

Hope for Nepal

Another major earthquake has hit Nepal. Scores of people have died and a U.S. helicopter has gone missing. As Nepal is a country of remote, isolated mountain villages, the death toll will probably rise. No doubt many people have been injured and lost their homes. It comes two weeks after a massive earthquake, whose epicentre was just outside of the capital city, Kathmandu. It killed more than 7,000 Nepalis and injured an equal number.

The international community has been quick to respond, for Nepal is a country that has just emerged from a period of bloody civil war. A few short days after the first quake, the Israelis had a fully functional field hospital up and running in Kathmandu, while European and North American donors began to airlift generous assistance.

One would expect that the Nepali government would have dropped all of its routine activities and devoted most of its considerably overstaffed bureaucracy to helping its citizens during their time of need, but that has not been the case. Instead, we read in the news that very quickly after the first quake, airport customs authorities were delaying the distribution of aid from Kathmandu to the stricken hinterlands, where people have been without food, water, medicine and shelter for days. This second quake will no doubt motivate donors to double their efforts to help Nepal. But that does not mean that the Nepali government will double its efforts to help its own people. We in the West must make the effort to understand why.

Nepal is one of the poorest countries in Asia, with an annual GDP of about \$1,500 dollars, not far above basket cases like Afghanistan. Twenty-two per cent of its annual budget is donor driven. How can one explain such apparently irrational and self-destructive behavior? The answer is not simple to

outsiders, but it is clear to a majority of Nepalis. Two years ago, I worked in Nepal for a number of months and this is what my Nepali colleagues taught me.

One hundred years ago, Nepal, being a landlocked Himalayan country, was cut off from the world and ruled by lineages of powerful aristocratic advisors called Ranis, with princely pretensions (like the Rajas of India with whom they intermarried). The Ranis kept the king and the royal family under virtual house arrest while they ruled in the royal family's name.

Before the 19th century, Nepal comprised scores of small, isolated Hindu kingdoms or principalities, spread across the foothills of the Himalayas. Most of these were then forcibly united under the Gorkhas, who created the Kingdom of Nepal, during the rise of the British Empire in India. The Gorkha rulers managed to keep both the Indians and their British masters at bay, effectively sealing off their country from the rest of the world and preventing foreigners from living and trading there.

After the Second World War, and with the help of the newly independent Congress Party of India, the Congress Party of Nepal made an alliance with the King and forced the Ranis out of power. The fact that all of sudden Nepal had become a buffer state between communist China and a democratizing India made it a strategic asset for the West. Mountain climbers poured into the country, as did tourists, trekkers, hippies, Peace Corps volunteers and development workers from the U.S., Canada, Britain, Europe, Israel and the Scandinavian countries. Nepal had finally opened itself up to the world. Nepalis began to study and live in the West in large numbers.

Until 1956 the social structure of Nepal was similar to that of feudal Europe during the Middle Ages. Agrarian states, such as pre-revolutionary France or the Mughal Empire in India, were based on peasants engaged in plow agriculture, and whose

surplus was appropriated by self-declared aristocratic elites, justified by a religious ideology that was a variation of the theory of the divine right of kings.

This surplus allowed for a parallel development of artisan castes or guilds, the growth of cities, characterized by merchant elites, religious elites, world religions, priestly hierarchies and (often) endogamous traders, close to the throne. Agrarian states are by nature expansionary and militaristic, and this well describes the origins of the Nepali state. The late historian of Nepal, Mahesh C. Regmi, described just such a state of affairs in Nepal from its Gorkha conquest and unification in 1768, until its first steps towards democracy in the early 1950s.

“Nepal’s political and economic system before 1950 might aptly be described as an agrarian bureaucracy, or a system that depended upon a central authority for extracting the economic surplus from the peasantry,” he wrote. “They were consequently able to combine political control of the peasantry with economic exploitation.”

In the case of Nepal, such inequality was justified by its highland version of the Hindu religion, supported by its attendant priestly caste, the first of four castes (Bahun, Thakur, Chetri and Dalits – the “untouchables”) that continue to permeate Nepali society. So, despite its remarkable tolerance, sophisticated theology and complex paths to personal liberation such as yoga, 19th– and 20th-century Hinduism in Nepal were and are still based on a fundamental value – the basic inequality of all men and women.



Omar Havana/Getty ImagesA Buddha statue is surrounded by debris from a collapsed temple in the UNESCO world heritage site of Bhaktapur on April 26, 2015 in Bhaktapur, Nepal.

Whereas in 19th-century India, in response to intense Christian missionary activity, Hinduism renewed itself and modernized, the same cannot be said for Nepal. Thus Nepali society, culture and economy continue to be based on a premise of inequality that is divinely sanctioned and permeates all social relations. This begins to explain the behaviour of Nepali government officials holding up aid at the airport. They are acting like the Ranis did before them. They have no loyalty to the state, but use their positions for personal gain, especially at the expense of the poorest of the poor, who may not have much clout in the capital city. And so, they can feather their own nests, and those of their families and friends. The state and its powers of appropriation are merely means for them to satisfy the upwardly mobile consumer needs of this latest class of extractive ruler bureaucrats.

If these were the only rules of the game, then Nepal would be in a permanent state of civil war. This has not been the case, for although the elites do not think of themselves as such, in Nepal there is "honor among thieves."

The system was first described by post-war Nepali anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista in his famous 1991 treatise, *Fatalism and Development: Nepal's Struggle for Modernization*. The terminology of this system is widely known and is part of the socialization of every Nepali.

The first term is *afno manche*. It literally means "one's own people." In practice it means the people you turn to in order to get things done, as your *afno manche* turn to you when they need things done. The important thing for outsiders to understand is that the *afno manche* moves against any sense of competence. If it means getting a government job, qualifications are not important. If it means rising in a business, experience does not count, and if it extends to forging documents to get the right qualifications, that is quite alright, as is filling bureaucracies with close kin and

friends, regardless of merit. Imagine a society of thousands of *afno manche* all jockeying for power in businesses and bureaucracies that supposedly run on merit and competition.

Then there is the phenomenon of *chakari*, which defines patron-client relations around the *afno manche*. Simply put, the *chakari* acts as the client to the big man and gives him his political or military or criminal support in order to get things done. He then receives favours, usually jobs or money. And so favours flow down the stream of *chakari* and political support and power flows up.

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