

## After the Earth's Violent Sway: project summary

The physical impact of a natural disaster such as a major earthquake is immediately visible: lost lives, displaced people, destroyed houses and a shattered cultural heritage. However, the longer-term impact of such an event is less apparent. This project will study the impact that the earthquakes of 2015 had on Nepali society. It will examine public discourse to understand social change; study efforts to reclaim and reinvent material culture; and study archival material to identify the permanent marks left by previous disasters.

First, the project will investigate the earthquakes' impact upon ongoing cultural and political discourse in Nepal. Nepal emerged from a ten-year civil war in 2006 and since then the country's main political players had been engaged in a seemingly interminable process of transition from a monarchical Hindu state to a democratic federal republic. Much of the debate and contention concerned the content of a new constitution for Nepal which would enshrine the new federal structure, safeguard democracy, and ensure greater inclusion of historically marginalized groups and communities. The earthquakes had a major impact upon this process: a new constitution was promulgated less than five months after the disaster, but its content proved to be highly divisive. The researchers on this project will investigate the ways in which the disaster changed the direction and content of the national debate on a number of key cultural and political issues over a three year period beginning on 25 April 2015 (the day on which the first quake occurred). Their analysis will focus on media, literary and cultural production ranging from newspaper op-ed columns to poetry, songs and urban graffiti (with a particular emphasis on material produced in Nepali), and on interviews and focus-group discussions in both provincial and metropolitan locations.

Second, the project will ask who it is that decides which elements of an aid-dependent country's destroyed physical heritage is worth restoring. Early photographs of earthquake damage showed heaps of rubble in Kathmandu's world heritage sites. This gave the impression of extensive devastation in the capital and led to an early media focus on the loss of cultural heritage in the Kathmandu Valley. It seemed to be generally assumed that the restoration of the Valley's historic built environment would take place contentiously, and that the international community would contribute to the cost of this restoration. However, the discussion is only just beginning of what the priorities of the restoration project will be, or how they will be set. The project will investigate the extent to which the selection and

prioritisation of sites and buildings for restoration is driven by what is held locally to be most 'dear', and to what extent by the evaluations of external donors and heritage experts.

Third, the project will draw historical comparisons between the sociocultural and political impacts of the 2015 quakes and those of the major quakes that struck Nepal during earlier periods of political and cultural transition in 1833 and 1934. A handful of brief accounts of these earlier quakes and their aftermath and impact have been published in Nepali and English (eg. Joshi 2015, Rana 2013), and several Nepali journalists referred to these accounts in their reporting on the 2015 disaster. However, little of this material has been utilised by