STAYING AFLOAT

Governments around the world are in the throes of choosing between economic survival and public health. It is in Nepal, the people voted with their feet, leaving Kathmandu by the thousands this week. As they piled into crowded buses, many said that if the virus does not kill, poverty will.

Yielding to public pressure, elected ruling party politicians violated their own government’s lockdown rules to send thousands of constituents home from Kathmandu in buses. Nepal has been in complete lockdown since April 6. Last week, the number of confirmed coronavirus cases stood at 10.45, with no fatalities, and the government has started thinking of an exit strategy.

“We will keep the border with India sealed, but we can start the process of partial re-opening within Nepal,” Prime Minister Oli told MPs on Wednesday.

How the lockdown will be lifted is not yet clear, but public health experts have advised against opening the borders and restarting international flights just yet. Routes like Bali-gazipur and parts of western Nepal where there has been community transmission may need to be sealed.

In Sri Lanka, which has seen 254 confirmed cases and seven reported deaths, authorities have started lifting its COVID-19 curfew in two phases this week. In India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has announced a staggered exit after the lockdown period ends on May 3.

While the case load in India is negligible compared to the country’s population, public health experts say it is proof that India’s strict lockdown is working, but warn against lifting it too soon. What India does has a direct bearing on Nepal because of the porous border and the movement of each other’s nationals across it despite it being sealed.

Nepal’s lockdown which ends 27 April, will therefore have to mirror India’s re-opening. It is expected to entail limited local public transport with restrictions on passenger numbers, buses with only one passenger within cities, no motorcycles, fail mobility for agricultural activity and limited resumption of infrastructure, industry and commerce.

The government’s biggest challenge now will be to have a contingency plan in place in case Nepali migrant workers from Malaysia and the Gulf are sent home en masse. In the short-term, massive quarantine capacity will be needed, and after that hundreds of thousands of new jobs need to be created in agriculture, tourism and manufacturing. Nepal’s travel trade employs a million people, and a strategy to reposition and kick-start tourism will be critical.

Says Deepak Raj Joshi, former CEO of Nepal Tourism Board: “We have to plan so that in 2030 we survive, in 2021 we revive, and in 2022 we thrive.”

5 YEARS
25 APRIL 2015

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Playing politics in a pandemic

K P Oli is now halfway through his term as prime minister. With almost a two-thirds majority, there was much hope that he would show the kind of statesmanship needed to fulfill his election promises of stabilizing politics to focus on rising living standards.

The people believed him, and gave his party an overwhelming mandate. But the NCP predictably fell into the same rut as governments since 1990 — tainted by corruption, inefficiency, a lack of accountability and an utter disregard for the poor and weak sections of Nepali society.

Although Nepal has so far, quite luckily and inexplicably, escaped the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, many analysts maintain that authoritarian states have been better able to control the spread of the disease, which democracies have been hobbled with.

But for every China there is an India, and for every New Zealand there is an Iran. Just like the virus does not respect national boundaries, it does not seem to care about ideology either. In this war, what is important is the health strategy of the state, how strictly isolation is enforced and for how long.

The virus does not care if it is a totalitarian government that does it or a democratic one.

Governments are also faced with a stark choice: protect the health of citizens or save the economy. The economy cannot be saved unless you make it safe for citizens first, but some governments have quite openly tried to keep businesses going. This is where politics gets tangled with the pandemic.

Some democratic countries are using the disease as an excuse to stiffen the grip on the media, suppress the abuse and emergency powers. Other elected governments which have failed to manage the disease effectively, or have shown a disregard for the vulnerable, resort to extra-constitutional measures to cover up their deficiencies.

The Oli administration is guilty of both. The pre-coronavirus legislation on media control hangs like a sword over the heads of journalists. The prime minister himself admitted recently that week of exaggeration of the plight of tens of thousands trapped by the lockdown.

He has accused the media of having a political agenda in exposing his cabinet’s nexus with businessmen profiting in procurement contracts of medical equipment from China.

Even before the pandemic, disinformation was running high. The Oli government was wrecked by one scandal after another — the real estate bust in Belrwa, the scam on the water to save Banke riverside project, the security printing press deal in which Oli’s trusted Information Minister was caught on tape exorganizing a $6 million kickback.

And now, the blanket coverage in the media of people left hungry, ill and cashing in on the lockdown has exposed the communist government’s lack of sensitivity to the proletariat.

Physically weakened by his second kidney transplant, politically isolated even within his own party, the besotted prime minister made a surprise move on Monday by getting the Cabinet to pass two ordinances, one of which will make it easier for farmers to split a political party. This sent a shock wave through the NCP, brought brawl of protest from coalition partners, and the opposition, and a wave of outrage from commentators and social media.

Indeed, the timing was all wrong. Why was Oli in such a hurry to allow political parties to split, when the country was in the middle of the worst crisis in its recent history? This was the time to focus on fighting out a post-COVID-19 exit strategy, and getting the economy cranked up again. For this, the country needs all political parties to row in the same direction.

What the ordinance proves is that the prime minister, his own political longevity is more important than the country’s ability to survive the pandemic and its economic impact.

His goal is still to prevent his environment Purpha Kamal Dahal from succeeding him as prime minister for which he is trying to thwart a possible no-confidence vote against him by holding up the threat of splitting the party.

But what the move exposed was a widespread disregard for democratic norms, core values, and an undermining of an elected parliament. This will force the country into prolonged instability. Instead of making him stronger, the move has weakened Prime Minister Oli.

It is not just Nepal, around the world the pandemic has exposed governance failures and poor leadership. Some analysts maintain that authoritarian states have been better able to control the spread of the disease, which democracies have been hobbled with.

But for every China there is an India, and for every New Zealand there is an Iran. Just like the virus does not respect national boundaries, it does not seem to care about ideology either. In this war, what is important is the health strategy of the state, how strictly isolation is enforced and for how long.

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Feeding 1,000 a day in Kathmandu

Quiet heroism feeds the hungry during the COVID-19 lockdown in Nepal

The web of wrinkles is etched deep into the soft bronze face, a lifetime of gritty wind and harsh realities on the Tibetan plateau, smiling out of the phone screen. Brightly painted furniture frame her long plaited hair in a dainty (it room in Khan, a distant eastern province of Tibet on the far side of the Himalayas.

SOFAR SO GOOD
Lisa Changal

Her son, Geshe Sonam Wangchen, booms back with delight, adjusts his dusty maroon monk’s robes and waves the phone in excitement, retuming joyous Lotus messages as he hears his mother shout on the small monitor through the sprawling family home on the northern rim of the Kathmandu Valley.

“They gave me half your aunt in Tibet?” My son Sangay and Rinchen, dressed in festive brocade-trimmed new silk shirts, are bent over the low sitting room table holding towers of chips, playing peker with their uncles and cousins—cards are dispensed with a flourish, intense contemplative concentration and whispers erupt into laughter as the tension releases at the end of each round.

Their grey-haired father and uncles are dressed more plainly in warm adventure gear and down windbreaks. Through the sliding glass doors, the light is glowing pink. Engraved silver bowls laden with meat, nuts and dried fruit glow at their elbows. “Tashi Delek and Happy New Year,” they call to their cousin’s phone.

Although only a couple of months ago, that afternoon seems like another era, BC (Before Coronavirus). We have always regarded our nephew Sonam Wangchen as something of an unlikely hero, with flashes of saintliness. Later, since he returned home as Geshe after years of study for his advanced Rikshuk degree at the transgendered Sera monastery on the stunning plains of Mysore, his life has been devoted to helping others in Nepal.

So now, he just sees the need, hopes on his battered scooter, and gets on with alleviating suffering in this imperfect world. The fourth son of my husband’s elder sister, he lived in the Tibet Children’s Village in Kathmandu before running away to become a monk. Serving as a translator for the pan’s leaders, Sonam Wangchen was known as Gelung for his keenness and a vast arc of focused compassion, attracting the admiration of donors who followed him and his tireless work to Kathmandu.

For expediency on the job, Senam Wangchen rearranges his robes with a utilitarian cloth tunic and red quilted jacket, topped with a bike helmet. Just like he used to hitch up his skirts to play a mean game of football with his boys in the garden during family gatherings.

As a kid Sangay collected money from college friends to assist the heroin detox centre in a modest Budhistkatha house, and Rinchen saved pocket money to educate young children who had found shelter with him. After one visit I was haunted by an old man with a supporting leg in a tunic who had found refuge there, abandoned by his family.

The scope of Sonam Wangchen’s work received a boost after the 2015 earthquakes when the quiet heroisms of his Hope and Challenge NGO attracted ongoing support from donors inspired to make a difference through his hands-on achievements — namely philanthropic individuals from around Asia, India and Nepal. His resolve never faltered, his grave, unfliching grin never far behind for sorrow.

Today, several expanded rehab centres offer drug and alcohol addiction treatment and counselling for inmates. From a humble rented room

COVID-19

HELPING HANDS. Geshe Sonam Wangchen with his NGO which provides drug prevention guidance in the Valley’s schools, medical advice and spiritual therapy. They run shelters for vulnerable aged people and homeless children in need of protection and schooling.

For many years one of their most effective and appreciated activities has been feeding the homeless and disabled, every day, around Boudhanath and Swyambhunath. Soon after lockdown last month, I called Geshe-la to see what was needed in these troubled times. “I imagine him impatiently fumbling amidst his disassembled rifles for the phone. “Hello Auntie!” I wish he wouldn’t call me that, but his cheery smile always makes me smile. “More food for the people who can’t work,” was his immediate reply.

The meal distribution stations operating on the streets of Boudhanath and Swyambhunath are overwhelmed with growing numbers of men, women and children turning up every day. They are not only handing out cooked meals, never turning anyone away, but also trying to provide care packages to sustain families — rice, dal and cooking oil.

An email to Nepali-centric friends produced heart-warming results from both home and abroad — many relieved to contribute tangible assistance and to overcome our collective helplessness under these current constraints. Last night Sonam Wangchen called to thank me and his boys for generating extra funds, and sent a load of photos and videos of the suitably masked, socially-distanced, and hand-washing food lines. At dusk, our local hero was still busy. “Whoever wants to come they can come. It used to be homeless people who came to us, but now many daily workers are hungry as they have no job — it is very difficult. Many people are coming — we have to keep cooking from early morning to late evening. We feed over 3,000 people every day.”

Hope and Challenge
Nepal Investment Bank Ltd, Bouda, Kathmandu, Nepal
Account name: Hope and Challenge, A/c account number: 024610520002, Swift code: NICOBKMT
Will politicians pass the COVID-19 test?

Just like the 2015 earthquake, COVID-19 is an exam for leaders to prove their worth.

It is the fifth anniversary of the big earthquake that shook us all on 25 April 2015. The rebuilding process has been slow, but contrary to public perception it has been steady.

Many first-time visitors to Kathmandu are quite impressed with the recovery, and often ask me where all the damage is. It is also noteworthy that in the last five years since the disaster, we proclaimed a new Constitution, survived a blockade, held elections to all three levels of government, and we hoped that with political stability there would be development.

Infrastructure, energy, health, tourism and education sectors were finally getting the attention they needed. World class school buildings and health facilities have come up across the earthquake affected areas. Women have been trained in masonry and carpentry, information technology applications have spread across Nepal’s remote locations.

Traditional artisans have done so well by reviving the craft and skills to restore our monuments. The restoration of Boudhanath set the pace and the rest followed. The flow of resources assures us that Nepal still has many friends all over the world.

But just as we were getting over the aftermath of the upheaval of the past five year, we have been hit by an unseen and unprecedented disaster. Once again, we are confronting some of the challenges we overcame after the earthquake.

The pandemic has exposed social inequalities, state inaction, lack of transparency. We still do not know who the poor are in this country. We tout poverty numbers and percentages all the time, but is that true picture? Who are the most vulnerable, and how do we help them?

We are bombarded by heart-wrenching videos of families who have run out of cash and food on the long march home from Kathmandu. These are the underprivileged, they were in Kathmandu because of state’s inability to provide rural jobs, and they are victims of state apathy after the lockdown. The image in their minds has been that of the lockdown, border in their backs, and being forced to walk hundreds of kilometers in flipflops are symbolic of the state of governance.

When the earthquake bit Nepal, we did not have elected local governments and identifying the poor and vulnerable took time. We started to define them, but now we may have to redefine vulnerability. This time it is frontline health workers, food and medicine store keepers, taxi and bus drivers, who are most vulnerable. Even a month after they returned, there is stigmatisation against migrant workers who have come back from abroad.

Then there is the catch-all phrase: capacity building. In the 1990s, the textile cloth factory did well in Nepal and the neighbourhood with high quality textile products. Then, like in other spheres of national life, a combination due to political interference, mismanagement, low productivity and inability to compete, the factory closed.

In the post-earthquake and post-COVID economy, why not revive the Kathmandu factory to produce cloth for the army and police and design it to produce masks and PPE? In an earthquake, it makes sense, and soon in the monsoon it can produce rains and rain gear.

The new normal is where a textile factory needs to quickly become a PPE and mask maker. How do we train the staff, and what kind of skills will workers need? In the next wave this winter, we will need sleeping bags and jackets.

Pharmaceutical companies in Nepal have to gear up to acquire the license to produce a vaccine or drugs for COVID-19. Which companies have the capability? Capacity building has a whole new meaning in the post-pandemic post-earthquake, and during the climate induced disaster-prone Nepal.

Another aspect of capacity is related to leadership of the centre, the provinces and local governments. Leadership, we have seen, is about who can keep millions of people to stay the course, lay out clear plans and communicate clear instructions at times of crisis.

It is about trust, transparency and accountability. The next election is less than three years away, that would be the perfect time to reward the doers. The earthquake was a great teacher, and COVID-19 is an exam for those who want to rule over us. Can they pass the test?

Amit Chitrakar (Columnist)

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Nepal Wherever You Are.
Reviewing lessons of the 2015 Nepal Earthquake

Despite weaknesses, Nepal did not do too badly in picking itself up in the past 5 years

Govinda Raj Pokharel

The earthquake struck at 11:56 on 25 April 2015, just as 50 young people were donating blood inside Kathmandu. Eleven of those who were trying to save the lives of others lost theirs.

Nepal faced panic for few hours, but soon, families, communities and the nation came together in the time of great need. Some of those lessons are relevant five years later, as we face another disaster of the pandemic.

There was no call from the government to help affected people. Nepal rose spontaneously and voluntarily — just like they are now helping the thousands who are trekking for days from Kathmandu to reach their homes in a lockdown, without anyone asking them to.

Nepal’s diaspora also came up with generous help for the relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction phases. Nepal’s culture of community-based organisations like guthis, cooperatives, mother’s groups are the foundations of our social cohesiveness.

Reconstruction activities revived the traditional labour barrier system in many rural areas. The task of rescue, relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction was led by the government with financial, material, knowledge and moral support of countries near and far, multilateral institutions, private sector, and many non-profits.

The mammoth job was coordinated in the beginning by the government and the National Reconstruction Commission (NRC) prepared a Post Disaster Need Assessment (PDNA) report with support from 500 national and international experts.

The Government Reconstruction Authority (NRA) led reconstruction activities. Ministries and departments had to learn to work together in a more integrated way to manage rescue, relief and reconstruction and to support each other. The level of synchronisation needed has set a base for managing future disasters.

Nepal faces many types of disasters and has also learnt from the experience of India, China and Pakistan which also suffered deadly earthquakes. The Gujarat own-build model for reconstruction proved valuable for Nepal, especially in home reconstruction.

The government provided technical services and grants in an installment basis, and the survivers take leadership to build own houses. Nepal’s own lessons learnt can now be replicated and adapted in other countries.

The 2015 earthquake provided experience to community-based organisations, local governments and national level policy makers. The NRC, departments and ministries, which lead the rescue, rehabilitation and reconstruction, now have precious institutional memory.

If a coordinating leadership emerges during the aftermath of a disaster, our institutions inside government and outside proved that they can deliver services with upgrated knowledge and capacity.

The experience gained by engineers, planners, masen, workers in the heritage sector will also be valuable. Many women contractors emerged from the reconstruction process, as women entered professions they were not in before, including masonry and carpentry.

We now have very good stock of skillsets required for similar reconstruction, and also in transferring knowledge about retrofitting buildings in other parts of the country.

Another important achievement after the disaster was that a system was created that can now be regular part of business of our bureaucratic machinery. Building Codes have been upgraded and implemented in urban centres. Planning criteria for local governments and real estate have been introduced.

Structure analysis of any proposed building now has to ensure seismic resistance from not just earthquakes nearby but also bigger ones in the region. This spillover effect is ultimately helping Nepal in not affected areas to have resilient public as well as private infrastructure.

The earthquake was an opportunity to revive traditional woodcraft and temple architecture, public buildings and even homes built in the traditional style — all this will help revive tourism in the future.

Whether in relief packages in kind or government grants, poorer families received more than better-off households. Tens of thousands of households who did not have bank accounts now have access to the banking system. The NRA also decided that landless and people living in disaster prone areas are entitled to have additional grants to buy land nearby in safer areas. The property also had to be registered in the names of both the husband and wife. Similarly, marginalized communities, single women, the elderly were allowed to receive additional grant through non-governmental organisations to support rebuilding.

To be sure, there were a lot of things that could have gone better, faster, smoother. The ‘integrated settlement’ for rural areas, which could have reduced public expenditure for water supply, rural access roads, electricity supply system, for example, could not be implemented. This was because we adopted the owner build model for private housing.

Affected communities were given this option with some incentives in land planning and registration cost and funding for public infrastructure. However, because of social and other reasons very few people opted for integrated settlements.

Although policy decision not to lease any government and semi-government institution’s land to private parties was taken, the management of more open areas for city dwellers was not initiated during reconstruction.

Traditional architecture could not be preserved in private homes and public buildings. Designs that followed traditional style and training for masons were completely ignored, as people opted for reinforced concrete frames.

People lost not only lives and homes but also livelihoods. There was too much focus on physical reconstruction and not enough on getting people back on their feet by engaging small and medium enterprises.

Despite all these weaknesses, the pace of reconstruction in Nepal is satisfactory, compared to other countries in the region that have suffered disasters on a similar scale. The experience and opportunities have been used to move the country towards a more resilient path.

Govinda Raj Pokharel, 50, was the first head of the Nepal Reconstruction Authority (NRA) in 2015.
**SELF-ISOLATION**

Suggested Books:

![Book Image]

**A Home in Tibet**
The first Tibetan poetess to be published in English,tering Wangmo Dhampa’s memoir about teaching her mother’s Tibetan language, completing her studies in her homeland and connecting with her roots through a barrier of language, space, and time.

**A Beginning at the End**
How do you say over after the end of the world? Mike Chen’s pop-apocalyptic science fiction fantasy follows the survivors of a plague that has wiped out billions across the world.

**A Clockwork Orange**
Anthony Burgess’ 1962 dystopian satirical black comedy set in a near future society conducted by the state and features the violent exploits of teenage Alex and his friends, and the state authorities intent on reforming them.

**The Weather Makers**
Embraced and endorsed by policy makers, scientists, writers and energy industry leaders, this book explores the development of the weather and climate change contributed to bringing the topic to prominence.

**QUARANTINE**

Suggested Movies on the Dish:

**Teen Spirit**
When a young teenager dreams of escaping her small town and pursues her passion to sing to the help of an unlikely mentor.

**Shot in the Heart**
The story of a man coming to terms with the sins and secrets of his notorious brother and, in the process, exploring the legacy of violence in his own family.

**American Gangster**
Inspired by true events, this partly biographical film follows an outlaw New York city cop charged with bringing down Harlem drug king Frank Lucas.

**Overlord**
A small group of American soldiers find horror behind enemy lines on the eve of D-Day.

**Molly’s Game**
The true story of Molly Bloom, an Olympic-class skier who ran the world’s most exclusive high-stakes poker game and became an FBI target.

**CONTAINMENT**

Podcasts we like:

**Myths and Legends**
Souced from Europe and retold for modern ears, Myth and Legends features stories from folklore that have shaped cultures throughout history.

**Intercepted**
The people behind The Intercept's reporting and commentary discuss the crucial global issues of our time: national security, civil liberties, foreign policy, and the Internet.

**Heavyweight**
Human being an odyssey helps people to resolve a moment from their past that they wish they could change.

**BINGE MODE**

Binge Mode
Episodes of this pop-culture podcast produced by Theinger give destination replays of your favorite television shows, films, or other piece of media.

**APPROPRIATE APPS**

**Yummly**
Yummly has millions of recipes to offer, which you can judge before trying by checking out how scores are at a one-star five-star rating system, there are also able to know the calories and time it takes to prep and cook the dish.

**Invisibilia**
A study of human behaviour, invisibilia fuses narrative storytelling about the invisible forces that shape our lives, beliefs, and assumptions with science that will make you see your own life differently.

**Tasty**
Tasty was one app that was made for millennial chefs, it’s Tasty, brought to you by Foodish, Tasty is a reflection of the mother brand with creative partners, vibrant look, attractive imagery and quick and easy how-to videos.

**Coolpad**
An app full of easy home-cooked recipes that inspires home chefs to experiment with food and share recipes with others around the world, linking an user generated content, Coolpad feels like a social network for culinary enthusiasts.

**ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI**

**KIRPA JOSHI**

This week marks the 65th Anniversary of Earth Day. This environmental movement that started in 1970 highlights the importance of a clean, healthy and thriving planet. As it is all the more relevant today given the current climate and ecological crisis. Every day is Earth Day and every person has an impact on the earth and others who live here. We make a difference by the choices we make, think and act each day.

**OUR PICK**

[Poster Image]

[Video Thumbnail]
A tale of two disasters

On the fifth anniversary of the 2015 earthquake, Nepali workers overseas describe how this pandemic is on a much bigger scale

Upasana Khadka

Although overshadowed by the coronavirus crisis, on 25 April Nepal will mark five years since the earthquake in 2015 that took nearly 9,000 lives. Many migrant families lost members and property when the earthquake hit. Five years later, they are once more trying to cope with an upheaval that has shaken not just Nepal, but the whole world.

A Nepali worker in Dubai compares the two disasters. “Back then, I was worried about the next shake, now it is about the next case. Five years back, I was worried about the safety of my family in Lamjung, this time they are worried about my health.”

For far, nearly 1,135 Nepalis abroad have tested positive for the virus and at least 20 have died. Among overseas contract workers, 46 Nepalis in Malaysia have tested positive, 15 in Kuwait, 18 in UAE and 1 in Malaysia. Four of these infected in the UAE have recovered, while one Nepali woman died.

When the earthquake struck in 2015, the world raced to help. As efforts were made to ramp up relief, an informal safety net stood strong for migrant families: remittances.

Migrant workers in countries unaffected by that disaster could rely on their more persistent asset, their labour to help families back home pull through either via remittances or by returning to lend a helping hand.

The Migration Development Brief of the World Bank showed that remittances rose by 20.4% in 2015, while average returns jumped by five times to $4,000 per day.

During this pandemic, however, many migrants are themselves vulnerable to the virus and the economic downturn caused by it. COVID-19 cases are on the rise in the Gulf and Malaysia. Many workers are on the verge of losing their jobs or having hours cut, and unlike last time, returning home is not an option.

Oil prices have crashed and reached the lowest levels in two decades, hitting Gulf economies hard. Disruptions in international mobility and supply chains, local economic slowdown, delay of infrastructure projects and cancellation of large scale events have all impacted on Nepali workers.

While workers have been assured basic salaries despite the lockdown, others are being asked to take unpaid leave, or are in danger of losing their jobs. A sense of panic has spread among migrant communities already dealing with the fear of being infected.

A Nepali security guard working in Malaysia told me over the phone this week that he had opted to stay home: “I could have earned more, but I thought who will provide for my family if something happens to me?”

He was in Chitwan when the earthquake hit in 2015. “The earthquake struck, it destroyed then it left. This disease is slow and uncertain. We cannot be with our families back home for each other. In fact, we are threats to each other and I keep reminding my family to stay home at all costs.”

Indeed, while both have been devastating shocks, the response during the earthquake allowed for a more social and collective response to ensure everyone had an indoor to go to. While COVID-19 has forced us all indoors. With this crisis, the whole world is in uncharted territory.

As the caseload rises in destination countries for Nepali migrants, there is uncertainty and distress among workers and their families. Social safety nets are required more than ever because the informal support networks that the poorest rely on during times of distress, whether at home or abroad, are all affected by COVID-19.

One quarantined worker in Qatar whose family is in Kapilvastu puts it like this: “I am more worried about my family than myself. Anything can happen anytime and I am in constant fear.” Whether during earthquake or COVID-19, migrant workers are grappled by a deep longing for home during times of distress.

In 2015, Nepal came together to raise funds for those affected back home. A Nepali in Qatar who is in the non-resident Nepali organisation remembers providing support to relief efforts in the districts, and contributing to the Prime Minister’s Relief Fund.

“We raised money to help workers who had lost family members or homes, and employer and colleagues also provided support,” he recalls. This time, it is difficult to lend any support due to restricted mobility, lack of tangible funding, and the need to be frugal.

But there are examples of Nepalis helping Nepalis – for example in Ajman in the UAE. Nepalis provide free food to fellow Nepalis displaced by COVID-19.

With informal support networks also affected, the Nepali government needs to make bold steps targeting the poor. It has launched a relief package to cushion the impact of COVID-19 that includes a mixture of food aid, waiver for one month’s rent and school fees, discounts in utility bills and support for contribution to the social security fund, among others.

COVID-19

Whether this help will reach the most vulnerable internal migrants and their evolving needs will depend on its proper implementation. Similarly, some overseas Nepali workers face the prospect of being sent home in a country not adequately prepared to transport them back, and without enough quarantine facilities. The government and its embassies need to ensure that at least their basic food and lodging needs are sufficiently covered.

A Nepali who works as a ground handler has seen flights amidst tourists from Nepal land at Dubai airport. He wonders when he will be similarly repatriated. His work is relatively safe, but other Nepali friends have riskier jobs as cabin cleaners or work in customer service with whom he shares his room.

Over the phone, his voice sounded worried: “Ideally, I would like to go home. I can always earn in the future. But if I don’t live, how will I live?”

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- 24-30 APRIL 2020 #1007

25 APRIL 2015

YEARS

5
Five years after avalanche,

Lhakpa Tamang Jangba

BORN AGAIN after the

National paralympian Ramesh Khatri rediscovers his purpose in life after surviving the 2015 earthquake

Ramesh Khatri

I cannot believe that it has been six years since I had to leave that darkness, underneath night sky. I lost my legs trapped under a concrete beam. I tried to myself to remain consistent. It was the only way I could raise the alarm for rescue. They finally came 24 hours later. I could hear them call out from what seemed very far away. I was transferred to a Tibetan hospital, where I would wake up three days later to realise that I had lost both my legs.

I was taken to Kathmandu at age 16 with the hope of providing a better life for my family back in Dalikh. My father and his father before that were seasonal migrant workers in India. I spent my childhood going back and forth between Nepal and India. My parents were held in high regard in our society, they were expected to be the income earners to take care of the family. I felt responsible about looking after my ageing parents, and was determined to give my brothers and sisters a good education.

My first job was to wash dishes at the hotel, but soon I learnt how to cook. I did not go back to Dalikh for two years, but was packing to return that very day. I had bought my bus ticket, but fate had other plans.

There are no words to describe the pain and suffering of those two months in the hospital. Even after being discharged, every day was a struggle. I had to constantly fight to regain the life I had lost.

But I was resolute about achieving something in life. I had lost my limbs, but my determination was very much intact. With the love and affection showered on me by my sisters Jasmin and Pujha Didi, and strengthened by support of friends, doctors and nurses, I began to see my goal in life with more clarity. I was taken care of at the Bal Pokhara Santha, who helped and supported me physically, emotionally and with my physiotherapy. I was constantly encouraged by Sunita Rimal, who runs the organisation, who used to tell me “Look at all the people who have disabilities just like you. Look at all the things that they can do. You can do them, too.”

My physiotherapy continued with Humility and Inclusion Nepal, which trained me to use my new prosthetic legs. After transferring to the Nepal Health Equipment Development Foundation (NHEDF) where I was looked after by its manager, Samrat Sarlet. I began visiting the Sanatuk Ayangu Keshi, where I would practice more physiotherapy. But the Blockade made it difficult to commute to my physiotherapy lessons, so I familiarised myself using with a wheelchair. It was dangerous, I could have been hit by cars, but I persevered because I needed to get my leg muscles working again.

To my delight, with the help of Devina Builc, Pawan Pradhan, and Pawan Pradhan, I started taking classes at Navajivan Madhyamik Vidyalaya. I could not believe that within a year of the earthquake, I had the opportunity to study again. After winning the Bhandari-aided 101-rich by showcasing my dancing talent, I received much more attention. The support of my family and the people who cared for me, helped me to pursue my real passion: swimming. I began training at Navajivan, and in December 2016, I qualified as a national player through the national para-swimming association and went to Japan for training. I then participated in the 2018 Asian Para Games in Jakarta after taking money required to attend from well-wishers, I competed in the 50m freestyle swimming category logging 49.89 seconds, and this got me a training opportunity in Korea, and I attended the Dream Project in 2020. The London World Championships was one of many competitions that I was not able to reach due to financial shortcomings, despite my qualifications.

I now share a room with a differently-abled friend named Dibas Pariva. Since we both lost our legs in the earthquake, we share a lot of things. We are both the same, but we cannot sit together because what Dibas can collect from various charities.

The lockdown is necessary, but has made life difficult for everyone — especially for people like us. But after being through so much, I feel this is just another hurdle that life has put along the way for me to overcome and become stronger.

ON WHEELS: Ramesh has rediscovered mobility after getting a wheelchair and being helped by a nurse to use his prosthesis legs.

Ramesh Khatri

25 APRIL 2015

YEARS

NEW LIFE: The Dorey Bakery and Coffee Shop in Kyirin Gumba before the avalanche in 2015 (above), and being rebuilt after the earthquake (below).
Tsering Choephel Lama

When the earthquake struck, I was doing my MA college in Kathmandu. I had just moved into my new flat with my wife and kids. We were out for a walk when the earthquake hit. We felt the ground shake and the walls move. We ran outside to safety, unsure of what was happening.

The damage was severe. Many buildings collapsed, roads were blocked, and water and electricity were cut off. The city was in chaos. Some people were injured or trapped under the rubble. We had to help others and provide assistance where we could.

The government and international NGOs were working to provide aid and rescue people. We were lucky to escape without injury, but many people were not so fortunate. The earthquake was a reminder of the fragility of life and the need to be prepared for such events.

Kartok Lama

Five years after the earthquake, I am still struggling to recover. The trauma of the disaster has not left me. I am still haunted by the memories of those who lost their lives.

The government has been working to rebuild the area, but the process has been slow. The destruction was extensive, and the task of rebuilding is enormous. I hope that we can move forward and find hope in the future.

Earthquake

Pemba’s story

Ramesh Khatri and Pemba Lama (pictured below) had been in Ghorkha for over four years, working in the hotels and guesthouses near the bus park in Gango. Saturday morning of 25 April 2015 was like any other. Ramesh and Pemba were about to have lunch when the building started shaking violently.

Pemba, quick on his feet, managed to run a few steps towards the exit. Ramesh did not make it. The eight-storey building was collapsing down on everyone. Pemba was trapped in a crumpling position and rescued after five hours, unconscious. Ramesh had just his legs trapped, which had to be amputated after his rescue.

“I guess I have just about managed these past five years,” Pemba says over Facebook Messenger. He went to Dubai to find work, returned home after a few months, and earned a living from the streets. He is now learning to play the guitar, and practicing some rock tunes through YouTube. During the lockdown, he is helping his friends in a guest house. He got bored in Kathmandu, and tried to walk back to his home village in Nuwakot, but lost his way and had to come back.

Pemba adds: “I would really like to meet the policeman who rescued me five years ago, and thank him. I have not thought about the future. I will take what fate has in store for me.”

Upazina Khadka

Tsering Jangbu Changnyempa

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Post-pandemic mental health epidemic
The prolonged lockdown and its economic impact could exacerbate Nepal’s hidden mental health crisis

Sonia Awale

The number of Nepalis suffering from mental health issues is increasing with the prolonged COVID-19 lockdown, and the lack of treatment and counselling means the country may be facing an epidemic of psychosocial disorders.

Mental health is a hidden pre-existing crisis in Nepal because of social stigma, with a survey three years ago showing that a shocking 37% of the population suffered from some form of mental health problem.

But a new survey this month shows that the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown to contain the contagion has exacerbated the problem, with a quarter of those surveyed saying they felt restless, helpless, anxious, worried all the time.

42% suffered from at least one kind of psychosocial problem, and 26% from two or more. At least 17% of respondents admitted they had taken to alcohol and substance abuse.

Over 1,500 Nepal participated in the survey by Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TCPO) Nepal and Shawar Foundation during the lockdown, which has now lasted a month.

"The fact that 35% of those surveyed admitted to experiencing constant psychosocial problems due to the COVID-19 pandemic is a significant finding," said Kamal Gautam, psychologist at TCPO Nepal. He explained that problems were more frequent among women, students stressed about postponed exams, people whose businesses are impacted by the lockdown, and daily-wage earners.

The findings could be a warning about an impending epidemic of psychiatric problems on the lockdown and its impact is felt across society. In fact, mental healthcare providers say they are already seeing more patients with depression and anxiety disorder, as well as more severe psychoses.

A 21-year-old boy was recently admitted to Patan Hospital for psychiatric breakdown after he started throwing things around his house, and screaming that everyone was going to die from the coronavirus. Also last week, a girl who had taken to excessive cannabis use during the lockdown was brought in due to serious side effects.

“Let’s people are suffering silently, unable to come to us due to the lockdown and it is very likely many do not recognize the symptoms of mental disorder,” said Sahi Shaha, professor of psychiatry at the Patan Academy of Health Sciences. “It is normal to be worried during the time of a pandemic, and most people can cope with it. But some experience persistent symptoms of mental health disorder, and prolonged stress can also lead to self-harm.”

Alcohol consumption as a coping mechanism adds to existing mental and physiological problems, as well as lead to an increase in domestic abuse. Alcohol relapse is among the most common cases during the lockdown at Patan Hospital.

For mental health counsellors this is a vivid reminder of the mental health crisis following the lockdown,” said Dr. Shaha.

“For mental health counsellors this is a vivid reminder of the mental health crisis following the lockdown,” said Dr. Shaha.

Mito Rana, a clinical psychologist at Teaching Hospital agreed that service providers will be overwhelmed with old and new patients if the lockdown is extended. She said many of her patients with pre-existing mental health disorders have not been able to come for follow-up consultations or get medications.

“During a time of a disaster or an epidemic, anxiety disorder, phobia, obsessive compulsive tendencies and depressive thoughts are more likely to be triggered in mentally ill people and aggravate their condition,” Rana explained.

Although children tend to be generally spared by the virus, they quite easily pick up anxiety from their parents and relatives. Health care providers, migrant workers and their families are among the most vulnerable to mental health breakdowns because they often face stigma and discrimination from neighbours and relatives.

Mental health care providers including hospitals, clinics and non-profits have started a tele-mental health program during the lockdown. TCPO Nepal alone has responded to 136 calls in the last three weeks through a toll-free number. Others have set up social media platforms, and 24/7 consultation services.

Nepal’s second confirmed coronavirus patient Prashasti Shrestha, wrote in her blog this week following a successful recovery: “One thing I have grown to realize in this process is that often times we disregarded the mental health part of the virus. Symptoms like shortness of breath are largely capable of exacerbating one’s anxiety as well as the ignorance the public may show towards them.”

TCPO Nepal: Toll free number: 1600012000

Centre for Mental Health and Counseling Nepal: Toll free: 1500815000, hotline: 1145

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