

Poverty and Despair: Basics in Nepal Were Absent Before the 2015 Earthquake

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If you think about Nepal today, you may be contemplating a yoga course in a hilltop nunnery; if you follow international news, you'll recall the 2015 earthquake and those distressing images of damaged temples. Alternatively you could know someone operating an NGO in Kathmandu for trafficked women or shoeless youngsters.

Perhaps you have a vague memory of a film, exotic even if it profiles an unemployed carpet weaver or a doomed mountain ascent.

True, trekking companies experienced a lull following the recent earthquake. The reduced flow of tourists to Nepal due to reports of damaged roads and cracked buildings is the least of the nation's worries however. Tourism, only 5% of the economy despite its exalted position in Nepal's international profile, cannot yet address the need for electrification in growing cities and cannot provide satisfactory water supply to the capital's four million plus residents. Householders here need to pay exorbitant rates for their water needs, and additionally endure more than 12 hours daily of what's called 'loadshedding' i.e. electricity cuts. Neither Nepal's government nor generously-funded international development projects have made substantial progress after years of research and planning towards providing basic services to its citizens. Year after year cities swell with migrants from rural areas. Residents, workers and expanding institutions place higher demands on water and electricity resources. Road conditions are similarly notoriously inadequate.

What I find so startling about this is how 900,000 or so yearly tourists and the sizable international NGO community manage to float above this status quo. Likewise visitors enjoy their yoga course and trekkers their mountain walks unconcerned or oblivious to the everyday hardships of citizens they see around them. (Facilities and comforts available to foreign NGO personnel may exceed those they might find if working in their own countries.)

These exceptional populations are well provided not only because they are richer but also because they operate in a second tier, one that isolates them from reality; this isolation meanwhile acts to reinforce hardships for the masses. It's easy for them and for development officers writing up yet another analysis of Nepal's needs to forget how Nepal's citizens live.

You will hardly detect shortages in any tourist lodging; both modest and luxury hotels have abundant water, supplied through private (mostly illegal) wells and provide backup generators and batteries. They ensure visitors have 24-hour showers and flushing toilets on demand, power for their gadgets, and unlimited restaurant delights. Even in the low-end tourist quarter a \$15-a-night room guarantees hot baths and laundered sheets. NGO offices throughout the valley, some isolated in essentially gated communities, have private wells

and generators too. As for rural lodges along trekking routes, they use wood or imported kerosene to cook a variety of omelets and to provide hot showers. Increasingly, simple hydropower stations are installed in mountain areas so that villages and roadside lodges are electrified.

Only if you spend time in private urban homes, apartments of the poor or in middle class bungalows, are you aware of chronic shortages and the unavailability of government utility services. Arranging water for household needs is a constant preoccupation of families. Occupants have to install water tanks in their yards or on rooftops; they need to hook up solar panels and purchase batteries and generators. In any residence, before 5pm for example, when municipal electric service ends, a family should have cooked their meal and set it aside until suppertime. For the few who can afford backup batteries, when house lights flicker warnings of the scheduled cut, the system is set to shift over to battery power. Imagine running a school for 400 children without a reliable store of water. (Forget about electricity for overhead fans, for lights or for classroom computers.)

Anyone concerned with energy sources and with public health knows about the abysmal state of utilities and the rising shortages along with Nepal's history of abandoned projects for hydropower plants and water supplies. This in a nation known for its mighty rivers and glaciated mountain tops!

The irony is summed up by one elderly resident:

“Look how people come here from around the world to enjoy our country's beauty; at such low cost, they paddle our rivers, photograph our glaciers and dine in fine cafes. What do we get from their cheap holidays here? Nothing. If my children can't find work driving a taxi or waiting tables, they have to sell their labor in Arabia and suffer there for four years.”

In May, before the monsoon rains began and when water shortage was so acute, people were talking about the all-too-familiar Melamchi Hydro Water Project with new enthusiasm. Even when Kathmandu's population was half its present size, water and electricity crises were common and widespread illnesses were attributed to poor sanitation. Construction of a major water supply was seen as essential long ago.

<https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2015/apr/09/kathmandu-nepal-city-glaciers-water-crisis>

Since 1998, citizens were informed that the Melamchi Water Project would bring water to the city within five years. After being abandoned for 17 years, reports are circulating that the project is again underway and will soon be complete. Water specialists, a common fixture in Nepal's INGO network broadcast their services while they warn of poor sanitation and other water needs. Local bloggers are also trying to monitor conditions

<http://www.wateraid.org/np>

<https://energyfornepal.wordpress.com/>.

Arranging Nepal's basic electricity supply is no less dismaying than addressing water needs. It looks as if the Melamchi Water Project will duplicate the experience of hydroelectric

projects designed three decades ago. Construction of the Marsyangdi hydropower project commissioned in 1986 was to start by 1989. Thirty years on it is still 'in progress'. Managers suggest more time is needed before power is generated from any of the three sections of this project Marsyangdi-A implemented by China's Sino Hydro and Nepal's Sagarmatha Power Company has experienced delays; if completed in September of this year as announced this will be the first one to actually start producing electricity. Another is the Middle Marsyangdi project initiated in 2001 and commissioned in 2008; by 2013 it was unclear if it was operational

<http://www.nepalenergyforum.com/marsyangdi-hydropower/>

<https://thehimalayantimes.com/business/upper-marsyangdi-a-hydro-project-sets-target-to-commission-power-by-end-of-this-year/>.

A third project in the same area, Marsyangdi-2, is described by a Nepal government source as "becoming functional by 2025/26"!

Unable to arrange such basic infrastructure even though Nepal has abundant financial resources and technical aid, you can appreciate how reconstruction of homes and schools damaged by the recent earthquake is languishing. Money is not in short supply for development, for daily utilities and for disaster relief.

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/apr/25/earthquake-survivors-stranded-nepal-aid-bureaucracy>.

Close inspection of any of the projects discussed and delayed earthquake repairs will quickly expose the lack of co-ordination and deep distrust between all the actors in the process.

Meanwhile tourists are returning (in selected seasons) to meditate on Himalayan sunsets and to join whitewater rafting expeditions.

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