Her second monsoon

Not much has changed in Nani Mulya Prisapat’s life since her husband and four other family members were killed when their house in Sankha collapsed in last year’s earthquake. The only difference is that, unlike when we interviewed her last year for a page 1 story in this newspaper (right), she is no longer dressed in a white mourning suit.

Everything else is the same: the tin hut next to the ruins of her home, the recurring nightmares, the loneliness, the lack of cash, and a heavy sense of grief and loss that time has not healed. Prisapat’s husband, daughter, son-in-law, granddaughter and mother-in-law were all killed in the earthquake.

She does not have money to rebuild her home, and without her husband she does not know how to do the paperwork to seek official help. Many women survivors like her face their second monsoon in temporary shelters.

“My government hasn’t given us anything, and I can’t build a house by myself,” she said. “I am working in the fields and knitting sweaters just to earn enough to survive from day to day.”

Prisapat, 47, says she must look to the future. She has managed to buy some kitchen utensils, a gas cylinder, stove, and a clock (adobe). Time has ticked away while she waited for government help that never came.

BY SHREEJANA SHRESTHA
DYING, TO MAKE A LIVING

In a world numbed by senseless violence and tragedy, this week we were once more reminded of the hierarchy of news.

Refugee Day. Nepali workers overseas may not be classified even as events were being held in Kathmandu to mark World Falen due to cutbacks, but also because Nepalis have taken that Nepalis are one of only a handful of nationalities willing the British Army — have been killed in Afghanistan in the past decade.

This week’s attack on Nepal in Kabul charges the Canadian Embassy in Kabul caused the most senseless loss of life, and underscores the fact that Nepalis are literally dying, to make a living. Such is the desperation for jobs and for a better life, that Nepalis are one of only a handful of nationalities willing to put themselves in harm’s way in risky jobs that no one else will accept.

Fatalities involving NATO troops in Afghanistan have fallen due to cutbacks, but also because Nepalis have taken up duties as frontline sentries and convoy escorts. There are said to be at least 9,000 Nepalis — mostly employed by private security firms — in Afghanistan alone.

Monday’s killings were full of glaring ironies. It happened even as events were being held in Kathmandu to mark World Refugee Day. Nepali workers overseas may not be classified as refugees, but they are economic migrants who have been compelled to leave because of the lack of prospects at home.

And in a world numbed by senseless violence and tragedy, we were once more reminded of the hierarchy of news. A tweet on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation handle with breaking news of the attack said: ‘All Canadian Embassy staff safe’— , raising questions about what that mission had done to ensure the safety of its own personnel, and whether they mattered. Are security guards are not staff? Who guards the guards? Who is responsible for the safety of foreign workers when a country subcontracts its security?

To trend globally, a news event has to be sudden and be coupled with dramatic visuals, the total loss of life has to be above a certain threshold, and then it depends on where the fatalities take place or where the victims are from. In terms of news value, the death of a dozen Nepali security guards is more or less equal to one NATO fatality.

But even within Nepal, there was a glaring discrepancy in coverage. The terrorist attack garnered more prominence than coverage of the other daily tragedy that unfolds more slowly and silently — deaths of Nepali migrant workers in the Gulf and Malaysia from ‘natural’ causes.

For example, 663 Nepalis died in just one year (2014 to 2015) in Malaysia and Qatar alone. In the six years between from 2008 to 2014, the death toll was 1,121 Nepalis in Malaysia, 880 in Saudi Arabia, 719 in Qatar and 264 in the UAE. But these deaths did not happen all of a sudden in one place, they were scattered across the region, the workers mostly died quietly in their sleep, and the only visuals were of coffins arriving at Kathmandu airport. The heartbreak of affected families rarely makes it to the news anymore.

Nepali soldiers killed in action while fighting in foreign armies, and fatalities involving security guards who protect embassies and airports in war zones around the world also expose the contradiction between pride and sovereignty.

On the one hand, we Nepalis boast about never having been colonised, and yet, even in this day and age, we allow our citizens to fight — and die — for foreign governments in far-flung lands.

The recruitment of Nepali citizens by militaries abroad is a historical incongruity that can only be remedied by stabilising our politics and straightening out the economy. This involves getting our governance right once and for all. If we do not, we will continue to see overseas remittances to prop up our precarious economy, and tragedies like the one that befall our compatriots in Kabul this week will keep recurring, with no end in sight.
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DEVELOPMENT BLACK HOLE
Why large energy and infrastructure projects never seem to get off the ground

LOKMANI RAJ

Delivering his budget speech in Parliament last month, Finance Minister Bishnu Poudel, following in his predecessors’ footsteps, reiterated: “I have envisaged a prosperous and self-reliant Nepal while charting out new fiscal policies and schemes.”

Poudel allocated Rs 311.9 billion for capital expenditure, up by 27.3 per cent from last year, and promised to disburse enough funds for all development projects. He emphasised the need for grandiose projects such as two new international airports, the 1,220 MW Budi Gandagi project, the Kathmandu-Tarai fast track highway, Tarai feeder roads, north-south highways and the Kathmandu-Rasuwa Gadi highway to link with China. He also gave priority to PM KP Oli’s ambitious dream projects, such as ending load-shedding in two years and generating 10,000 MW of electricity by 2026.

But even within Poudel’s own UML, there is a sense that he has overspent. Ex-Finance Minister Bharat Mohan Adhikari, a UML adviser, while noting that the budget is more development-oriented than ever before warns that it will need a strong political will to implement.

The history of large development projects in Nepal has never been one to be proud of. Two decades after the Mahabali Treaty, work on the 6,720 MW Panchaswar Dam has yet to start. The deadline for the East-West Midhili Highway — which was to be completed in 2014 — has been extended by another decade. The Melamchi Project is 20 years behind schedule.

There are already signs that Oli’s mega projects will also suffer the same fate. His goal of generating 10,000 MW in 10 years is already a non-starter, with only six of the 99 procedures completed thus far. Early this month, a parliamentary committee instructed the ministries concerned to review this workplan and set a new achievable target. But even the revision of the procedure is in limbo.

Subarna Das Shrestha, former President of the Independent Power Producers’ Association Nepal, blames a lethargic administration for the failure: “There is bureaucratic apathy because the officials are neither rewarded for good performance, nor punished for delays.”

He says the civil service is influenced by politics and will not make any decisions without a nod from the patron. On their part, politicians have their own vested interests, which are governed by personal or partisan benefits.

For example, Monist MP Top Madhur Rayamajhi was one of the most vocal critics of US dollar-denominated Power Purchase Agreements (PPAs). Shortly after becoming Energy Minister early this year, however, he allowed the NERA to accept PPAs in dollar terms. This caused a setback for several hydropower projects — including the 216 MW Upper Trishuli 1 — of nearly two years.

The delay in passing the bill to amend the Electricity Regulatory Commission Act is another example of how politicians and bureaucrats seem to be in no hurry at all. The current legislation gives too much power to the NERA’s Board of Directors, which is dominated by the Energy Minister and Energy Secretary. Drafted in 2008, the bill proposes to curtail the power of the Board, hence the Minister and Secretary have both constantly put the bill on hold, demanding more time for review.

The Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA) is also responsible for development projects being stalled. In September 2015, the CIAA issued a gross statement asking then-PM Sushil Koirala to sack Energy Minister Radhika Gyawali for misusing her power to select a contractor to construct the Solo Corridor transmission line. In March, Gyawali got a clean chit from the Supreme Court, and the CIAA simply deleted its statement about her from its Facebook page.

The Parliamentary Committee on Agriculture and Hydropower has recently begun monitoring progress to make the relevant agencies, authorities, companies and contractors accountable. Its President Gagan Thapa says: “We need a system to penalise those who delay projects, and we must amend laws that obstruct progress.”

Ford fun
Celebrating Ford Motor Company’s 113th anniversary, local partner GO Ford announced GO Kart racing for all ford owners on 25 June along with activities such as human swing, haverboard and melt down, as well as food and drink stalls.

Huawei’s addition
Keeping entry-level smartphone users in mind, Chinese telecom company Huawei has launched its Y3 II (in Nepal). The device, priced at Rs 5,900, is available in arctic white and Obsidian black, and boasts a powerful battery and a 1.3 GHz quad-core processor.

Safe banking
Prabhu Bank Limited and Nepal Certifying Company have partnered to provide mobile online banking services to its customers. Stressing the need to minimise risks in online transactions, the bank has introduced security measures for both its national and international customers.

PRABHU BANK

With this, Kolkata joins the list of the carrier’s 288 other destinations. Fares (excluding taxes and fees) from Istanbul to Kolkata start at $199, and at $299 from Kolkata to Istanbul.

Obi in Nepal
California-based telecom company Obi Worldphone announced its entry into the Nepali market with the introduction all its S1 and the S1.5 mobiles. The S1.5 is priced at Rs 21,399 for the model with 2GB RAM/16GB internal memory, and Rs 26,199 for the model with 3GB RAM/32GB internal memory, while the S1.5 retails for Rs 14,799.

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Freedom is not free

I was living a regular everyday life, then this happened...
The monsoon arrived this week not with a bang, but creeping in slowly, advancing and receding until it held sway over the whole of central Nepal. Kathmandu Valley has already received 210 mm of rain in the first three weeks of June, due mainly to healthy pre-monsoon showers. Now, the hope is that the momentum of the moisture advance will be sustained in the coming weeks. Indian forecasters have predicted normal precipitation over the northern subcontinent, which means there is still the worry of heavy rains may trigger landslides along slopes in earthquake-hit districts where the mountains are still unstable. For now, enjoy the glorious mud.

KATHMANDU

KATHMANDU

THE REBOUND

Uplifting the status of people with disabilities through sports

SMRITI BASNET

The Army Physical Training and Sports Centre hall in Lagankhel, echoed with the skidding of wheelchair and thumping of a basketball. With onlookers cheering and coaches barking directions, the players vigorously propelled their wheelchairs while simultaneously taking aim. Sliding to his wheelchair on the sidelines, Bijay Bhutta (pic, right) contemplated his upcoming strategy as he observed his competitors battling it out.

Bhutta is one of two earthquake survivors who are among the 80 physically disabled players participating in the wheelchair basketball league championship organised by ENGAACI, an NGO based in Kathmandu. The 17-year-old had just completed his tenth-grade finals when the 7.8-magnitude earthquake struck central Nepal in April last year. Bhutta was trapped under the debris of his house and sustained a permanent spinal injury. “I thought my life was ruined,” he said. Some 5,000 persons were disabled as a result of the earthquake. “After training here I realised that given the right opportunities, people like us can do a lot,” said Bhutta, who is now playing for Nepal Spinal Cord Injury Sports Association (NSCISA). “And this social network is important, without it some of us might feel isolated and fall into depression.”

Bhutta’s friend, Kohb Bahadur Tamang, a fellow competitor, also believes in shaping his own destiny. “It was hard to deal with my situation initially. But I realised that I still have my hands, if not my legs,” said Tamang who had fallen off a tractor while distributing relief materials, during a strong aftershock that hit Laizok, Gorkha. He is now a peer counsellor at the Spinal Injury Rehabilitation Centre in Sungs, which has its own basketball team. Supported by Turkish Airlines and the Embassy of Switzerland, six male and three female teams are competing in the championship that is spread over seven Saturdays. The finals are slated for 9 July.

The game makes us sweat, releasing various toxins from our bodies, which would otherwise not be possible for most of us through exercise,” explained Himal Aryal, who is team captain of the Nepal Army Wheelchair Basketball team and has been playing for the last five years. His paralysis from the waist down was caused by a mine blast in Gorkha in 2003 during the insurgency. ENGAACI brings in volunteer coaches to support and motivate the teams. “Our aim is to create a system that can bridge the gap between persons with and without disabilities, through sports,” said Simone Galanbene from ENGAACI.

The training focuses specifically on a range of wheelchair manoeuvres and hand movements. Certain rules have been altered to suit the players’ needs but all games are held in international-standard basketball courts within the Valley.

“I have come with the hope of winning,” said 27-year-old Sarita Koirala, who was sixteen when she was buried under a landslide while working in the fields in Kavre. She feels the sport plays a key role in challenging conventional notions about people with disabilities. “People look at us differently now that we are identified as players,” said Koirala. Additional investment is needed for infrastructure and wheelchairs, but league commissioner Michael Rosenkratz, who had helped bring coaches from the USA in 2013, is optimistic that this will evolve into a national-level tournament one day. He said: “It is about creating opportunities to lead a full life. It is not about disability, but discoverability.”
THE SECOND CHAPTER

Survivors of trafficking help one another rebuild their lives

TSERING DOLKER GURUNG
IN BANKE

As far back as 1996, police raided prostitution dens in Mumbai and rescued 500 young women. More than 100 of them were from Nepal.

The story received wide coverage in both the Indian and Nepali media, and highlighted the enormous problem of young Nepali women being trafficked into the sex industry in Indian cities.

At the time and in the years since, the Nepali media has been accused of being obsessive and insensitive, compounding the problem for rescued women who were stigmatised and ostracised by society — sometimes including their own families — as they tried to start new lives back in Nepal.

Sunita Danwar, now 41, was one such rescued women, and remembers being subjected to constant scrutiny and judgment. “Families would refuse to accept their daughters, out of fear of being excommunicated by the community,” recalls Danwar, whose own relatives disowned her upon her return, because she had worked in the sex industry. “Even doctors tested us for HIV were scared of touching us.”

The discrimination and stigma prompted 15 of the trafficked women to set up Shakti Samuha in 1997. It is Nepal’s first anti-trafficking organisation run by survivors to help survivors, and also address the push factors that lure the women away.

“We have a simple objective: to fight trafficking, and help trafficking survivors rebuild their lives by providing them with the kind of support that we didn’t receive,” says Danwar, a founding member of Shakti Samuha and its current president.

Shakti Samuha has set up a nationwide network to help bring victims of trafficking together and facilitate their reintegration into society by providing legal and psychosocial counselling, livelihood and skills development training, and support to income generation.

There are now 22 such groups in 10 districts, including Shakti Sahara in Kohalpur here in Banke, which has 21 members.

Meena Salami, 37, was a teenager when she was trafficked to Delhi by labour recruiters promising to send her to Kuwait for employment. Fortunately, her family tracked down and rescued her before she could be sold to a brothel.

“When I returned, people gossiped about me,” Salami recalls. “Many said I was a bad woman just because they assumed I had
About traffickers

The findings of a new study entitled *Imprisoned Traffickers in Kathmandu Valley* show that human traffickers are not aware of how high the risks of their activities are, and how low the financial reward can be. Published by the Centre for Strategic Knowledge, the report attempts to fill the gap in research on perpetrators of human trafficking.

While collating reliable data on human trafficking is complicated, particularly in the absence of adequate research and measuring tools, reports by the media and various organisations tend to focus on the trafficking victims, patterns, legal measures and prosecutions. Often missing from the discourse is information regarding the traffickers, who are at the nexus.

The study looks at the methods used by traffickers, their thought processes and experiences. It claims to be the first-ever initiative to provide a glimpse into evolving trends, by featuring two comparative sets of interviews with traffickers in Kathmandu Valley prisons.

The baseline study was carried out in 2006, and the follow-up exercise was undertaken 10 years later. The imprisoned traffickers completed a short questionnaire, and in-depth interviews were conducted with willing inmates. One reason this study is significant is that it is among only a handful of studies on human traffickers, says Jonathan Hudson, the lead author. “To try to understand human trafficking and how we can more accurately deter and fight it, we have to know more and understand the traffickers,” he adds.

While reaffirming the persistence of recognised trafficking trends, the study also challenges popular perceptions relating to the trade. The findings indicate that at least in Nepal, a realistic cost-benefit assessment would show that engaging in trafficking is an illogical proposition at best. Would traffickers appear to be unduly swayed by the seemingly profitable nature of trafficking, but in fact most of the traffickers in the study reported earning less than expected and rarely breaking even?

This skewed assessment is made against a backdrop of a low perception of risk of being apprehended. The lack of access to accurate information—stemming partly from the loose nature of the network of traffickers—contributes to a situation where harsh penalties do not have the expected effect. Compared to eight years ago, the number of convictions has increased; so have the fines and length of jail sentences.

According to the research, Nepal functions mainly as a source country, with Newakot and Sindhupalchok persisting as the most popular source districts for recruiters. Trafficked victims are sent as far as Chitwa and the Gulf, but Delhi and Mumbai in India remain the most prevalent destinations. Promises of employment and assurances of marriage are still the primary tactics employed, implying that these are still successful and casting doubt on the effectiveness of awareness programs that have been implemented.

The authors concede that the traffickers’ responses may have been distorted, and that when coupled with the multiple assumptions and unknown variables, the report’s conclusions “are admittedly tenuous.” Nonetheless, the study suggests that efforts to alter the erroneous perception of the inherent risks and benefits may achieve a better outcome in reducing trafficking. ADHA Shrestha

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Lead researcher: Dr Tek Nath Dhakal, Tribhuvan University
Publisher: Center for Strategic Knowledge, Kathmandu
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**Customer Care**
Sidhi (Stairs)

Having money is important, but is it more vital than family? What is one willing to do to attain even elusively wealth? Sidhi (Stairs), now at Saravanam Theatre, seeks answers.

Written and directed by acclaimed Indian theatre director Subodh Pothani, Sidhi revolves around a low-income female-headed family, and young people crushed between politics of the country and their desire for a better life. Auma (Vineet Khadka) sells corn cobs on the street to make ends meet. Her son (Ajjan Neupane) and daughter (Sabina Gopal) are typical teenagers, unwilling to help their mother and ashamed of her work. While Auma toils daily, the son chants slogans at protests, and the daughter whitens her face away with her boyfriend.

Short of cash, the son resorts to stealing money his father left behind. The daughter splurges her share on a new bag. When Auma finds out, she leaves home, utterly disappointed in her children. The story, written in Hindi by Pothani and translated into Nepali, is predictable and lacking. One cannot help but wonder if something was lost in translation.

Khadka does well in her role as the mother: she is loving and caring, but not hesitant to display anger and disappointment. Gopal’s manner to pull off her character as a daughter, sister, and a girlfriend. Neupane’s best moment comes when he is out on the streets, protesting. But the actors need to hone their skills to make their acts believable. Their expressions were at times exaggerated, yet occasionally bland.

The background music was intermittently jarring, but the creative use of a set of bamboo staves to alternate as a house, vehicle, house and garden added a spark of drama and fun. Subrata Shekhar

Directed and written by Subodh Pothani
Cost includes: Meena Khadka, Siddhha Bhandari, Subrata Shekhar, Siddhika Gopal, Ajjan Neupane and Khadga Khadka
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PRIDE AND PREJUDICE AND ZOMBIES

It is a testament to Jane Austen’s enduring popularity that almost two hundred years after her death, her novels continue to be used for various film adaptations, including, most astonishingly in 2009, a pulp parody titled Pride and Prejudice and Zombies — a book that even this reviewer could not get through. The fluffy, forced commandeering of Jane Austen’s elegant prose, spiking her wit with heavy-handed, clumsy dialogue and contrivances that are a burlesque over the head, make it impossible to read through this unlikely version of a beloved story laced with a plethora of zombies rampaging through 19th-century England.

It was, therefore, quite a surprise to hear that Pride and Prejudice and Zombies was to become a film, and that, too with a decent cast, starting no less than the lovely, charming Lily James as Elizabeth Bennet. While the film is to be approached by only those with a high tolerance for the absurd and a real love for Austen’s characters, this adaptation is surprisingly enjoyable (note: I did not say it is good). For those who enjoy a good old mash-up and plenty of tongue-in-cheek, well, this might just be your cup of tea.

The plot is essentially the same except that the Bennet sisters, instead of being trained in the martial arts, specifically famed throughout their region as zombie killers. When Mr. Darcy (Sam Riley), another fanged zombie killer, comes to town to look over the lay of the land (Britannia is besieged by zombies and is just holding them in check at various points), the fun begins, and the familiar courtship between the witty, strong-willed Elizabeth, and the proud, haughty Fitzwilliam Darcy begins — but this time, in addition to admiring Elizabeth’s mind, Mr. Darcy also admires her ability to off-mute automatons with skill, efficiency, and grace.

If all of this sounds absolutely preposterous, ruminate on whether you would like a romantic comedy infused with action and a healthy dose of science-fiction-fantasy, glued with high production values, and hybrid costumes that work surprisingly well. Also, some well-known character arcs have been slightly altered to confound expectations — the formidable Lady Catherine de Bourgh (played by the great and gorgeous Lena Headey) gives us a nice surprise with an about-face later on in the film, and the sneaky Wickham (Jack Huston) yields an even nastier secret.

Personally speaking, I enjoyed Pride and Prejudice and Zombies because of my own propensity for certain types of nonsensical fun, but I will warn that many people may find this film intractable. For those with a higher threshold and a bit of imagination though, this can be a thoroughly enjoyable waste of time.

nepalitimes.com

MUST SEE
Sophia Pandé

BLOOD MONEY: Prime Minister KP Oli pays his final respects to 12 of the 13 Nepalis killed in Kabul on Monday. Their bodies were flown home on Wednesday.

OPERATION KABUL: Brothers Capt. Sowri Raji (left) and Capt. Subash Raji flew the special Nepali Airlines flight to Kabul to bring back the bodies of 13 Nepalis killed in the blast on Monday. Another 14 Nepalis working in Afghanistan were also flown back.

OPPOSITION: The main opposition leader Sher Bahadur Deuba attends the first General Convention of the Nepal Mahila Congress Party in Kathmandu on Monday, which has replaced Mahant Thakur (center) from JNVP as its President.

HANDS UP: Politicians, diplomats, bureaucrats and commoners participate in an event to mark International Yoga Day at Durbar Marg in Kathmandu on Tuesday.

MONSOON PLANTING: A farmer prepares rice seedlings for planting in Khokana on Friday. The onset of the monsoon this week signalled the start of the rice-planting season across Nepal.
Lives of our brothers

Profiles of some of the 13 Nepalis killed in Monday’s bombing in Kabul.

Annupurna Post, Rajdhani, Kantipur, Nagarik 22 June

Narendra Singh Thapa, Bhalu

After retiring from the Indian Army, Narendra Singh Thapa went to work in Iraq as a private security guard. His family members thought Iraq was too dangerous, and forced him to return home, but he subsequently convinced them to let him go to Afghanistan. The family thought Kabul was safer and did not put pressure on him to return. He came back on Wednesday, but in a pink wooden box. (His wife Sangita and four-month-old baby are pictured above.)

Madhu Sudan Koirala, Nuwakot

Madhu Sudan Koirala lost his son Shihir and daughter Swastika when last year’s earthquake destroyed their house. He could not attend their last rites because he was guarding the Canadian Embassy in Kabul after having retired from the Nepali Army three years earlier. Koirala’s wife and three remaining daughters moved to a rented room in Kathmandu.

He came to Nepal in April on the first anniversary of the earthquake, and observed the one-year memorial rites for his children. While in Nepal, he recorded a song: “My heart weeps...may such a tragedy not befall anyone.” He returned to Kabul because he needed to save money to rebuild his house in Nuwakot, and educate his surviving children. He was among the 13 Nepalis killed in Kabul in Monday’s Taliban bombing.

Chandra Bahadur Magar, Karpur

After surviving a deadly Moosai attack in Sindulpulchok in 2003 in which eight of his fellow soldiers were killed, Chandra Bahadur Rana Magar left the Nepal Army. He found a job as a private security guard in Kabul, and took a loan to buy a one-storey house in Kathmandu. After a holiday in Nepal, he had returned to Kabul in May. He died in the suicide bombing.

Nabin Singh Chhetri, Parbat

Nabin Singh Chhetri had been injured in a Moosai attack during the war. He left the Armed Police Force to open a shop in Kathmandu. When he found a job as a security guard in Kabul, his wife took over the running of the shop. At home on leave last month, Chhetri told his wife that his job in Afghanistan was too dangerous and he would soon return to Nepal. But before he could leave Kabul, he departed this world.

Ankur Moktan, Sunauli

Ankur Moktan of Sunauli was in the bus in Kabul chatting with his wife on Facebook messenger. Minutes after he ended the conversation, the moving vehicle was blown up by a Taliban suicide bomber. Geeta Gole, Ankur’s wife, says: “He had promised to call me after he finished his duty shift, but that chat I had with him turned out to be our last conversation.”

FROM THE NEPALI PRESS
Women still waiting to

Women survivors of the earthquake struggle to cope with grief, loneliness and government neglect

SHREJANA SHRESTHA
IN BHAKTAPUR

Inside a tin hut in Bhaktapur that now serves as a bedroom, kitchen and living room hangs a fading laminated photograph of two men. They resemble each other.

The picture is one of the few moments Nani Maiya Koja, 56, has of her husband and son who were killed when their three-storied house collapsed in the earthquake in April 2015. Since then, Koja has had to deal with homelessness, support her remaining family, maintain the temporary shelter, try to obtain compensation, and ponder how she can rebuild her home and life.

"I lost my husband, elder son, and everything else during the earthquake," she told us this week as monsoon rains pounded the tin roof. "Without the men in the family, no one speaks up for you."

Koja also lost her younger son who was suffering from kidney problems. Five months after the earthquake, she now lives in the hut with her 22-year-old daughter Samjhana. The Koja family’s circumstances reflect the special needs of thousands of other female-led households after the earthquake.

Nepal Police data shows that about 2,000 women were widowed in the earthquake, and some 50,000 women lost their homes. Just over a quarter of the total households impacted in the 34 affected districts are female-headed, according to a Post-Disaster Needs Assessment report prepared by the National Planning Commission last year.

Among the distinct problems faced by women survivors are the lack of land titles and house ownership papers, and limited access to economic resources, including a dearth of job prospects. It was usually the men in the family who worked the system, dealt with the bureaucracy. With them gone, most women face seven challenges in the recovery process.

"Women in the earthquake-affected districts face problems in obtaining compensation, as land is generally not registered in their names," explained Lily Thapa at Women for Human Rights, an NGO that helps single women. "And the compensation process becomes even more difficult if the property is owned by their in-laws."

The National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) has commenced the first phase of grant distribution. Each earthquake-hit family receives Rs 200,000 to rebuild homes, on top of the Rs 15,000 most survivors collected immediately after the calamity. But 14 months later, many women like Koja have not received either of the government grants.

NRA spokesperson Ram Prasad Thapaliya said the authority could in future come up with a ‘special grant’ to top up the payment, but only for certain single women. "We can give single women above 75 years of age a special grant as a priority area in future, and help them rebuild their lives. But we need to come up with suitable criteria first." However, he admitted that the NRA has not pinpointed single women or widows for special consideration thus far.

ENGENDERING RELIEF

After the earthquake we need to rebuild better, not just houses but also lives

Following the major earthquakes in 2015, Nepal’s National Planning Commission (NPC) issued a Post-Disaster Needs Assessment report that strongly emphasised ‘building back better’ as the guiding principle for recovery and reconstruction. But what does this catchphrase really mean?

Most recommendations in the report focus primarily on technical interventions such as reconstruction of physical assets, enhanced communication capacities and logistics, risk assessment, vulnerability assessment, and improved legal and institutional arrangements. However, the impact of disasters and processes of recovery is embedded in unequal power structures, and therefore needs to be addressed by taking into account vulnerabilities and inequalities.

Disasters such as earthquakes are natural phenomena, but their impact is not. Various studies have shown that the effect of a natural disaster is unevenly distributed, and pre-existing inequalities and discrimination along the lines of gender, caste, class, ethnicity and disability
rebuild homes and lives

“Everything in my life changed after the quake but I have had to overcome the hurdles. Each day I tell myself that I am not the only one who is going through this,” says Manjari as she grieves her nine-year-old son Khushi’s death by their school (left).
For the past year, she has been living in a small room provided by the community, God, and has been doing odd jobs — such as selling and working in a cemetery — to raise her family. After her stay appeared in this newspaper last year, donations poured in and the school’s tuition fees for her sons.
“Can I provide for my family, and not having a place to stay in my area?” she says, eyes brimming with tears. “I doubt if life in law wants to give a share of the house to me. My in-laws have changed a lot after my husband died.”
Many women affected by the earthquake are facing similar problems, with their in-laws reluctant to part with property. Some face harassment in the presence of their husbands, who are even dead. But Manjari says she is hopeful about her family’s future, and is willing to make any sacrifice necessary to ensure her sons are happy and succeed.
She says, “A year ago, I never thought I would be able to get over the tragedy. But life goes on somehow, and I have to focus on making sure I take care of my sons.”

“A copy of a land ownership certificate from a government official is not sufficient for property to be transferred to a wife’s name if the husband was killed in the earthquake,” Thapaliya said, “and a death certificate for the husband should be enough to secure compensation to rebuild a house.”
Despite such assurances, an Emergency Fund for Single Women set up by the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare before the earthquake has not been revived to help female heads of households.

Life after

The past 14 months have not been easy for Nirmala Mahajan. Nearly a moment passes without her being overcome by memories of the day when her home at Patosh village and the last four members of her family.
Nirmala and her two sons were pulled out alive from the ruins, but her husband, Sitar, brother-in-law and seven-month-old niece were buried under the rubble. (Even though her life was turned upside down in the blink of an eye, she is determined to move on despite her grief and the seemingly insurmountable challenges).

Thapa said the government has already collected Rs 30.9 million for an emergency fund earmarked for single women. “We are lobbying the government to use those monies to help single women rebuild their homes.”

Many women like Nirmala blame fate for the deep personal tragedy they suffered in the earthquake. But it is easy to see that the government’s slow response to reconstruction is not fast, and has hit women survivors particularly hard.

Women are exacerbated and further reinforced in the relief and reconstruction phase.

An extensive study on natural disasters between 1981 and 2002 in 141 countries showed that in societies where the socio-economic status of women is low, calamities directly or indirectly killed more women than men. In the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, 80 per cent of the deceased were women and girls. Following the recent earthquakes in Nepal, 35 per cent of those who lost their lives were women and girls, in comparison with 45 per cent being men and boys.

In the case of the 2004 tsunami, more women and children died as they were inside homes, in contrast to men who were out in the fields. Women’s limited access to public spaces where information about disasters are given, social norms of modesty whereby women and girls are discouraged from activities such as running, swimming and climbing trees, and traditional clothing like sari’s that hinder women’s swift mobility also influenced survival during the disaster.

In the context of Nepal, the higher female mortality rates during the earthquakes can be attributed to numerous factors such as male migration to the capital city and abroad, and women’s caretaking responsibilities resulting in a higher likelihood of women and girls being at home. In many cases, women were reported to have delayed their escape to rescue their children, older family members and valuables.

Being a woman does not in itself lead to higher vulnerability. It is the socially constructed gender norms like assignment of roles, responsibilities and ‘appropriate’ behaviours, along with unequal distribution of resources, rather than biological differences.

Gendered vulnerability is derived from intersecting identities and social relationships, as it is equally important to consider other identity factors — such as class, caste, age, location, marital status, sexual orientation, political affiliation, ethnic identity, religion, language, and absence or presence of disability — which influence the severity of the impact of disasters. This does not mean creating a checklist or doing an exercise, but instead understanding how different socially constructed identities interact to create different experiences of vulnerability.

For example, a blanket approach to post-earthquake relief distribution resulted in many cases, in those with political links and social status accessing the bulk of the resources. A study conducted during the relief phase showed that discrimination based on caste or political affiliation was perceived as one of the main reasons for unfairness in aid. Historical marginalisation and systemic exclusion have aggravated pre-existing vulnerabilities for many Dalits, Tamangs and minority communities post-disaster.

Single women faced a unique set of challenges further complicated by geographical location, as many women — due to childrearing responsibilities — found it difficult to make the long journey to local administrative centres to access relief. Only 19.7 per cent of land and houses is under female ownership, which makes it difficult for many women to directly access funds to rebuild their houses.

With thousands of health centres and hospitals destroyed, it became especially problematic for pregnant women and newborns. Reproductive healthcare. In makeshift temporary shelters, women and girls faced added risks in terms of security, and lack of privacy and sanitary facilities. The prevailing social stigma against sexual and gender minorities was exacerbated as transgender users of segregated sanitary facilities in Kathmandu camps faced sexual harassment and encountered abuse.

In urban areas like Kathmandu, many casual labourers — predominantly men, and living in poor quality houses — were highly vulnerable to disaster risk, yet in the aftermath compensation funds went to household owners and not tenants who were directly affected.

The earthquakes have affected all social groups. However, identity and power relations make the experiences of vulnerabilities and risks different and complex. The focus should be on the inequities in daily life — and not just in times of disaster — when we strive to ‘build back better’, because yes, we need to rebuild homes but we also need to rebuild lives.
Knock-off knation

Those of you who are downhearted watching the news about fake doctors, fake pilots, fake gas cylinders, fake bank notes or fake Oakley shades in Thailand should remind themselves, like I do here every week, that there’s just about everything in this country is fake, none of the bad stuff is actually real either.

In other words, this is not the real Nepal. Whatever is happening here is not really happening. There is a parallel universe out there somewhere in which the actual Nepal exists in real time, and if it is not Switzerland already, that Nepal is at least a Switzerland.

The point I’m trying to make here, in the Ass’ usual convoluted fashion, is that there is a silver lining in the clouds at the end of the tunnel in all this. Everything is huunky-dory in the bookstores in the real Nepal out there in the vast cosmos, and what we see around us is actually a pretend Nepal where everything is fake.

In other words, the fake government has cunningly allowed an underground economy to flourish in which counterfeit Benson & Hedges made in Waban (Mass.) (a.k.a. the market because, as the world’s 155th poorest country, we cannot afford to smoke the real thing. (Statutory Government Health Warning: As If We Care. It’s Going to Kill You Anyway. So It Doesn’t Matter What You Smoke.)

We have to learn to live within our limited means. It does not behove us to indulge in conspicuous consumption and actively resist on only buying expensive, original designer stuff.

And thank goodness we have the underground economy, because if we had only relied on MinFin, we’d all be doomed.

Some people say that Nepal’s economy is propped up by the fixed exchange rate with the Indian rupee. Not true. It is propped up by counterfeit Indiace 500 rupee notes, and at the rate the fake currency is circulating, INR is going to be declared legal tender in this country just like in the good old days.

So, unlike most people, I am not worried that the diesel at the pump is adulterated, the guji jamuna at weddings are made of flax, or that our bottled water is diluted with sewage. What all these knock-off proves is the ingenuity and the can-do attitude of Nepal’s fake entrepreneurs and their remarkable ability to launch unrealistic products that turn into viable businesses.

Here are some more ideas to make a slew of new fortunes:

Fake Wildlife Contraband: Here is a wild idea to control the poaching of endangered species. Start shipping fake rhino horns and artificial tiger wee-wee to China. Customers won’t be able to detect the real thing, and poof! the bottom will fall out of the market. Ditto for ylang-ylang: just use plastic caterpillars and false fungi.

Pseudo-Prade: These are knock-offs of the actual Mitsubishi 4WDs, but for a fraction of the cost. So, if you are a politician, all you have to do is to be only half-corrupt to be able to afford one of these pretend pajuras.

Quasi-Diesel: Instead of pure diesel, which is expensive, you can power your generator with this fuel that is actually high-octane and highly inflammable Bagmati water.

Phone-Telephony: These designer mobile phones with names such as Naka, Sonny, and Mutterola serve their purpose since we keep getting cut off anyway.

Sham Shampoo: Squirt out a liberal amount of Head Over Shoulders shampoo with conditioners, rub gently over scalp, and rinse. Careful, now, we don’t want the wig to fall off.

Pretend Democracy: Feign freedom in a make-believe land.

Fake Federalism: It doesn’t matter how many provinces we have, because the boundaries are all imaginary.

Copyright CIAA: Think it is the CIA.

INR 1,000 Note: Even the counterfeit Indian currency detected in the false bottom of an imitation Deely suitcases were found to be copies of the real. But lucky we have them, because we can pay IOC with fake bills for fake fuel.

Counterfeit Constitution: What do you expect from a document drafted by fake revolutionaries?

Pretend Ass: Even this column is fake because the lins we make up are actually true. This column is so substandard that the Department of Food and Other (Illy) Stuff has declared it unfit for human consumption.

The Ass