“We Need an Even Bigger One”: Disasters of Inequality in Postquake Kathmandu Valley
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“Our houses are fine, ours are destroyed. But there is no help for us. Unless the rich are hurt, nothing will change. Now we need an even bigger one that affects everyone.” These were the words of Ama, an older woman who lives in the agricultural periphery of Nepal’s Kathmandu Valley. Despite losing an entire mud house and half of a concrete house in the April 25 earthquake—forcing her joint family of ten to move from seven rooms into three—the government denied Ama any aid since her family was not, technically, homeless.

A scene from Khokana, a Newar farming caste town on the southern edge of Kathmandu Valley. Photo by Andrew Nelson.

Ama’s frustration speaks to the disproportionate suffering and relative lack of relief for the poorer communities of Kathmandu Valley. While neither earthquakes nor inequality are new to the Valley, the few records of previous quakes suggest that all classes suffered their consequences. For instance, in the 1934 earthquake, members of the royal Shah and the aristocratic Rana families died in crumbling palaces, just as...
commoners lost their lives in their houses (Rana 2013).

The impact of the April 25, 2015 earthquake and the subsequent aftershocks, however, depended largely on one’s social status and geographic position. Although right in the middle of the fourteen most-affected districts, accounting for 47 percent of the population and nearly 50 percent of the houses in that area, Kathmandu Valley accounted for less than 15 percent of the private homes destroyed. This disjuncture stems from the difference in architecture between the urban centers of the Valley and the rural hinterland. While the majority of mud (kacchi) houses, which represent 80 percent of the buildings in Nepal’s rural hills, collapsed, the concrete (pakki) houses, accounting for 76 percent of structures in the Valley, were generally spared.

Literally translated as “raw” or “unripe,” kacchi refers to houses made of timber, brick, and stone-in-mud mortar. Until 1970, this type of construction constituted over 90 percent of the Valley’s homes (Chaulagain et al. 2012). By 2010, though, such houses had become a rarity in the urbanizing Valley, with the exception of peripheral agricultural settlements (https://nepalTIMES.atavist.com/as-remote-as-kathmandu-kecids) such as the one in which Ama resides. Areas like these, particularly the dense agro-towns and villages populated predominantly by the farming castes of the indigenous Newar ethnic group, were devastated.

Since the 1970s, the overwhelming majority of new buildings are pakki (“cooked” or “ripe”) houses made of reinforced concrete frames and (mostly) unreinforced brick-in-cement mortar infill. Some pakki houses did collapse in the quakes, but these were isolated cases. Where multiple pakki houses were destroyed, this was most often in transitory neighborhoods where absentee landlords built beyond permitted levels or hollowed out ground floors. While many landlords of collapsed houses absconded soon after the quake for fear of retribution, tenants—mostly migrants coming to Kathmandu (http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/05/world/asia/nepal-already-stripped-of-young-men-faces-a-darker-problem.html%20) to seek foreign labor opportunities—were left inside. Thus, although physically within the Valley, agricultural communities and migrant laborers shared a marginal position with rural areas outside the Valley where the impact of the earthquake was greater.

Ama made the point not only that the poor suffered more than others, but that reconstruction was unlikely to address such inequality. In the aftermath of the 2001 earthquake in Gujarat, Edward Simpson (2013) reported that people used the metaphor of crows descending on the carcass of a city to describe how the government, development banks, planners, construction engineers, religious organizations, and NGOs exploited the disaster for their benefit. It remains too early to know the identity of Nepal’s crows, but we can speculate about how external actors, opportunists, and the state will reshape Kathmandu and the country in ways that will perpetuate current inequalities.

Thus far, NGOs have claimed (and overclaimed (http://aid.works/2015/06/nepal-haiti/) ) credit for providing safe, inexpensive, and indigenous materials such as bamboo, as well as brick techniques that do not require kilns. However, due to the prestige attached to kiln-fired bricks and concrete, as well as the perception that pakki houses did not fall (http://nepalTIMES.com/article/nation/A-concrete-future.2251), many recipients of alternative materials might balk at their adoption, not viewing them as permanent solutions.

The state will soon release its new building code, likely limiting house heights and increasing open-space requirements. However, without enough engineers and inspectors to monitor new construction, it is difficult
to expect that the laissez-faire attitude of pre-earthquake construction will change. While the Nepalese Army has reportedly demolished two thousand structures (http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/news/2015-05-19/all-falls-down.html) that were marked uninhabitable by inspectors, it does not have the equipment to tear down the most threatening structures that are more than three stories in height. Moreover, the promised state subsidy of 200,000 Nepalese rupees ($2,000) to be paid to the earthquake’s homeless will be insufficient to rebuild in the Kathmandu Valley, where construction of basic one-story houses generally starts at 2 million rupees ($20,000).

It is more likely that the state’s actions will create conditions in which the Valley’s burgeoning population of developers and private housing companies will benefit. Although their exclusive housing colonies and apartment complexes currently only account for 3 percent of Valley housing units, the decision to lower loan rates, allow foreigners to buy apartments, and limit plot development to registered private companies will help developers expand their product to the middle classes. As a result, we can expect a further divide between those with access to private, more reliable infrastructure and those dependent on inconsistent public resources.

While a stricter building code, house demolitions, and increased privatized housing might make some in the Valley better prepared for the next earthquake, these actions will neither help peripheral farming communities rebuild nor help migrant tenants to find affordable and central housing. Without addressing the social conditions that caused disproportionate suffering, reconstruction efforts will only lay the foundation for future disasters of inequality.

References

