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Nepal Earthquake: Rebuilding Hope, Rebuilding a Nation

by Dina Bangdel

June 10, 2015



Celebrations of New Year
at the Kathmandu Darbar Square area

If the world has imagined and experienced the beauty of Nepal and its people as an idyllic Shangri-la, the brutal aftermath of the April 2015 earthquake has forever shattered that dream. The massive quake changed the fate of Nepal—from a fragile, emerging democracy still recovering from a crippling decade of civil war, to a nation in crisis and mourning, in the wake of this devastation that, at the time of writing, has claimed over 8,000 lives, with more than 15,000 injured. The shocking numbers continue to rise: 450,000 individuals are displaced and homeless, with hundreds of villages obliterated in the remote areas of midwestern Nepal. In the centuries-old cities of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur, 60 per cent of the historic monuments in the seven World Heritage sites were completely destroyed or damaged. Many are on the verge of collapse, without immediate emergency response measures in place to stabilize them. The numbers are staggering, and the destruction of unimaginable proportions, even as emergency response teams continue their efforts in relief and rehabilitation.

Looking back at that day, it seems like Nepal before the earthquake is another world, another reality, and a distant memory, where the pristine landscape and architectural genius somehow collectively constructed the distinctive identity of the nation. Saturday 25 April was a balmy spring day, with a sense of festivity still lingering in the air across the country, since we had just celebrated the Nepali New Year 2072 only a few days prior. The cultural heart of the Kathmandu Valley was bustling with its usual religious activities associated with the auspicious ushering in of the new year. At the ancient city of Bhaktapur, the spectacular Bisket Jatra chariot festival had symbolically renewed the city of Bhaktapur, when thousands of spectators and devotees gathered to receive the sacred blessings of the Hindu god Bhairava and the great goddess Bhadrakali. For the city of Patan, this year was particularly significant, as preparations had begun for the celebration of the Rato-Matsyendranath chariot festival, occurring once every twelve years. The beautiful clay image of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, brought from the temple in Bungamati, was installed in the chariot and the crowds had come to make ritual *puja* offerings and receive *darshan* or blessings from the deity. In addition, Saturday is generally a time when most Hindus and Buddhists visited the sacred shrines of Mahakala and Sankata/Achala, two powerful protective deities worshipped in the Kathmandu Valley. For me as a native Nepali, these are indelible aspects of our identity, be it in an urban metropolis or a rural village, where the sacred and profane, the ancient and modern, and past and present have learned to adjust, just as Buddhism and Hinduism have coexisted peacefully for 2,000 years. When the earthquake hit just before noon on that leisurely Saturday morning, it became a brutal reality, which—although forewarned—was incomprehensible until it happened.



The aftermath of the earthquake



Severe damage of 17th century shrine of
Anantapur at the Great Stupa of Swayambhu

The damage was extensive and immediate—in Bhaktapur itself over 250 people lost their lives, with hundreds of homes destroyed, and the ancient monuments reduced to rubble. In Patan Darbar Square, two 17th century temples—the exquisitely carved three-storey temple of Hari-Shankar and the smaller Char Narayan shrine—immediately collapsed, while families scrambled to save loved ones buried under the rubble. The ancient palace square of Hanuman Dhoka in Kathmandu has suffered a similar fate: the seven-storey Basantapur Palace damaged, and the two majestic temples—the Maju Deval temple built in 1690, and the Mohan Narayan temple, dedicated to Vishnu in 1679—that stood next to the home of the Goddess Kumari completely annihilated. The 16th century wooden temple of Kasthamandapa from which Kathmandu derives

its name now lies in ruins. In the outskirts of the Kathmandu Valley, the scenes are even more devastating: in Bungamati, hundreds of families are without homes, and the white temple of Rato-Matsyendranath just a pile of bricks. In the town of Sankhu, the site of the famous Vajrayogini shrine and among the hardest-hit towns in the Kathmandu Valley, mud-brick homes have crumbled, leaving hundreds dead or severely injured. Tragically, 180 visitors perished when the iconic Dharahara tower—rebuilt after the 1934 earthquake—fell. Outside the valley, the situation is even more severe, with no likelihood of provisions for basic infrastructure in the near future.

I grew up in Patan, also known as Lalitpur, 'City of Fine Arts', and upon seeing these images I felt that a piece of my soul had died. I realized that my identity, like that of other Nepalis, has been inexorably linked to place, my toI, and my community. Patan Darbar Square, and the other historical monuments have been recognized for extraordinary workmanship of imagery. These architectural masterpieces underscore the excellence in artistry and the genius of the Nepalese craftsmen that have come to define the arts of Nepal. More importantly, these were and are tangible symbols of our cultural heritage, of our faith that unites us as a nation, and it was the local community who immediately responded to salvage these sacred objects— living embodiments of the community—from the rubble and to protect them from further damage. They have withstood the test of time, and as the cycle begins again, we will reconstruct them as necessary. Indeed, just as creating and offering a work of art or monument is considered highly meritorious in a traditional context, yet another profound act of faith is *jimoddhara*—that is, the refurbishing or reconstruction of an old or damaged image or monument. This is done through the ritual of renewal and reconsecration, when a new life essence (*jiva*) is once again imbued into the image. Traditionally, rebuilding is understood to sustain and nourish the soul, and the merit of such action benefits all sentient beings.



The two collapsed temples



Remains of the collapsed Radha Krishna temple

In the face of such insurmountable conditions, how do we begin to rebuild? It was in this darkest hour that we rediscovered and witnessed our collective humanity, as the world came together in support— strangers helping strangers, local communities and youth uniting in aid of those in need. Although the trauma of what we have endured is still raw, we are starting to slowly rebuild our faith, rebuild our community. Even in the most trying of circumstances, we pride ourselves as a nation of people generous of spirit. Just as we rose from the ashes after the 1934 earthquake, we embrace the realization of the impermanence of all things, and through this understanding, it allows us to build a culture of resilience. But we cannot do it alone.

The need is two-fold and urgent: in the areas of humanitarian relief, and simultaneously in the areas of cultural heritage. An important contributor to the safeguarding of cultural heritage is the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust, cooperating with Nepal's Department of Archaeology and UNESCO. The organization has immediately started on this emergency response to assess the damage caused by the earthquake, and to stabilize existing monuments in danger of collapse. 'If we can't save our heritage and history at this critical hour, what answers do we have for our children when they ask us why?' observe the community volunteers as they help salvage images from temple ruins.



Bhaktapur Darbar Square with the collapsed sandstone temple of Vatsala Devi

We hope you will continue to support both emergency and long-term needs through funds, your own expertise, and through connecting with other outreach activities that create that sense of a global citizen. Even as we mourn for the precious lives lost, we are confident that we will rise strong, to rebuild our faith, our nation.

Dina Bangdel is a historian of Himalayan art, specializing in the arts of Nepal, and Director of Art History at Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar. She is the daughter of Lain Singh Bangdel, Nepal's preeminent modern artist and author of the pioneering work on cultural preservation and repatriation, Stolen Images of Nepal.

List of organizations providing critically necessary relief and longer-term support in Nepal

INGOs

International Red Cross www.icrc.org/en/document/nepal-earthquake

Save The Children www.savethechildren.org/site/c.8rKLIXMGlpI4E/b.6150545/k.B8DE/Nepal.htm

Mercy Corps www.mercycorps.org/donate/survivors-need-your-help-now

CARE my.care.org/site/Donation2?df_id=18920&18920.donation=form1&quickDonate=

OxFam blogs.oxfam.org/en/blogs/15-04-26-devastating-earthquake-nepal-immediate-relief-and-long-term-disaster-risk-reduction

Doctors Without Borders (Médecins sans Frontières) donate.doctorswithoutborders.org/onetime.cfm

www.doctorswithoutborders.org/article/nepal-our-priority-reach-people-places-where-no-one-else-going

Seva Foundation secure2.convio.net/seva/site/Donation2?idb=438303342&df_id=4800&4800.donation=form1&idb=0

Humane Society International donate.hsi.org/ea-action/action?ea.client.id=104&ea.campaign.id=16153&ea.tracking.id=email&ea.url.id=395655

NGOs

Nepal Villagers' Earthquake Fund www.gofundme.com/nepalvillagers

(Shakun Leslie, working with colleagues and friends through the 'Buddhist People's Rights Forum', to distribute basic supplies to Nuwakot and Sindupalchowk.)

HELP NEPAL Network (HNN) www.helpnepal.net

(HNN has procured and provided 200 tents in Gorkha in collaboration with BPKIHS and ANMF, deployed food to Nuwakot, and provided necessary supplies to Sankhu and Bhotechaur in Sindhupalchowk. Donate to aid further relief as well as long-term rebuilding.)

Nepal Orthopedic Hospital (NOH) www.noh.org.np (run by Dr Saju Pradham in Jorpati and connected with Operation Walk Chicago, a 501c3 tax-exempt organization). Direct donations to www.operationwalkchicago.com (select 'Nepal' for funds going to earthquake relief efforts. No 'administrative overheads' are taken from these donations.)

Siddhi Memorial Foundation www.facebook.com/SiddhiMemorialFoundation

Wire donations to: Siddhi Memorial Foundation, Bhaktapur, Nepal,

Current Account Number: 00201030001544, Nepal Investment Bank Ltd, Seepadole Branch, Bhaktapur, Nepal, Swift code: NIBLNPKT

Bhaktapur Homeopathic Clinic and Medical College www.homeopathynepal.com

Wire donations to: haktapur International Homeopathic Clinic e.V. (BIHC), IBAN: DE81 3705 0299 0330 0004 24, BIC/ SWIFT: COKS DE 33)

KVPT Nepal Earthquake—Architectural Heritage Response Fund www.youcaring.com/nonprofits/kvpt-nepal-earthquake-architecturalheritage-response-fund/344046 (All donations are tax deductible—KVPT is a 501c3 New York-based charity.) Many structures painstakingly restored by KVPT over the past 25 years have withstood the earthquake, but support is needed to continue preserving and rebuilding the ancient temples, palaces and monuments. KVPT pledges that nothing will be spent on administration.

Thanks go to Elizabeth Knight for researching and compiling this list, a complete version of which – including the organizations above - [can be found here](#).