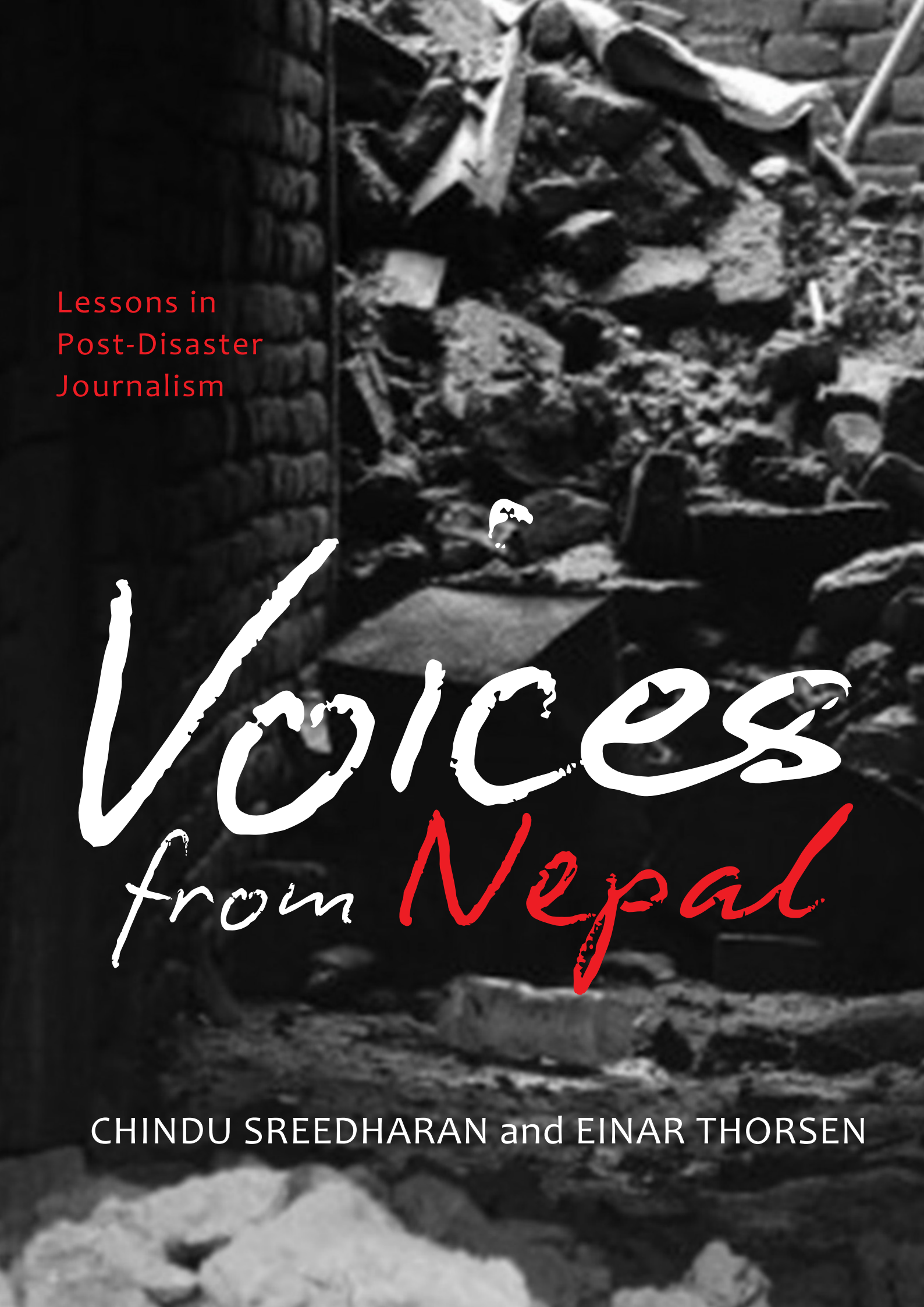

Lessons in
Post-Disaster
Journalism

# Voices from Nepal

CHINDU SREEDHARAN and EINAR THORSEN

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## Lessons in Post-Disaster Journalism

CHINDU SREEDHARAN and EINAR THORSEN

CSJCC Centre for the Study of Journalism, Culture & Community Bournemouth University

Voices from Nepal: Lessons in Post-Disaster Journalism
Chindu Sreedharan and Einar Thorsen

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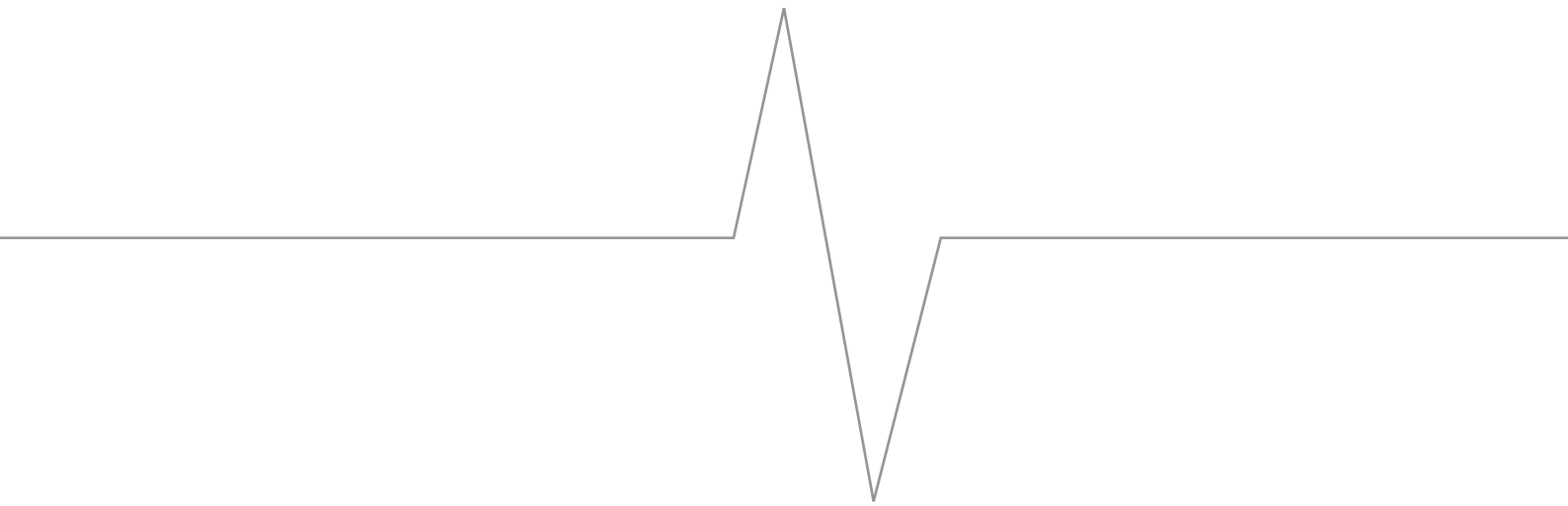
*For the survivors,*
*journalists and media workers*
*in Nepal*



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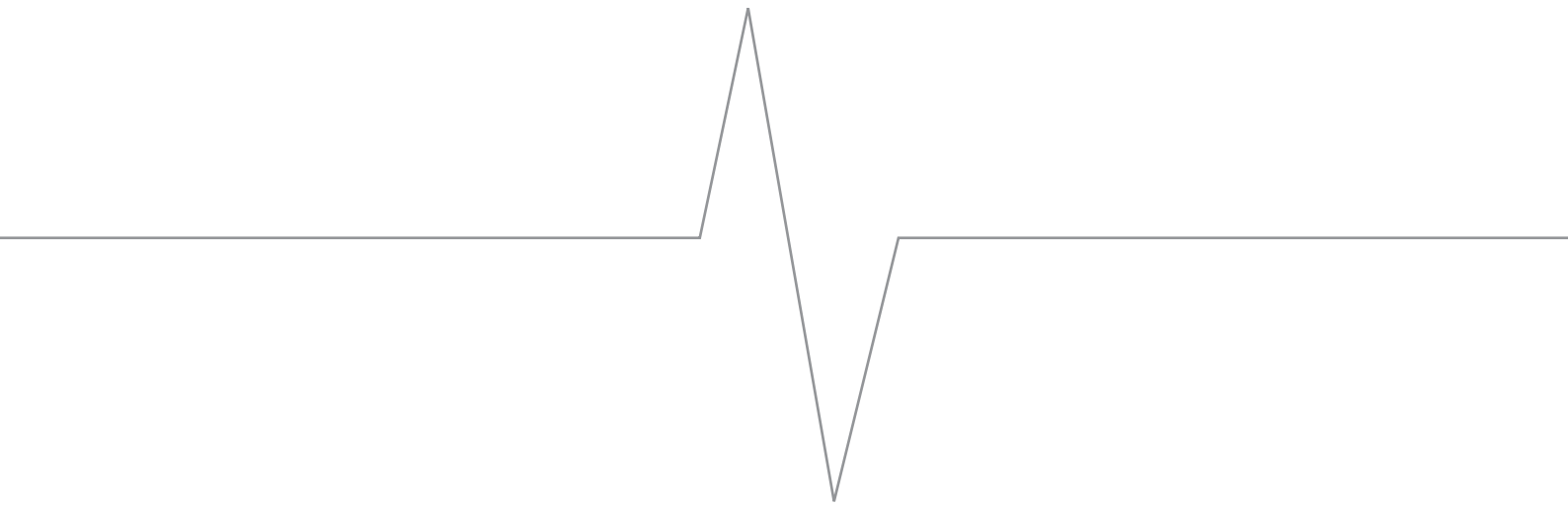

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This publication originates from Aftershock Nepal (http://aftershocknepal.com), a practice-based research and journalism project that we began after the 2015 Gorkha earthquake.

Aftershock Nepal was a collaboration among five universities—Bournemouth University (UK), Tribhuvan University (Nepal), Kathmandu University (Nepal), Symbiosis International (India), and Amity University (India)—with two objectives in mind: one, to publish original and innovative journalism on how ordinary Nepalis were rebuilding their lives after the disaster; and two, to create a better understanding, and awareness, of the challenges that journalists faced in post-disaster Nepal.

*Voices from Nepal: Lessons in Post-Disaster Journalism* presents outputs addressing both objectives. The first part maps out the post-earthquake issues that impacted the news reportage of Nepali journalists, offering insights and recommendations to strengthen news media resilience to disasters. The second part presents perspectives on the everyday life of ordinary citizens in the days and months after the disaster. These perspectives are curated from the journalism originally published on Aftershock Nepal (http://aftershocknepal.com), where we also published video reports, and some of the first 360° films from Nepal after the earthquake.

This publication, indeed Aftershock Nepal itself, would not have been possible but for the encouragement, support, and hard work of many dear colleagues and friends:

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University School of Arts.

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**Chindu Sreedharan** and **Einar Thorsen**
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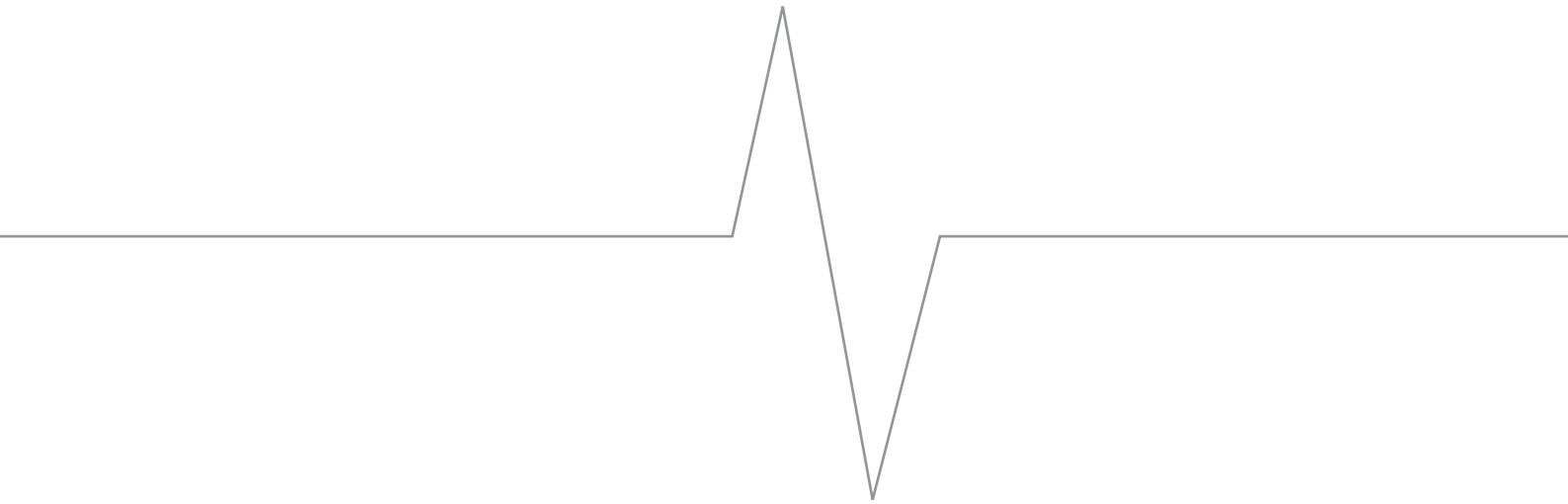


# FOREWORD

The two 2015 earthquakes were the most severe disaster Nepal faced in modern time. A report by the Federation of Nepali Journalists shows that at least 1,813 journalists were directly affected. Three lost their lives, 35 others had deceased family members and over 1,000 journalists lost their homes.

Despite these enormous sufferings, journalists and media houses demonstrated a praiseworthy spirit, by providing continuous service during the first 72 hours, in spite continuous strong aftershocks.



In the direct aftermath of the earthquakes, UNESCO organised trainings for journalists from earthquake-affected districts, on safety measures while reporting from vulnerable places.

The media were overwhelmed with the ever-increasing numbers of casualties and devastation, however other consequences of the disaster got little attention, such as human trafficking or spreading diseases. UNESCO therefore initiated fellowship programmes and published a handbook on disaster reporting in Nepali language to encourage journalists to report comprehensively from different angles on disasters.

In October 2017, at the *International Conference on Promoting Freedom of Expression and Marginalized Voices in the Media* organised in Kathmandu by UNESCO and FNJ, a special session on reporting on disasters got intense attention among journalists from the entire South Asian region.

The present publication by five universities from three countries, led by Bournemouth University, is another important step to strengthen disaster preparedness of the Nepali media. It provides insights into the role of media in disaster situations through interviews with journalists who were affected by the earthquake but continued their duties. It

assesses the level of media preparedness and shows the challenges. There are many concrete recommendations, such as media contingency plans should be prepared and a curriculum for disaster journalism at university level developed.

This study is in line with the objectives of UNESCO, to ensure effective journalism before, during and after a disaster. Therefore, this publication is an excellent reference for journalists who could face future disasters.

**Christian Manhart**
UNESCO Representative to Nepal

# FOREWORD

Nepal is no stranger to natural disasters.

The 2015 earthquake and aftershocks, which killed nearly 9,000 people, injured more than 22,000, and brought about economic losses exceeding one-third of the country's GDP, was not in any way unexpected—being one of the most earthquake-prone countries in the world, past records indicate that Nepal should expect two major earthquakes every 80 years.

But while it is difficult to change the seismological profile of a nation, it is possible to reduce the fallout from the disadvantages of such a profile. Indeed, it is crucial that we do so. Disaster preparedness is the key to this, and in this, Nepal has made significant strides since 2015.



In situations of disasters, journalists have a very important role to play in making a nation resilient, as well as in its disaster response. When a crisis unfolds, the news media disseminate essential information on safety and resources, alert relief agencies to where and what kind of help is needed, and lessen the impact of dangerous rumours and misinformation. In the recovery phase, journalists throw light on how the disaster could have been managed better, how new policies and frameworks could help improve outcomes, how those affected are rebuilding their lives, and so on. Their documentation builds public awareness, sets the stage for future disaster interventions and, once the immediate crisis has passed, directs attention to lessons learnt, long-term effects, and disaster relief measures undertaken (or not).

It is, hence, important to strengthen the preparedness of news media personnel in Nepal. In the days after the 2015 earthquake, Nepali journalists showed great resilience in the face of a disaster they all had a personal stake in. What happens when reporters are also survivors? What lessons can we learn from the way they reported the earthquake? What can we do to prepare journalists better? These are the important questions addressed in

this publication, which combines scholarship with original journalism.

In the first part of this publication, we get insights from the first study focussing specifically on post-disaster journalism in Nepal. Gleaned through in-depth interviews with journalists and communicators, it outlines the unique challenges faced by the Nepal news media in covering the earthquake. Based on their research and with an empathetic approach, the authors Dr Chindu Sreedharan and Dr Einar Thorsen suggest strategies that can empower the news media during disasters, which in turn can empower the people.

The second half comprises a combination of in-depth post-disaster journalism from Nepal and snapshots of the lived experiences of those affected by the earthquake. From the reportage in this part, we hear the stories of ordinary people that would otherwise not have been heard.

In view of the massive earthquake and the works of journalists and media during the disaster and after that, the media sector in Nepal has realised that there is still much to do in preparing journalists for post-disaster reporting. Nepali journalists still lag behind in terms of security equipment and psychological preparedness. In disaster situations, journalists have to sometimes risk their lives to bring the true story from the field. This shows us that there is a great need to provide training to journalists for reporting disasters.



As the representative body of Nepali journalists, the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) has initiated several capacity building workshops for disaster reporting, as well as training sessions to mitigate possible psychological risks and trauma. As journalists in such situations are also survivors, it is very tricky to manage the balance between their personal and professional lives, which calls for specific skills. This publication gives us insights into the role of Nepali journalists and how they had to work with minimal support and resources after the 2015 earthquake. I believe this publication could help us prepare better in future if a similar situation occurs, not only in terms of an earthquake, but disasters such as floods and landslides, which are very common in the country.

**Govinda Acharya**
President, Federation of Nepali Journalists
Media Village, Tilganga Kathamandu

# SHOCK AND AFTERSHOCK:
## MAPPING THE POST-EARTHQUAKE CHALLENGES OF NEPALI JOURNALISTS

Chindu Sreedharan and Einar Thorsen



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nepal is still recovering from the largest natural disaster to strike the country in 80 years. The 2015 earthquake and the aftershock that followed killed 8,794 people, injured 22,300, and brought about economic losses amounting to more than one-third of the country's GDP. *Shock and aftershock: mapping the post-earthquake challenges of Nepali journalists* focuses on the disaster preparedness of news media personnel in Nepal, and their response to the 2015 disaster.

### Purpose

Journalists have a crucial role to play in the public information landscape when disasters strike and during the recovery phase of societies affected by disasters. Enhancing journalists' and media workers' disaster preparedness is therefore of great importance to ensure they are best equipped to fulfil this role, and to enhance their contribution to national disaster planning and building resilience for future. This study maps the key challenges that Nepali journalists faced in 2015 and after, assesses the levels of news media preparedness, and suggests good practices and recommendations to strengthen post-disaster journalism.

## Approach

We interviewed 46 journalists, editors and other officials who reported on the earthquake and its aftermath for this project. The interviewees were from urban Kathmandu and Patan, as well as rural areas affected by the earthquake: Sindhupalchok, Nuwakot and Gorkha. We conducted an inductive content analysis using MAXQDA to systematically analyse themes emerging from the interviews.

Our findings are also informed by 150 interviews with survivors (including journalists) undertaken for our affiliated post-disaster journalism project, Aftershock Nepal. We further make use of reflections by participants on that project in our analysis.

## Post-disaster challenges for journalism

Our research identified a range of challenges experienced by Nepali journalists after the 2015 earthquake. Some of these echo the results from previous studies on journalists in post-disaster scenarios, whilst others appear to reflect the unique social, economic and cultural context of Nepal. We place our findings in three broad categories as issues affecting: *journalism practice*, *journalism strategy*, and *journalistic identity*.



*Issues of journalism practice* impacted the everyday reporting and publishing of earthquake news. These included destruction of newsrooms, destruction of communication infrastructure, inaccessibility to earthquake sites and victims, and threats to personal security of journalists.

*Issues of journalism strategy* related mainly to the lack of editorial preparedness and can be seen to have impacted the quality of post-disaster reporting overall. Specifics included confusion and uncertainty, favouring of impressionistic reporting, difficulty of returning to normalcy in journalism, and lack of investigative training.

*Issues of journalistic identity* saw reporters and editors trying to balance their professional responsibilities as journalists with their emotive responses as earthquake survivors. These included responding to personal trauma, coping with familial pressure, and overcoming feelings of professional inadequacy.

Each set of challenges is explained in detail in the following pages, together with specific recommendations.

## Areas of strengths

Despite significant challenges, *Nepali journalists showed resilience* when responding to physical destruction of their news environments. Respondents identified several examples of good practices and improvisations: news production in makeshift offices, sharing of resources (computers, internet access), and peer support.

*There were many examples of good editorial leadership*. Editors, on the whole, showed great empathy and consideration for staff and freelancers, recognising and accommodating their dual role as survivors and journalists.

*Nepali journalists were positive about learning* from their experiences and recognised the need for post-disaster development and training opportunities. They are acutely aware of their own limitations, and welcomed opportunities for capacity building.

*Nepal has several journalism organisations that can help enhance preparedness* of journalists and act as disaster resilience networks in future crises.

## Key recommendations



1. Better integration of news media in national disaster reduction plans is needed, as well as the development of specific strategies at national level to enhance the disaster-resilience of journalists.
2. The scope of post-disaster journalism in Nepal should be widened to include, among others, skills such as sensitive interviewing, investigative journalism, and financial reporting. Importantly, there should be regular training sessions and drills to ensure that the skillsets of journalists are up-to-date.
3. News organisations should develop editorial strategies for dealing with different disaster scenarios, including plans for day-to-day reporting, as well as follow-up and in-depth coverage in the recovery phase.
4. Collaborative media network(s) should be established to share resources, experiences, and best practices for disaster resilience and response.
5. Post-disaster reporting should be absorbed into the curricula of all journalism courses to train future journalists.
6. Peer- and professional-support networks should be established to support journalists suffering from PTSD and to mitigate future incidents.

A view of Sankhu, which suffered severe destruction in the earthquake, four months after. Photo: *Pushkala Aripaka*

# EARTHQUAKE CONTEXT

The 11th most earthquake-prone country in the world[1], Nepal has a history of severe seismological disturbances spanning centuries. The first major earthquake in the region dates back to 1255. Since then, 12 major disasters, with magnitudes ranging up to 8.2 on the Richter scale, have occurred in the country, killing tens of thousands and displacing millions. The death toll in the Great Nepal-India Earthquake of 1934 alone stood at more than 8,000[2]. The comparatively weaker tremors of 1980, 1988 and 2011 together killed 849, injured 6,965, and damaged, at a conservative estimate, more than 92,414 buildings[3].

The 7.8 earthquake that occurred four minutes before noon on 25 April 2015, thus, was the latest in an extending series of disasters in the region. It affected 31 of Nepal's 75 districts, 8.1 million people. Together with the 7.3-magnitude aftershock that followed 17 days later, it killed 8,794 people and injured 22,300[4]. Nearly 500,000 houses were destroyed and another 288,255 partially damaged[5], leaving hundreds of thousands homeless to face the upcoming Himalayan winter in temporary shelters. The total economic loss stood at US $7 billion—more than one-third of Nepal's GDP.



As aftershocks continued, Nepal's disaster preparedness came under revived scrutiny. Every year, Nepal sees approximately 500 disaster events such as fire, landslides, floods, and epidemic. Despite this, disasters have been managed on an ad-hoc basis traditionally, "attended to as and when they occurred"[6]. The Natural Disaster Relief Act (1982), the establishment of the Disaster Preparedness Network Nepal (1996), and formulation of the National Strategy for Disaster Risk Management (2009) and the National Disaster Response Framework (2013) were all steps in strengthening the crisis management capabilities in the country through legislation and policymaking. But, as several studies have highlighted, Nepal's disaster response was found lacking in the wake of the 2015 earthquake. Although there existed policies to manage crises, the "framework could not deliver what it seemed to promise", limited, as it were, by both its "structure" and

1 UNDP Global Assessment of Risk: Nepal Country Report,http://www.undp.org/content/dam/nepal/docs/reports/UNDP_NP_Nepal%20Country%20Report.pdf

2 Sapkota, S N, Bollinger, L and Perrier F (2016), Fatality rates of the M w ~8.2, 1934, Bihar–Nepal earthquake and comparison with the April 2015 Gorkha earthquake. Earth, Planets and Space (2016) 68:40

3 See EERI Earthquake Reconnaissance Team Report: M7.8 Gorkha, Nepal Earthquake on April 25, 2015 and its Aftershock for a breakdown

4 Post-Disaster Needs Assessment, https://www.nepalhousingreconstruction.org/sites/nuh/files/2017-03/PDNA%20Volume%20A%20Final.pdf

5 UNDP report Rapid earthquake recovery in Nepal, http://www.np.undp.org/content/dam/nepal/docs/reports/2017_reports/Rapid%20Earthquake%20Recovery%20in%20Nepal%20-%20Final%20Report.pdf

6 Nepal, P, Khanal, N R and Sharma B P P (2018), Policies and institutions for disaster risk management in Nepal: a review. The Geographical Journal of Nepal Vol. 11: 1-24

"response capacity"[7].

Forty months after the earthquake, the national disaster preparedness of Nepal has seen significant changes. New strategies and policies have emerged, including a milestone legislation—the Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act (2017), which replaced the decades-old NDRA of 1982. But the debates on improving resilience, of establishing better strategic and operational processes and structures to govern both disaster preparedness and impact mitigation, have paid only limited, if any, attention to the role of the news media in post-disaster Nepal—to the challenges journalists faced, and the requirements for building better news media preparedness in the future.

That the news media play a critical role in crises situations is well evidenced by several studies. But one criticism that can be levelled against crisis journalism in general is its transient nature: news coverage largely tends to be episodic and immediate, leaving a gap both in the reporting of the disaster and our knowledge of sustained post-disaster journalism. In the case of Nepal, understanding the challenges that journalists face becomes even more pertinent—not only because of its exceptional vulnerability to disasters as a nation, but also because of the nature of the media system there and its development needs.



The Nepali media landscape is characterised by a remarkable number of radio stations. Spread across the country, and particularly serving the rural population, these stations broadcast in a plurality of languages—123 languages are spoken in Nepal, according to the 2011 census—to command substantial reach, higher than the other media forms. Newspapers are centred in the Kathmandu valley, with low overall print circulation owing to "the difficult geographical terrain, the high recurring costs for both publishers and readers, and the adult literacy rate at only around 60 percent of the population"[8]. Recent years have seen a dramatic increase in television and digital and social media penetration, but radio enjoys a far greater reach into rural communities across the nation. Compared to the 189 newspapers published daily and 117 television channels predominantly catering to urban audiences, there are 736 FM radio broadcasters, including 314 community. This allows an estimated 98 per cent of the population access to radio (a significant proportion access FM stations via mobile phones).

While the diversity of outlets signal a robust news media system (a point to note here is that, unlike in many other South Asian countries, radio stations are allowed to broadcast

7 See Disaster preparedness and response during political transition in Nepal, https://asiafoundation.org/publication/disaster-preparedness-response-during-political-transition-nepal/

8 See Media landscapes: Nepal, https://medialandscapes.org/country/nepal

news and news-based programmes in Nepal), it must be remembered that professional media have only had a very short lifespan in the country. Till the adoption of democracy in the 1999, and the resultant emergence of commercial media houses, journalism was a 'volunteer' career[9]. As such, the profession is still in its nascency in Nepal, facing several training, resourcing and other developmental challenges[10].

It is against this backdrop that we explored the disaster response and experiences of Nepali journalists. In this, we were guided by scholarship that documents the impact of natural disasters on news organisations, which chronicled how devastating events lead to changes in routinised news practices[11] and the challenges to their professionalism due to their dual role as victim and journalist[12]. Our main objective was to map the challenges that journalists faced in the wake of the earthquake—not just in the days immediately after, but also in the recovery phase. A 2016 report by the Federation of Nepali Journalists shows that, much like every other aspect of Nepali life, the earthquake brought destruction to the journalism infrastructure[13] as well: 266 media houses were damaged, and 1,813 journalists directly affected, which included the deaths of three journalists and injuries to 14. Under such circumstances, how did journalists go about their professional duties? How prepared did they feel, as survivors themselves, to report on the aftermath? What steps are required to improve post-disaster journalism in Nepal?



## SCOPE OF STUDY

This study primarily draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 46 journalists, editors and other officials responsible for news reporting after the earthquake, including politicians and civil servants, NGO officials and community leaders. Interviewees were from the city areas of Kathmandu and Patan, as well as regional areas affected by the earthquake: Sindhupalchok, Nuwakot and Gorkha. Nearly three-fourth of the journalists and editors interviewed were from radio or newspapers, with the remaining from TV, dedicated news websites or wire services. We analysed the interview transcripts using MaXQDA, conducting an inductive content analysis. This study is also informed by 150

9 Media landscapes: Nepal, https://medialandscapes.org/country/nepal

10 See UNESCO report, Assessment of Media Development in Nepal,http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002254/225486e.pdf

11 Mathews, J (2017), The role of a local newspaper after disaster: an intrinsic case study of Ishinomaki, Japan. Asian Journal of Communication, 27 (5), 464-479

12 Usher, N (2009), Recovery from disaster: How journalists at the New Orleans Times-Picayune understand the role of a post-Katrina newspaper. Journalism Practice, 3, 216–232

13 Nepali media set example in face of adversity, https://thehimalayantimes.com/kathmandu/nepali-media-set-example-in-face-of-adversity/

interviews with survivors (including journalists) undertaken for our affiliated post-disaster journalism project. We further make use of reflections by participants on that project in our analysis.

# KEY FINDINGS

The Nepali news media—print, TV and radio channels alike—were ill-prepared for the earthquake. While journalists showed great resilience in the face of a disaster they were personally affected by, their news coverage was impacted by several challenges, particularly in the response phase. We place the formidable issues that Nepali journalists faced into three broad categories: *journalism practice*, *journalism strategy*, and *journalistic identity*.

## 1. ISSUES OF JOURNALISM PRACTICE

The damage caused by the earthquake to media infrastructure was severe. Together with the general breakdown of infrastructure and public facilities, this complicated newsgathering and publishing, rendering both tasks impossible on occasions. This was particularly true in the immediate days after the earthquake. Editors and reporters spoke about the destruction of newsrooms and destruction of communication infrastructure, besides highlighting blockage of roads and fuel shortage as limiting their news coverage.



*Destruction of newsrooms*

Several interviewees described their newsrooms as being fully or partially destroyed. One newspaper journalist in Kathmandu said:

> "We didn't have an office. Our building was damaged and we had a temporary workplace. We didn't have internet connection, we didn't have enough computers… there were a lot of technical problems. There had been talk for years about Kathmandu being hit by a big disaster, but everyone was shocked by the extent of it when it happened."

Another newspaper journalist from Gorkha described how, as "the aftershocks were so frequent" and his office building was so "cracked", he didn't feel safe at work. Similar was the case with a Kathmandu journalist who said the "building where we worked as a newsroom had collapsed, and we didn't know where to work".

Journalists, hence, were forced to find workarounds. The Kathmandu journalist described how he and colleagues wrote their news reports from a printing press:

> "Our publisher and editor were out of town…so our second man and other persons, they just managed to take our stuff into the place where these things get printed. We managed there, and wrote our initial reports on the death toll, on the situation."

Others, like the journalist from Gorkha, adapted to a more itinerant style of working:

> "I spent most of my time in public places like hotels, especially the garden of the Gorkha Hotel. It was all crowded, but I wasn't feeling safe anywhere except for open spaces."

A radio journalist from Kathmandu spoke of how the destruction of newsrooms prevented his team from broadcasting for several days:

> "After seven days, one week, we took our equipment from the office [which was destroyed] out to a field. We bought a tent, and we started to broadcast there."



*Partial destruction of communication infrastructure*

Journalists, mostly the editors we interviewed, stressed the difficulties brought about by the destruction of communication infrastructure. They were unable to reach colleagues or sources using telephone, and could not use the internet to communicate or publish. Those who did have access to cell phones experienced severe difficulties connecting to jammed networks struggling to cope with overwhelming demand, and said they often relied on (delayed) text messages.

Communication issues were more acute in regional areas, where some interviewees cited no electricity or radio for seven days after the earthquake. Others based in the capital said there were delays of only a few hours before cell phones were operational, but they still lacked electricity for three days.

At this point, Radio Nepal was an important source of communication, as were other radio channels. A magazine editor based in Patan noted that social media was also a useful source of official information, but only after a week or more after the earthquake:

> "Some government officials and agencies, and even the police and army had

> their Twitter account, their Facebook account. But in the first week, everyone—the government, the media, everyone—was disorganised."

The lack of generators and batteries further exacerbated the communication situation faced by news media personnel. Journalists were unable to power cell phones, computers and other digital devices when they ran out of power. Some journalists described 'borrowing' electricity and internet access from friends who had backup generators in their homes. The associate editor of a magazine based in Kathmandu said:

> "By the first evening, I found my friend's place. Their internet was still working and the generator was working so I set up there."

*Damage and disruption to transport networks*

Blocked and damaged roads, lack of public transport, and a shortage of vehicle fuel prevented journalists from reaching their newsrooms or travelling to affected areas. While several interviewees spoke about using bicycles or mopeds to get around, there was a consensus that accessibility to both sites of destruction and to places of work was a major problem. A Kathmandu-based radio editor spoke of how a "neighbour's house collapsed and the road was totally blocked… I was helpless".



Destruction of transport infrastructure delayed journalists from attempting to reach the worst-affected rural areas. Journalists from the Kathmandu area who did visit regional districts described doing so only after days or even weeks. A newspaperjournalist spoke about this inaccessibility, acknowledging that the media focus on Kathmandu, sometimes for reasons of practicality, did a disservice to severely affected regional districts:

> "It was very hard to go to different districts. We live in Kathmandu, yes…. I think we really didn't do justice in reporting the real ground level issues."

The Patan-based magazine editor expanded on this:

> "For the first week, all journalists, all media houses, they just focused on the disaster that hit Kathmandu… Until the third or fourth day we didn't even have an idea that Sindhupalchok was the worst-hit district. I think on the third week of the disaster, we put the Sindhupalchok story on the front page."

*Physical risks and lack of disaster-reporting preparedness*

Many journalists expressed trepidations about aftershocks and buildings collapsing, especially as there were rumours that a bigger earthquake could strike.This made them reluctant to travel to remote areas affected by the earthquake. Some interviewees also spoke about security risks, including robberies. One NGO worker from the Nuwakot region described the situation in these words:

> "We didn't have information on what's going on. A lot of rumours were going around and many people were also saying that now the biggest earthquake will come. People were really traumatised, frustrated and irritated from the earthquake that hit but still a lot of robberies took place. Lots of security issues were there."

Interviewees were further worried about finding basic necessities, including shelter, food and sanitation. A magazine editor from Kathmandu spoke about his fears of travelling to remote villages:

> "[There might be] no shelter, it's cold, it might rain, there might be lack of light... you have to find fuel, toilets. These everyday necessities become inaccessible during a disaster and it's felt most profoundly at night."



For their part, the journalists who did travel to regional locations said they felt a sense of professional inadequacy. More than one interviewee spoke about being unsure of how best to go about their jobs—a problem compounded by the fact that they were ill-prepared for the physical demands of the changed 'site of news'. An editor of an English magazine based in Kathmandu spoke about this:

> "The village I went to was in Sindhupalchok. And I was unplanned. I wanted to stay there a few days to cover the disaster, without realising that there was no water. Then at around six o'clock, we started looking for water. People were living on the banks of the river in tents, but we didn't have anything as such to live there. We didn't have sleeping bags or anything like that. So I came back to Kathmandu in the midnight. The road was really bad and I fell down several times and there were landslides all over the road. Thank God, it wasn't raining."

Another journalist, a freelancer, also from Kathmandu, expanded on how reporters lacked editorial guidance:

> "Most journalists did not follow any kind of planning at that time. It was not clear that we could reach Ghokar or Bardin or another remote part of the country. We were just moving towards those areas... we did not have a concrete plan on reporting."

**Impact on journalism practice**

The issues highlighted above influenced the post-earthquake news coverage produced by the Nepali news media, constraining both news production and news gathering, and placing journalists under considerable stress.

The destruction of newsrooms, the breakdown of established processes and communication channels, and the other operational difficulties outlined above affected news production as well as journalistic rigour at a time when these were most crucial. A newspaper journalist in Kathmandu recalled:

> "We had limited computers because our newsroom was not functioning and we were shifted to a camp. So many reporters were standing for their turn to write at one computer. Once a reporter finished a copy, the copy-editor would sit at the same computer, and then the designer would take over... It was very hard."



Like several other interviewees, he spoke of the stress of working in such an environment:

> "[I]n that situation, how will you write? You queue up in the line and your time is already passing, and you are already worried about going home because there is no vehicle."

With limited phone connectivity, severe breakdown of transport infrastructure, and inadequate logistical resources at their disposal, many journalists felt obstructed from carrying out their reporting assignments. A freelance journalist from Sindhupalchok, one of the worst-affected districts, recounted:

> "All the houses were destroyed, there was no food, people were suffering everywhere. In that situation, there was no transport, no information, no cell phone service, nothing. There were problems collecting news."

While this was true of the majority of the journalists we interviewed, a few respondents managed to travel with the Nepali army on helicopters to access regional areas. This

practice was both envied by some journalists because of the access it provided, and questioned by others, who noted those who did go by helicopter to remote areas were still very limited in their range and time spent there. They would not, for example, undertake the one or two days of trekking required to reach the most remote villages in the area. There was also resentment towards Western journalists who had access to resources—such as helicopters—that most Nepali journalists did not. A freelance journalist said:

> "Some of the [foreign] journalists, they hired helicopters and easily managed to go to the most affected place in Gorkha and the epicentre. But we didn't think about the helicopter. We just thought about the roadway, yeah. So it took time, but we were first to visit that place because the journalists who hired the helicopter, they just went [there] and returned on the helicopter."

Journalists who *did* have access to greater resources also expressed a conflict about their professional role as reporters, and having to leave people behind. A journalist with the *Kathmandu Post* and an international news organisation recounted an incident where he was requested by a trekking guide in Gorkha—near the epicentre—for a place on a helicopter:



> "I'm not the guy who has the authority... but I'm the face that says it's probably not going to happen. And then the helicopter leaves and you think then that this guy is probably going to have to walk down this road, and the road is destroyed. So quite a lot of guilt at getting back into this helicopter."

This journalist also touched upon feelings of guilt over other perks he had access to, and which he ended up rejecting:

> "I could have stayed at the hotel the entire time with all the [international] people, but I didn't want to. But I was scrounging for breakfast tokens and they were having a hotel breakfast... they didn't stop laying out this wonderful spread every morning."

The practical issues faced in their line of duty, thus, can be seen to have impacted the post-earthquake news coverage of Nepal news media negatively. Several journalists we interviewed indicated that they were severely limited in their outputs. While their comments were specifically about the response phase, given that some of these issues—for instance, damages to road transport and communication networks—continued into the months after, it is expected that the news coverage of the recovery phase was also similarly impacted.

## Recommendations

1. *Newsrooms and journalists should be an integral part of national disaster risk reduction plans*. There is a need to establish agreed lines of communication and areas of responsibility in terms of information dissemination between media organisations and government agencies, emergency services, NGOs etc. Media organisations (either directly or through umbrella associations) should establish partnerships with emergency management authorities, and—given their central role in information dissemination—be involved in disaster management process.
2. *All journalists should consider personal safety and have a professional operational contingency plan*. This includes having ready access to earthquake survival kits, backup batteries for phones/laptops, and electricity generators for sustained downtime.
3. *Regular training in coping with disasters for journalists*. Operational drills and role-plays should be repeated on an annual basis at least. This will prevent the perception of risk-mitigation equipment and procedures as unlikely and hypothetical scenarios.



4. *Establish redundancy locations and routines for newsrooms*. Several innovative approaches to keep newsrooms working emerged in the aftermath of earthquake. These can be developed into contingency solutions—such as, so to speak, a 'pop-up newsroom'.
5. *Risk-mitigation partnerships*. News organisations can agree to draw on each other's resources in the event of one (or more) falling victim to disasters.
6. *Develop guidelines for embedded journalists* who travel with army or aid agencies to affected areas.

## 2. ISSUES OF JOURNALISM STRATEGY

Despite Nepal being particularly earthquake prone, journalists described a lack of preparedness for the disaster—personally, as well as in terms of infrastructure. We found this non-preparedness was exacerbated by the lack of structured information management systems in Nepal, the lack of backup mechanisms or procedures for dealing with the crisis, and the subsequent government failure to effectively distribute relief. As a newspaper journalist in Kathmandu said:

> "I saw a small boy come, he brought two other boys with him. He said that these two don't have a father anymore and asked the police if they could look after

> them. It was total chaos. Nobody had anticipated that this would happen… there was no preparation."

*Lack of editorial preparedness*

The lack of preparedness extended to journalistic institutions, and also to the journalists themselves. There was no back-up plan on how to respond infrastructurally or as reporters. A contributory factor was that despite Nepal being prone to earthquakes and other disasters (flooding, landslides, fires etc), there is no specific journalistic beat devoted to disaster reporting. Interviewees indicated that the lack of such a specialism in newsrooms added to the sense of chaos, and indeed, the slow reaction from some journalists: there was lack of clarity about how to respond and the ownership of different lines of enquiry remained ambiguous.

An official of the National Seismological Centre appeared to be referring to these issues when he spoke about the head-in-the-sand approach that the news media displayed previously:

> "Whenever there was any estimation of an earthquake, it got issued [by the media], otherwise there was silence. Nobody was taking any precautions or worrying about it."



A magazine editor from Kathmandu agreed with this assessment, noting that even though some news outlets did try to raise awareness that an earthquake could hit at any time, this did not translate into preparedness on their own part.

> "Ironically, we wanted to raise awareness, we wanted to tell people that you should be prepared for the big one, but our office wasn't prepared."

As a consequence, almost all journalists we interviewed described a sense of confusion and uncertainty in the immediate aftermath. They struggled to cope with the severe disruption to their routinised labour, particularly as this was heightened by the fact they could not get hold of senior staff for directions, and also by that many editors and news managers were uncertain themselves at what to do. A freelance journalist, who formerly worked for the *Kathmandu Post*, spoke about this situation:

> "Even the editors were not in a position to give that kind of instruction. We just reported whatever we saw, whatever information we got from the government officials. We were not so prepared to report on the disaster."

A Kathmandu-based newspaper journalist expanded on the confusion caused by the breakdown in news routines:

> "Normally, we would have meetings about twice a day—in the morning, in the afternoon… But immediately after the earthquake we could not sit for meetings…. We also failed to make proper plans. How should we do the reporting for the day? How should we make the story? How should we make the planning for the post-production?"

*Need for post-disaster training*

Most of our interviewees were acutely aware that they needed more knowledge about reporting on disasters. Many expressed a sense of professional inadequacy, and felt they could have done a better job if they had sufficient training. A radio and print journalist said:

> "We don't have that kind of training, for what kind of story we can give during a disaster or crisis. We didn't have that kind of idea. Even now, we don't have that kind of institute to give that kind of training or orientation. And people think that journalists have to know everything, which is very unfair."



A small section of interviewees said that they had received earthquake training (typically those with wire services, or some experience with international news organisations), or that their news organisation had some contingency plans for physical safety. But none of the respondents described any form of editorial strategy in the event of an earthquake. Only one interviewee described role-play training based on an earthquake scenario, over 2-3 days of 10 hours per day. Earthquake survival kits were often inaccessible or perceived as "collecting dust" in the office.

While journalists said they learnt a lot from their experience of reporting on the earthquake, there was unity of opinion that formal training was needed to prepare them for future scenarios. Drawing from interview and focus group responses, as also our personal experience with post-disaster news coverage for Aftershock Nepal, two areas emerge where support is required: training to provide clarity on the typology of stories and the approaches to newsgathering needed in post-disaster situations, as well as training to report safely from the hostile environment created by disasters. A Kathmandu journalist touched upon the latter point—the need to understand the news necessities in the response and recovery phases—when he said:

> "We didn't think before the earthquake how we should report. Now time has come to think if another disaster comes to Nepal, *how* should we report about the disaster?"

*Impressionistic reporting and 'innocent journalism'*

Several journalists described a shift in their reporting style in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. Their reports consisted mainly of short impressionistic updates and personal or anecdotal observations about destruction. There was a sense of urgency to communicate immediately, but this was coupled with an inability to do so in a wholesome way—as a result of the variety of issues mentioned above.

One newspaper reporter from Gorkha described how the lack of "training and knowledge about disaster reporting" meant they produced more "innocent journalism", noting that training would likely have made their journalism more formal and conventional. A Kathmandu-based radio journalist spoke of how reporters jotted down their observations of immediate surroundings to put together reports.



> "We didn't have camera at that time, charge also finished, no electricity, mobiles were switched off. We just observed things, houses, and wrote in our notecopy."

Initial reporting centred on developing an impact scenario—how many people died, how many were injured, which buildings were destroyed and so forth. This was closely followed by concern about food, medicine, sanitation and distribution of essentials.

Whilst this style of reporting—impressionistic as well as focussed on the 'quantity' of devastation—was primarily in the immediate aftermath, some journalists said it took up to six months before they began to pursue in-depth and "quality journalism".

*Information deficiency, official access and political pressure*

The lack of preparedness on the part of government agencies appears to have added to the confusion that journalists faced. There was no clear information-sharing strategy that came into play once the earthquake happened, and journalists lacked access to authoritative sources, and had no processes to rely on to verify information. Consequently, news reports were not always accurate. Whilst this was acute in the immediate aftermath,

Journalist Anita Maharjan of Radio Paryabaran. Nepal has a remarkable number of radio stations, broadcasting in a plurality of languages. Photo: *Preeti A Karna*



the ambiguous information sharing also continued into the recovery phase. As a Kathmandu-based NGO worker said:

> "Lack of information, conflicting information, was there throughout, especially regarding coverage and guidelines. Coordination in my opinion remained a challenge throughout, even now in the reconstruction phase in terms of who's doing what and how we're actually coordinating with people on the ground and the government and each other."

Data from the semi-structured interviews and focus groups highlighted the lack of access to government sources. Respondents were clear that journalists in the capital had greater access to official sources, and indeed resources to investigate. Regional journalists felt that they could not do 'quality' stories because they did not have access to senior officials (who were usually based in Kathmandu). Also, there was a sense of inadequacy among regional journalists at reporting a disaster of this scale—not only because of their lack of access but also because of their limited journalism training and experience.

Even Kathmandu-based journalists spoke about lack of information. Quite often, they said they sourced information from international news (direct from 'parachute' journalists, or from online publications), or foreign official sources (e.g. embassies, army). A magazine editor in Patan spoke about the overall atmosphere of confusion:

> "I've been covering earthquake reconstruction regularly, but I still can't explain what's going on. It's so complicated, they don't have compact data. For the first few months I used to rely on the UN humanitarian agency for reliable information, but I think they have stopped updating their data. I [now] need to rely on the National Reconstruction Authority, which is very... their data are not consistent. And then I'm so confused because they say, for example, 200,000 houses were destroyed, but what we wrote back then was that 600,000 houses were destroyed. So yeah, it's really confusing, the inconsistency. It's not easy to understand what's going on."

A few respondents also pointed to political pressure on journalists. This appeared to be especially prevalent in the regions, and at times led to more relaxed fact-checking or even counter-narratives—for example, claims that NGOs were wasting money—in order to detract from criticism against government failures. An NGO worker in Kathmandu spoke about this:

> "Local media definitely needs more fact-checking... There are media outlets that are clearly politically aligned and clearly pushing back against this international media narrative of 'the government is terrible'. They say, 'look at the NGOs and how much money they're wasting'. And you know, they kind of drum up this anti frenzy... everyone gets more defensive, we publish more press releases about how many people we've reached—and that's not the discussion I want to have."



*Difficulty in returning to 'normal' journalism*

Journalists described how the earthquake consumed all news reporting. It was omnipresent, shaping all other events in Nepal persistently. Respondents spoke about how they sought to incorporate it into stories that were not directly related, signalling not only how it affected every part of life but also the ways in which it influenced their thinking about news and journalism. Arguably, this is a consequence of conventional news logic, where the dominant story of such a scale in inflected within other genres (e.g. which sports teams were affected). However, journalists expressed difficulty in shedding this dominance as time passed, which caused problems in returning to conventional reporting and normalcy. A freelance journalist in Kathmandu provided insights into this:

> "Everything was shaped by the earthquake—political changes, government

> changes. Even the constitution-writing process, which was delayed for years, was settled immediately after the earthquake. So what we did is we just covered the earthquake. Even when we covered politics or economics, the earthquake was there."

Reporters covering niches such as sports actively searched for ways to weave the earthquake into their news stories. A Kathmandu-based newspaper journalist said:

> "No one wants to speak about sports issues at a time of crisis, when people are suffering. So we observed and asked some government authority to provide reports about sports that were affected or damaged by the earthquake. You cannot consult common people about sports."

*Lack of specialist journalism skills*

Journalists and editors alike expressed the regret that they did not have the capabilities or resources for investigative journalism. Neither did they feel confident about analysing financial data. Respondents also spoke about being unsure of dealing with traumatised survivors and victims, indicating a need for specialist interviewing skills as well.



Speaking of the inadequacy of investigative journalism skills, a magazine journalist said:

> "After the earthquake a lot of money came in. And I desperately wanted to track that. [But] I felt unprepared. I ended up writing about the conflict between the donors and the government… but I really wanted to track how much money is coming in, who is raising it, things like that."

The slow pace of aid distribution was an immediate concern, with monies apparently residing in government agencies for long periods without reaching those it was intended for. There were also concerns about corruption related to this, and several journalists expressed a desire to have conducted rigorous inquiries into the flow of funds from external donors in the recovery phase. But, as an assistant editor for a magazine based in Kathmandu pointed out, Nepali journalists lack the expertise for carrying out such investigations:

> "Nepali or local reporters weren't and aren't trained in the most important aspect of reconstruction—the money. Where are the funds coming from? Where are they going? The death toll is easily available, the government tells you how many people died… [but] the money coming into a country like Nepal

> is difficult to follow. The money is coming in from so many different sources to so many different organisations. But what do they do? [T]he government needs to be scrutinised because it's the biggest player, but even the NGOs, the INGOs, how much money is coming in? What percentage of that is going to salaried workers and employees or going back to the country? That was a challenge."

Several respondents said they would have liked to move beyond the disaster and reconstruction narrative, to explore the everyday lived realities of survivors.While their voices and images are centre stage when providing a spectacle of suffering in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, this is quickly replaced by aid and reconstruction (or lack of) in the recovery phase. Here journalists called for sharper focus on both reflecting and supporting the human resilience expressed by survivors. However, these stories were not easy to report. A Kathmandu-based radio editor spoke about how human interest stories were important, but were "in kind of a shadow":

> "[T]here are series of stories we can do especially focussed on reconstruction, not only building. Reconstructions of the heart and emotions, because people lost their family members. They are still in trauma. Small children… their parents are gone. What are they going through? The government is thinking about building, planning. That is not enough. And these can be the stories [told by] the media."



A newspaper journalist based in Kathmandu expanded on the practical difficulties of talking to survivors:

> "Talking to patients was another big challenge. They were in a hospital bed and you needed to go in to talk to the family, you needed to convince them. It's a very hard thing, you know, in any sort of disaster."

Another freelance journalist in Kathmandu reflected on how disaster reporting reflected an elite-centric view that neglected already marginalised voices:

> "Still we are not able to reach out [to] people suffering the most in the remote part of the country, particularly the underprivileged community. They are not getting proper space in the media. We have not been able to raise their voices in our reporting. I see kind of lapses in giving proper space to these people."

The 2015 earthquake, as seen above, highlighted several issues with editorial preparedness.

While journalists found workarounds in time, it needs to be stressed that planning for disaster reporting, including establishing workflow processes and training, is of utmost importance in Nepal. Some possible solutions are detailed below.

## Recommendations

1. *Develop editorial strategies for dealing with disaster situations.* These should include:

   • Different risk scenarios (ranging from small impact to those that destroy the newsroom or production facilities), and operational solutions for dealing with each.
   • Pre-agreed areas that should be considered in disaster situations (contextual issues, questions that should be raised, etc). This is important given the chaotic scenarios in the immediate aftermath of any disaster.

2. *Capacity building workshops for journalists focussing on how to report key questions after a disaster* (and not just on how to cope with physical challenges and safety). This should not be considered as a one-off, but rather an ongoing professional development need that should be continuously updated. This might include:



   • Engaging with seismological data, understanding disaster cycles, knowing what questions to ask and of whom, and engaging with broader context beyond their regular beat.

   • Dealing with sensitive issues and how to interview survivors / vulnerable peoples, as well as understanding the motivations and needs of aid agencies and emergency services, and development of ethical guidelines for such scenarios. This should include engaging with those NGOs and survivor support groups to understand their experiences of being subjects of disaster reporting.

   • Learning how to interrogate disaster prevention measures, and how lessons can be learnt from response and recovery phases—and indeed the extent to which lessons from previous (domestic or foreign) disasters have been learnt.

   • Exploring how journalism about survivors can be sustained in productive ways in the long-term (beyond news coverages on anniversary occasions).

3. *Training for specialist journalism skills to investigate post-earthquake issues.* This might involve:

   • Investigative reporting

- Techniques to investigate large datasets—for example, about aid distribution, or financial data, or crime statistics.

- New ways of engaging audiences with such stories (either visualisation, interaction, or new narrative constructions).

4. *Establishment of collaborative media network to share experiences and best practices for disaster resilience and response***.** Journalism federations or associations may have a role to play here, though it is important that there is also direct interaction between newsrooms and journalists. This network should include disaster management professionals and specialist organisations, such as the National Seismological Centre in Nepal. International collaborations should also be sought here, for example through UNESCO and similar inter-governmental organisations.

5. *Establish routines for fact-checking and verifying disaster-related information,and engaging with other information-clearing organisations (both domestically and internationally)*. This should engage with official sources, but journalists should also develop independent strategies for coping in the event of information deficiency or operational inefficiency by national institutions or government. Shared information resources should not be restricted to quantitative information, and journalists should consider sharing or pooling of information to lessen impact on survivors.



6. *Develop educational interventions* (e.g. sample curricula, learning materials and strategies). These can be used to ensure journalism education at all levels in Nepal includes considerations of disaster impact and recovery, and ensures future journalists are equipped to deal with both physical and reporting challenges of disaster scenarios.

7. *Engage in regular promotion and reporting of national disaster risk reduction policies and programmes.* This would act as a preventative measure, supporting resilience.

## 3. ISSUES OF JOURNALISTIC IDENTITY

The tension between journalists' professional identity and their emotive response to experiencing the disaster as survivors emerged as a recurring theme. Respondents revealed a conflict between coping with their (and their family's) trauma and their perceived professional duty to report.

*Personal vs professional*

Several interviewees spoke about struggling to cope with the destruction of their homes, and how that affected their journalism. A Kathmandu-based radio journalist, among the many who spoke about this, said:

> "I lived for a month in a tent. My house had cracks. The kids were very scared and they didn't want to go to the house. The quakes came continuously and I thought, they all thought, they were going to die. I just forgot at the time that I was a reporter."

An online journalist from Kathmandu described a feeling of "numbness" all around.

> "Complete lack of sleep because every five minutes there were aftershocks. Also, everyone had become somewhat numb with the fear of uncertainty. In Nepal there is a term called *satogoye*. It means when someone is in shock or trauma, at that time he becomes numb. So that was the feeling all around. We didn't know what to do."



Many journalists were too shaken to work right after the earthquake. The disaster also gave some respondents a different outlook. A newspaperjournalist in Kathmandu gave voice to this, when he said:

> "We could have been killed that day… so that gave us a new perspective. Till now I am reminded of how I was lucky to survive that day. It's hard to forget the destruction we saw. We couldn't live properly and work properly after that. I couldn't come to my office to write."

Journalists spoke about how difficult it was to report about a disaster in which they had a personal stake in. They were survivors first, journalists second—and, as such, they struggled to cope psychologically with the situation they were expected to observe and report. A freelance journalist from Kathmandu expressed this in the following words:

> "It was very difficult to maintain quality… we just tried to collect the information. We were not able to work properly. There were psychological problems, family obligations. Life comes first, before any other things … also need to stay safe, before writing anything."

A radio journalist from Sindhupalchok spoke about how she was "crying with the victims" and how she "just mixed my emotions in my write-ups". Another, a Patan-based magazine editor, said he was not in the right "frame of mind" and how that affected the quality of his work:

> "To get information wasn't that easy…If I had tried a little harder, then I could have got more information. But I was emotionally disturbed, I couldn't focus on stories."

Despite the personal trauma, a section of journalists also spoke about a prevailing sense of duty. One newspaper journalist from Kathmandu expanded:

> "In the evening, I called the manager and he said, 'If you think you can come, you come. We don't want to pressure you.' But as a journalist, I felt I should go because it is my duty… so that is why I went to my office. They had shifted our office to this temporary makeshift camp."

Putting aside "personal obligations" caused some dissonance, but several journalists expressed an element of pride in their decision to keep working. A newspaper journalist from Kathmandu said:



> "To be frank, I compromised all my personal obligations. I moved out for reporting. Two days after the earthquake I was the first one to go to the Shorpani, near the epicentre in Gorkha district."

Similar was the experience of another journalist, who started freelancing when he could no longer print his own paper:

> "My family suffered and I suffered a lot of loss. In that situation I didn't care about my family… only my work. I just kept working. I lost being able to print my own paper because of the earthquake, that's why I started freelancing and writing for other publications."

A magazine editor from Kathmandu said he was motivated by the opportunity to do "some good" by reporting, but also emphasised the importance of taking care of his parents:

> "It's your job as a reporter, as a journalist, to share the story… you are at the centre of the world's attention, you want to use that to do some good. But you have to ignore some of that… I had to report back, clock in at work, and clock in

> at home as well. Had to spend those few hours at home. Because this is when my parents were also staying in tents. So you have to go, they aren't young people, they're worried, they're old... have to take care of their parents who are even older. It's hard, but other people have it even harder."

The personal and psychological stress that journalists were under continued even after the immediate danger passed. Respondents indicated that going to work was an escape and perhaps a way of coping. A Patan-based wire service journalist provided insights into this sentiment when he said:

> "I slept in a school for a couple of nights. When I finally got back home I was a bit worn out and panicky. I'm still that way. I still notice if there's a roof over your head. So when you're in a field the first thought is, oh, it'll be alright if it happened again."

*Cultural specificities*



Nepal has a collectivist culture where great emphasis is given to social norms and community and family (including extended family) responsibilities. In the 'afnomanche' family support system here, the needs of the 'inner circle' take priority over other obligations. In this case, it meant that many journalists delayed returning to work.

Kathmandu was severely affected by the tremors. This aggravated the issue of capital-centric reporting as many reporters who were based there felt unable to travel to report from regions near the epicentre. As a newspaper journalist put it, "As a journalist I have a responsibility towards society, but as a son I have my responsibility towards my parents."

Traditional gender roles also came into play, as in the case of this female newspaper journalist based in Patan:

> "My family force me... please leave your job, please leave your job. Just leave this job and apply for other types of work. This is not suitable for you. It's family and society... for ladies, it is not an open society."

Some journalists described how bearing witness in the name of journalism played out badly with some victims. A newspaperjournalist in Kathmandu said:

Children in Chimling Beshi, a village in Sindhupalchok, six months after the earthquake. The villagers here had an incredible escape: though nearly every house was damaged, no lives were lost. Photo: *Naomi Mihara*

> "It was a dilemma for us because people get irritated when journalists ask them about what they lost, what they had to suffer, because they were already heated up. They were also irritated by the government lacking to provide them relief. One of our friends, a photographer, had his camera broken when he was taking photographs of people getting rescued. They asked him why he was taking photographs instead of helping the rescue operation."

*Commitment to advocacy and direct intervention*

Echoing previous research[14], we found a clear commitment to advocacy of their national identity and resilience from our respondents. Many journalists spoke about how their country would bounce back, as also feeling compelled to help out with the relief operations both during and after work time. This is a known phenomenon for journalists reporting from crisis situations, where they may blur professional boundaries (as impartial observers) and become part of the story (though they might not always report this).



A TV journalist from Kathmandu said, "We talked to different organisations and arranged food and clothing, and I myself went to give it to people." The same journalist described pushing aid workers to provide additional support to a victim, using the threat of filming them as leverage to make an intervention. "We thought, ah, at least we did something. And that difference was made by the camera probably," he said.

Respondents described how they, as journalists, were the first to reach certain locations, and thus were able to provide officials with information to follow-up and provide aid. A newspaper journalist from Gorkha said:

> "We supplied our information to the media as well as to the DDRC [Disaster Risk Reduction Portal]. The government had their own information network but it would take them long time to obtain the information and help people. As journalists we have good information supply so at that time I did not wait to break the news, rather I supplied it to the DDRC, so that they could help maximum people in need."

Others set up makeshift information centres, as described by a radio editor from Kathmandu:

14 Usher, N (2009), Recovery from disaster: How journalists at the New Orleans Times-Picayune understand the role of a post-Katrina newspaper. Journalism Practice, 3, 216–232

> "We established information centres, just one table, one or two chairs. We didn't think that people would come. After some time we realised, oh, we need some more chairs. People came from the village… so we needed some water also."

On the other hand, some journalists considered helping out, and then decided that their journalistic work was where they could be most effective. A magazine editor discussed this choice:

> "At this point when people need to be taken out of the rubble, should I invest my energy in collecting stories, or should I invest my energy in collecting food supplies? Because that was the initial reaction of most people: band together, send supplies out. So balancing that was a challenge. And I was grateful to our team, because at some point they told us the best way we can help is by doing what we do, by telling the stories. And that's when I started to go out to report stories."

However, he also said that journalists had to display their solidarity and show they were helping out more tangibly than just telling stories.



> "While you're at it [reporting], if you're going to a village, carry something. Because at that point, people don't want to talk to journalists. They haven't eaten for three days. You say, 'I've come from Kathmandu,' the first question you'll get is, have you brought tents? Have you brought food? Have you got medicine? If you say, 'No, I'm here to see how you feel about the situation,' they might punch you."

*Criticism of parachute journalists and international media*

International journalists were widely criticised by those we interviewed. They were perceived as engaging in self-centred reporting, lacking understanding and appreciation of local context, not having sufficient knowledge of locations and reinforcing decades of poverty-reporting.

An NGO worker and translator for international journalists in Kathmandu described how a group tried to coerce victims to show more emotion.

> "Right after the earthquake, on the second or third day, I started working with a news channel. There was a group of British journalists with celebrity status

> coming over to Kathmandu, which was already devastated by the earthquake. I had a bit of a moral crisis, a sort of an ideological war with them because as soon as they came, I heard them saying that there is nothing award winning here. When I took them to areas where people were cremating the bodies of family members, that British guy asked me—I was working as a translator—to ask the victims who had lost their family members to display some emotions, to ask them to describe the pain, and that they shouldn't look expressionless. [Here's] a place which has been so devastated, people are already living in so much trauma, turmoil and crisis… and then a journalist comes and all he needs is an award-winning story."

International journalists were generally perceived by our respondents as having fulfilled the stereotypical parachute role—arriving for a short stint, conducting top-down observations, and then leaving. One interviewee noted that a member of the international media "had to leave because their princess was giving birth to a baby, and it was more important for them to cover this news". Respondents also said international journalists chased locations that suited them (e.g. Khumbu region with Mt Everest) and that they had the wrong "mindset", filing anecdotal stories that exploited the tragedies of survivors.



Some international news organisations,such as NBC[15], experimented with new forms of reporting in the aftermath, using drones to obtain aerial footage of devastated areas. Citizens worried for their safety due to the proximity of the drones and the Nepal government was concerned that footage of valuable heritage artefacts could be "misused later"[16]. Soon after the 25 April earthquake, the Nepal government banned the use of drones without permission.

Some respondents observed that international media failed to recognise Nepal's problems *prior* to the earthquake (e.g. poverty, lack of regulation, lack of investment in infrastructure, bureaucracy, recent civil war and so forth), and that this compounded the effect of the earthquake.

Another criticism of the international media that emerged was that journalists only focused on the negative: destruction, suffering, relief failures. Respondents felt they ignored positive stories of human resilience and successes such as the speed with which the nation opened up for tourism again.

15 NBC News crew briefly detained in Nepal for using a drone, https://www.politico.com/blogs/media/2015/05/nbc-news-crew-briefly-detained-in-nepal-for-using-a-drone-207144

16 Nepal bans use of drone, https://in.news.yahoo.com/nepal-bans-drones-060217482.html

Several respondents criticised the lack of attention on the recovery phase in Nepal, and crucially the sustained fuel blockade, for which the Nepal government blamed India. The international media was criticised for "viewing Nepal through an Indian lens"—effectively using their connections in Delhi, rather than hearing out local sources in Nepal. Several interviewees also commented on the spike in attention on the one-year anniversary of the earthquake, and the absence of any attention before and after.

## Recommendations

1. *Develop culturally specific post-disaster guidelines for journalists dealing with disaster situations.* Nepal's specificities and news culture need to be taken into account while developing guidelines, and it should be done with involvement from Nepali journalists—not just those based in and around Kathmandu, but also regional news personnel. Importantly, these guidelines should go beyond the physical safety of news personnel (conventionally involving risk mitigation, health and safety and insurance) to consider the ethical conduct of journalists in these situations.
2. *Establish a system for delivering continued post-disaster journalism capacity building for Nepali journalists*, working with international networks and organisations such as UNESCO, to disseminate guidelines and training in a widespread and persistent manner.
3. *Establish peer-support networks for journalists experiencing personal trauma.* These networks could be in partnership with national and international organisations to draw on existing best practices.

Villagers of Sangachok, one of the severely affected areas of Sindhupalchok, making their way back home after Christmas Day celebrations in 2015. Photo: *Patrick Ward*

# KEY RESOURCES

## National journalism organisations and networks

National Seismological Center Nepal
http://www.seismonepal.gov.np

Press Council Nepal
http://www.presscouncilnepal.org/en/

Federation of Nepali Journalists
http://www.fnjnepal.org/en

Nepal Journalists Association
http://nja.org.np

Nepal Press Institute
http://www.nepalpressinstitute.org.np/

National Union of Journalists, Nepal
nujnepal@gmail.com



Nepal Press Union
http://www.nepalpressunion.org.np/ne/

Centre for Investigative Journalism, Nepal
https://cijnepal.org.np

Photojournalist Club, Nepal
https://pjclub.com.np/

SancharikaSamuha - Forum of Women Journalists and Communicators
http://www.sancharika.org

Working Women Journalist
http://wwj.org.np

## International organisations and networks

The International Federation of Journalists
http://www.ifj.org/

South Asia Media Solidarity Network
https://samsn.ifj.org

Federation of Nepali Journalists, UK
http://fnjuk.org

Reporters Without Borders
https://rsf.org/en

Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma
https://dartcenter.org/

UNESCO Office in Kathmandu
http://www.unesco.org/new/en/kathmandu/

## Guidelines and practical resources for journalists

Nepal Disaster Management Reference Handbook 2017
https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/CFE-DM%20Reference%20Handbook-Nepal%202017.pdf

Disaster Reporting (Nepali)
http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002448/244830nep.pdf



Disaster and Crisis Coverage (International Center for Journalists)
https://ijnet.org/sites/default/files/Disaster_Crisis.pdf

Disaster and Crisis Coverage: a manual for journalists
https://www.rcmediafreedom.eu/Publications/Manuals/Disaster-and-Crisis-Coverage-a-manual-for-journalists

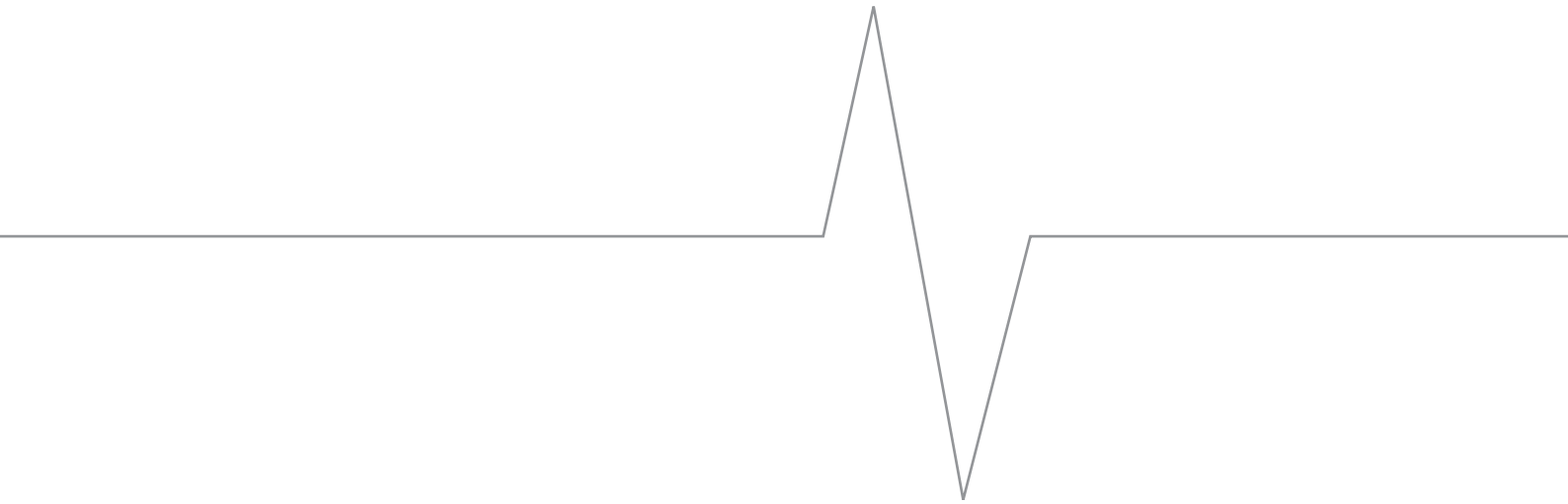
Reporting on disasters: Andrew Harding (BBC)
http://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/journalism/skills/reporting/article/art20

Reporting on disasters (Earth Journalism Network, 2016)
https://earthjournalism.net/resources/reporting-on-disasters

RTDNA Guidelines: Hurricanes and other Natural Disasters
https://rtdna.org/content/guidelines_for_hurricanes_and_other_natural_disasters

Trauma & Journalism: A Guide for Journalists, Editors& Managers (DART Centre)
https://dartcenter.org/sites/default/files/DCE_JournoTraumaHandbook.pdf

Covering Recovery: The Challenges of Preparing for Major Disasters
https://dartcenter.org/resources/covering-recovery-challenges-preparing-major-disasters



# STORIES FROM NEPAL

It is easy for the world to forget a disaster. As easy, in fact, as it is difficult for those from the outside to comprehend, to truly understand, the lived realities of those affected by that disaster.

In June 2015, when we began thinking of a post-earthquake project in Nepal, we hoped we could capture, in some little measure, how ordinary Nepalis were rebuilding their lives after the tremors. What does it really mean to be a survivor? What do their lives look like in the days after? What do they need, how do they cope?



In our own small way, we wanted to bring these questions to the world's focus, to give them the attention they deserve.

Early in August 2015, on a day marked by heavy downpours, a small group of us gathered in Kathmandu. By now, five universities in three countries were working together on a project we had begun to call 'Aftershock Nepal'.

We had agreed to publish a single-issue, multimedia web site of post-earthquake journalism about ordinary Nepalis. We would focus on voices that would otherwise not be heard, and we would continue our coverage till at least the first anniversary of the earthquake.

Aftershock Nepal (http://aftershocknepal.com) began publishing on August 27, 2015. The stories that you see on the following pages are curated from what our reporters—journalism and media students from Bournemouth University (UK), Tribhuvan University (Nepal), Kathmandu University (Nepal), Symbiosis International (India), and Amity University (India)—recorded from the worst-affected areas of Nepal. Quite often our reporters were among the few journalists to revisit, or even visit, far-flung villages.

In this section, you will find stories of resilience, learning, setbacks, hope, and frustration that we published, up till August 2016—stories that serve as a reminder, as a record of the post-earthquake days that we have much to learn from.

# VOICE 1



“Her name was Mithu, Mithu Parajuli. You know what Mithu means? Mithu means ‘sweet’. My sister was sweet to everyone, but she was not sweet enough for God. That’s why God gave her a cruel death. She was inside the rubble for two days. It took nine years for her to build a happy family, with a son and a daughter. But it didn’t take even a second to destroy that happiness. Her husband was injured, her children lost their mother. Of her two children, I brought Emisha with me. When I look into this little girl’s face, I see my sister. Sometimes when Emisha asks about her mother, silence kills us both.”

**Tara Devi Dulal | Sindhupalchok**

Interview & photo: **Mandira Dulal**

# VOICE 2



"I haven't gone home since the earthquake. I asked others to take out my belongings and bring them to me because I am scared of returning. I have a family of eight and now we all live in our poultry shed. I cannot think of going home. I am afraid an earthquake will hit us again."

**Shobha Maharjan | Lalitpur**

Interview & photo: **Ashma Gautam**

# VOICE 3



"The earthquake buried me under bricks. While I lay there, before my husband removed the rubble and rescued me, the only thing I was praying was, 'God please take me!' Now I realise that God already took me. He took me the day I married my husband 40 years ago."

**Panchakumari Shrestha | Sankhu**

Interview: **Anju Thapa Bista** | Photo: **Pushkala Aripaka**

# VOICE 4



"I had a house and a shop in the market area. Now I live in this shelter. I sew clothes here. When I had to move in here with my family, I cried for almost a month. There is nothing here. No ceiling, no floor, no furniture. It's hard to sleep on the cold ground. It's hard to care for my family. But then I remember the day of the earthquake. I was cutting cloth in my shop when the earth shook. At first, I ignored it. But then I ran out when I felt how massive it was. I had left my husband in our house. I was scared for him because our house is quite old. I tried to run home, but I couldn't. The road was blocked with rubble from destroyed houses. I screamed and I cried. After half an hour or so, my husband found me. He was covered with dust, and without slippers on his feet. When he appeared in front of me, it was like a fairy tale. It was the most miraculous moment of my life."

**Rachana Shakya | Sindhupalchok**

Interview: **Enika Rai** | Photo: **Unnat Sapkota**

# IN SINDHUPALCHOK, IT'S LIKE THE EARTHQUAKE STRUCK YESTERDAY



## Rubble. Red dust. Tents on green hills. **Patrick Ward** reports from the district most affected by the Nepal earthquake

Sindhupalchok is now clear of rubble, but only just. It takes careful navigation to get past the sections ravaged by recent landslides, where, weakened by the earthquake and exposed to the near-daily onslaught of the ongoing monsoon, the mountain face along the 144-km Araniko highway from Kathmandu to the border town of Kodari continues to pose a constant danger.

Yet one cannot but admire the beauty of the Panchkal valley as it unfolds. The highway, weary with traffic when

we left Kathmandu, had melted into stunning scenery—rolling hills and red-rocked mountains decorated with lush greenery spread out before me in waves, alongside tributaries of the river Indrawati. It was like something out of a picture book, an everyday natural beauty, raw and rugged, that you don't get to see often.

Much of the international media's post-earthquake reporting was focused on the capital and on Everest, places best known and most regularly frequented by foreign visitors. They suffered hugely, and while there was widespread devastation to both lives and property in the two places, the concentration of destruction was little compared to elsewhere in the country. Sindhupalchok is the worst-affected district. Of the estimated 8,702 earthquake deaths across Nepal, 3,440 were in Sindhupalchok, the highest number in any district. This is nearly three times more than in Kathmandu, which—with a death toll of 1,222—bore the second biggest brunt of the disaster. The number acquires more significance when you factor in that while Kathmandu has a population of around 1 million, Sindhupalchok has roughly 300,000. In other words, this rural district lost more than 1 per cent of its population in the quake. Along with this, an estimated 90 per cent of houses were damaged or destroyed.



The scale of this disaster became more visible once we travelled some 50 km from Kathmandu. Our destination was Bahrabise, one of the worst-hit places in the district, some 22 km before the Tibetan border. As our sturdy Scorpio crossed the Indrawati, I could see a spate of damaged buildings along the way. Much of the route was still stained with the orange-red dust of previously cleared landslides, with the occasional outcropping of mud and

rocks jutting out ominously on to the pot-holed road.

As we approached Lamosanghu, small shops began to spring up by the roadside. All around lay huge piles of debris. Houses, some with whole sides damaged beyond repair, stood by. The road was blocked by a large digger, tipping smashed masonry into a truck and villagers worked to clear debris in the pounding midday sun. Dust from the rubble hung heavily in the air. There were people washing themselves from a hose pipe, scrubbing their clothes against rocks in the gutter. To see the storeys-high piles of bricks, cement and twisted metal, it was difficult to believe that work had gone on for a long time. It looked like the earthquake occurred yesterday, not four months ago.



Eliza Khatri, a staff nurse at the Langosanghu Health Camp, attended to many earthquake victims. Some were so traumatised that they wanted to die, rather than heal. Photo: *Ashma Gautam*

When we spoke to the villagers, it became clear the panic of the initial days have subsided. In its place was a stoicism borne of necessity, which had transformed into diligent hard work, to clear the rubble, to rebuild their lives. The

physical and mental injuries were also beginning to heal. "It was very disheartening in the beginning," said Eliza Khatri, the staff nurse at the Lamosanghu Health Camp, who has been here for the past two months. "People who had nobody left in their families would be the most depressed... It's better these days. There's been a lot of progress in most cases."

The earthquake is only the most recent disaster for the inhabitants of this hilly area. One of my colleagues would later report that a villager she met had seen her home destroyed four times in recent years, the first three times by landslides, and now by the earthquake. Destruction and reconstruction were, for many, a painfully regular feature of life. Another woman, Sushma Shrestha, said, "I am worried about the future. I'm worried about landslides and where to go from here and how to build my house again."



It is understood in these parts that it probably won't be long before the next devastating act of nature occurs. And you could see the reason behind that sentiment in the landscape: as we left Lamosanghu and continued along the highway to Bahrabise, the main road suddenly became rough terrain, uneven and curving through large piles of large, white rocks. To our right ran the Sunkoski River, which flows from Tibet. In the mud banks to its left, only slightly higher than river level, stood a house. But only the top floor was visible, the lower floor—or floors—were now metres below the mud. Next to it stood a lone electricity pylon. I initially thought that this too had been a product of the earthquake, but I was wrong. It had happened last August, when the side of the mountain towering over us

broke free and deposited 5.5 million cubic metres of rock and earth across the road and into the river, cutting off more than 5 km of the highway, and, for a time, the river itself. The landslide caused 156 deaths and the amassed water created a large lake, and caused floods as far away as northern India. It took more than a month for the army to clear the blocked river. Nature had not been kind to the people of Sindhupalchok, even before the earthquake.



There is a semblance of normalcy on the main road of Bahrabise. But look closely and you see there is barely a structure here that is undamaged. Photo: *Patrick Ward*

**BAHRABISE** was in a similar state as Lamosanghu. Shops were open. There were places you could grab a bite to eat. But this was against the backdrop of piles of rubble, which still blocked many entrances. Most buildings bore the scars of the earthquake. Several had bricks protruding from damaged fronts, while others had partially collapsed under their own weight and stayed propped up precariously by wooden supports. Villagers were clearing rubble, fitting gates to driveways, and standing on top of

dangerous half-demolished buildings, knocking away brickwork into the street below by hand.

As I watched, a large bus arrived, and people disembarked carrying large bags of rice and other essentials. The vital highway—the only route through the area to Tibet, some 20 km north—was now clear, but for a long time it hadn't been. Villagers described how, after the earthquake, the road was lost to sight entirely; how clearing it had been a priority, for the blockade had cut off the area from the rest of the country.

Many of the villagers still lived in temporary shelters. Through the gaps between the buildings and the foliage behind, I could make out a hill dotted with multicoloured tents. We walked towards it, crossing a pile of rubble, then up a steep pathway, till a field opened up. There were dozens of tents there. Dogs and goats trotted around freely by the camp. In the background stood steep, majestic green hills.



In front of the camp stood a large, white UNICEF medical tent. Next to that, a small shelter converted into a shop, selling sweets, cigarettes, and strips of *paan*. A few metres behind, a young woman, Rachana, used her tent as a tailoring business. "The earthquake damaged my shop, so now I run it from the shelter," she said. "But here I don't get as many customers as I did previously."

When she first moved to her tent after the quake, Rachana said she cried everyday for almost a month. "We have no proper ceiling, no proper floor, no furniture here," she said, as she measured and chalked fabric. "It's hard to sleep because of the cold floor and the noise of bugs."

Among the inhabitants, there was frustration at

the government for not being proactive in tackling reconstruction programmes. There was also some bitterness, particularly as some villagers felt the government had directed its attention first to saving foreigners from the disaster. Raju, a young man standing near the makeshift shop, lost his friend in the earthquake when a falling rock struck his head. “It isn’t right that foreigners were saved first,” he said. “We live here, so we deserved help.”

But there was also a sense among the inhabitants that they had to be proactive if they were to get by. Their shops and businesses had collapsed, along with their housing. The small businesses growing out of the camp were their attempt to address that.



The villagers of Bahrabise need to first clear piles of rubble before they can rebuild their houses. There were similar sights along the road from Kathmandu to this village. Photo: *Unnat Sapkota*

Though not initially apparent, the trauma people had gone through broke out every now and again. One woman spoke of how she had been trapped in her collapsed house, with debris pinning her down by the arm. She kept holding her arm, and repeating how it hurt. Others were simply grateful that their initial fears of losing family members had proved unfounded. Rachana, the seamstress, described her feeling when she found her husband was alive, "It was like the miracle of my life."

As the villagers worked stoically with whatever tools they had to clear rubble and rebuild, the sheer scale of the task ahead seemed more than daunting. Without houses, hospitals, schools and other vital instruments of a civil society, there was a level of despair in their bravery. And with a cold winter coming, as well as the ever-present danger of landslides, not to mention earthquakes, there is every possibility that without adequate attention, the situation in Sindhupalchok could get worse still.



The sun was still hot when we left Bahrabise. People were clearing debris, carrying away sacks filled with rubble on their backs. Our return ride to Kathmandu was long, and we sat for much of the time in silence. As the sun set against a purple sky over the green hills, I could see mounds of rubble punctuating the view around us. The mounds were once houses. Each had a story, each had inhabitants. Many of the inhabitants will now be living in shelters. Many others will never see a sunset again.

*Additional reportage: Enika Rai, Unnat Sapkota, Preeti Karna, Ashma Gautam and Bidhur Dhakal*

# VOICE 5



"I lost everything in the earthquake. I lost my daughter. She was 12 years old. When she died, my heart died with her. I lost my house. Now I have to look after the rest of my family. I cannot look for help from the government. Before, I started from zero. Now I am trying to rise from zero again."

**Rupesh Maharjan | Thaiba, Lalitpur**

Interview & photo: **Bidhur Dhakal**

# VOICE 6

"Wealth is meaningless. The massive disaster has proved that. People with houses costing 50 million, after the quake their houses cost half a million! All people are equal. Money cannot buy the importance of life."

**Mohammad Hussain | Sunsari**

Interview & photo: **Ashma Gautam**

# ‘NEPAL HAS NEVER UNDERTAKEN SOMETHING OF THIS MAGNITUDE’



*The reconstruction of Nepal following the earthquake is a mammoth task, and one of the government’s initial responses was the Post Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA), co-led by senior government policymaker* ***Dr Swarnim Wagle****. This document, produced over a matter of weeks and presented at the international donor conference on June 25, gave a detailed account of the damage to the various sectors of Nepal’s society, and action plans for the future, setting out how reconstruction, economic reform and planning for further disasters should take shape. One of its recommendations was for the establishment of a National Authority for Reconstruction to oversee the recovery. The NAR is yet to be formally adopted by parliament, and its CEO, Govind Raj Pokharel, was only appointed by then Prime Minister SushilKoirala in mid-August. Dr Wagle, a member of*

*the National Planning Commission, spoke with Patrick Ward about the PDNA, the problems of recovery, and the future challenges for Nepal.*

**How would you say the progress of the recovery is going since you published the Post Disaster Needs Assessment in June?**

The National Planning Commission (NPC) was very active for the first two months. I don't think the government of Nepal has ever undertaken something of this magnitude. It coordinated nearly 500 experts, almost 30 development partners, under the leadership of the government ministries. We organised all these experts in 23 groups and we managed to get something useful, something coherent, in the form of the PDNA in three to four weeks.



The big question we were asked was, even through a regular budget system, you're not able to spend all your money. We probably spend only 80 per cent of the government department budget in a year. There are lots of hurdles, procurement bottlenecks. It's a separate issue; we need to fix it over time. But the question we got was, if you are going to use the same machinery to do reconstruction, and you're pumping in billions of additional dollars, how can you assure us money will actually be spent?

So we had to design an alternative system to assure our development partners that we'll do things differently. So the design of the extraordinary mechanism, which took the form of the National Authority for Reconstruction, was also done by the NPC. So those were the things we were tasked to do and we delivered.

Unfortunately, the NPC is basically an advisory board. We are not an executive or implementing body. After that, I admit that there has been a bit of a slowdown in momentum, because it essentially became a political decision. So we were a bit disappointed in the time it took for Prime Minister Koirala to make up his mind. But it is also a very fluid political situation. You can't afford to alienate any political party. He could have just gone ahead and appointed a CEO, but that CEO would not be credible or strong if there wasn't sufficient buy-in by other political parties. So I think he took his time to make sure whoever he appointed would also be supported by other political parties. That ended up taking a lot of time, and that affected at least the perception that the reconstruction hadn't picked up.



The other hiccup has been the ordinance that created the NAR, which should have been converted into an act of parliament within 60 days. Because the country was so focused on the constitution, and given the problems in the Terai and Kailali [where protests and strikes for constitutional rights are on], I think it's just slipped the calendar scheduling. The government did its part and everything was sent to the parliament. But I think somewhere in the calendar of the parliament itself it slipped, and so the 60-day window was missed.

**So the international aid money still has not been transferred to the NAR because of this?**

Well, that's half true and half false. The pledging was about $4 bn. That was just a pledge. The pledges now need to be converted into concrete projects. [Some of the] donors are

in the business of development in a professional manner, such as the World Bank or the Asian Development Bank. They were very quick. They have converted their pledges to concrete projects already. The World Bank has a massive housing project that has already been signed by the Ministry of Finance. In the Ministry of Finance there's a foreign aid coordination division, the International Economic Cooperation Coordination Department. The joint secretary is Mr Madhu Marasini. So he's been talking with all sorts of donors over the last two, three months. World Bank has already been signed. ADB has a big project on education that has already been signed, I think. And they want to do more.

But it takes time. For the Chinese, for example, they're in the diplomatic business, right? They're not used to doing development. Even India, which was the largest contributor, they don't do traditional development like the World Bank does. So they would need to get things going with the help of professionals, that they might bring or they might hire locally, to convert their commitments into concrete projects. That might take time, but that will happen in a sequenced manner.



But the fact that we'll have a functioning NAR will definitely help. The final signing will happen at the Ministry of Finance, but on the substance—is housing a priority, or education a priority?—on those issues it would have helped the donors to be able to do a substantive dialogue with the Authority. The issue is, it's not like the relief-rescue phase, where you just disperse the cash. You have to adapt a more thoughtful process, bring in all the institutional checks and balances, modes of accountability

and transparency. This is going to be multi-year—up to five years—so it's going to be big. But the process has begun, it's not that because the Authority has not hit the ground running, everything is at a standstill. That's not the case at all.

**Another earthquake is expected sometime in the future. Are you confident that after these five years, or however long it takes, Nepal will be prepared for that?**

Absolutely, that's the core principle. The NPC has already come up with a reconstruction policy and from now on all the houses that will be rebuilt—hundreds of thousands of houses—will all have to be earthquake resistant. And not just earthquake resistant, we are already mindful of other hazards that Nepal is prone to. Landslides, you really can't protect against unless you move the settlement itself, but fires and other hazards that Nepal is prone to. I think that those things will be taken care of in the new housing designs that will be endorsed and supported by the Authority.



The last disaster of this magnitude was 80 years ago. You can see that even between April 25th and May 12th, the two big earthquakes, I think the government was much better prepared after May 12th in terms of communicating with the public and getting the news out. April 25th did come as a shock. People knew the earthquake was coming, but unless you know the particular date—what the Americans call "actionable intelligence"—there was no actionable intelligence. The Americans knew some kind of terrorist attack would happen of the kind that happened on 9/11, but if you didn't know it was going to happen on 9/11 there

was very little you could do.

But I think Nepal has been jolted. We lived through it, we felt the minute-long vibrations, which was terrifying. So I think there is definitely going to be better preparation, but things that need to be done institutionally—a disaster management authority, the earthquake preparedness—that needs to be internalised in school curricular. The drills that you need to do, the large amount of training that we need to do, for the police and the army, right now it's happening in piecemeal and much smaller scale. But now we have to take on this challenge in a more routinised, institutionalised manner, and I think that awakening is there now.



**Several of the aid agencies we have spoken to have said that while the government and authorities here did offer facilitation and assistance to their work, they had some obstacles with the bureaucracy involved, and with the need to pay taxes and import duties on relief supplies coming into Nepal. What do you know about that?**

There was an issue during the relief and rescue phase, in the first few months. There were some issues over whether some consignments were eligible for duty waivers. The first thing to note is that it would have been very difficult for the government to just say, OK, free for all then, just come in. So it was necessary to put in place certain guidelines. That's what the Ministry of Finance did.

Problems were exaggerated as well I think, because there's a 2007 convention on humanitarian assistance. If NGOs, the big ones, whose whole existence is to do humanitarian work, charity work, if they had registered

their name within this framework, those guys would not have been affected at all. So they could have brought in whatever relief material they could, duty free. For others, there was a guideline put in place to declare, what have you brought? Where do you intend to go with it? The basic questions. You don't show up in a sovereign country and expect a red carpet treatment and say 'no questions asked'.

Even when certain basic guidelines were put in place there was a lot of abuse. We saw people were already importing commercial merchandise as humanitarian goods—big companies—and in Nepal the revenue need is very high. So for six weeks, seven weeks, it was completely relaxed. All you had to do was declare and then schedule things through. But the kind of requests we were getting from other development partners to make all the relief works free of taxes, that wouldn't have been tenable to the system for a long time. It's easy to be sentimentally driven—oh, it's a humanitarian crisis!—but those guys aren't the custodians of the nation's treasury.



**You mention in the PDNA the need for economic reforms—what do you mean by that, and is there the political will to undertake them?**

There's political support, of course. There's second-generation reform we need to do. In the early-1990s the big opening-up happened, but now we need to do more on the regulatory front. So we have given sufficient space to the market. An efficient well-functioning market economy also needs supervision and regulation of the government, and we've been lacking on that. A lot of perversions in the system, car tailing and syndicates, I think those things


This school in Harisiddhi is still in use, but has serious structural damage, months after the quake. Future-proofing new buildings is a major part of plans for reconstruction. Photo: *Patrick Ward*



have to be taken care of in the next phase of reforms, but this has to be supported by a stable political regime.

The other thing on the economic front is really when we're looking at reconstruction. There are five concrete building blocks. First is, of course, to rebuild private houses, community assets. Second is to focus on the infrastructure, physical and social infrastructure. The third is we need a distinct agenda for our heritage sites and heritage settlements, because people perceive reconstruction as just rebuilding physical things. So the first three are somehow physical, getting things back up, but we don't want to ignore the social and economic agenda. It's a huge opportunity for us to do things differently and to use reconstruction as a source of capital formation that will pave the way for future growth, not just urban areas. If you look at the ethno-geography of the crisis, certain communities have been hit particularly badly. If you look at the geography, this is often

almost the Himalayan belt. It's not immediately accessible. You have to walk, it's a difficult terrain. I think the issue of vulnerability and livelihoods, getting livelihoods going, is very important. We need a distinct programme on that, so I hope the Authority will bring programmes of that nature as well. So it's not just physical reconstruction.

The fifth one we're looking at is really economic revival. We want rural centres. So issues of integrated settlements, clustering, not just in isolation but one rural cluster interconnected with another rural cluster. They can become rural centres of growth. Right now, we write off the rural areas. We say they can't be dynamic sources of economic growth, it's just paddy production or wheat production, agricultural. But I think there's enough, if we envision it right, to really plan these things. These rural centres, once the resettlement happens, once the clustering happens, and once the planning of the provisioning of the amenities happen around those integrated, more efficient settlements, I think they really can become semi-urban areas as a source of growth themselves.



But to support that at the national level, the second-generation reforms have to be pursued, and the work on that is going on. There are almost 40 pieces of legislation at different stages of maturity. Some are already in the parliament, some policies have already been cleared by the cabinet, but in a democracy it's a lot of back and forth. NPC has to give some consent, the Ministry of Law has to look at the legal implications, the Ministry of Finance has to look at the financial implications. So there are lots of things flying in the air but at different stages. If we were a less democratic country, we could just announce these things in a second,

second generation reforms, big bang, here are the things that will come into operation tomorrow. But that's not the luxury we have. This is the proper way to do it, to make sure all the perspectives are incorporated.

This is partly related to reconstruction. But even without the crisis, without the disaster, this is something we should be doing anyway. We were delayed by the decade-long conflict and now we are finally back on track with a new constitution in place, I hope. People can finally focus on the economic agenda and support that higher ambition of putting Nepal on a higher trajectory of growth. You need to undergird that with the second-generation reforms. It's overdue now.

# Voice 7



"The main problem in Nepal and other developing countries is that we have no preparedness plan in case of a disaster. We have no emergency relief material here. We have no proper law or system to address the disaster. When the earthquake hit Gorkha, we started collecting tarpaulin, but there was no tarpaulin in the market. We just collected 200 pieces from the entire Gorkha bazaar and there were no more. How can shelters be made without tarpaulins? There was very little rice and biscuits to distribute to the victims. In Chile, there was an earthquake measuring 8.3 magnitude. Fourteen people were killed. Here we had a 7.8 and 10,000 were killed. Earthquake itself did not kill the people, but it was the structure. A government support system, disaster management committee, and preparedness plan are all necessary for surviving a disaster."

**Mohan Pokharel | Gorkha**

Interview & photo: **Namita Rao**

# VOICE 8



"The man came in when I was finishing my homework. My mother and sister were working in the fields. I would have gone with them, but I had a gash on my hand from the last time I went to cut grass. He asked where my mother was. When I told him, he started inching towards me, enquiring about my arm. He put his hands on my chest and then tried to shove his hands up my skirt. He asked me which class I studied in as he did that. When I pushed him away and ran out, he wanted to know where someone as little as me got so much strength. We lost our house in the earthquake. Now this is my home, where I am supposed to be secure! It's difficult for me to go to school. This is the first time I am sharing the details of what happened with anyone besides my mother and sister, but I know some people know about this in school. Facing them is almost as bad as the incident itself. Sometimes I wonder if things would be different if my father was alive, or if we hadn't lost our home."

**An earthquake survivor**

Interview & photo: **Ritu Panchal**

# VOICE 9



"We used to live together under one roof before it came down in the earthquake. Now, six members stay here in this camp and the other four have rented out a small flat. We all go to our old house for lunch and dinner, but we come back to our tent to sleep. We celebrated Dashain there and did the puja together. The earthquake broke up our family, but we can't keep thinking about the old times and complaining about the situation. My sons will earn enough money. We have to rebuild our house and stay together once again as a big family."

**Gopal Goja | Bhaktapur**

Interview & photo: **Namita Rao**

# VOICE 10

7900000

"Anju was my daughter-in-law. She had just come back from the river, after washing clothes. She ran in to save her daughter, Anisha, who was eating in the kitchen. Anisha was saved, but Anju got stuck under the rubble.

"It took us more than an hour-and-a-half to locate where she was buried. She was under the rubble of two houses. There were continuous aftershocks at that time. Even our goats betrayed us that day. When we were looking for her, we heard a sound. We thought it was Anju, we dug out the rubble. But it was the goats. We saved them, but we lost Anju.

"I do not know if Anisha understands her mother is gone. She keeps asking for her. We have not yet let her see a picture of Anju.

"My son Suresh has not been the same. He was like a madman. He had seen Anju two minutes before. Two minutes after, she was gone. He has not been able to forget that."

**Kalpana Ghimire | Tasinchowk**

Interview & photo: **Mandira Dulal**

# HOW INDIA'S UNOFFICIAL BLOCKADE IS AFFECTING POST-EARTHQUAKE NEPAL



## A nation struggling to recover from one crisis has been hit by another. **Naomi Mihara** reports from Kathmandu

The day I arrived in Kathmandu, the Nepal government had just announced a quota system limiting the number of vehicles on the roads in response to the fuel crisis. Very few private vehicles were plying. Buses were completely packed. Taxis were charging three or four times the usual rate.

I had read about the protests taking place near the Indian border over Nepal's new constitution even as I left England. I knew about the blockade of supply trucks at the border, and, in an abstract manner, about the fuel shortage that was beginning to grip the country. But I had little idea how much the situation was affecting everyday life across a country struggling to get on its feet after a devastating earthquake—and how angry, and upset, Nepalis were with their 'Big Brother' across the border.

"We are trying to put our house in order and a big neighbour has come to disturb it," Dr Uddhab Pyakurel, a political sociologist at the Kathmandu University, was to tell me soon. "A small section of Nepali society has always been critical of India's influence. But now, more people are feeling this way."



India's role in the fuel crisis has been extensively reported, and it would be difficult to find a Nepali who believes


Taxi drivers waiting in a queue for petrol. They often slept in the vehicles, as the queue barely moves for hours on end. Photo: *Naomi Mihara*

New Delhi's claim that it was concern for the truck drivers' safety that was behind the pile-up of supply vehicles at the border on the Indian side. Every person I spoke to in Kathmandu seemed to believe, perhaps with some justification, that India had effected an unofficial economic blockade to pressurise Nepal into editing certain provisions in its brand new constitution—specifically, those relating to the demands of the Madhesi people in the border region, with whom India shares strong cultural ties.

It is not surprising, then, that many in Kathmandu are fuming. The ordinary Nepali, says Anup Ojha, a journalist at the *Kathmandu Post*, feels betrayed. "We are feeling humiliated," he said. "It shows that India can interfere in each and every part of our politics."



It is not just the politics that people are upset about. The blockade has translated into everyday hardships for everyone here, to the point that some in Kathmandu feel it eclipses even the situation they faced after the earthquake. "This crisis is more troublesome than the earthquake," said Munni Pandey, a mother I met in Pattan, on the outskirts of the capital city. With few taxis plying, Munni was frustrated at her inability to take her children to their schools on time; at home, she was about to run out of cooking gas.

Kalyan Tamang, a bus driver who had been waiting in a fuel queue all morning, was more measured in his response. People were moving on from the adversities caused by the earthquake, he said, and trying to rebuild their lives. But the fuel shortage has hit them hard. Sangam Lama, a bus conductor, put it simply:

"If the buses don't work, I don't get my salary."

**A WEEK AFTER** I reached Kathmandu, there were news reports that India had instructed its officials at the border to lift the undeclared blockade. The people I spoke to that day were cautiously optimistic that an end was in sight. "We are slightly relieved," said Surya Dhungana, "but we cannot fully rely on that because we have been facing a similar situation for the past 30 years."

Behind the negativity colouring that sentiment is the fact that the reprieve at the border is yet to alleviate the crisis in any tangible manner. Although trucks carrying fuel and other essential goods have begun to trickle in (or so I read in the newspapers), for the ordinary Nepali, nothing has really changed yet. The quota system is still in place for public transport and government-owned vehicles, which are allowed on the roads only on alternate days. Private vehicles received a slight relief when the ban on fuel sales was lifted for just one day. But in truth, the situation appears worse than it was, with the government now slashing the fuel quota for public vehicles.



Many in Kathmandu are also concerned about the upcoming Dashain, the biggest festival of the year, which lasts 15 days. There is a sizeable population in the city from other parts of the country, and traditionally, most people return home for the festival. But with the fuel rationing in place, transportation will be difficult to find.

For more than a week, schools have been running classes only on alternate days. Without fuel for generators, which are needed to tide over the prolonged power cuts caused by Nepal's electricity shortage problem, businesses are seriously suffering. According to the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry, the

cumulative effects of the two months of strikes, blockades and protests over the new constitution has cost the economy $1 billion.

**THE CRISIS** has also severely disrupted earthquake relief work. Much of the cement, steel, glass and zinc sheets needed for reconstruction is imported from India. “These cannot be accessed by villagers unless there is a smooth transportation facility,” said Dr Pyakurel. “More than that, earthquake-affected villages need a large number of skilled and semi-skilled workers, many of whom come from the bordering cities of India. Given the situation, Indian workers may not feel safe to come to the hilly districts to carry out reconstruction.”



Ramila (right) has run out of cooking gas and is no position to cook for her family of 12. Photo: *Namita Rao*

The biggest hindrance to relief work is, not surprisingly, the lack of mobility. "We are in a race against time," said Iolanda Jaquemet of the World Food Programme, which has had to halt many of its operations because its delivery trucks are out of diesel. "Earthquake affected populations at high altitudes will be cut off from the world by snow in about 3-4 weeks."

"It's the same story for all NGOs," said Ram Hari, who works for Mission East, a Danish NGO. His organisation faces the prospect of losing donor money because they would now not be able to finish distributing relief materials to meet a mid-October deadline. This also means that vulnerable families in Sindupalchok—the district worst-affected by the earthquake, where many are still living in tents—will not get the aid they have been promised.



Importantly, the issue that has spurred the blockade and fuel crisis still remains unresolved. Talks between the government and parties representing the Madhesis—the main group protesting their under-representation in the new constitution—are taking place, and the government has agreed to some amendments. But there is still much ground to be covered.

"In the Madhesh, there is palpable anger against Kathmandu," said DaulatJha, a Madhesi political analyst. "Right now, the polarisation is at its peak and will take time to decrease."

**IN THE CAPITAL**, though, there is much solidarity on display. People have grouped together on social media to voice their anger at India through hashtags such as #IndiaBlockadesNepal, #BackOffIndia and

#DonateOilToIndianEmbassy. Residents have also resorted to sharing rides to get around. Carpool Kathmandu, a Facebook page to coordinate travel in and around the city, has now amassed more than 94,000 members.

"From one point of view, the situation has helped unite Nepalese people," said Sagun Khanal, an accountant. "They are ready to help each other."

There is also a feeling that Nepal needs to rely less on India. As of now, more than 60 per cent of Nepal's imports are from India and this over-reliance, many in Kathmandu say, makes their country vulnerable to manipulations. They point to 1989, when India imposed an official blockade that lasted 13 months, thought to be an attempt to punish Nepal for buying weapons from China. "Our situation is probably worse now than it was in the past, because we consume so many goods that are imported from India," a Kathmandu resident said.



There have been calls for Nepal to reach out to other neighbours, especially China. The road to the northern Tatopani border point, buried by landslides after the earthquake, was hurriedly cleared and reopened last week. Last week, the government-owned Nepal Oil Corporation issued a tender for the import of petroleum products from any country through any medium, hoping to break more than 40 years of Indian monopoly as the sole supplier.

Besides the anti-India sentiments, many Nepalis appeared increasingly frustrated with their own politicians' lack of action, foresight and ability to negotiate diplomatically. Following the promulgation of

the constitution on September 20, Nepal's parliament is attempting to form a new government. There is a sense that this has been prioritised over reaching a solution to the crisis.

"They have behaved very immaturely and disrespectfully," said Dr Sudhamshu Dahal, an assistant professor at the Kathmandu University. "They should start putting people at the centre of their negotiations."

Others are angry at Madhesi politicians and protest leaders for inciting unrest, rather than negotiating. "I understand that people in the Tarai are unhappy with the constitution," a student said. "But this is affecting everyone's lives." There are also many who plead the cause for unity. In Ratna Park, a group protesting India's actions held signs referring to the three regions of Nepal: "Himal [mountain], Pahad [hill], Tarai [plains]: no one is an outsider".



Commuters travelling on bus roofs were a common sight in Kathmandu.
Photo: *Naomi Mihara*

Although anti-India sentiment in Nepal is high at this point, the India-Nepal relationship is not irreparably damaged. “Many people feel doubts about whether the kind of relationship that the two countries have had until now should continue,” said DrPyakurel. “Still, there is room to be engaged. But India needs to undo this blockage as soon as possible and allow Nepal to deal with its domestic problems on its own.”

Thankfully, the animosity felt towards the Indian nation does not seem to extend towards the Indian people. “We share a familiar culture, landscape, lifestyle… there are so many things that can bring Nepali and Indian people together,” said blogger Siromani Dhungana. “We have shared a special bond in the past, and I believe that will continue in the future.”



*Additional reportage: Namita Rao, Ritu Panchal and Unnat Sapkota.*

Public buses queuing up at a petrol station in Patan.
Photo: *Naomi Mihara*

# VOICE 11

"I entered that house as a bride, but now it's gone. I don't think I will ever return to that house. My sons are fighting over who gets what and they can't agree."



**Mashayanu Waju | Byasi**

Interview: **Nitika Shreshtha** | Photo: **Pratik Rana**

VOICE 12



"My daughter was born with a disability. Since my husband died 20 years ago, it has been me and my daughter against the world.

"Being a woman in this society is difficult. As a woman, you are born with the responsibility of a family. Your life begins and ends with the family. I lost my house and everything inside it in the earthquake. Like the rest, I stay in a temporary tarpaulin tent. I can't go anywhere to work because there is a constant fear that anyone can enter it and my daughter won't be able to fend for herself because of her mental impairment. I have no sense of security. I am scared of this generation. I am scared of the men.

"As woman in this village, I have no rights. I haven't received the 15,000 NPR that was pledged to every family that lost their homes. All the times I went to the local authorities, they gave me a list of excuses. Then they told me I can't receive any money because I only have a daughter, and there is no point in getting relief as I don't have a son. Now I have started believing my daughter is a burden to me. But neither can I kill her, nor can I throw her away."

**Bimala Bika | Gorkha**

Interview & photo: **Ritu Panchal**

# VOICE 13



"I am in the middle of my final exams for the School Leaving Certificate. These are the most important exams. But I cannot only focus on studying. At home there is no water in the tap or the pond anymore. Before the earthquake we had plenty. Now I have to walk far every day to fetch water. This is going to affect my exams results, I'm sure, but water is our basic need to survive."

**Sabita Gopali | Thankot**

Interview & photo: **Nitika Shrestha**

# ‘IN NEPAL, THERE’S A CULTURE OF MISMANAGING FUNDS MEANT FOR CONFLICT-AFFECTED PEOPLE’



*It is difficult to understand Nepal’s slow post-earthquake response and the problematic way it has handled the border crisis without understanding the civil war that raged in the country between 1996 and 2006, claiming the lives of an estimated 17,000 people. The uprising—the People’s War, as it has been called—led to mass support for the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), which was elected to power in 2008, forming the nation’s first constituent assembly. The Maoist policy of republicanism, proportional representation and federalism became, nearly 10 years after the end of the war, expectations for many in the run-up to the promulgation of Nepal’s new constitution in September. This charter was controversial with groups in the Terai region, who see their already limited political*

*influence as marginalised, and it led to the border crisis that has seen a severe shortage of fuel, medicine and food supplies around the country.*

***Jaya Puri Gharti** was a leading member of the Maoist party. President of the All Nepal Women Association (Revolutionary) during the conflict, she served as the cabinet minister for Women, Children and Social Welfare during the Maoists' term in government. Gharti is from Rolpa, the heartland of the Maoist insurgency, and a member of the historically marginalised Magar community. In this interview with Patrick Ward, she speaks about the issues facing Nepal today, and the difficult road to reconciliation after the war.*

**Has the situation improved since the end of the civil war?**



It is comparatively better. But I hoped the country would ensure the rights of people, economic growth, justice, peace. There are still things that need to be met. That was obstructed due to the earthquake and fuel crisis.

**How so?**

They wanted a constitution that ensured the full rights of people, and after the earthquake they rushed for consensus to write the constitution. So it was rushed, and there were some gaps due to that rush. There was a big meeting for reconstruction after the earthquake, but progress slowed down. The international community provided funds, but the government has been slow.

The ruling parties didn't consider that there would be a crisis in the Terai. It was a mistake. If they had made a small effort it could have been resolved. For example, Madhes

would have been given more districts. This could have resolved the crisis. But India is imposing [a blockade]—it's not justifiable. It's against human rights and international rules, treaties and relationships.

### Could the response to the earthquake have been better?

The government has not been able to tackle the issue as required. The political situation is so difficult. I am worried about the situation now. I suggest the government take it more seriously, the earthquake and the blockade.

### After the deep divisions in Nepal during the civil war, how has the country united itself?



After the earthquake and the blockade, we realised we should be together, but perhaps there are still some gaps. For example, not all parties were involved in the constitutional process. There is still chance to bring all the parties together. But the leaderships often think traditionally, with narrow thinking.

### How was the rehabilitation of those affected during the conflict?

Nepal has got lots of money for rehabilitation. But that has disappeared at the top. People in real need haven't benefited from that. In Nepal, there is a culture of mismanaging funds, for conflict-affected people, earthquake victims. They are mishandled by the authorities, which is not good.

International development partners are not targeting

funds to actual need. Almost three-quarters of the funds have gone to the NGO circle ruled by the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), who handle 75 per cent of the budget; 25 per cent belongs to the Nepal Congress and others. Maoist cadres have received less than one per cent.

During the civil war we had a different perspective of the NGOs. Now we realise we should cooperate with them. We were against the NGOs in the wartime. So the NGO international development partners are not fully trusting. We need to build that trust.

## Is there a problem of accountability with the NGOs?

Only 10 to 15 per cent of NGOs are fully accountable. I observed that as a minister. I tried to get at least 75 per



Children play among the ruins of their home in a village in Kathmandu. Thousands of earthquake victims are still waiting for government help in reconstruction. Photo: *Patrick Ward*

cent accountable, if not 100 per cent. I tried to put them on track, but our government collapsed. One change I could achieve is that before, every international NGO had to register in Kathmandu, and I was able to establish regional offices instead. But my successor, a male minister, collapsed that.

**Why?**

Due to his thinking, he was not committed to change. People weren't able to all come to Kathmandu. But he unfortunately collapsed my policy. We had fundamental differences.

**After such a high level of support following the civil war, why did the Maoist government collapse?**



It was difficult to meet the needs promised in the war. There were also factions within our party. I am confident the issues raised by my party are still true. Issues like a republican state, federalism, proportional representation, secularism. The NC, UML were against these issues in the beginning, but they were all eventually reflected in the constitution.

What the failure was, we could not convince the public of the issues raised by the Maoists. We could not convince people that credit should go to our party. And fractures in the party meant we could not win the election. And the other parties were tricky; the Maoists were straightforward.

Though the party is now weaker, our policies have all been incorporated by other parties. The NC was against the idea of a republic. The UML would not accept proportional

representation and federalism, now they have.

When I was in parliament, we once went to the UK to learn about decentralisation of power. I was fortunate to observe the UK parliament. But in Nepal we discuss basic needs, like food and shelter. When I was there, the discussion in parliament was about controlling mice!

## Why did you first become involved in the People's War?

I was just a student at that time. I had heard about the Communist Party and Communist Manifesto, and that the Communist Party helped people in the region and was against gender and ethnic discrimination. In my locality, there was a lot of violence against women. Women couldn't go to school or be educated. There was also extreme poverty. I was inspired to become involved in the movement by that poverty. It was difficult even to buy goods.



My family was not very poor at first, but my father was a gambler. He lost his property and we became poor. My mother was interested in education, and so my sister and a friend were the first female students to go to school. I went to school sometime after that.

When I was a Year 4 student in school, I went to school wearing pyjama trousers. The teacher beat me for wearing them. Later, when I was elected to the Constituent Assembly and became a minister, that same teacher approached me. I was responsible to hear teachers' problems. It took more than ten years for the teacher to appreciate me. I appreciate the teacher in turn for pushing me.

## How much has changed in the Nepali society since you were in school?

Women now think they should get justice, and not face discrimination. Most women think this way now.

People travelling on top of a bus during the fuel crisis, which worsened the post-earthquake situation in Nepal. Photo: *Patrick Ward*

Patriarchy is still in male minds, but they have started to think it's not justifiable to discriminate. Women have felt more changes than men.

**Could you ever imagine, when you were a child, that one day you would become a government minister?**

Never. I just wished to reduce injustice, but never imagined I would be a minister.

*This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.*

VOICE 14

101**00000**

“He was in the army. We were completely in love, so we eloped. We had four beautiful children before he got posted to Kathmandu and got involved with someone else. Now the only time he speaks to me is to fight with me. He says I was whoring around the village and that the children are not his. He doesn’t help with their education, he doesn’t provide for anything, and he took away the relief money the government gave after the earthquake.”

**Earthquake survivor | Gorkha**

Interview & photo: **Ritu Panchal**

# Voice 15



"This is where my house stood. I built it myself. I got married here. My seven children grew up here. My parents took their last breath here. So when I walk around it now, it is like I am walking around a piece of my destroyed heart."

**Om Nath Sapkota | Kavre**

Photo & interview: **Mandira Dulal**

# VOICES 16



"I am here today to preserve and celebrate our Hindu religion. The earthquake was God's decision and we need to accept that. No matter how much we hurt, we should never forget our traditions. It is what we are passing on to our younger generations."

**Bindu Karki | Basantapur**

Interview: **Mandira Dulal & Sven Wolters**

Photo: **Sven Wolters**

# Voice 17



"After the earthquake, lots of government workers came to the village. They took photos and took name after name after name. But when the list came on the noticeboard, many victims from our village were missing. The only ones who got help were those who were from the city. Who will listen to small people? Who will listen to the voices of the small people in this country?"

**Hari Prasad Sapkota | Taame, Nuwakot**

Interview: **Joe Nerssessian** | Photo: **Shemin Nair**

# IN QUAKE-HIT KATHMANDU, A TIBETAN COMMUNITY FIGHTS AN UNEQUAL BATTLE



**Namita Rao** and **Ritu Panchal** report on a refugee community struggling to restore a handicraft centre that has sustained them for half a century

"I never expected this building to be so dangerous," said Tenzin Paljor. Standing in the crumbled remains of a weaving hall, the secretary of the Jawalakhel Handicraft Centre looks dejected. The centre, which has played a pivotal role in the lives of the Tibetan refugees living next to it, is now unusable.

"We called four or five engineers to check the building," he said. "Each one of them said that it needs to be demolished. The irony is that it is too expensive to even demolish this building."

We had stumbled upon the centre walking through Kathmandu in an effort to avoid travelling on the overcrowded buses. Rows of Tibetan prayer flags billowing in the breeze told us there was a Tibetan settlement close by. On entering a large compound, we realised we had walked straight into the centre we had read about before coming to Nepal. From the outside, despite the deep cracks creeping across the walls, the building appeared intact. But once you entered, the scene changed.



Pillars of the building have sunk into the ground. Photo: *Namita Rao*

The main centre, which used to be thrumming with industrious Tibetan weavers, is now a striking reflection of the devastation caused by the quake. Our footsteps echoed in the deserted building. Rows and rows of broken pillars greeted us, many of which had sunk into the ground. Everywhere we look, we could see red brickwork under exposed patches of plaster—some bricks missing, others surrounded by webs of cracks. The remnants of the thriving weaving hall could be seen in the forms of tattered yarn, balls of threads lying here and there, and tall weaving machines, now abandoned.

"It was fortunate that the earthquake was on Saturday," said Paljor. "If it had been a working day, a huge loss of lives might have occurred."



Outside, we met Choezin, a store manager who has been working at the centre for more than 15 years. She recalled the first time she saw the centre after the earthquake. "Those two months, living in the tents pitched on our football ground, and then coming back to the weaving centre to see it broken down, felt like being in a nightmare I had not woken up from," she said.

Choezin lives in the refugee settlement next to the centre, which is home to around 780 first- and second-generation Tibetans. In 1959, around 30,000 Tibetans fled to India, Nepal and Bhutan along with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, following the Chinese occupation in Tibet. This meant that the Tibetans had to start their lives all over again in a new land.




These store managers have been working for more than 15 years at the handicraft centre. Photo: *Ritu Panchal*

"The first 300 to 400 Tibetans who arrived in Nepal by 1960 lived in the Jawalakhel camp, which was funded by foreign aid and relief programmes," said Paljor. "In 1961, with the help of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the International Red Cross Society, we built the Jawalakhel Handicraft Centre." The centre allowed the Tibetans to retain their identity and culture, and served as an economic avenue to sustain the community organically.

The carpet business was a big success. The JHC introduced this unique craft to Nepal and it also became famous elsewhere in the world. As Paljor showed us around the camp, he told us that the weaving has always

been exclusive and of top quality, with products ranging from 60 and 100 knots carpets, shawls, pashminas and handicraft items. For decades now, the centre has been weaving exquisite carpets using time-honoured Tibetan designs as well as fresh contemporary patterns. The intricate carpets come in dark hues, muted pastels, earthy ochres and enduring neutrals adorned with traditional iconography like the endless knot, mandalas and the Tibetan landscape.

"But for the last four years the business hasn't been very good," said Thupten Dolma, another store manager. "There are too many new carpet stores and factories in the same area which are run by single families. Their carpets are cheaper as they use lower quality material. The profit they make sustains only one family. On the other hand, the JHC makes the best quality carpets which are invariably more expensive as they have to sustain an entire community of 200 Tibetan families."



Despite the economic crunch faced by the centre in the recent years, it provides free education to the children, a kindergarten for the younger kids, support to the elderly people and handicapped, and medical assistance and housing to those who do not have homes.

Due to the destruction of the weaving hall, the weavers have had to move to an old, cramped storage room to carry out their work. "Work has become slow and has totally changed," said Dolma. "They have to take more tea and water breaks to cool down and their faces become very red. The old hall was big with a lot of space to move around. Despite that, we are happy to work and be busy."



After the quake destructed the weaving hall, workers have had to move to this cramped storage room. Photo: *Namita Rao*

There are now 60 women weavers along with administrative staff, store managers, salesmen, and packaging units at the centre. Even though the centre was not functional for two-and-a-half months, it still paid minimum wages to the workers during that time. According to their estimates, it will take three to four months just to demolish the buildings and around NPR 90 million (around £560,000) to rebuild it. The thought of raising this amount is an overwhelming one, especially as the community has little means of raising funds to cover the entire cost, given their status in the country.

While the Nepalese government treated Tibetans who arrived in Nepal before 1989 as refugees, those who

arrived more recently have no legal status here. They cannot own property, be legally employed, pursue higher education, carry a refugee card, or have a passport. Because of its economic dependency on China, Nepal has come under political pressure from Beijing to restrain Tibetan activity—which has placed a huge humanitarian and economic burden on this community. After the earthquake, and with no legal status, Tibetans are not 'eligible' for any compensation—nor have they received any from the government. In such a scenario, it is next to impossible for the centre to raise funds on its own. Paljor said all they have managed so far are a few private donations of small amounts.

"It is a very hard time for us right now," he said. "But I am hopeful that some way will come out."

# VOICE 18



"We used to be a well-equipped school. But now we don't even have a library. We don't have a computer lab. We don't have a science lab. And it's School Leaving exams.

"The students are not allowed to enter the school. It is not safe. There are cracks everywhere. We have built temporary classrooms, right next to the ruin. And a small zinc hut that serves as a canteen.

"We have written to the government. Some ministries want to help. We have the manpower. We could start building a new school right away. It will take a few years. We just need the government to give us the land so we can start."

**Akhilesh Azad | Vice Principal, Durbar High School, Kathmandu**

Photo & interview: **Sven Wolters**

# BHAKTAPUR: AWAITING RECONSTRUCTION

## **Ritu Panchal, Namita Rao** and **Naomi Mihara** visit the UNESCO heritage site



The ancient city of Bhaktapur, a former capital of Nepal, is home to one of the country's most famous historic attractions: the Bhaktapur Durbar Square. Nine months after the earthquake, tourism is slowly recovering, but in the historic centre, which is a UNESCO World Heritage site, the crumbling remains of half-destroyed temples and damaged houses can still be seen. As with all of Nepal's damaged heritage sites, reconstruction is in a state of limbo, pending funds from the National Reconstruction Authority, the body responsible for distributing earthquake relief funds.

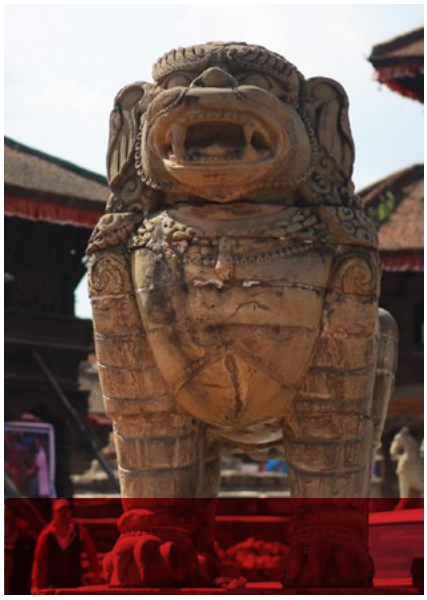
Bhaktapur is famous for its traditional pottery industry, and is home to two 'pottery squares' where rows of clay pots can be seen drying in the sun. The potters are particularly busy during the Tihar festival of lights, one of the biggest festivals in Nepal, making diyekos [earthen lamps] which are then filled with oil and lit outside each household. In Hinduism, fire is an important symbol of cleansing and purification and its light dispels gloom and darkness.
Photo: *Ritu Panchal*

Bhaktapur was one of the most badly affected districts by the earthquakes, with nearly 28,000 homes damaged and more than 300 deaths. Across the entire district, more than 2,000 people are still living in displacement sites and in the old city centre, the scattered remains of homes are a reminder that the earthquake did a lot more than just physical damage here.
Photo: *Ritu Panchal*

It is very common to see a grid of bamboo poles supporting old, historic monuments in the narrow winding streets of Bhaktapur. However, serious reconstruction work is yet to take place, and the Department of Archaeology says it has not received any budget from the government for this purpose. According to the Post-Disaster Needs Assessment report, the rebuilding of 750 damaged cultural, historical and religious monuments across Nepal will cost an estimated Rs 20.55 billion [£131 million]. Photo: *Ritu Panchal*

The remains of the Fasidega temple. This temple was built as a homage to Lord Shiva, but the monument at the top of the steps was destroyed by the 1934 earthquake. The replacement, built in white using modern motifs, stood out conspicuously amid the traditional design of the other temples of Bhaktapur before its destruction in the 2015 earthquake. Photo: *Naomi Mihara*

Several of Bhaktapur's main temples, including the five-storey Nyatapola, Nepal's tallest temple, suffered remarkably little damage. The Nyatapola temple has now survived four major earthquakes because of the traditional earthquake-resistant design elements that went into building it. Photo: *Ritu Panchal*



A set of stone lions stand on their own in Bhaktapur's Durbar Square. It is thought that the temple they used to guard was destroyed by the 1934 earthquake, the worst in Nepal's history. Nearly a third of the city's temples and buildings were destroyed in that earthquake.
Photo: *Naomi Mihara*

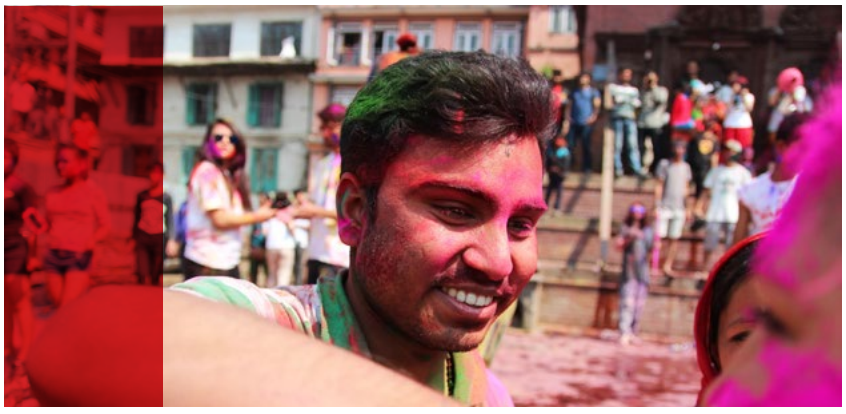
Right at the centre of Bhaktapur Durbar Square lies a 15th-century palace, sections of which collapsed in the recent quake. The interior has remained closed since the 1934 earthquake. The courtyard surrounding it still lies in ruins and the uncleared debris from the broken down buildings has now become a part of the temple complex.
Photo: *Namita Rao*

Wooden beams, such as those lining the walls of the National Art Museum, support many of the buildings in Bhaktapur Durbar Square. The museum, which contains ancient paintings and artefacts from Hindu and Buddhist traditions, is scheduled to undergo renovation, like a lot of the other damaged government buildings in the city.
Photo: R*itu Panchal*

# VOICE 19



“Holi is completely different this year. In spite of the destruction, I have never seen so many people celebrating together. And there are many tourist guests from all over the world, too. That’s why I’m having a good sale of colours this year.”



**Pappu Kumar Yadav | Durbar Square**

Interview: **Mandira Dulal& Sven Wolters**

Photo: **Sven Wolters**

# VOICES 20



"We lost six goats and a buffalo in the earthquake. We lost so much food. One ton of rice got damaged. The house collapsed onto our farm. The money from the government covered only food, it wasn't enough for shelter. Our children are getting older and the expenditure is increasing. It might take 10 years, 20 years to return to the state we were in."

**Apshara Thapa | Taame, Nuwakot**

Interview: **Joe Nerssessian** | Photo: **Shemin Nair**

# Voice 21



"The most dangerous thing after the earthquake is epidemic diseases, so me and a few other doctors focussed our attention on that. We distributed purification pills to sanitise water, and sanitary pads. After a while we also went to help outside the Kathmandu valley. There we saw a lot of misery, whole villages were destroyed. People were searching their ruins for food, separating mud and rice. There was no rescue efforts there. There was nothing in that remote area, because nobody would walk for 3, 4, 5 hours to go for supplies. The most important thing we gave them was hope. We could see that in their eyes. They were not happy because we gave them sanitation, they were happy because we gave them hope."

**Roshan Thapa | Kathmandu**

Interview: **Einar Thorsen** | Photo: **Pratik Rana**

# HEALING WITH LAUGHTER

## With their colourful costumes and clown noses, these artists bring relief and a sense of normalcy to far-flung villages in Nepal. **Naomi Mihara** reports



The street is dusty and lined with rubble, swept into orderly piles. Across the road, half of a five-storey building stands out conspicuously, its bright pink wallpaper and zig-zagging stairs giving the impression of peering into a dismembered doll's house. Groups of men and women sit on the sidewalk opposite, some playing card games, others chatting. A few have noticed the curious blue carpet that has been rolled out, and are waiting with anticipation as to what, if anything, will happen.

Music begins to play. And soon, an unexpected figure emerges.  She has pink hair, green hotpants and an unmistakeable clown nose. Then another one appears, in a multi-coloured jumpsuit, sporting the same red

nose. At first, the children are wary of the strange figures who are not quite adult, definitely not children, but so eager to play and so childishly fascinated by everything they see. Then a small boy with a green hoodie and a mischievous grin jumps off the swing and runs over to them. Within minutes, there is a Pied Piper effect and a large crowd of children has gathered. The adults begin to draw closer too, looking bewilderedly at the group of seven clowns who now grace the blue carpet stage, dancing, inviting the audience to laugh with them, to be silly and just have fun.

Before the earthquake, the historic village of Bungamati was one of the prettiest parts of the Kathmandu valley, frequently visited by tourists who would come to see the ancient temples and monuments. Since the earthquake



Children enjoying the performance of Bogar and her team of clowns in Bungamati.
Photo: *Naomi Mihara*

last April, most of the visitors have been aid groups or volunteers, and now, the remains of half-destroyed buildings and crumbling temples are evidence that reconstruction is still a long way off. But on this sunny day, a group of people have arrived who definitely don't want to talk about the earthquake. It's the result of a unique collaboration between Circus Kathmandu and Clowns Without Borders, two organisations who both use theatre and play as a means to overcome trauma. And increasingly, people in the humanitarian sector are beginning to realise the unique value of the performing arts in bringing relief to people in a time of disaster.

"After a tragedy, people are so traumatised and so busy with figuring out practical things like where they're going to sleep, that they forget to laugh," says Micael Bogar, who has a background in conflict resolution and applied theatre and has been a volunteer with Clowns Without Borders since 2009. The international 'humanitarian clowning' movement has chapters in 12 countries and has sent teams to perform in places such as the refugee camps of Lesbos, Greece, and the evacuation centres of post-Typhoon Philippines (Bogar was part of that group), in partnership with local and international NGOs.



Bogar and her teammate Juliana Frick, both from San Francisco, came to Nepal after being invited to take part in a two-week tour of earthquake-affected areas by Circus Kathmandu, the country's first professional circus group. Founded by filmmaker and circus artist Sky Neal in 2010 as a programme to provide support for children who had been trafficked into Indian circuses,

Circus Kathmandu is now made up of 13 young people who are using their skills to forge sustainable careers, performing professionally in Nepal and internationally. They also conduct regular outreach work with street children and, more recently, earthquake survivors. After Bungamati, which is a mere 20-minute drive from Circus Kathmandu's training centre in Jhamsikhel, the team—comprising the two Americans and six members of Circus Kathmandu—would be travelling further afield to more isolated Himalayan communities, such as the village of Ghyachchok, which lies close to the epicentre of the earthquake in the Gorkha district.

It's not the first time Circus Kathmandu has visited Ghyachchok. In June 2015, the troupe embarked on a four-day trip to Gorkha as part of an outreach project called 'Artworks', which involved dancers, artists and educators. The group began by performing for the primary school children at the village, followed by a circus skills activity session.



"At first, the girls didn't want to touch the boys and vice versa. But we mixed them all in one group and played games," says Jamuna Tamang, who joined Circus Kathmandu five years ago after being trafficked into an Indian circus as a teenager. "By the second day, they felt free and they were running all over the place. We didn't provide anything material to them but we gave them self-confidence and motivation," she says.

In the context of a disaster, circus and clowning fall under the category of psychosocial relief, a way of helping survivors to deal with the emotional impact of what they've been through by using joy and laughter.

Niranjan Kunwar, a writer and education consultant who led the Artworks outreach project, believes that for young children this can be more effective than dwelling too much on the cause of the trauma. “I happen to think they just need a normal schedule after what they’ve been through,” he says. “Talking too much about the earthquake may not be helpful.”

Teams of Artworks volunteers have so far made three trips to earthquake-hit rural villages—isolated, neglected communities whose problems have only been exacerbated by the disaster. Kunwar’s aim is to use art, in all its forms, to plant the seeds of inspiration. “We’re showing them certain things. As an educator I believe that once you spark someone’s imagination, many things could happen,” he says.



After Bungamati, the group travelled to isolated rural communities in Dolakha and Gorkha districts. Photo: *Naomi Mihara*

Jamuna Tamang and Juliana Frick in Bungamati. Photo: *Naomi Mihara*



Bogar is more frank about clowning's specific role in post-disaster contexts. "Laughter is a healing, powerful thing," she says. "The simple reminder of 'Hey, we're all still here. The sun is shining.' It's delicate to come in and say that to someone, but it's really important!"

Bogar, however, is clear that this kind of relief only has a place after essential needs have been met. "We have this philosophy that humanitarian clowning is amazing, but it doesn't bring you food and shelter and medical aid, and those are the first things that need to happen," she says. "We don't go into places that haven't had this initial support."

In Bungamati, by the end of the short performance (which involves a queen, three thieves, a magical crown and some impressive acrobatics), the previously shy and cautious children have been well and truly won over. Jumping and laughing, they swarm the stage, and a sense of delight pervades the air in this usually quiet street: a small piece of magic in an unlikely setting.

# VOICE 22



"Richer people have already left the camp. But whenever they hear about the distribution of new relief material, they come back. They do not participate in any kind of community work. But they show up whenever a new face appears in the camp."

**Ram Krishna Suwal | Byasi**

Interview: **Nitika Shresta** | Photo: **Pratik Rana**

# Voice 23



“My wife died 35 years ago. Now I only have my dogs. This one is Kancha. He needed medicine against rabies, so I spent the last 300 rupees of my relief money on him. I got NPR 25,000 in all. But I needed asthma medicines. I needed appointments with the doctor. This was the last bit. Now it is gone.”

**Man Bhakta Maharjan | Khokanai**

Interview: **Pratik Rana & Sameen Poudel**

Photo: **Pratik Rana**

# VOICE 24



"People say it was God's injustice to let that earthquake happen to us. But I have faith in God. Just imagine how much worse it would have been if the earthquake happened at nighttime, or on a weekday. Scientists forecast that if a big earthquake hits, Kathmandu would be totally destroyed. But look, we are still alive."

**Pradhman Sharma Sankhu | Maithigar Mandala, Kathmandu**

Interview: **Rupa Khadka** | Photo: **Enika Rai**

# 2015

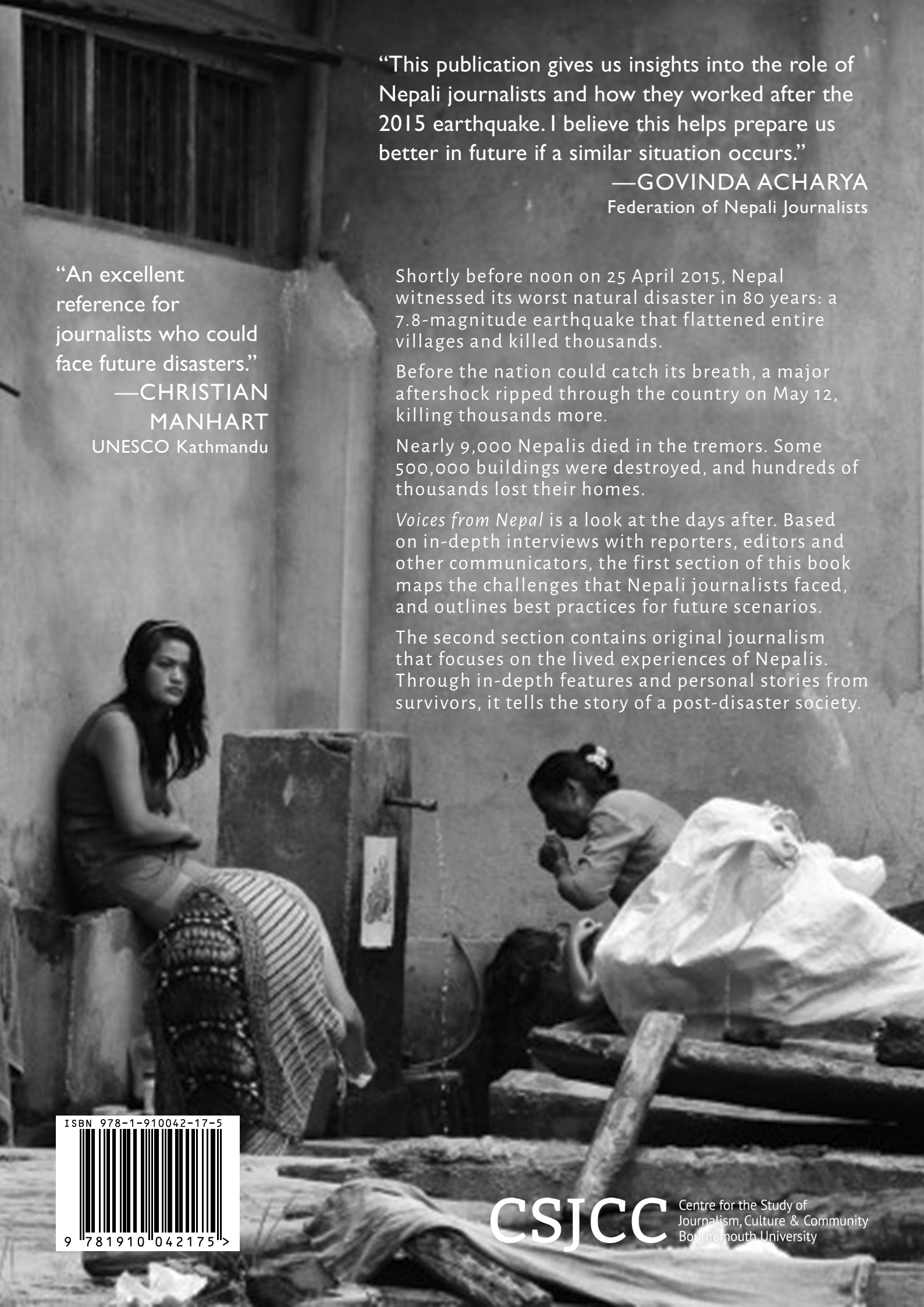


"We became best friends because of the earthquake. Her house collapsed and her family was moved to this camp, even though they are not from around here. Then she got admitted to the same school I am going to. First I saw her there and when I saw her again later in the camp, I talked to her. And since that day we became best friends."

**Prakriti Suwal (r) | Byasi**

Interview: **Nitika Shreshha**

Photo: **Pratik Rana**



"This publication gives us insights into the role of Nepali journalists and how they worked after the 2015 earthquake. I believe this helps prepare us better in future if a similar situation occurs."

—GOVINDA ACHARYA
Federation of Nepali Journalists

"An excellent reference for journalists who could face future disasters."

—CHRISTIAN MANHART
UNESCO Kathmandu

Shortly before noon on 25 April 2015, Nepal witnessed its worst natural disaster in 80 years: a 7.8-magnitude earthquake that flattened entire villages and killed thousands.

Before the nation could catch its breath, a major aftershock ripped through the country on May 12, killing thousands more.

Nearly 9,000 Nepalis died in the tremors. Some 500,000 buildings were destroyed, and hundreds of thousands lost their homes.

*Voices from Nepal* is a look at the days after. Based on in-depth interviews with reporters, editors and other communicators, the first section of this book maps the challenges that Nepali journalists faced, and outlines best practices for future scenarios.

The second section contains original journalism that focuses on the lived experiences of Nepalis. Through in-depth features and personal stories from survivors, it tells the story of a post-disaster society.

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