

One Year After: Earthquake Victims Share Their Stories

By Suman Gurung

Introduction

It has been one year since a devastating, 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck Nepal. The earthquake resulted in the untimely death of more than 8,500 people and injured more than 15,000. This report tells the stories of survivors who, though thankful to be alive, have lost everything in the earthquake. These people could salvage nothing out of the rubble of their houses, but more than losing homes and belongings, many Nepalis lost their way of life.

The magnitude of the destruction was such, that it was impossible for a poor economy like Nepal's to make a quick recovery. Many people, companies, organizations, and countries stepped forward to help, but lack of proper planning and proper resource allocation has limited the effects of this aid. One year after the earthquake, hundreds of thousands of Nepalis are still homeless and have very few resources available. Some have managed to get their life together and are assuming their normal routines, but for many, everyday life has become a struggle. Some of these people are in the same or even worse state than when the earthquake struck Nepal.



Gaumati Rathel outside her tent

Name: Gaumati Rathel

Age: 76

Gaumati Rathel is a resident of Chitrapur, Darikot Village in Bhaktapur. Before the earthquake, she had a five story house in Bhaktapur, which was all she possessed. To support herself, Gaumati would rent part of her property. This income allowed her to purchase food, clothing, and medicine. She had little, but her needs were small. She has 4 sons and 4 daughters. She has been a widow for more than 25 years.

She lived alone and was

frequently visited by her children and grandchildren. She was very happy.

Then the earthquake completely demolished Gaumati's house, and she could salvage nothing. One day she had everything she needed to live a fulfilling life. The next day, she was on the streets. Her sons and daughters did not take her in, so she was obliged to seek asylum in an earthquake victim camp.

Gaumati registered herself as an earthquake victim, and the Nepali government gave her about NPR 15,000 (equivalent to USD 150) to live on for the year. This is all the financial assistance she has received, and her children did not help her at all. She proudly stated, however, that one of her granddaughters gave her NPR 300 (equivalent to USD 3) for medicine. This is clearly not enough to sustain Gaumati's life. She is



old, weak, and cannot work. She has no source of income and has developed a lot of health problems as a result of poor living conditions in the camp. The toilet is unusable, especially for the ladies. She has slept on a tent floor in Bhaktapur for nearly a year, and the winter is very cold. When we visited Gaumati, her tent was very hot, like an oven, so she had to stay outside the tent during the day. This has become her daily routine. Gaumati had one medical checkup in the last 12 months.

She is terrified of visiting a hospital again – she simply cannot afford it.

She describes pain throughout her body, and she has impaired vision, stomach pain, a swollen leg, and thyroid problems. The doctors have prescribed medication, but without income she has not been able to afford food, let alone medicine and hospital bills. Gaumati's only desire is to rebuild her house and live a life of dignity again.



Name: Juna Astamaya

Age: 50 +

Juna Astamaya has lived in Bhaktapur all her life and never had a house of her own. She has always struggled financially, but until the earthquake she was able to meet her basic needs. Juna was married to a man who was addicted to alcohol and died very young. She has 3 children - 2 sons and 1 daughter - all of whom don't live with her anymore. She is not sure about her age.

Juna Astamaya outside her tent

Before the earthquake, Juna lived in a small rented room that was more than enough for her. She worked, earning enough to afford rent and food. She was healthy and had no medical problems.

The earthquake completely destroyed the house Juna was living in, along with all her belongings. She describes how the earth started shaking, and she barely made it out of the house before it collapsed. She could not salvage the clothes and utensils from her room. This might not seem a lot, but she was very emotional when she spoke of her lost belongings.

Juna explained how hard she struggled to bring stability to her life and what her belongings and that little room meant to her.



Juna with Gaumati and her dried vegetables trying to make a living

Juna tells us about going to one of the earthquake victim camps, and how many organizations brought food, water, and relief materials. It was easy in the beginning, but slowly the relief materials and help stopped arriving. Juna then started looking for work, but living in the poor conditions of the earthquake victim camp had taken a toll on her health. She started getting ill. Juna tells us about pain in her abdomen, which she has had for a couple of months now. She describes enormous pain erupting from her uterus

and rushing to fill her chest. Her health has seriously declined, leaving her unable to work. People are not willing to hire a sick laborer, so she is now at the mercy of her neighbors.

Juna has no income, no financial support from her children, and sometimes she has to stay hungry for days, since she does not want to resort to begging. Her usual meal consists of a pack of biscuits and hot water. Her usual dilemma is, "Where will my next meal come from?" Since Juna did not own the house she lived in, she could not even register as an earthquake victim. Only the owner of a demolished property is entitled to financial support from the government.

Juna has been through a lot. She is very ill, has no income, and cannot afford food or medical care. She is trying very hard to get her life together, but until she gets proper medical care, this seems highly unlikely.

Juna states that many organizations have promised to help her, but she has not received help. She hopes that through her story she can get help and build a stable life for herself again.



**Name: Krishna Maya Bhaka
(Mother)**

Age: 60

**Name: Rita Bkaha
(Daughter)**

Age: 26

Ms. Krishna Maya Bhaka is very ill and has been bedridden for a long time now. Her daughter, Ms. Rita Bhaka, lives with Krishna and takes care of her. Krishna is in serious need of healthcare, which was

Krishna Maya Bhaka in her bed

immediately evident when we visited her tent. She could barely get up from the bed in her oven like tent, and was too weak to speak to us. Additionally, the area around Krishna's tent was very unsanitary and infested with flies.

Krishna has 3 daughters, 2 of whom are married. Her only unmarried daughter, Ms. Rita Bhaka, lives with her and takes care of her. They have been living in the tent since the earthquake.

This family had a 5 story building in Makha Gali, Bhaktapur and had a small scale noodle packing business. They had a steady source of income, and could easily afford the necessities of life. But that changed completely after the earthquake. Their house was demolished and they lost all their belongings.

Now the family has no source of income except to rely on the married sisters. The married sisters do help, but the financial assistance is not sufficient even for the medicine needed for their mother. Krishna has asthma, and recently, her entire body became swollen with extreme abdominal pain. The family does not have the resources to afford a hospital.



RMF team visiting Krishna Maya's tent

Her daughter, Rita, says there are times when she cannot afford medicine for her mother, and she has no idea what to do.

She goes through psychological trauma every day not being able to give her mother proper care, and seeing her suffer that way.



Bharat Bhattacharya in his tent

Name: Bharat Bhattacharya

Age: 38

Mr. Bharat Bhattacharya is a resident of Bhaktapur. Before the earthquake, he rented an apartment in Quanta Gali, Bhaktapur. He has 2 sons, 18 and 12 years old.

Before the earthquake, the family was financially stable. They had a steady source of income. Mr. Bharat worked in the hospitality industry and has over 20 years of experience. After losing

everything in the earthquake, they moved to the camp. This was supposed to be temporary, and the family was planning to start their life in a new apartment.

Mr. Bharat's older son was in the last year of high school while the younger son was in 7th grade. Mrs. Bhattacharya was a housewife and Bharat was the only breadwinner in the family.

While living in the tents, Mr. Bharat caught a disease and lost 22 kg of his body weight in a very short span of time. Bharat showed many signs of being ill, but was ignorant towards the symptoms and kept losing weight. Finally, he was so weak that he could not get up at all. Even then the family did not seek medical attention and went to a traditional doctor with no medical degree. The family spent what little savings they had on treatment for Bharat.

Now the family cannot get out of the camp – they have no resources to pay for a new apartment or proper medical care for Bharat.

Both of Bharat's sons had to quit school, since the family could not afford tuition. Mrs. Bhattacharya is the breadwinner now and works in a small curd factory. She earns very little; barely enough to feed the family. The family has no belongings, as they lost everything in the earthquake.

Bharat told us that they went to a hospital after the traditional doctors failed to cure the disease. But the medical bills are too high for the family, and they can't even afford the tests needed or follow up appointments.

Bharat needs a full checkup. He has been ill for a very long time, and without the tests it is very unlikely his illness will be diagnosed. In order for this family to get back on its feet, Bharat needs to

be healthy and working again. But the family is now in a position where they can only afford food - nothing more. The earthquake completely changed the lives of this family.

Summary

Our visit to the camps revealed that some people who took shelter there have been able to leave and resume normal lives. Others, however, have become trapped by poverty and poor health. Most of the people still living in the camps have serious illnesses and are in need of immediate medical attention. We believe proper medical care is imperative to these people if they want to get out of the camps.