Nepal | Rolling On

An iconic bus service revs back to life in Kathmandu
By Ross Adkin | 1 July 2014

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Currently, Sajha Yatayat's 16 buses carry about 10,000 passengers every day.
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THE PASSENGERS COLLECTIVELY CURSED the diminutive teenage conductor as he called a halt on a thoroughfare through Dilli Bazaar, a congested Kathmandu neighbourhood, to allow yet another passenger to board. There was only crouching room in the small van—a "micro" to locals—as it jolted back into traffic, then stopped again at a cluster of stationary micros, buses and three-wheelers down the road. Most of the vehicles were full to bursting, and their conductors hung precariously out into the street, as if on racing yachts. It was an unusually hot Friday morning in April, and the already heavy traffic was further delayed by roadworks. Upon arrival at the Ratna Park terminus in the city centre, dishevelled passengers spilled out, some checking their bags and belongings—the rush at such times provides cover for pickpockets and bag snatchers. Buses and vans waited to start their next trips, and drivers and conductors competed to attract passengers. Four half-empty micros waited at the eastern exit, each unwilling to leave without a full load.

Getting around is a constant challenge for Kathmandu's residents. The city's chaotic traffic and public transport services are symptomatic of its failure to deal with rapid urbanisation. After two decades of liberal economic policies, rising incomes and access to credit, there are now over half a million registered vehicles in and around the Kathmandu valley. That figure accounts for more than 60 percent of all vehicles in the country, and is still rising fast. The valley's population,

currently nearing three million, is also climbing at 4 percent per year. Public transport vehicles constitute only 2.5 percent of all vehicles on the road. The public transport sector has long been left to its own devices by the municipality and the government, and is controlled by a host of private syndicates operating buses, vans and electric three-wheelers of every shape and size. There is little coordination regarding routes and stops, but there is collusion in resisting efforts to enforce traffic, safety and pollution regulations. The continuing boom in the sale of private vehicles, and the congestion that comes with it, is driven at least in part by a desire to avoid the routine delays and discomforts of using public transportation. So far, that connection appears to have eluded the city's administrators and transport entrepreneurs. But a recently relaunched cooperative bus service is trying to change that.

The consequences of the rising number of vehicles have been severe. Official efforts to manage traffic and improve infrastructure have been insufficient and inept. The government launched an ongoing campaign to widen roads a few years ago, but the work has been haphazard. That campaign also fails to recognise evidence that new cars quickly fill up extra road space, with little long-term decrease in congestion. Space is already at a premium in Kathmandu, and there is only so far the government's current approach can go; aside from a few thoroughfares, the city centre is a maze of narrow streets and lanes, while sprawling suburbs are already climbing up the sides of the valley.

As a result, Kathmandu punches well above its weight in terms of congestion and air pollution. 'Every Breath is Slowly Killing You,' a headline in a local paper proclaimed in 2012, with some justification—1,900 people die in the city every year due to respiratory problems. A recent study by the Nepal Health Research Council found pollution levels outside a Kathmandu school to be five times over WHO guidelines. The government has been oblivious; in 2010, and again last year, a local weekly reported that seven machines installed around the city in 2002 to measure air quality had not gathered any data since 2007, and had been abandoned in disrepair.

The situation was not always so grim. Until the early 1990s, Sajha Yatayat—literally, "cooperative transport"—a flagship, government-run bus scheme, dominated public transport in Kathmandu, and also operated long-distance routes throughout Nepal. Sajha was founded in the late 1960s, and grew to command a fleet of over a hundred iconic blue buses at its height, in the early 1990s. Though that number was still relatively low, for a time Sajha ran well, and in a country of rigid social hierarchies its democratic service was remarkable. That ethos was celebrated in a song by the renowned comedian Hari Bansha Acharya that gained great popularity in the mid 1990s. "*Sajha-bus ma jo pani chadhda chha*," Acharya sang—anyone and everyone rides a Sajha bus. But as the 1990s progressed, the service became bogged down by overstaffing, mismanagement and political interference, and after a prolonged decline it closed in 2007.

Now, after a brief hiatus, Sajha Yatayat is back, and looking to transform Kathmandu's approach to transportation. "We need to slowly extricate our public services from cartels," Kanak Mani Dixit, Sajha's chairman and a prominent local journalist, said when I met him in March. But Dixit also recognised that the syndicates provide an essential service, and added that with its new fleet of 16 buses, painted green to promote a "green" image, Sajha was not aiming to regain its former dominance. Instead, Dixit hoped, the service would act as a "catalyst," and provide an

example of profitability, comfort, environmental friendliness and efficiency for private operators to follow. When Sajha was relaunched as a public transport cooperative in April 2013, at its Pulchowk depot in the city's south, there was a buzz of expectation and no little nostalgia. The highlight came when the crowd joined Acharya and his fellow comedian Madan Krishna Shrestha in singing "*Sajha-bus ma jo pani chadhda chha*."

On a Tuesday morning this April, the Sajha fleet stood gleaming in the depot. The first of the day's drivers, Rebika Thapa, was waiting to depart. Thapa is one of Sajha's six female employees, and a great rarity among Kathamndu's public transport drivers and conductors. "Women think big buses are too long and heavy, and that they are not strong enough to operate them," Thapa explained. Sajha makes a concerted effort to hire women, but some prejudice seems to endure. Despite having driven buses for a tourism company for several years, Thapa said, she still had to fight to convince her managers to take her on. On the streets, she said, people are still often surprised to see female bus drivers. Thapa drove the first bus out exactly on schedule, at 7am sharp.

Regularity is one of Sajha's selling points; security is another. The service's buses are equipped with CCTV cameras to discourage theft and harassment. Unlike other public transport vehicles, Sajha buses also have designated entry and exit doors to speed up boarding and disembarking. Bimla Maharjan, who commutes every day from Pulchowk to her office in Jamal, in the city centre, told me she was impressed: "The bus stops for a moment, people get on and it leaves. It's very convenient." That the managed system of entry and exit is a talking point, though, "shows how far the country has regressed in terms of public transport," Dixit told me, pointing out that many of Sajha's current features were already part of its modus operandi as far back as the 1960s. Sajha is also proactive in controlling air pollution, and all its buses conform to Euro III emission standards, in compliance with government regulations published in 2012.

Sajha currently operates on two trunk routes—one running north to south through the city, and the other east to west to include the airport—and carries around 10,000 passengers every day. Many narrow old streets, however, are off-limits for the service's large buses, and there private operators still hold sway. There is no indication yet of whether they will adopt any of Sajha's model practices. Dixit pointed out that private operators can be difficult to negotiate with, given the array of competing companies and cartels. But Sajha officials told me they are still doing their best to reach out and start formulating a coordinated, city-wide transport strategy. When we met at his office in April, Padam Maharjan, Sajha's executive officer, told me the company was also advocating for the government to offer rewards, such as reduced import tariffs on vehicles, for private operators who agree to meet certain basic service criteria and regulations.

The government, however, has been slow to respond, and has left reimagining Kathmandu's transport infrastructure to a handful of independent campaigners. Prashanta Khanal, a programme coordinator at the campaign group Clean Air Network Nepal, is a champion of non-motorised and public transport. His group is drafting a set of rules it hopes the government will adopt to ensure bicycle and pedestrian access become high priorities in all future infrastructure projects. But, Khanal said, ministers and municipal officials are "not easy to work with … You build a relationship, and then he goes, and you start again." Kathmandu has not held local elections since 1997, and urban planning has suffered at the hands of unelected bureaucrats and

civil servants. Khanal said popular support for eco-friendly transportation is slowly growing. As an example, he pointed out Kathmandu Cycle City 2020, a campaign started by a group of university students to make the city bicycle-friendly by the end of the decade.

Khanal proposed a Bus Rapid Transit system, where buses are given priority access to reserved lanes along busy routes, as a possible solution to Kathmandu's congestion problems that would require relatively little government input. He emphasised the earlier success of the city's trolley bus service, which began in the mid 1970s and, at one point, absorbed 80 percent of journeys between Kathmandu and Bhaktapur, seven miles to the southeast. Unfortunately that scheme, like Sajha, folded after the 1990s. Maharjan was also excited by the possibility of a BRT system, and hoped some of the 25 additional buses Sajha plans to acquire in the near future would be used to expand services onto Kathmandu's ring road. As a possible model, Maharjan cited a BRT scheme recently launched in Rajkot, Gujarat, to cover part of the city's 29-kilometre ring road, which is roughly the same length as Kathmandu's.

But with little government support or immediate incentive for private operators to change their ways, any measures to ease Kathmandu's traffic and pollution woes are still some way off. Outside the airport in May, I met Niresh Khadka, who was waiting to see off a friend headed to Dubai. After a brief chat, I asked Khadka, who is in his mid twenties, if he would take a Sajha bus back into town. Khadka wasn't impressed with any of the public transport options available. "Sajha are always late, the micros are always late," he said. "A motorbike is the best way for now."

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