Walk the talk

Vehicles Free Zone
सवारी साधन निषिद्ध होना

Winter-like weather has come early to Kathmandu Valley this year, and with it the temperature inversion layer that traps pollution. Already in early October, visibility has been so poor that there are massive delays in flights in and out of Kathmandu airport. Suspended dust particles from unfinished road works, increased emissions from the growing number of vehicles and brick kiln emissions in Kathmandu have added to transboundary pollution from crop fires and soot particles blown in from northern India by prevailing winds.

A study by the Energy Policy Institute at the University of Chicago last week added proof about how air pollution is shortening the lifespan of people in Asia’s most-polluted cities. Given that Kathmandu Valley’s air quality is even worse than in New Delhi and Beijing on most winter mornings, this should be cause for grave concern. Residents of Kathmandu, the Tarai and Chitwan could have their lives shortened by as much as four years because of foul air.

In an online survey by Cede for Nepal, more than three-quarters of respondents said Kathmandu’s air quality was undermining their health. In written suggestions and responses, some actually said their decision to emigrate abroad was based on deteriorating air quality. (Read more page 8-9)

Last winter, there was unprecedented public outrage as pollution levels stayed at dangerously high levels for weeks on end. The reason was dust particles from road expansion and building reconstruction. Dust was visible, but the really dangerous pollution was from diesel fumes. In one year, the number of vehicles in Kathmandu has grown from 925,000 to 1,042,000, meaning that this year the concentration of toxic emissions will be even worse.

Kathmandu’s municipalities and Traffic Police have proved they can end drinking and driving and honking and require vehicles to stop at zebra crossings by enforcing strict fines. They are planning to do the same now to punish vehicles that spew out more than the permissible limit of soot and gases in their exhaust.

“We are now cracking down on air pollution, and have launched a drive to fine vehicles with smoky exhausts. We have fined 80 vehicles in the past week alone,” says Surbendra Khanal, Chief of the Metropolitan Traffic Police.

The Metropolitan City has also pedestrianised Thamel’s main streets, pictured above on Wednesday evening, and plans to extend this to congested areas like Asan, Patan and Bhaktapur. It’s also expected to follow suit by restoring car bans on roads leading to their Darbar Squares.

Public anger about poor air quality and worry about its impact on health forced the authorities to act. However, a lot more needs to be done to reduce the number of vehicles in Kathmandu and experts say that will only happen if public transport is made more reliable and convenient.

As environmentalist Thuban Tuwalhar told this paper: “Better public health is directly linked to better public transport.”

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WHAT'S IN IT FOR US?

A
n in-depth report by Om Astha Rai in last week's edition of this paper (see page 8) delved into plans to build large reservoirs on Nepal's rivers showed how electricity generation and geopolitics make for a volatile mix. Joint river projects between India and Nepal have always been a political potato, even after bringing down governments in the past because of accusations by the opposition that they sold the country down the river.

And when the opposition gained power after elections, it went on to repeat exactly what its predecessor in government had done.

Politicians have discovered the hard way that water is an inflammatory topic. Yet, a cool-headed analysis of Nepal's dam-building requirements shows that the country's need for extra electricity generation capacity to meet seasonal and daily peak demand cannot be met with existing run-of-river schemes.

The time has come to think big dams, while minimizing their environmental and social costs. Searching for water from Himalayan rivers could in future also be sold to India at a premium, and multi-purpose reservoir projects have other benefits like irrigation, flood control, fisheries, navigation, and tourism.

Unfortunately, Nepal's experience with border bargains like the Kosi, Gandaki and Mahakali, have left a historical legacy of distrust of India. Till today, the public perception is that the irrigation schemes on Nepal's three big rivers are symmetrical and iniquitous. The strategy of Nepal's planners, power-makers and rulers over bilateral river projects for the past 40 years, therefore, has been to do nothing. Our cunning plan has been to not propose any projects, and delay as much as possible what has been agreed. We are so clever we will be able to sit back, perhaps just let our hunger for water flow unused down to the sea.

As a thought experiment, what if the flow of the Ganges is from Nepal's four main rivers, which start beyond the mountains in China. The Chars rivers are already a level of a suggestion that these dry up most of the year and turn into raging torrents during the monsoon. It is estimated that 90% of the annual flow of the Ganges is from tributaries in Nepal and most of that goes down in these months July, August and September. It makes sense for India, therefore, to construct a series of storage projects using large reservoirs to regulate the flow of Nepal's rivers for flood control and dry-season irrigation demand.

Planned well, these projects can also generate power and benefit the Nepali Tamii with irrigation and flood control.

Nepal and India need to start on a clean slate on bilateral river basin cooperation, for the benefit of the peoples of both our countries. Make that frugal, since regulated flow of the Ganges will also ultimately benefit Bangladesh. But such cooperation has to be fair, just and the cost-benefit sharing should be proportionate. It is in India's national interest to ensure that the Nepalis people accept the building of reservoirs that will permanently submerge their villages, but they first need to be convinced that the benefits will make inundation worthwhile.

For its part, the Nepal government must change its dog-toe-manger policy, and respect international law as it pertains to the rights of the lower riparian.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during his visit to Nepal in 2016, was able to restore the trust of most Nepalis that India would not act by a bully, and instead try to be a benevolent and magnanimous older brother. In a speech to Nepal's Parliament he announced that the flagship Panchaswar Project on the western border river would be a symbol of this new start.

Much water has flowed down the Mahakali since then; there were the talks and there have been four prime ministers in Nepal. Prime Minister Deuba signed the original Mahakali Treaty during his leadership tenure 20 years ago. During his visit to New Delhi in August he said that the detailed project report for Panchaswar would be finalized within a month. But negotiations are still stalled over sharing irrigation water on the Sarda Canal downstream on the same river.

Nepal-India relations should not be governed by each person's personal political enlightenment self-interest should allow people in India and Nepal to benefit from close economic, cultural and political ties. Indian investments can kickstart Nepal's infrastructure and energy projects to boost tourism, manufacturing and services to create jobs here. It takes but two hands to clap, and cooperation is only possible with mutual trust based on principles of fairness. Successive rulers in Kathmandu have kept Nepal a level of a suggestion for India for political advantage at home. Nationalism is synonymous with India bashing, and New Delhi has often obliged by playing Big Brother.

Balanced negotiations also mean we need bureaucrats and politicians in Kathmandu who actually understand water issues in general, and the technicalities of large reservoirs in particular, so that they can safeguard Nepal's long-term interests.

Neither the government of Nepal nor India will be inextricably linked with downstream benefits of regulated flow of water and both have to be factored in when there are future bilateral negotiations. From here on, Nepal's strategy for hydro-diplomacy with India over river reservoirs has to result in an answer to the question: "What's in it for us?"

DIRTY WINTER

With the early arrival of winter, Kathmandu's air pollution is already getting worse due to emissions from road vehicles, tractors and traditional cooking stoves. With this view of the city's residents cope with dirty, grey winter.

This week, Nepal has a chance on Air Quality Index and air pollution levels as Ozone 3.5 concentrations in Kathmandu. Kathmandu, Dec 8 at 24.80 PM for the week's pollution measurement.

Also this week, check out the online survey of what Kathmandu residents think of public transport in your city that we conclude this week. Check the results online or for offline survey discussions and chats with the report.

On the road

By Jayanta Basnet

The deplorable state of our roads is creating a nightmare for drivers, particularly those who commute to and from the city center by road. This is undoubtedly the worst time for road users, as we face icy weather conditions and slippery roads. It is a common sight to see vehicles sliding on the road, with many drivers losing control over their vehicles.

The situation is dire, and we need to take immediate action to improve road conditions. This can be achieved by regular maintenance and timely repair of roads, ensuring that they are safe and conducive for both drivers and pedestrians.

In addition, we should also promote public transport and reduce the number of private vehicles on the road. This will not only reduce traffic congestion but also help decrease pollution levels.

The government must take responsibility and take steps to improve the road conditions. Road safety and the well-being of our citizens should be the top priority.

Online packages

WHAT'S TRENDING

Reservoirs of suspicion

The proposal of water is an alarming plan that will have long-term consequences for both Nepal and India. The construction of large reservoirs will not only affect the environment but also lead to conflicts between the two countries.

I believe that it is crucial for both nations to come to a mutual agreement, taking into consideration the interests and concerns of each other. It is important to ensure that the benefits of such projects are shared equally.

Disastrous Politics

Large capital-intensive projects inside Nepal are naturally fuelled by a high degree of corrupt politics (Researchers of suspicion, Om Astha Rai, 4886). This is not only in hyperpower and Nepali elites but also in the sectoral policies that do not involve major construction or international procurement contracts. For the last 10 years, 100% of Nepali and Indians no there, therefore, very little to show in terms of development projects, say myself drinking water project, now under construction for nearly a quarter century, being one of the most notorious.

There is no hope unless Nepal's corruption-proof politics is replaced to structurally foster policies to be clean, transparent, and accountable. When such projects also involve the upper political region, India, it works, because its policy towards its neighbours has all along been that they don't need help. Deserving the cold hands of Manmohan Singh.

Bhikhu Shrestha

Unfortunately, our foreign policy has always been ‘party centric’, with the interest of the country lying at the rock bottom. We feel sorry for not having anyone with the calibre of King Mahendra.

Anupam

Likely the movie

Contrary to the initial review, I personally liked the movie, and the whole audience in the hall were also thoroughly enjoying. Chharka Pampa J. (Sahana Sherman), 4886. The humor may not appeal to the politically correct judgmental smokes from Kathmandu’s educated elite, but it tackles head-on the main message of the counterpart of Nepali politics as we know it. In scenes over Nepal people are laughing while watching the film, and in doing so, they are also forced to reflect and laugh at their own predicament.

Sneha D
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A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER
Lhotshampa, Rohingya
Burma's pernicious populism and a preoccupied world abandon the Rohingya

ON THE WAY UP
Kanak Maro Durr

More than 100,000 were beat up under the son-of-the-soil 'Dring Lam Namira' banner, to live as refugees for nearly two decades in Nepal before they were fortunate enough with third country resettlement in the West.

The Lhotshampa, too, were regarded as Bhutanese citizens until the harsh state decided to generate statelessness, with a scruffled oath policy that spread fear among the targeted community. The fleeing Lhotshampa entered India, which for its own considerations facilitated the transfer of the refugees to Nepal, where they were put up in camps by the UNHCR.

The bulk of the Lhotshampa were invited to the largely uninhabited southern hills of Druk Yui by the Bhutan nobility, the settlers providing revenue to state coffers. But as the economic and strategic value of the southern hills became apparent in the modern era, and as fear of cultural inundation built up alongside the 1985 Citizenship Act and 1988 census, the Druk government activated its depopulation machine as directed by the then king, Jigme Singye Wangchuk.

In 1992, I was on the ground watching the desperate Lhotshampa arrive by the banks of Mai Khola in Jhapa from their homes in Samchi, Chiring, Gelephug and other parts. The scale of eviction of Rohingyas is exponentially more horrendous as the fleeing mass of humanity was filmed on land and sea and by airborne drones. The tragedy is ongoing, and the number of Rohingyas' refugees in Bangladesh is hitting the one million mark even as this is being written, which includes those here since 1992.

The Rohingyas' historical home has been the Rakhine region on Burma's west coast, and they were regarded as citizens when the country became independent in 1948, and thereafter as well. Things began to go awry following the military takeover of 1962, and the 1974 Constitution and Citizenship Act of 1982 ended up wresting citizenship from the Rohingyas. The tragedy escalated to

unbearable proportions because the Rohingyas are stateless within Burma. The non-Muslim Rakhine people, then, faced Rakhine religious influx, the other nationalities of Burma, the military, bureaucracy, political class or civil society, all seem to be agreed they are 'Bengali' foreigners.

Anti-Rohingya populism within Burma is so virulent that the stand-alone leader and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi seems embroiled in the strategy may be that her mindset is at one with the chauvinists, which has her ignoring calls for reversal from Diamond Tutu, the Dalai Lama, Malala Younsaidi, the UN Secretary General, as well as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the last terming the Rohingya tragedy a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing".

Suu-Kyi, evidently in isolated existence of the capital Naypyidaw, cannot even bring herself to mouth the term 'Rohingya'. On the day she delivered her Nobel address in Oslo back in 2012, her response to the rape, arson, looting and mass displacement of the Rohingyas was as I wrote then in *Lady Liberty and the Ethnic Cauldron in Myan Myanma* (Southwest Asia) to equivocate rather than speak directly to the human tragedy: the 60,000 refugees in the absence of proper citizenship legislation, a 'heart-hearted' response of a politician (who was inactive to their enforced statelessness, Laurentianism and the right to life and livelihood).

The rounds of violence and the exodus to Bangladesh began in 1978. There was another bout of depopulation in 2012, and the latest and ongoing eviction on 25 August, following reported attacks by Rohingyas militants which killed 12 Burmese border police. In exactly two months, 604,000 Rohingyas have fled to Bangladesh after their houses were torched by the main Rakhine inhabitants. Violated and killed. Within Burma, there are said to be another 156,000 kept in internment camps, with
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The 11th edition of Film Southasia begins on 2 November

Save Gangamaya Gopal Shrivakoti

Gangamaya and Norsa Pauldak, a couple from Nepal, begin a hunger strike in front of the residence of Nepal's Prime Minister demanding justice for the 2014 murder of their teenage son Krishna Prasad Shrivakoti. Authorities arrested brutally beating them to death in Kathmandu. On 22 July 2014, Norsa Prasad died after 333 days of fasting. On 19 Oct. 2014, Nepal's government promised justice to Gangamaya and persuaded her to end her own 353 day fast unto death. The murders of Krishna Prasad still haven't been brought to book, and the last rites of her husband haven't yet been performed. Gangamaya sought justice through the courts as citizen should, but the administration was not by providing justice. She, despite deteriorating health, Gangamaya once again began her indefinite hunger strike and is being force-fed intravenously.

Born Behind Bars Malati Rao

Prisons are for punishment. Part of the price that incarcerated mothers pay is losing their right to bring up their children into the outside world. In India, children can accompany their mothers in prison till they are six. The film explores the trials and tribulations of such children, who are living the first phase of their lives inside the Special Prison for Women in Hyderabad. As the jail organises a school and attempts to educate the children toReverse the cycle of crime and misery, the kids learn their own lessons of life and moral ambiguity. The film offers a passage into the lost world of children living inside prison walls for no fault of their own and their tentative journey to make sense of it all despite the odds.

The Scar Pradip Ghosh

Year 1999. The 12th National Conference of the country’s largest cultural organisation, Bangladesh Uchchi Shidtpasha, was going on at the open arena of Town Hall in Dhaka. On the last day of the three-day event, 10 people were killed in a bomb attack by communal terrorists. The attack hasn’t stopped yet, targeting in a regular basis either a political party or the public.

Burmese Storybook Petr Lom & Corinne van Egeraat

Burmese Storybook is a creative documentary about a country emerging from years of dictatorship, told through Burmese poetry. The film circles around the story of the country’s most famous dissident poet living today, as he waits for his long-lost son to come home.

K2 and the Invisible Footmen Lara Lee

In K2 the Invisible Footmen, filmmaker Lara Lee, and learn about the lives of Pakistani and Nepalese Sherpas. The film also follows the first official all-Pakistani climbing team, made up of former farmers, who successfully summited in 2014 on the occasion of K2’s 60th anniversary.

While the audience for documentaries is growing, screening opportunities are still limited. And although film-making has become less expensive, making a profit is still difficult. “Non-fiction is something that needs a lot of encouragement,” says Varma, “because even today if youngsters are going into it as a career they need a lot of dedication because the money lies in either features or advertisements.”

With the goal to encourage new filmmakers and bring others from around the world to discuss non-fiction film and promote mutual understanding, Film Southasia is back with a new edition.

This time out it will showcase 63 films from Nepal, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Burma. Of them, 12 will be shown under the non-competitive ‘Documentary of Dessert’ category, introduced this year with a special focus on India. Six others will be screened under the ‘Student Films’ category, which showcases works by the next generation of Film makers. The 45 Films in the competitive section will vie for five awards. The Ram Sahukar Trophy will go to the best film, along with a cash prize of $2,000. The runner-up will be awarded $1,000. The best debut film will merit the Tareq Manu Award and $1,000, the UNESCO Award will go to the Best Film on Children’s issues ($1,000) and the award for Best Student Film will merit $500. To make it easier for the audience to choose what to watch, organisers have grouped the films by themes. For example, on Day 1 the audience can watch six films around feminism, gender, sexuality and rights at the Majlis Hall of Tulas Muya, followed by a panel discussion. Organisers are also launching an app this year to make it easier for the audience to keep tabs on the schedule.

It is difficult times for everyone across South Asia so I think the filmmakers are also sharper and more insightful, and they are doing wonderful films,” says Varma.

SAHINA SHRESTHA

6 NATION

27 OCTOBER - 2 NOVEMBER 2017 • B881

T justified in the spirit of cinema, the film depicts the every-day suffering of the early part of those hideous crimes who chose to return to scale K2 in spite of past tragedies. In striving to perfect their craft, these mountaineers practice a fresh lens into the culture and many traditions of Pakistan, a country typically portrayed in the foreign media as merely a land of conflict and sectarian strife.

Visit www.filmssonthasia.org for the complete schedule for the festival.
Nilaam’s dream

IN UDAYPUR

I t is not often that one comes across a 12-year-old schoolgirl tearing down the street on her bike. But today, Nilam made a splash. Her cycling skills were evident as she zoomed around on her two-wheeler.

Nilam’s mother, Sonja, a nurse in the nearby hospital, asked her daughter to accompany her to work. However, Nilam, who is a student in class 8, refused to go. She explained that she had to go to school and that she needed to complete her assignments.

Nilam’s school, Sunita Memorial Girls High School, is located in the heart of Udaipur, a city renowned for its beautiful lakes and temples. The school is well-known for its academic excellence and sports activities.

“I don’t want young girls to go through the same hardships that I did. I would like them to have the support of their family. Despite my past, I’m happy that I have been able to send my younger cousins to school and be a part of their education,” she says.

In the past decade, Nilam has seen the needs of women in this rural district change. With social media like Facebook, many girls are now falling victim to cyber predators wanting to abuse young women or lure them to migrate. She sees an urgent need for media literacy, especially among young rural women.

Nilam finally graduated from school after multiple attempts, and is now an undergraduate student of rural development and social work. “This is the happiest day of my life,” says Nilam, leaving through the gate. She attempted earlier that day (left). “I never thought I would be going to college one day. Now I feel like I can do my maa’s too,” she adds.

Nilam’s organization is no longer confined to Udaipur, but is running a nationwide campaign for gender equality and inclusiveness with the slogan “Aamaa ma mahila, bahan ma mahila, susan ma mahila” (Women in charge, women in the mainstream, and women in government). The campaign is spread across 24 districts and has recently been trying to encourage women’s participation in elections.

“The government has to be more serious about the involvement of women in policy-making and local governance, and we need to keep fighting for equality and equity,” she says with conviction.

“There is still a long way to go, but I know from experience that every obstacle can be overcome,” she adds.
A social media survey reveals the true extent of the health impact of Kathmandu’s deteriorating air quality

AYESHA SHAKYA

With winter approaching, the Kathmandu Valley air pollution gets worse as the inversion layer traps dust and vehicle emissions. The mountains begin to disappear, flights are delayed and city-dwellers develop persistent coughs. It didn’t use to be like this. Winter was the time of deep blue skies and dazzlingly clear views of the Himalayan peaks to the north. This year, Kathmandu did not even have to wait for winter for the air pollution to become hazardous thanks to a combination of smoke from crop residue burning in the Indian plains, and dust from Kathmandu’s earthquake reconstruction and never-ending road-widening project.

What is most alarming is the looming health catastrophe triggered by this perpetual pollution. Hospitals report a surge in patients

% of Kathmandu residents who say their health is impacted by air pollution

Breathing is hazardous to health

Kathmandu’s poor air quality has become so serious that with the onset of winter there is growing public outrage about its health implications. Findings released this week by the Energy Policy Institute at the University of Chicago add further proof that air pollution is emerging as the world’s single largest environmental health threat and Asian countries are most at risk.

The study has mapped air pollution data to show where it is worst. Deteriorating air quality in Kalimpong Valley due to suspended roadside dust particles, vehicle emissions, brick kiln smoke and transboundary pollution from India is shortchanging the average lifespan of people born by up to four years. Pollution levels in Kathmandu are sometimes worse than in cities in China and India.

The findings were published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences last month based on an analysis of pollution data from 154 Chinese cities from 1983-2013 compared with mortality data covering 78 million people from 2004-2012. Researchers found a strong correlation and concluded that life expectancy is reduced by about seven months and one year with every additional $10/μg m$^3$ of particles that are 10 and 2.5 microns in diameter respectively.

The results greatly strengthen the case that long-term exposure to particulate air pollution causes substantial reductions in life expectancy,” said Michael Greenstone, an author of the paper and director of the Energy Policy Institute (EPIE) at the University of Chicago.

Researchers studied China’s Huai River Policy, which has provided free coal for indoor heating during winter months for residents in cities north of the Huai River since the 1950s. They found the policy lead to an increase in cardio-respiratory diseases that have decreased life expectancy in Beijing by 3.1 years, compared to cities in the south. The policy contributed to the increase in particulate matter concentration over time, with PM10 concentrations five times higher that the World Health Organisation (WHO) safe limit (10ug/m$^3$).

China is now engaged in an aggressive policy to reduce air pollution. It is switching to electric vehicles and changing its main source of heating from sulfur-rich coal to gas-fired boilers and electric units. It has shut down polluting thermal powerplants near

cities. As a result, the concentration of 2.5 micron particles in Beijing and other cities has decreased, and it is expected this will now improve average lifespans.

India has 13 of the world’s 20 most polluted cities, and despite efforts the problem appears to be getting worse every year. The crisis is compounded in winter when water vapour condenses on suspended particles leading to thick smog over the Indo-Gangetic plains, which in turn increases the burden of seasonal lung ailments.

The researchers also developed the Air Quality-life Index (AQIL) a tool that will allow people in different countries to learn how much longer they could live if the air pollution was reduced to meet WHO or national standards for smaller and more harmful PM2.5 particles. In Nepal, people in the Tarai, Kathmandu and Siltwan on average lose four years of life to pollution (see map, left).

Rising PM2.5 levels have shortened lifespans of South Asians. In Bangladesh, where PM2.3 concentration is often above 100μg/m$^3$, people could live 5.6 years longer if air quality met the WHO standard, while Pakistanis live 2.49 years less than their average lifespan because of air pollution. In 2012 in Nepal alone, 315,236 person years were lost to people getting sick from ambient air pollution.

Sonia Awale
with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, emphysema and even lung cancer.

An online survey by Code For Nepal, #BreatheFreshly, sheds light on the negative consequences of breathing this toxic air. Not surprisingly, most of the responses were from Kathmandu Valley. Of the 799 answers collected earlier this year, a staggering 76% stated that their health has been affected by the air pollution. Most cited were breathing problems, chest pain and eye infection.

I can’t walk or ride my motorcycle freely. I have to cover my whole body, from head to toe, just to block out the dust. If I don’t use a mask, I’ll have to suffer from the ensuing bronchitis and dust allergy,” wrote one respondent.

The situation is even more difficult for people with existing respiratory problems: “I am an asthma patient and also have an allergy to dust and cold. So I have to think twice before I go out for a walk or even ride a scooter. Because of the pollution, he has increased my meds to twice a day.”

One respondent even stated that the primary motive behind his decision to study abroad was to get away from Kathmandu’s worsening pollution. Others noted that it is not only physical health that is impacted: “The pollution increases my stress level and I become irritated very easily when I am working from home and work.

Nearly 64% of respondents stated that they used masks on a daily basis. While air pollution is a round-the-clock problem, most said the period between 7.48pm was when the air quality was worst, probably because that is when they were out and about. A survey by the group, #Breathe, showed daily peaks in PM2.5 (the most harmful particles less than 2.5 microns in diameter) in the mornings and evenings in winter at 10 measurement stations in Kathmandu Valley.

Dr. Embirici’s data also show that PM2.5 levels were highest from January to March 2017, reinforcing how inversion during winter months creates a dust-bowl effect, increasing the concentration of pollutants. The levels of fine particles were significantly higher between 8-11am.

On 1 January 2017, PM 2.5 levels saw a high of 17.82 µg/m³, much higher than the internationally accepted level of 15µg/m³. Between 7am-11am, PM 2.5 stayed consistently above 10µg/m³.

With 189% more vehicles on the roads than last year, pollution will be even worse this winter.

One respondent pointed out: “There’s not a single hour when Kathmandu air is clean, except while it’s raining.”

nepaltimes.com

See more tables and interactive graphics online.

POLLUTION SOLUTION

People from Kathmandu are used to complaining, but they also have solutions to the pollution crisis. The Code for Nepal online survey elicited suggestions, including the ones below:

a. Minimize vehicle emissions. Only use hybrid or electric vehicles (if available in Nepal).
b. Minimize measurements and on-road fuel. (proper collection and disposal of dust generators)
c. Avoid parking in the middle and main roads. (Achieve the pollution by the time)
d. Complete the traffic development project happening in Kathmandu and Pokhara plan, road expansion etc.
e. Multi-lane roads to reduce traffic.

DIff winter

With the early onset of winter, Kathmandu’s pollution is so severe that even people who are not usually exposed to vehicle exhaust, dust from construction, construction sandblasting as well as forested areas pollute their lungs.

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Hotel Mystic Mountain. Plan a weekend trip to this newly-opened private resort located in the foot of Nagarkot hill. Nagarkot, (01) 4496946

Chhamaike Resort. Enjoy the beauty of nature and a peaceful weekend. Perfect for BBQs, jhumki and family hangouts. Bhadeghat, (01) 4629172, 9851818489

Thamel Eco Resort. For a relaxed weekend, book a room with yoga, meditation and spa at this eco-friendly resort. Thamel, Chholabazar, (01) 4197505

Dwarika’s Hotel. A little slice of paradise hidden in the middle of the city. Start your day off with yoga classes in this grand heritage hotel. Bhaktapur, Kathmandu, (01) 4407070

MUSIC

Rock music. Enjoy the true stories mural, along with its cultural expressions combining theatre, dance and music, written and directed by Kanta Pradhan. Depuy Gym, ownward, Roopnjeet Naka Ghar

Bribal Chhaya. Experience the arts, culture and traditional expressions combining theatre, dance and music, written and directed by Kanta Pradhan.

The True Stories Mural. An art exhibition that seeks to highlight the stories of women and children whose lives have been upturned. Includes an exhibition of murals on the themes of mysticism, mythology, exploitation and the empowerment of women. 23-26 October, Sadiwadi Art Gallery, Babai, Makalu Residency. Entry fee: Rs10. SPoRT@KMA@gmail.com

SONGS OF THE HIMALAYAS
Don’t miss this musical treat featuring the singer Sang, Ang Choing and Tain, and traditional music of other Sherpa and Tamang. 19-20 November, Gym, Ropplung Koshik Ghar, Kompanc, with lunch, dinner and socialising with guests, Rs5000, Rs10000 and Rs20000 (Royce). (01) 5801471, 01

Diwas Gurung. Book your seats for a musical evening with your very own Diwas Gurung, featuring Sambhu, Awaj and Konsum from Almabrost. Seats are limited. 27 October, 40 Mitha, Chandragiri. In 500. 9807115577

Classical concert. A group of talented classical artists will perform as part of the Ghairah Musicals Festival 2013, which runs from 4 November in selected venues. 1 November, 5.30 onwards, Around the corner, Tundikhel, (01) 5801617, 01

Crepule cuisine. Try world-class authentic dishes from New Orleans, Italy, Spain, Africa, Germany, the Caribbean and Portugal Rs500 per person. 27 October-5 November, 6.30-10pm, The Leaf, Sitalpokhari, (01) 5171754

Capital Grill Restaurant & Bar. Tantalise your taste buds with the best Nepali kheta nana, known as jirruk Thukul, in town. Nagarkot, (01) 4402744

Coffee Jireh. For a peaceful evening and the best finegood pizza. Bhaktapur, (01) 5923162

Little Italy. Turn vegetarian at this Italian food chain and don’t forget to end your meal with the chefs’ special chocolate cake. Tambach, (01) 4122077, 4223518, 9801955696

Bubbly brunch. Book your seats and enjoy Saturday brunch with a buffet and live music from a host person (men). The amazing shawarma and pastas won’t let you down. Every Saturday, from 10am, Sheridan’s Garden and Club SandySpur, Doughnut toffee

AIR QUALITY INDEX

This issue of Nepal News and the NEA bulletin are collaborating on this weekly graph of air pollution in Kathmandu. Based on measurements at monitoring stations at Narayanhity and Tatra Holder in Patan, the data is collected to make informed health-related decisions. The Air Quality Index values in the graph represent the concentrations of total suspended particulate matter, and the acute health effect threshold is given in this format. For example, the value of 187 on the chart is a level of 187 micrograms per cubic meter of average concentration, which is highly dangerous. The index is calculated for all the major pollutants in the Kathmandu Valley. www.nepalnews.com/energy/environment/air-quality-monitoring
Modinomics falters
Are the Indian Prime Minister’s economic reforms on track or too slow? Find out in this preview of the author’s new book.

Excerpted in 2016 on a platform of economic reform, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s reforms agenda is being hotly debated three years on. Business publications are not too bullish.

**GUEST COLUMN**
Pradumna B Rana

The Economist ran a cover story recently arguing that Modi is not really a reformer and lamented the missed opportunity to harness the low price of oil, an important import. The Financial Times argued that the economic boom of the past two years is now wobbly, with the main reason being India’s serious structural problems.

Government officials disagree. Anil Shah, the president of the ruling BJP, said recently: “We have completely transformed the thought process of the people and have been successful in creating brand India.” Finance Minister Arun Jaitley claimed: “No government in India has reformed as much as this one.”

Who is right? If one’s focus is on macroeconomic reforms then Modi deserves credit. His Make in India campaign, together with Skill India, Digital India and Smart Cities campaigns, has helped attract record foreign direct investment (albeit from a low base) despite there being many hindrances to doing business in India. The country ranks 128 among 190 countries in the World Bank’s Ease of Doing Business Indicator.

Modi was also instrumental in pushing a national biometric system (known as Aadhaar), which has made it easier to dole out subsidies directly to the needy, bypassing intermediaries who in the past pillaged up to three-quarters of the amount.

The Prime Minister’s most talked-about, and boldest reform, was the surprise demonetisation of large-value bank notes in November 2016. However, recent evidence suggests that the costs (lower economic growth) have outweighed the benefits (digitalisation and control of “black money” and corruption).

The introduction of the Goods and Services tax (GST) had been under discussion for several years, but it was Modi who pushed it through in July. In principle, the GST is an excellent idea because state taxes hindered the free movement of goods and services, fragmented markets, and raised the cost of doing business. The compromises and complexity of the system have, however, led some analysts to reduce projected growth estimates to only 0.4 per cent.

Macroeconomic sectors and second generation reforms in governance had underpinned Modi’s campaign pledge of ‘Minimum Government, Maximum Governance’. During his visit to the US in June, Modi boasted that 7,000 such reforms had been initiated. This was an exaggeration.

The much discussed privatisation of state-owned enterprises has been slow. Bad debts of banks need to be worked out. The government has also lagged in the provision of basic services to the private sector, such as an efficient and clean public administration system, education, healthcare and a functioning market for land and labour.

A new bankruptcy law introduced in May 2016 is an area where some action has occurred, but even this law cannot be fully effective until the judicial system is reformed. There is a huge backlog of pending cases: 24 million, nearly 10% of which have dragged on for over a decade.

Aside from strengthening the Prime Minister’s Office, Modi has done little to reform the public administration and the civil service system. The World Bank’s governance indicators show India ranking far behind many East Asian countries in government effectiveness, control of corruption, rule of law and regulatory quality.

Educational standards are poor and the country lacks a capable and healthy workforce. Much education and healthcare is provided by the private sector because of the poor quality of public services.

In many Indian states, firms with more than 100 workers must seek government approval to hire and fire workers. As a result, many resort to contract workers or simply choose to hire foreign economies of scale by remaining small. During Modi’s first year in office, states such as Rajasthan, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh had sought to partially liberalise their labour markets. But it now looks like those efforts have stopped. Slow progress in microeconomic reforms means that the government has not been successful in creating an enabling environment for the private sector, and investment could dip further. The economy grew by only 5.7% in the quarter ending 30 June, the lowest since 2014.

As in the past, an inefficient public sector will continue to be self-persuasive in the Indian economy.

Pradumna B Rana is Associate Professor at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (SRISI), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. This article is based on his co-authored book, Improving South Asia: Resolving Fiscal Reforms and look East. Policies, which will be launched in Kathmandu on 3 November.
HAPPENINGS

HAIL TO THE CHIEF: US Ambassador to Nepal Aloina B. Teplitz called on Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba at his residence on Tuesday.

KNOW THE RULES: Election officer Baisista Raj Poudel briefs candidates of GSTKU, Nirmal Kaji Shrestha (far left) of the Maha (Centre) party and Basu Charan Bhattarai of Naya Shakti (far right) in Kathmandu on Monday for the election code of conduct.

FOURTH CEO IN TWO YEARS: The newly appointed chief of the National Reconstruction Authority, Yuvraj Bhakal, assumes office in Kathmandu on Tuesday.

POLICE SCHOOL: Locals in Khotang grieve a written order for temporary police postings on Wednesday. Some 75,000 temps are being hired for provincial and parliamentary elections to be held on 10 November and 7 December.

SELFIE LAHERY: A woman poses for a selfie with Lakhe masked dancers during this week’s Nepal Dance Festival in Patan on Wednesday.

DENIS Villeneuve is possibly the only director working today who could take on the immensely nerve-wracking task of making a sequel to the most important science fiction film of all time, the original Blade Runner, from 1982. Made by the intrepid, visionary Ridley Scott and featuring a young Harrison Ford as the titular “blade runner,” the first film is a disturbing meditation on the moral quandaries involved in hunting down humanoid replicants made to simulate humans.

In his futuristic vision for the first film, set in 2019, Scott created an extraordinary, now iconic amalgam of architecture, styles, and aesthetics that combines to allow a future that is a simulation of our own world—but all smushed together emulating the essence of postmodernism with many levelled domes on top of each other, sleek art deco buildings housing huge corporations, and a darkness that can come from the dystopia that is inevitable when humans start creating AI that think and feel but are created as slaves.

Blade Runner 2049 continues the story of the replicants’ struggle to realize their own humanity even as the people around them adjust their own to suit this new evolution: there is festivity, but also wonder and fear, a natural but not original trope when encountering an “other” so closely related to us and yet so different.

The plot of the first film, which loosely follows its sequel, and while Ryan Gosling plays another memorable part as “K,” a blade runner who is a replicant himself, there is little in this new film that truly breaks ground. Replicants are still going rogue, and the mantle of generating ever more human-like slaves has been taken on by Kipler Wallace (David Leitch) and his nefarious corporation.

K plods along on his rather sad existence as a sub-citizen, treated like insects by his employers while he must ruthlessly kill his own kind and return day after day for the new infamous but slightly altered Voight-Kampff test that ensures his feelings have not evolved beyond the baseline – of relative insensitivity.

Things spin out of control when it is discovered that certain replicants may be able to procreate. To tell you anything further would ensure that an already fairly clichéd plot line would then be too tedious to sit through – for this is a long, self-indulgent script by Hampton Fancher, who also wrote the perhaps more flawed but far more stimulating original.

The problem with Blade Runner 2049 is essentially the problem of Denis Villeneuve – a director who is extremely talented at creating gravitas without an iota of humour to lessen his ongoing love affair with the themes of love, death and prophecy.

While this is a good film it is not a great one, neither visually nor in terms of plot or introduction of new character. Even the entrance of Harrison Ford in the latter half of the film cannot really leave its self-involved garment and while the film is supposedly visually stunning it is not even close to Villeneuve’s other, far better 2016 film Arrival (2016) which while heavy, is truly beautiful.
Insult to women

The disappointing number of women candidates in the first phase of parliamentary and provincial elections raises a question: what is the status of women in Nepali politics? Despite fielding only 5% women candidates, political parties can still fulfill the constitutional requirement of reserving 33% of seats for women in both the federal Parliament and provincial councils. For this, they have to nominate more women under proportional representation quotas. This will send a message to women that it is not their right, but they owe their representation to the kindness of the majority.

This situation shows how deeply entrenched patriarchy is in Nepali politics. During the Maoist war, many women challenged this patriarchy by standing shoulder to shoulder with male guerrillas. In the wake of the war and the Democracy Movement 2006, the first constituent assembly guaranteed 33% of seats for women. A significant number of women fought and won elections. As the battle for equality weakened, the second CA did not turn out to be inclusive.

The 2015 Constitution requires political parties to field women to the post of either head or deputy head of local councils. The parties could not blatantly violate this provision, but they did so, by choosing women mostly as deputy chiefs. This time, they have further marginalized women, disregarding the spirit of the Constitution and fuelling social discord.

Editorial

No stopping elections

Naya Patrika, 26 November

After the Supreme Court (SC) made it clear that the Election Commission (EC) must print separate ballot papers for parliamentary and provincial elections under the first past the post (FPP) system, there is speculation that these elections, scheduled for 26 November and 3 December will be postponed, and the country will face a constitutional crisis after 21 January 2018 – the constitutional deadline to elect a new parliament and provincial councils.

But the EC cannot use the SC ruling as an excuse to postpone elections. The commission was already planning to print ballot papers for the FPP polls only after 27 October. So it still has time to re-design these papers, without wasting much time and resources.

Even if re-designing ballot papers takes time, it should not be a problem because the first phase of polls will take place only in 37 of the total 174 constituencies. The balance of ballot papers can be printed later. The EC has also argued that it may need more ballot boxes, it is to print separate ballot papers. But this is another lame excuse. If ballot papers are printed separately, they will be reduced by half. So, whether ballot papers are separate or not, it will not require more room in the ballot box. Two different colours are used for two separate ballot papers. It will be easier for enumerators to count the votes.

The EC has already printed two sets of ballot papers for the proportional representation (PR) vote, but that is not a cause of concern for the SC. The PR polls will go anyway. So should the FPP polls.
Caught in the middle by

Migrant workers learn to face exploitation and abuse from recruiters at home and abroad

UPASANA KHADKA

Ram, an engineer from Dhanusa, says migrant workers like him often exchange information they have on recruiters. "We can connect current migrants easily at destination countries through Facebook Messenger and IMO to get up-to-date information. We ask about the kind of job and the salary that the agent has arranged for them before making a decision," he explains.

Nepal-based migrants prefer agents from their own community to protect them from cheating. Still, Jignath from Dhanusa knows a recruiter named Ramkesh who ran away with workers' advances. He is now in Delhi and runs a memo shop. "He has not dared to come back even when his wife died two years ago," Jignath says.

While cheating by agents remains common, migrants are being more careful in their selection. Hira from Dhanusa says he investigates the assets of agents to gauge whether they are trustworthy. He says: "Agents with land and houses are tied down and cannot run away and it could signal their ability to return our recruitment costs if our migration attempt fails."

International migration offers middlemen both in Nepal and abroad myriad opportunities to cheat prospective workers. Given the information asymmetry between an employer in Malaysia or the Gulf and an aspiring migrant, there are many stories of contract substitution upon arrival at the destination with less favourable terms of employment and remittances by agents.

However, migrants and even repeat migrants, knowingly continue to rely on middlemen despite the risks and the higher costs. Information regarding job demand is only one of the services provided by middlemen, and there is a love-hate relationship between migrants and their agents.

In the Tami district of Sindhupalchowk, greater accessibility, familiarity and proximity to agents than with the Kathmandu-based manpower companies makes local recruiters a more convenient option despite their gouging.
While agents continue to play a prominent role in migration, conversation with migrants reveal that unlike in the past, when agents were relied upon blindly, migrants have become more careful selecting agents three days. Trust and reputation, asset ownership and demonstration effect emerges as key considerations.

Trust is key, which is either built through personal relationships with the agent or through referrals of trusted community members. However, trust in an agent is not permanent and migrants update their beliefs about them constantly based on recent migration cases.

In addition, migrants also look for other clues to gauge an agent’s credibility based on how well their clients have done while abroad. The demonstration effect of factors like property and the kind of schools a current migrant’s children go to can be important clues.

But labour recruiter Hari says such evidence can be misleading: “Migrant workers just use the money and not the hard work and overtime under challenging circumstances put in to earn that much,” he says. “This can wrongly shape their expectations about the foreign dream because most migrants tend to downplay the difficulties faced abroad.”

Manpower companies to the capital subcontract their work to local agents because it is not physically possible to follow up the process with each worker. But they are also encouraging the need to deal with complaints.

“When manpower companies rely on us, they know that migrants or their families will contact us if things don’t go as promised,” says Ravi from Ilam, who started working as an agent after successfully sending his son abroad. “It is our phobia that ring incessantly when migrants or their families are unhappy.”

A tainted reputation can be irreparable in the community and local agents often find themselves stuck between migrants and manpower companies. But there are also Nepali agents working in host countries supplying workers to big recruiting agencies.

“I got paid a commission for each worker I brought to my security guard supply company, and given that many migrants are not happy with their jobs, it is not difficult to attract workers,” says a Kuala Lumpur-based Nepali agent named Hari.

The role of agents also increased significantly in Malaysia when I started sending back undocumented migrants on special travel passes. While the process officially costs $300, migrants end up paying twice as much since agents know how to grease the wheel.

“Of course we would prefer to get the paperwork done ourselves, but given that they made the process easier for us at a markup, we rely on them,” says Jisha, a recent returnee from Malaysia, who worked as an undocumented security guard.

Migrants choose foreign-based agents on the basis of trust and referral by social networks, but still get duped. They don’t have the same level of accountability that they expect from Nepali-based agents from their own communities. Unanswered phone calls and visiting cards with false office names are the norm.

Jana, an undocumented worker in Malaysia, was duped by an agent who charged him to legalize his status. “Even though I have the receipt, there is nothing I can do with it because of my undocumented status,” he says.

Fourteen Nepalis were recently deported from Dubai after being sent by agents on visit visas instead of worker visas, on the pretext that it was a quicker way to go abroad. The agents paid Rs28,000 for each migrant to Kathmandu airport to let their clients pass through.

They were promised that a Dubai-based agent named Prem would get them jobs as lifeguards. One of them, Padma, recalls his sticking feeling when he saw a large number of favourable outside Prem’s Dubai apartment, where there were 72 other workers crammed into a small room for months. Instead of finding them jobs, the agent started abusing them verbally and physically, and they returned when their visitor visas expired. The 14 were cheated by agents in both Kathmandu and Dubai, and now wait justice.
All my troubles seem far away

I know many of you are worried about the state of the country. The garbage piling up on the streets bothers you, there is doubt even at this late stage whether or not there will be elections, and if so, what proportion of candidates will be convicted serial killers, and then for those of us who are adherents of quantum mechanics, there is always the overarching uncertainty about the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle that gives us sleepless nights.

In a futile effort to deal with the mental tension many of you have tried reducing your caffeine intake, gone on 15-day Vipassana retreats, had an acupuncture performed on your cerebral cortex, and some of you have even dared yourselves with tranquilliser guns meant to be used to tranquilise Asian One-horn Rhinoceri.

Which is why, in the interest of sanity, it may be advisable to take your mind off mundane day-to-day worries about politics, pollution and pot holes, and focus about much more frightening things. Thinking about some of those impending global catastrophes will make all your current troubles seem far away, and petty everyday concerns that presently loom large in our lives will pale into insignificance.

So, ready? To take your mind off the Supreme Court rejecting the board of Nepal Oil Corruption, let us plunge right in to list the even scarier stuff you should really be agonising about:

Are We Alone? Are we alone in our Milky Way Galaxy? Is there intelligent life on other planets and if so, do they have higher IQ than Donald Trump? Are there three parallel universes and if so, how many? Is there God? If so, is it a he, she, or it? Is there life after death?

Asteroid Hit: Last week, a spinning rock the size of Labim Mall whisked past our Home Planet. There are a couple of million other near-Earth asteroids out there just waiting for the opportune moment to drop in on us unannounced. Geologists reckon 90% of the species on Earth, including the dinosaurs, were wiped out in a mass extinction after a meteoroid strike 65 million years ago. It is likely to happen again.

Boost twice a day, while employing your bowels, over the likelihood of the Earth being hit by a hoomoonich and nothing scary about Nepal’s politics will ever spook you again.

Nuclear Winter: Atomic scientists have just adjusted the Doomsday Clock because the likelihood of all-out thermonuclear war has increased with the ongoing contest between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un about which one has more sinister-looking hair on his warhead. It is not enough to destroy the world only once, we have arsenals to deliberate it many times over. Think about that, and relax.

Global Climate Change: When you’re down and troubled about the state of Nepal, turn your attention to melting polar ice caps, Iceland turning into Greenland, the Maldives becoming an Underwater Republic, Khumbu Waterfall replacing the Khumbu Scramble. And, sure, didn’t you feel much better?