

Clarfield: 'The younger generation of Nepalese are Westernizing. They demand equality.'

ISSUES &



A rescue worker rests amid the ruins after a second major earthquake struck Kathmandu, Nepal on May 12.

JONAS GRATZER / GETTY IMAGES

Bungled earthquake relief efforts are sadly predictable in this corrupt, caste-based society. But the next generation may not stand for it

Geoffrey Clarfield

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 came 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 overstuffed 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 behaviour? 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 advisers 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 it 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 toler-

ance, 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.

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 "honour among thieves."

The system was first described by postwar 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 all right, 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.

Unfortunately, most political parties in the country are organized this way: they give favours to business interests in return for political support. In order to survive, or rise, one must participate in the *chakari* complex, which can often include almost daily formal, ritualized visits to the patron's compound or office. If you participate you will be hired and if you do not, you may not even keep your job for long.

As in the days of feudal Nepal, when warriors loyal to the king or the Ranis conquered and kept down the peasants, they are given the right to extract a surplus from them. This was called *jagir* and *birta*, and translates as "sharing the spoils." So, if one reasonably assumes that a hierarchy of corruption characterizes the government and bureaucracies of Nepal today, this system still functions, but according to the ways and means of an industrializing society. *Jagir* and *birta* permeate the private sector, as almost every sector of Nepal's modern economy is dominated by cartels, which manipulate supply and demand in a way to maximize profit and minimize services.

A classic example of this is the oil cartel, which often sells adulterated fuel, as is the production and sale of sub-standard pharmaceuticals. It goes without saying that building standards in Nepal's exploding cities, and the rules for urban planning, are constantly violated. One can therefore assume that many innocent men, women and children died during the two recent earthquakes due to substandard, illegally built structures.

Nepalis at the village level talk about widespread petty corruption, including the need to give bribes to local officials to fill out forms, enter local educational institutions, or get a marriage or business license. At the highest level of

the economy there is a group of descendants of Marwari traders from Rajasthan. They are now Nepali citizens and act as a powerful yet quiet lobby for Indian companies, so that their businesses get preferential treatment. No doubt, the government officers with whom they deal are given the appropriate gifts, in both cash and kind. The whole system is driven by a range of small to large under-the-table payments that Nepalis call *Ghush*.

Part of my job as the executive director of a new human rights organization (Mozaud.org) is to closely monitor freedom and corruption in the developing world. And so I can say that there is some good news coming out of Nepal. Most of the corrupt, high-level government bureaucrats are middle-aged men who are Internet illiterates. The younger generation of Nepalis, who are the demographic majority, are both literate and computer literate. They are starting blogs and digital newspapers all over the country, which regularly report on what we in the West call corruption and mismanagement.

These younger Nepalis are westernizing, they have taken up the mantra of equality, they have learned foreign languages, they have worked abroad and many of them have emigrated to Europe, Australia, Canada and the United States. Some of them have started NGOs and charities that directly assist their communities of origin in Nepal.

Although these newly formed Nepali "expatriates" will continue to send masses of remittances to their poor relatives back home, they do so out of love and altruism, not as part of a mutual and asymmetrical "back scratch." They look on the government and the political parties of Nepal as part of the problem, and they are not surprised when needed relief supplies are held up at the airport, for they know that the bureaucrats are hoping to be bribed to let the aid get to the despised peasants of the rural areas. If they are not bribed, then they will take what they consider "their fair share of the pie." Then they will leave some for the peasants. The donors will conveniently look the other way. In the West we call this a "mafia." This recent earthquake will not quickly change the way things do and do not get done in this Himalayan country. Nepalis deserve better treatment.

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