepal is ahead).

The activists decried the tradition of post-retirement appointments which make High and Supreme Court judges kowtow to the political bosses. They spoke of the unconscionable delays in delivery of judgments, with more than 30 million cases pending in the courts across the land. Only public prosecutors are being allowed to enter the judiciary from the outside, whereas law professors, scholars and legal activists should be allowed access, said the panelists.

Human rights activist and film critic Harsh Mander said his foremost worry was about the deep sense of insecurity among Muslims of India, who felt unprotected under “right wing majoritarian triumphalism”. In a shocking reference, he said many Muslims were now using the name “Akkaal” (victims of the Daudi mob lynching in Uttar Pradesh) as a verb, indicating the “ongoing systematic construction of second-class citizens”.

On the more pleasant side, one was intrigued to see the then Finance Minister and Chief Secretary sitting in the podium, talking comfortably as equals and taking cues from each other during presentations. A far cry from the palpable obsequiousness of bureaucrats before minister, whether in New Delhi or Kathmandu.

A Kerala activist wryly asked participants from elsewhere not to get carried away by romantic visions of his state, as there were problems enough festering under the surface.

One wanted to ask: But is that not in the nature of things? Nothing is ever perfect in a democracy, with one always having to watchdog and course-correct. Sometimes things go from bad to worse, for which one only has to take a glance at the daily unravelling of American democracy. Locals like they could learn a thing or two - from the state of Kerala or the nation-state of Nepal.
TRANSPLANTING LOVE

On 14 February, celebrate the ultimate love of a man who gave his kidney to his wife.

SHREEJANA SHRISTHA

Bhoj Bahadur Chale wakes up at six every morning and prepares tea for his wife. As the rays of the rising sun strike the walls of their soft marigold-colored bedroom, they sip tea together and plan out the day. Every day together is a gift for this remarkable couple.

Five years ago, when both of Sabitri’s kidneys failed, Bhoj Bahadur stepped forward to donate his left kidney. This was highly unusual. Most of the 114 kidney transplants performed at Bir Hospital in the past year have been on husbands whose wives donated the kidneys. Bhoj Bahadur is one of the only five husbands who were donors.

“Who will save my wife if I don’t? I would not have been able to survive without her,” Bhoj Bahadur says, eyes brimming with tears. He overcame pressure from his own family not to donate his kidney.

Bhoj Bahadur, 44, was a migrant worker in Saudi Arabia and returned home to take care of his wife when she was diagnosed with renal failure. The kidney transplantation was done in 2012, and the couple remembers their meeting two days after the operation in the ICU of Bir Hospital as the happiest day of their lives.

Their eyes met, but neither uttered a word as tears rolled down their cheeks.

“I remember being so happy to see my wife breathing, and I forgot my own pain,” says Bhoj Bahadur, giving his wife a loving glance at their three-room rented flat in Gongabu.

Sabitri is from Lamjung and Bhoj Bahadur is from Tanahun. Their marriage 23 years ago was arranged by their families. She remembers thinking he was the
right man as soon as she saw him for the first time. So did he. When Sahishi became ill and needed a transplant, as luck would have it, Rijju Bahadur had the same blood group and Human Leukocyte Antigen (HLA) tissue which is necessary to match transplant patients.

Rajendra Agrawal, the surgeon who looked at their case remembers the couple had a unique bonding. “They are perfectly made for each other. It is the power of love, especially because it is so rare for a man to donate his kidney to his wife in our society,” Agrawal says. Rijju Bahadur always accompanies his wife when she has gone for checkups in the last few years. Apart from Bir Hospital, kidney transplantation is done at Tribhuvan University Teaching Hospital and Human Organ Transplant Centre, and records show that more than 90 per cent of the of the kidney donors are female.

After donating his kidney, Rijju Bahadur himself is physically fragile but he carries on with a smile on his face. He says his weakness and hardships do not compare to what his wife has had to endure. Neither is row fit enough to work, and depend on their extended families for their livelihood and educating their two children.

They help each other in household chores. They are dependent on their extended families for their livelihood and educating two children because they say they are not physically fit to work.

“I am fortunate to have a husband like him who risked his own life to save mine. I would have died if it were not for him,” she says, bursting into tears. Rijju Bahadur affectionately wipes the tear drops from her cheek. “Money cannot buy love and happiness. I just want to live the rest of my life with him.”

On 14 February, Nepal celebrate an improvised festival by gifting to their loved ones roses imported from India. This year, Flower Association of Nepal (FAN) has estimated that 300,000 rose pieces worth Rs 5 million will be imported from as far away as Bangalore and Pune. An additional 100,000 rose pieces will be sourced from within Nepal.

“We do not have the technology to grow roses in winter, so we need to depend on India,” nepaliyan Kumar Kajal of FAN. Kajal may not like it saying so, but you understand but there may want to rethink V-Day roses since they don’t last long, are wrapped in plastic and widen our trade deficit with India. Consider the carbon footprint of blossoms that have journeyed from so far away, and we are so not even going to remind you of the agronomists used for frostbite.

And we haven’t even told you about the Merely brand used in ornamental flower cultivation, which destroys the protective ozone layer in the stratosphere that shields harmful solar UVC radiation. Here Tuesday, instead of sprinkling on a kid’s shoe your loved one they’re special with these alternatives.

- Donate to a charity helping earthquake survivors
- Invest in a child’s future and support youth earning their education
- Get to those who cannot ask, care for local pets
- Send a handwritten card made from locally-sourced lokta paper
- Cut that’s sweet tooth on industrial-strength anti-pollution mask

Cultivating Partnerships
Figuring out what to do

Air pollution data is needed for an informed public and responsible decision making

**W hile in recent years we have been choking and coughing through ground-level air pollution, and Himalayan peaks have disappeared behind a regional haze, the larger picture of air pollution may be changing. The new widespread construction of roads and buildings in Kathmandu Valley’s roads has unleashed such terrible amounts of dust that action to reduce air pollution finally seems imminent. And to support this potential action, a state-of-the-art air pollution monitoring network in Nepal has begun broadcasting data to the public.**

The atmosphere team at ICIMOD has supported the development of new air pollution monitoring networks in Nepal and Bhutan. To date five stations are operational in Nepal: in Kathmandu (Ratna Park), Lalitpur (Chandrakanjana), Lalitpur (Kathmandu), Chitwan (Syangja), and certainkeyup. For the first time ever, we have instruments broadcasting real-time air quality information through the government’s data portal www.pollution.gov.np.

All of our stations measure PM2.5 and PM10, as well as meteorological parameters needed to interpret pollution data: sunlight, pressure, temperature, relative humidity, precipitation, wind speed, and wind direction. PM10 is the mass density of particulate matter smaller than 10 micrometres (think dust particles), while PM2.5 is the mass density of particulate matter smaller than 2.5 micrometres (primarily smoke particles). Historically, more attention has been paid to PM10, but in recent years there has been increased recognition of the threat impact of these particles like PM2.5 that can penetrate deeper into the lungs.

So far, seven half-hourly new stations will be added to the network, while at several station gas analysers that measure carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides and sulphur dioxide will also be brought online.

Recent data from the new stations provide notable insights:

- **Pollution levels started rising as soon as the last monsoon rain ends.**
- **Particulate levels are higher in the mornings and evenings than at midday or late at night.** The rising of the pollution peaks, however, do not coincide with rush hour as one might be expected. Rather, these peaks are a result of a complex interplay between emissions, and when and how the Valley is ventilated.
- **While the ground-level station at Ratna Park draws high PM10 levels due to wind-blown dust from nearby roads, PM2.5 levels at Ratna Park and on a 6th floor balcony point in Pulchowk show remarkably similar patterns, indicating that fine particles are fairly well mixed in the Valley’s air mass.**
- **The air at Pulchowk is significantly cleaner than in Pulchowk and Ratna Park, but Pulchowk does experience a small peak of pollution in the late morning as Kathmandu’s pollution blows through.**
- **Surprisingly, PM2.5 levels in Chitwan are often as high as in Ratna Park, while in Lumbini they are often much higher than in Kathmandu.** This means that air pollution is not a problem confined to the Kathmandu Valley. It is also common across southern Nepal due to the heavy use of open burning, use of biomass energy, and pollution that blows into Nepal from beyond its borders.

The new air pollution monitoring network allows us to track such trends over time, and to increase our understanding of the processes that influence pollution levels. In addition, this network will serve to inform the public about when to avoid exposure to dangerous levels of pollution. Residents of Kathmandu, for example, check PM2.5 levels before deciding to exercise outdoors.

The network will provide the basis for designing emergency response plans for cutting emissions when air pollution levels exceed certain pre-determined thresholds. We can learn from Paris and Mexico City which have successfully implemented these systems. In addition, the network will provide feedback on the effectiveness of our mitigation efforts. If you have a radar and a parabolic mirror, you would measure your temperature to see if the window is strong enough to block the light. If it doesn’t, you should take more action.

Because air pollution in Kathmandu Valley has multiple large sources, reducing it requires targeting emission sources in different sectors, addressing the lowest hanging fruits in road sector immediately, and then moving on to more difficult measures. In a task force report submitted to the National Planning Commission this week we have identified solutions in 12 areas, while highlighting six immediate steps.

ANNOUNCEMENT

**DATA DRIVEN: Aerosol Scientist Dr Praveen SP of ICIMOD and Shankar Paudel of the Department of Environment at the air pollution measuring station at Ratna Park this week.**

**SONIA AWALE**

**Like bells have been ringing about the dust that blankets Kathmandu, but experts say that vehicular exhaust is much more harmful.**

The earthquake, endless road-widening, and the dumping of construction material on sidewalks have all helped turn the Valley into a dust-bowl. But the increase in the number of vehicles and lack of emission control have led to a worrisome rise in the level of the most harmful pollutants.

The impact of air pollution on health isn’t limited to respiratory infections but is a leading cause of heart diseases and strokes,” said environmentalist Bhuvan Tuladhar. “And a major source of this pollution is transportation which will increase unless we invest in a proper mass transit system.”

Although the concentration of dust in the valley’s air is off the charts, dust particles are bigger and not necessarily toxic, meaning they are blocked in the nasal passage. However, diesel soot is microscopic, can be embedded deep in the lungs, and even be absorbed into the bloodstream.

The dust from the valley’s road widening therefore is a symptom, and not the disease. The dust will ultimately settle as the roads are completed. However, wider roads mean more cars and therefore more pollution in future.

Explained Tuladhar: “The problem is we haven’t seen beyond road-widening. We need to get over the fixation that a bigger road is better. The backbone of a transportation system in any city must be its public transport.”

Kathmandu’s poor air quality has become serious enough for the UN’s World Health Organization (WHO) to take notice and send Carlos Dora of its Department of Public Health in Geneva to Kathmandu last week. He told Nepal Times: “The government is widening roads and reducing sidewalks. That is going to increase pollution in the long run.”

The good news is that increasing public awareness is translating into government action. A task force led by the Department of Environment submitted a 12-point recommendation to the National Planning Commission on Wednesday which highlights the importance of improved mass transit (page 14-15).

Task force member Amico Panday, an atmosphere scientist at ICIMOD said: “PM2.5 particles below 2.5 microns is diesel exhaust is the most harmful. Measuring air quality helps us see trends and plan mitigation efforts.”

**Sonia Awale**

**In Senior Atmospheric Scientist and Programme Coordinator of the Atmepsheric Initiative at ICIMOD.**

**Every breath**

The impact of air pollution on public health can be minimised
Going up in smoke

You cannot solve a problem until you understand what the problem is. To effectively reduce Kathmandu’s horrendous air pollution crisis, scientists say, it is important to measure the nature of pollutants. Solutions must be data driven.

“While to why the Kathmandu-based International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) is collaborating with the Department of Environment set up air quality observatories in Rano Park, Pulchok, Dhulikel, Chhinchu, Lame and Langtang. The idea is to investigate the nature of pollution in Kathmandu and track the number of suspended particles from the Indo-Gangetic plains up to the Himalayas.”

“It is important to understand the emission and the meteorology that affects air pollution, so that we have effective mitigation measures that can solve both technical and behavioral issues,” said Bhupesh Adhikari, ICIMOD’s Air Quality Specialist, while inspecting the equipment at the Dhulikel observatory.

Apart from measuring particles with diameters of 1, 2.5 and 10 microns, the stations also have analyzers to measure carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides and other harmful gases. Scientists can then find out the source of pollutants, meteorological factors, transport pollutants, and propose mitigation methods.

Rano Park was chosen as an observatory site to represent Kathmandu, and the movement of pollutants from the Valley eastwards in the evenings is sampled in Dhulikel. The Chhinchu site measures air quality in the national park, while the Lame and Langtang observatories track the trans-basinal movement of pollutants. Measurements in Langtang have helped glaciologists understand increased melting of snow and ice due to global warming and wastewater deposits.

“We want to measure ultra-fine particles in the future and develop a model to forecast air quality like we do with weather and air quality levels,” said Shankar Prasad Paudel of the Department of Environment. “Ultimately we want to spread awareness about pollution so we can curb them at source.”

The WHO recommended Particulate Matter (PM) below 2.5 microns is 10 µg/m³, while Nepal’s national standard is set at 40 µg/m³. Even so, the concentration of PM2.5 in Kathmandu is several times higher than even the minimum national level for most of the day.

Most of the PM2.5 in Kathmandu comes from diesel exhaust from vehicles. While the use of generators has gone down with 24-hour power, the number of polluting vehicles is rising.

Brick kilns in Bhaktapur are another major source of air pollution in that area. Of the 107 kilns in the valley, 105 were damaged in the 2015 earthquake, but only 12 of them have been replaced with low-emission kilns.

The roads of Kathmandu were always dusty because they were poorly built and used to dump construction material. But after the earthquake and the road-widening campaign, the concentration of dust in the city’s air has become much worse. Recently pipe-laying work for the Melamchi Drinking Water Project has been a major source of pollution in the valley.

The dust levels are so unbearable that last week the Supreme Court directed the government to take immediate steps to reduce it. Although contractors laying water mains have started boxig down some roads, implementation is slumber.

Public health experts and urban planners say the problem with road-widening is not just the dust, but that wider roads will mean more traffic and more pollution.

Said the WHO’s Carlos Dora: “I see there are potential solutions to air pollution in Kathmandu. Narrow roads can be used for cycle and pedestrianisation, and some roads can be widened for bus lanes to reduce traffic.”

Environmentalist Bhusnath Tuladhar agrees: “Forty per cent of people in Kathmandu travel by foot. If we pedestrianise some roads, the pollution will go down. Expansion of roads where needed is essential but we can’t have a car-centric development, we need people-centric development.”

th you take

 organised by improving Kathmandu’s public transport system.
Events

**Women of the World**
Mark your calendars for Women of the World Festival, a one-day festival to celebrate women & girls’ featuring talks, workshops, performances and more.
14 February, 11 am to 8 pm, Stuff College, Jawalakhel. (01) 4101746, (01) 4101747, (01) 4101748, 9849192633

**Movie talk**
Attend the screening and discussion on the film ‘Jakerwa’ directed by lka Pival and Majid Farter.
23 February, 3 pm onwards, Martin Chaurasi, Thapathali. Free. (Contact: (01) 4138650, 4101207, 4112453, 9849192633)

**Namo Buddha pilgrimage**
Embark on a one-day pilgrimage tour to Namo Buddha, a monastery located in Kavre district. 14 February, 7:30 am to 5 pm. Meeting point 7:30 am at Kathmandu Park. For more details: 9849154560/9849120334/9868179253. kbs@gmail.com

**Celebrating Marley**
Celebrate the life international reggae sensation Bob Marley’s Birthday with Gusthaest and The Himalatams. 10 February, 8 pm onwards, Base Camp Outdoor Café, 9849128697, Cover charges Rs. 300

**Reggae night**
Herve Nepal, reggae band join Family Internationale set out some of their hits as part of the Bikkhu history Month series. 15 February, 8 to 11 pm, House of Music, Thamel. (01) 4760727, Deep cell. 300

**Jazzy evening**
Trip to the brash as Adhira Sunar and group play up-beat jazz rock numbers. 15 February, 7 to 10 pm, Hotel Pacific, Thamel. (01) 4760727

**Dining**

**Dining**

**Lhapka Chulo**
Try the tender steak and Thai style salads.
(01) 5542986

**Pauline’s Garden**
A easy place in the heart of Kathmandu serving fresh and Gokari cuisine as well as Nepali dishes. Happy hours every Thursday.
Pauline’s Garden, Brikishwar (Closed on Mondays). (01) 4221539/9839735535

**Mezze by Roadhouse**
S sprintf a suspended at one of Kathmandu’s most popular restaurants. Mercure Plaza, Donkhar Marg, (01) 4232808

**Hyatt Hotel**
Participate in a luxurious overnight stay or a relaxing massage. Stay for a romantic experience and a spread of sumptuous five-course meal in the hotel’s famed restaurant, Taxi. 14 February, on 2nd floor for every couple (stater), Rs. 9,999. Overnight stay excluding drinks, Rs. 15,990 per couple (valid until 28 February)

**The Factory**
Celebrate the day with your loved one with an unplugged session featuring Nepali band Kaathai. Enjoy a special bar and food menu as well.
14 February, 6 pm onwards. The Factory, Thamel. (01) 4761185

**Musical night**
Spots a musical Valentine’s night with your loved ones as Nepali band Rekha featuring some romantic numbers. 14 February, 7 to 11 pm, Lolo Lounge, Kamalpith, 9861016861
Teller of tales

Noted Swiss author who made bedtime stories enchanting is visiting Kathmandu next week for a children’s book festival

SMRITI BASNET

When The Rainbow Fish was first published in 1997, Swiss author Marcus Pfister’s multi-colored fish with hologram foil was a sensation in the world of children’s book publishing. The book combined his two strengths: art and storytelling. Pfister’s self fish not only taught children a valuable lesson in sharing, but also showed how children’s stories could be made to come alive with creative design.

It has been 25 years since The Rainbow Fish came out. Pfister has published many more books since but it is this one that stands out. Looking back, he regrets working too hard and too fast on his books and wishes he had more time to develop the stories. Many children who are now in their twenties may not agree, for them the books were perfect as it were, and inspirational.

“The most important aim that a picture book can achieve is to bring parents and children together for 15 minutes a day in a very intimate way,” the award-winning author told Nepali Times as he prepared to fly out to Nepal from Bern, where he is now based.

For as long as he can remember, Pfister says he had a deep fondness for drawing and storytelling, but it was not until he gave his entrance exams at the Art School Bern did he realise its true value and saw an opportunity in the field. His first picture book was The Sleepy Owl in 1986, and since then he has written 50 more books, selling over 30 million copies in 50 languages. Questions Questions, Happy Birthday Bertie and The Yellow Cat have been translated into Nepali as well.

This year, he is looking to publish two more books, a new title in the The Rainbow Fish series and a picture book without any text, using just illustrations and emojis, in September.

“As an artist you just feel the need to invent new stories, techniques, artwork and concepts,” said the 57-year-old artist. Apart from the hologram foil, the author has experimented with pop-ups, die-cuts, and innovative folding techniques in his books, making them all the more exciting for children.

Children’s books have a power to lay the foundation for their early years, Pfister says, “It’s the first step to discover a new fantasy.”

The author/artist does not limit himself to simple adventure stories, they all come with an embedded message: friendship, modesty, tolerance, understanding alphabets, and appreciation of the environment and nature.

“To see the bright eyes of children while you are telling them a story, what could be more moving than that?” he asks. However, Pfister is disillusioned by how parents today are not willing to invest as much time reading to their children.

Pfister will be attending the Balkahya Mahabhairav Festival Gee bed in Kathmandu next week and conducting hands on trainings on drawing and inventing new characters.

“This is my first time in Nepal,” he says. “I am waiting for the country to take me by surprise.”

**Literature for little ones**

Balkahya Mahabhairav is an annual children’s literature festival and features readings, art and drama workshops, live performances, book stalls, and the book bus. The festival will have guest speakers from Nepal as well as Swiss author Marcus Pfister, and writers from the Kanker Project from India. This is the third consecutive festival Rato Bangala School is organising, and this year the two books in Sinhalese will also be launched. The festival will also have children’s book reading under the Pipal tree in Fatu Utrika.

18 February 10 am to 5 pm
Rato Bangala School, Rs. 200 per person
Pipal tree events are free

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HIDDEN FIGURES

There are nine films nominated this year for the Academy Awards Best Picture category, and while I have not yet seen them all (with four down, and some to go) I can already tell that Hidden Figures will be my favourite.

While La La Land (reviewed last week in this column) is the front-runner for the award, and Manchester By the Sea boasts the heavy weight that these films demand, with Ken Lonergan, an extremely talented playwright turned even more finessed director, and the likes of Casey Affleck and Michelle Williams in the cast, Hidden Figures with its feel-good story and lovable characters doesn’t really stand much of a chance – except that the film is based on the incredible true story of a number of black women who worked at NASA starting in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, making crucial computations as mathematicians and engineers, helping to put the first Americans in space and on the moon.

Adapted from the non-fiction book of the same name by Margot Lee Shetterly, the film follows closely the lives of the mathematicians Katherine Goble Johnson (the lovely, intelligent Taraji P Henson), Dorothy Vaughan (the magnificent Octavia Spencer), and engineer Mary Jackson (the feisty, boundary breaking musician Janelle Monáe) the three brilliant women who are the most famous of the team of black women who contributed for NASA but were never recognised at the time.

The film works so well because of the strength of the characters and the incredible charisma of the actors playing these women who struggled, with humour and with grace, to raise families and against all expectations to excel in their fields. Feats that are now finally acknowledged with the book, the film, and a 2015 Presidential Medal of Honour for Johnson (there is also now a wing named after her at Langley).

At a time when an American President threatens to open up deep divides within the U.S. and without, Hidden Figures is a film with a formidable reminder of the injustices perpetuated by white people against those whose only difference from them was the amount of melanin in their skin.

Katherine Johnson, the most brilliant mathematician in her generation was forced to use a separate coffee pot than her white male colleagues; Dorothy Vaughan fought to be promoted to supervisor even while eminently qualified, and Mary Jackson went to court to be allowed to attend night classes at a school that only allowed Caucasians.

The achievements of these women threaten to be undone in ugly times like this when people are barred from their freedom (of movement, to speak out based on religion and skin colour). It is a shame that Ms Johnson would have to see a day when a man like the deeply racist Steve Bannon has gained crucial access to such a powerful post in the White House.

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SHREEJANA SHRESTHA

HIGHWAY ROBBERY

Nepal’s public transport is in the grip of cartels which will stop at nothing to prevent competition

SHREEJANA SHRESTHA

Last month, a bus cartel in Bhaktapur sent a letter to the Route Permit Division of the Transport Management Office. Dated 16 January 2016, it ordered the government agency responsible for regulating public transport not to allow City Yakay to operate on the Bhaktapur route with its spacious, new buses. The letter from the Mahadipur Yakay Sadbhav Committee warns: “If you want us to remain friends, don’t let City Yakay run in our bus routes from Dakshin Bazaar, Thimi, Sano Thimi, Pepal Cola, Gupta and Jorpati.”

Talha Oshahare Minibus Entrepreneurs Association which has a monopoly on the ‘Talha route, warned the Transport Management Office of violence if new permits were given for the route, and warned that new permits should not be issued without its consent. It warned “if new buses are allowed to ply in Talha, there will be violence and vandalism on the road.”

In November, Suya Yakay added 30 new buses to its fleet to improve public transportation in Kathmandu Valley, but private operators have taken the operator’s service expansion as a direct threat. The Bhaktapur Minibus Service Committee, for example, wrote to the Transport Management Office and warned it not to allow Suya to operate on the Bhaktapur route. “If Suya buses are allowed here, our transport system will fail, and committees will have to face hardship.”

The Small-Horse Vehicle Section of the Transport Management Office in Bakhtapur Kuna receives so many threatening letters from private bus cartels that they don’t even raise eyebrows anymore. Threats of violence have become the norm, and this is the main reason public transport is in such a sorry state in Kathmandu.

There are more than 250 bus ‘committees’ registered under the Federation of National Transport Entrepreneurs (FNTSE) and they are actually cartels that want to protect route monopolies at all cost – by threatening the government and new bus companies.

The comfort of commuters and public service is not the priority of the bus mafia that is said to enjoy political protection – some of them are even owned by senior bureaucrats and security officials.

Last week, a Nepal Times reporter approached the Bagmati Zone Chief of the FNTSE, Dharma Rimal, posing as a potential investor interested in operating new buses on the Kathmandu-Bhaktapur route. Without mincing words, Rimal warned the reporter: “Careful, there might be problems for you if your new buses operate without our consent.”

Rimal continued in a threatening tone: “It is we who decide who is allowed and who is not on this route. You will regret it if you defy us.”

When asked how some transport syndicates appear to be more powerful than the government, an official at the Transport Management Office admitted: “The FNTSE is so powerful the government just cannot go against it. The kind of threats we receive if we issue route permits without their consent is frightening.”

Hemanta Shrestha of City Yakay wanted to operate on the Bhaktapur route, but got only a limited permit to operate 10 high capacity modern buses from Dakshin Bazaar just up to Pepal Cola. Shrestha freely admitted to us that the only reason he secured the permit was because of his own political connections.

“I was told by other entrepreneurs not to operate big buses because it would take their business away,” he said.

A report submitted two years ago, the Kathmandu Sustainable Urban Transportation Project (KUSUTP) recommended restructuring bus routes into three tiers with eight small routes for 17-m buses, 15 mediumsize routes for 40 -50 passengers and 40 routes for medium-size buses and 40 routes for small public vehicles.

Supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the report is politically unacceptable at present. Current bus cartels would have to run as amalgamated companies and compete with each other.

“Since KUSUTP allows the recommendations need political will for implementation.”

“Transportation entrepreneurs have to understand that we are not trying to\ndisplace their business. We are trying to restructure the routes to improve the quality of service,” he says.

KUSUTP is reserving a pilot project to run 17 medium-size buses in the Sankhuwasabha-Ramosalkhola-Mugling routes and negotiating with the syndicates that dominate the route.

Brijendra Sagar, an expert at the Department of Transport Management told Nepal Times: “We are relocating small public vehicles to the tertiary routes proposed by the KUSUTP.”

Meanwhile, the Transport Management Office will stop renewing route permits of small public vehicles other than 20 seats from 31st March as part of public transport management in the valley.
Shot by the bus mafia

Bus syndicates are so powerful they will stop at nothing when it comes to protecting their interests, as Jeevan Thakali, JMC’s director, found out just 13 years ago when he was chief of the Transportation Management Office for Gandaki zone in Pokhara.

Despite threats from the bus mafia, Thakali issued permits for new 19 minibuses, 23 trucks, and eight mini coaches on the Kathmandu-Pokhara route. The syndicate operators protested to his office for months but Thakali didn’t back down.

One day he was walking in Kathmandu, he fell on the ground. On regaining consciousness after four days, he found himself at Tilak Hospital with a gunshot wound in his hip that paralysed him for months.

I analyzed the capability and public demand and issued permits accordingly. I didn’t give in to threats or offers of bribe. But look at me now, I am disabled. I have lost hope that the police will ever catch the culprits,” says Thakali, as he tops his new job at the Ministry of Physical Infrastructure and Transport.

He is convinced public transportation will remain shoddy and dangerous until the bus mafia is dismantled and the regulator freed from political interference.

What also helped was Sherchan’s affiliation with a transport committee close to the UML, and he is also an adviser to the FNTE. He revealed that all members of the transport federation have to be close to one party or other.

Frighteners and vandalism are the norm when the government tries to increase capacity on routes or allow better bus services to new operators. Officials who have tried to end the monopolies have never been successful, and may even face violent attacks like a transport office in Pokhara who was shot and injured in 2006 (see box, above).

Basanta Adhikari, the new chief at the Transport Management Office, denies there is any undue pressure. “We have nothing to do with any transportation committee and we are against syndicates,” Adhikari said defiantly. “We are free to issue new route permits as per the existing laws.”

However, the reality does not bear this out. Fees market policies adopted by the government in the 1990s were supposed to improve the quality of public transport, but the sector is in the stranglehold of cartels.

Not only are city and long distance bus services unreliable and uncomfortable, they are also downright dangerous — more than 16,000 people have been killed on roads in the last 10 years because of reckless driving, poor maintenance, overcrowding, and the lack of investment in upgraded services.

Poor maintenance of obsolete vehicles also means that bus exhausts are a major source of fine particles and gases in the Kathmandu air. Particles below 2.5 microns in diesel fuel bonds digestive illnesses and lungs can be absorbed into the bloodstream, causing cancers (see page 9-8).

There are more than 10,000 public buses operating in over 200 routes in the valley, but most are overcrowded, ad hoc and offer poor quality service in ramshackle buses. The government’s effort to phase out smaller public vehicles in favour of buses will make workers hang on to their jobs.”

Tulsi Shrestha, former Secretary at the Ministry of Physical Infrastructure and Transport, says the only path to more efficient public transport and cleaner air quality is to dismantle syndicates: “The government has the power to shut down all transportation committees and break the monopoly, but it doesn’t dare do it.”

Currently, Sajila Yatat is the only semi-government cooperative. More than 250 transportation committees are functioning as NGOs despite repeated calls from the government to get registered as companies under the transportation law.
The naked truth

Over the years, we media watchdogs have watched with growing alarm the erosion of journalistic values in this country as the Fourth Estate becomes obsessed with real issues, and turns to full attention to mammon and mammonies.

To make matters worse, certain lazy young reporters who have requested anonymity because they are afraid to call themselves mediapersons still insist on just reporting the facts and leave out all the tragic, unjust, and pronounced notions they have nurtured since adolescence.

Whatever happened to good old-fashioned bias? Where is the editorialism? Why are we so content to pursue alternative facts and fake news when these are sanctioned in the post-truth age? If journalism don’t have the hubris to stand up to what they believe in, and back that up with views masquerading as news, then I’ll tell you what I consider a shame to any longer remain in this profession. I quit.

Our readers do not need hydropaths; they need analysis (from the Latin, “to think” – leaking “anal” – bashed). And the only people who can administer the supposed are registered armchair analysists who are officially certified to pontificate on any subject under the sun.

Today, young scholars (and phantoms) think opinion is only for the opinion pages. What rubbish. Journalism schools should start teaching students that their job is not just to report the facts but to decide them. In fact, facts should never be allowed to get in the way of a good argument. Especially if that argument coincides with our own. But alas, standards are slipping and ultimately it is you, our valued clients, who end up being duped.

This is its correspondent’s objective and neutral opinion that journalism without bias is like chicken without chilli. "After all, admitting to having a prejudice is being truthful. Political correctness itself reveals ignorance of other people’s viewpoints," this correspondent said to himself in an off-the-record interview while reporting this objective opinion piece.

So, to make up for telling you down, this week, the Ass gives you a completely unbiased summary of this country’s current politics. (Oh! No. The opinion expressed in the following snippet of objective news item is the reporter’s own and in no way reflects the prevailing situation in the country.)

Deuba divorces Dahal
By a Congressite correspondent

KATHMANDU — Ex-prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba’s India PM Dahal is distantly fumbling an election to prevent him from being ex-Pm for the fourth time. He has therefore filed for divorce. He had tied the knot with the evildoer and other that boosted into bed with the Republicans. He openly flirted with Dahal and wound him away from his ex. Dahal, but now marriage is now said to be on the rocks. This Ballerina's Day, alert readers will recall that Brave Lion once performed congress with the Congress, but the new Prime Minister is now on the verge of breaking with Mr. Needy over the appointment of the new IGP.

It is the considered opinion of this correspondent that he should be made Prime Minister once more. The man deserves it just for the patience he has shown so far to stage a comeback. And if you don’t agree with me, you can go stuff it.

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