

FORGING COMMUNITY THROUGH DISASTER RESPONSE:

Nepali Canadians and the 2015 Earthquakes

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IN APRIL AND MAY 2015, Nepal experienced two devastating earthquakes. Nearly ten thousand people died and over 600,000 homes were destroyed across this South Asian country that is home to nearly 30 million people.¹ The earthquakes were at once a traumatic and galvanizing experience for the approximately 14,390 Nepalis in Canada, including at least 1,155 in British Columbia.²

As is well documented in global disaster studies literature, formal and informal disaster governance networks are crucial components of disaster response.³ Diaspora communities often rely on such governance networks (international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and informal social networks) and play an important role in responding to

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¹ For details of the disaster and published research about its aftermath, please see the online research guide at <https://guides.library.ubc.ca/reconstructingnepal>.

² 2016 Census, Statistics Canada. The Nepal Cultural Society of BC (NCSBC) estimates that Nepali Canadian population numbers in British Columbia are closer to twenty-five hundred.

³ Rocío Carrero, Michele Acuto, Asaf Tzachor, Niraj Subedi, Ben Campbell, and Leng Seng To, “Tacit Networks, Crucial Care: Informal Networks and Disaster Response in Nepal’s 2015 Gorkha Earthquake,” *Urban Studies* 56, no. 3 (2018): 561–77.

disasters in their home countries.⁴ From fundraising, to providing direct relief, to providing advisory and translation services to humanitarian organizations, to speaking with the media, moments of crisis provide diverse opportunities for community engagement. In so doing, such moments of rupture may themselves work to forge diasporic identities. We argue that this was indeed the case for the Nepali Canadian community in British Columbia. The experience of responding to the 2015 earthquakes enabled consolidation of an emergent South Asian identity in Canada as it brought Nepali Canadians into new relationships with each other, their home country, and other communities.

“Nepalis” have not always been obviously recognized as members of a distinct “South Asian” community in British Columbia, either by governmental and non-governmental agencies or by other South Asian communities. The status of Nepalis has been more akin to that of an “invisible minority.” In other words, there is little public awareness of Nepalis as a group with their own language, culture, and histories of settlement in British Columbia; instead, they are often misrecognized as members of other, more prominent South Asian communities, such as “Punjabi” or “Indian.” However, a sudden media interest in Nepal after the earthquake gave the Nepali community unexpected exposure all across Canada. Representatives and board members of the Nepal Cultural Society of British Columbia (NCSBC), an organization of people of Nepali origin residing in British Columbia, became a primary source of information for the media. Such media exposure also helped the NCSBC to network with various other organizations and reach out to the Canadian public for support. At the same time, through these processes, debates over fundraising strategies and modes of channelling the raised funds (through the Canadian Red Cross or the Nepali Prime Minister’s Disaster Relief Fund, for instance) brought dormant ideological differences within the community into the open. These were often linked to political party affiliations back home and required in-depth discussion to reach consensus.

In general, diasporic populations maintain strong ties with their country of origin and are eager to provide financial and non-financial

⁴ Shams Rehman and Virinder Kalra, “Transnationalism from Below: Initial Responses by British Kashmiris to the South Asia Earthquake of 2005,” *Contemporary South Asia* 15, no. 3 (2006): 309–23; Mark Sidel, “A Decade of Research and Practice of Diaspora Philanthropy in the Asia Pacific Region: The State of the Field,” *SSRN Electronic Journal* 1 (2008); Ann-Margaret Esnard and Alka Sapat, “Disasters, Diasporas and Host Communities: Insights in the Aftermath of the Haitian Earthquake,” *Journal of Disaster Research* 6, no. 3 (2011): 331–44; Richa Shivakoti, “When Disaster Hits Home: Diaspora Engagement after Disasters,” *Migration and Development* 8, no. 3 (2019): 1–17.

support to their communities in times of need.⁵ They may retain linkages to their home country through cultural ties, languages, political loyalties, and other forms of identity. Although such identities tend to weaken over time and across generations,⁶ when a disaster strikes their country of origin, the identities of diasporic populations are reinforced, and involvement in their home country increases substantially as they play an active role in fundraising and relief efforts.⁷ This was indeed the case with the Nepali diaspora residing in British Columbia in the aftermath of the 2015 earthquake in Nepal.

METHODOLOGY

This article first presents historical background about the Nepali Canadian diaspora population in British Columbia and its organizations, and then investigates disaster response within this context. To do so, we draw upon a range of methods and sources, including participant-observation, organizational profiles and media reports available online, and Statistics Canada data. We write as three scholars with different disciplinary commitments, who were all personally implicated in the 2015 disaster in Nepal and the local response to it in British Columbia. In this section we situate our own positionalities vis-à-vis the events described in this article in order to explain how we came to access the data that form the basis of our analysis.

In our own ways, each of us writes from a hybrid position of “Insider-Outsider” in the sense that we are researchers seeking to understand the Nepali Canadian community of British Columbia while also being personally engaged in it. Ramjee Parajulee is a Nepali Canadian political scientist who teaches at Capilano University. Sara Shneiderman is an American anthropologist who had worked in Nepal for over twenty years at the time the earthquakes struck and is now a faculty member at UBC and a permanent resident of Canada. Ratna Shrestha is a Nepali Canadian economist who lectures at the Vancouver School of Economics. All three of us were personally involved in the events described in this article.

Although we were previously acquainted, we came to know each other well and to discuss the issues about which we write through the

⁵ Shivakoti, “When Disaster Hits Home,” 1.

⁶ Patricia Weiss Fagen, Carlo Dade, Robert Maguire, Kathleen Felix, David Nicolas, Noriac Dathis, and Katelin Maher, “Haitian Diaspora Associations and Their Investments in Basic Social Services in Haiti,” *Georgetown University (A Report Prepared for the Inter-American Development Bank)* (2009): 1–97.

⁷ Shivakoti, “When Disaster Hits Home,” 1.

process of organizing and participating in post-earthquake discussions and fundraisers. At that time, due to the unexpected nature of the disaster and the crisis it provoked, we had not conceptualized our activities within a formal research framework. However, we all brought our disciplinary and area-specific knowledge to bear upon the experience and slowly came to realize that we were in fact participant-observers in the process, who, from that vantage point, could make a contribution to scholarship regarding the Nepali diaspora, its disaster response, and BC's immigrant communities in general. Much of the article is therefore based upon self-reflection as participant-observers in the immediate post-earthquake response as it unfolded within the Nepali Canadian community and its network of allies in the province. In this vein, the article presents several brief vignettes that show how the category of "Nepali Canadian" became visible to individuals, organizations (both community-based and global humanitarian), and governments (both Nepali and Canadian) through the work of disaster response on the ground in British Columbia. It then works to contextualize this material within a broader analytical framework shaped by subsequent conversations with other community members, census data about immigration, and other publicly available materials such as organizational profiles and media reports. In general, the Nepali Canadian community is underrepresented in existing scholarship. By giving voice to both Nepali Canadian academic authors and to broader experiences within the community, we hope this article will take some initial steps towards filling these gaps.

The events we describe primarily took place in the Lower Mainland, in municipalities including Vancouver, Surrey, Burnaby, New Westminster, and Richmond. We gratefully acknowledge that these settlements are located on the unceded traditional territories of the Coast Salish peoples, including the territories of the *x^wməθk^wəyəm* (Musqueam), *Skwxwú7mesh* (Squamish), and *Səl'ílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh* (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. One event we describe took place in the city of Victoria, which sits on the traditional territories of the Esquimalt and Songhees ("*Lək^wəŋən*") Nations. We offer thanks to all of these sovereign nations for welcoming recent settlers such as ourselves and the broader Nepali Canadian community to their lands.

THE NEPALI DIASPORA IN CANADA

The Nepali diaspora population in Canada is small but growing, especially since 2001, when settlement began to accelerate. There is next to no published material available about this community or its history of immigration, so in this section we provide necessary background information. The data that follow complement a recently published baseline survey about Nepali Canadian living standards in Ontario.⁸ They do so by providing both a broader view of demographic data on Nepali immigration to Canada over time and a deeper dive into specific experiences in British Columbia. In turn, this emergent knowledge base about Nepali Canadians joins a burgeoning literature about the global Nepali diaspora.⁹

Nepalis started to migrate to Canada in the 1960s, mostly after Nepal established diplomatic relations with Canada in 1965.¹⁰ Initial migration was slow: there were only forty-five officially documented Nepali immigrants prior to 1980. As Figure 1 below demonstrates, the number gradually began to grow and increased substantially after 2000, bringing the total to 14,390 in 2016.¹¹

Two major factors contributed to this sudden increase: the decade-long civil conflict in Nepal (1996–2006) and the introduction of the express entry program for skilled workers in Canada. As Nepal faced a civil conflict between Maoist and state forces across the country between 1996 and 2006,¹² many Nepalis felt increasingly unsafe and moved either to the capital city of Kathmandu or to foreign destinations, including Canada, looking for safer alternatives and better economic opportunities.¹³

⁸ Tom O'Neill, Uttam Makaju, Rinjan Shrestha, Naresh Tamrakar, Bimal M. Shrestha, and Birendra Ratna Sthapit, "The Nepali-Canadian Living Standards Survey: Newcomer Incorporation in the Greater Toronto Area," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 51, no. 1 (2019): 69–88.

⁹ See David Gellner and Sondra Hausner, *Global Nepalis: Religion, Culture, and Community in a New and Old Diaspora* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹⁰ "Citizenship Canada," Government of Canada, "Supplementary Information 2018–2020, Immigration Levels Plan," <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/notices/supplementary-immigration-levels-2018.html>.

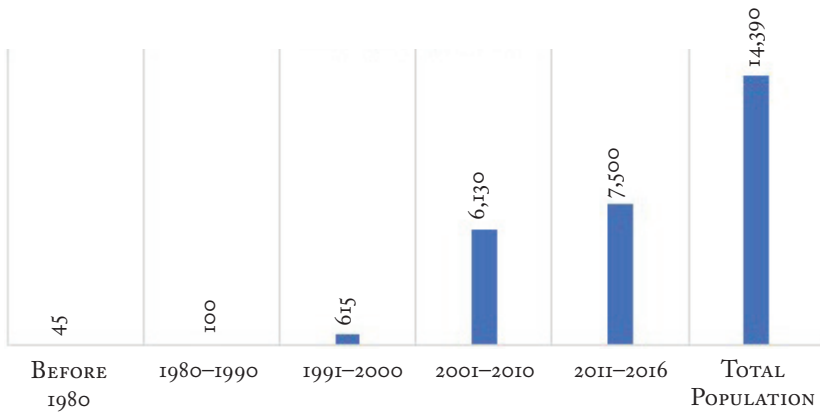
¹¹ These data do not include a subset of the population that falls into either a non-immigrant category or non-permanent resident category. According to Statistics Canada, non-immigrants include persons who are Canadian citizens by birth, and non-permanent residents include individuals with work permits, study, or work permits, refugee claimants, and their family members sharing the same permit and living in Canada with them.

¹² See Deepak Thapa with Bandita Sijapati, *A Kingdom under Siege: Nepal's Maoist Insurgency 1996–2004* (Kathmandu: Martin Chautari, 2003); Sara Shneiderman, Luke Wagner, Jacob Rinck, Amy L. Johnson, and Austin Lord, "Nepal's Ongoing Political Transformation: A Review of Post-2006 Literature on Conflict, the State, Identities, and Environments," *Modern Asian Studies* 50, no. 6 (2016): 2041–114.

¹³ Pratikshya Bohra-Mishra, "Nepalese Migrants in the United States of America: Perspectives on Their Exodus, Assimilation Pattern and Commitment to Nepal," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 37, no. 9 (2011): 1527–37.

FIGURE 1

Nepali diaspora population in Canada (based on place of birth)



Source: Data Tables, 2016 Census. Statistics Canada.

This pattern is similar to the experience of the Sri Lankan diaspora, another South Asian diaspora population in Canada. A lengthy civil conflict that started in 1983 and lasted until 2009 generated a rising level of insecurity in Sri Lanka. Many Sri Lankans came to Canada looking for a safer place and better economic opportunities, in the same way as Nepalis did some years later.¹⁴ How their political affiliations subsequently shaped discourses of nationalism,¹⁵ development, and disaster response at home has been well documented.¹⁶ In addition, Canadian immigration policies that allowed skilled workers to apply for immigration also encouraged many Nepalis in the managerial (e.g., restaurant managers), professional (e.g., doctors, dentists, architects, teachers), and technical and skilled trades (e.g., chefs, plumbers, and electricians) to come to Canada in the post-conflict period.

Compared to the immigrant population of other South Asian countries, such as those of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka,

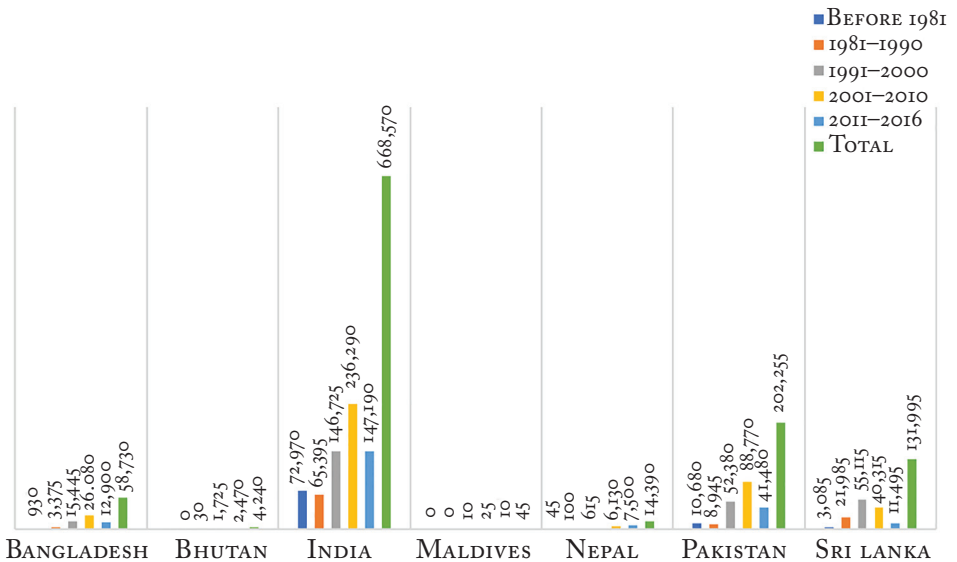
¹⁴ Jennifer Hyndman, "Aid, Conflict and Migration: The Canada-Sri Lanka Connection," *Canadian Geographer* 47, no. 3 (2003): 251-68.

¹⁵ Sharika Thiranagama, "Making Tigers from Tamils: Long-Distance Nationalism and Sri Lankan Tamils in Toronto," *American Anthropologist* 116, no. 2 (2014): 265-78.

¹⁶ Eva Gerharz, "Diaspora's Developmental Activities and Their Implications for Spatial Order: An Actor Oriented Perspective on Sri Lanka's North," Working Paper No. 371, Development Sociology and Social Anthropology, Universität Bielefeld, 2012.

FIGURE 2

*South Asian diaspora population:
Immigration trends (based on location of birth)*



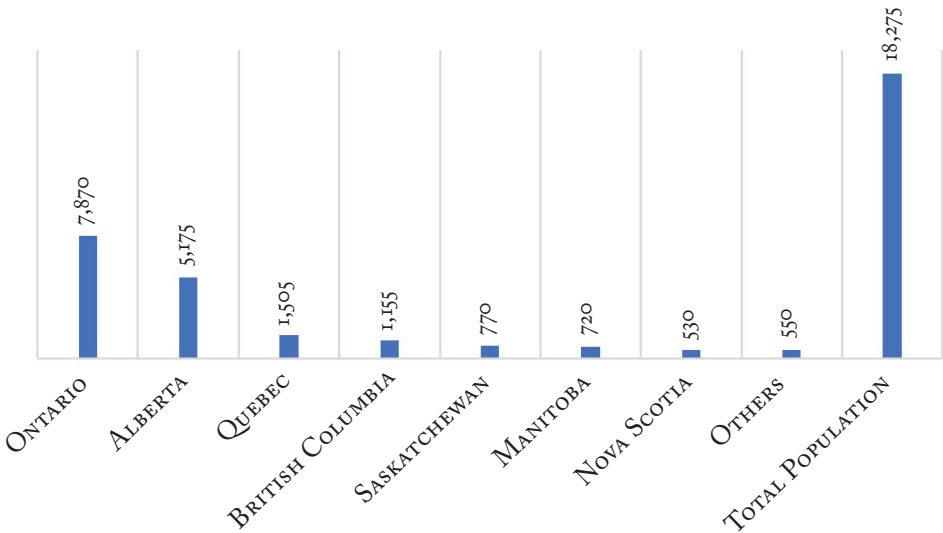
Source: Data Tables, 2016 Census. Statistics Canada.

the Nepali immigrant population in Canada is relatively small. As of the census data of 2016, the Nepali diaspora, however, is somewhat larger than the diaspora population of Bhutan and Maldives (Figure 2).

Figure 2 demonstrates the divergent pattern of diasporic population flow from South Asia to Canada. Diasporic populations from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka grew substantially between 1991 and 2010, and started to decline in 2011. In contrast, the Bhutanese and Nepali diaspora came to Canada mainly during the period between 2001 and 2016. Most of the Sri Lankan immigrants moved to Canada during the violent civil conflict in their country. Similarly, most of the Bhutanese refugees of Nepali origin came to Canada from refugee camps in eastern Nepal after 2007, when a UN-brokered agreement on third country resettlement was reached. Immigrants from other countries, except Sri Lanka and Bhutan, were mainly economic migrants looking for better economic opportunities.

FIGURE 3

*Provincial distribution of Nepali diaspora population in Canada
(based on language spoken)*



Source: Data Tables, 2016 Census. Statistics Canada.

NEPALI DIASPORA IN CANADIAN PROVINCES

The Nepali diaspora in Canada is spread throughout various provinces (see Figure 3), with the largest number residing in Ontario, followed by Alberta, Quebec, and British Columbia. A small number of Nepalis also live in other provinces, such as Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Nova Scotia.

Compared to the diaspora population of 18,275 who can speak the Nepali language (Figure 3), the population size of the Nepali diaspora who came to Canada directly from Nepal is slightly smaller, at 14,390.¹⁷ This variation in number is mainly due to the inclusion of diaspora populations from Bhutan, India, and Tibet who reside in different

¹⁷ "Data Tables, 2016 Census," Statistics Canada, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/dt-td/Rp-eng.cfm?LANG=E&APATH=3&DETAIL=0&DIM=0&FL=A&FREE=0&GC=0&GID=0&GK=0&GRP=1&PID=110526&PRID=10&PTYPE=109445&S=0&SHOWALL=0&SUB=0&Temporal=2017&THEME=120&V-ID=0&VNAMEE=&VNAMEF=>

locations across Canada and who can speak the Nepali language but do not identify as “Nepali” in terms of their national origin.

The total number of Nepali immigrants to Canada has likely increased since the 2016 census as the Canadian government announced a three-year plan in 2017 to bring in about 980,000 immigrants within the following three years.¹⁸ With the increased Nepali diaspora population in Canada, community members will likely have more opportunities to actively organize themselves and establish greater visibility within the broader South Asian community in the future.

LAYERED IDENTITIES

Out of the 14,390 Nepalis documented by Statistics Canada in 2016, 8,430 are from the 25–54 year-old age group, 2,265 are in the 0–14 age group, 2,025 are in the 15–24 age group, and the rest are above 55 years of age.¹⁹ Although these Nepali migrants are either permanent residents or naturalized Canadian citizens, we have observed that many of them express strong ties to their Nepali roots through participation in Nepali organizations and annual festival celebrations.

Nepal currently does not have any laws granting dual citizenship to Nepalis living outside the country. Hence, upon assuming Canadian citizenship, Nepali immigrants automatically lose their Nepali citizenship. Although Nepali law requires Nepalis who obtain foreign citizenship to report their status change to the government of Nepal, there is no official record of compliance with this rule.

Nepal’s 2015 Constitution includes a dual citizenship provision for non-resident Nepalis to protect their economic, social, and cultural rights.²⁰ Subsequent draft legislation to amend the Citizenship Act, 1963, to grant dual citizenship for non-resident Nepalis (NRNs) was introduced in the Nepali Parliament in 2018.²¹ The Parliament has yet to endorse this revised citizenship legislation and has been waiting for the final report of a parliamentary subcommittee on the citizenship bill for over a year. In any case, the constitutional dual citizenship provision is restrictive as it does not grant political rights to NRNs. The members of the NRN community have welcomed this provision as the first step

¹⁸ “Citizenship Canada,” Government of Canada, “Supplementary Information 2018–2020.”

¹⁹ “Data Tables, 2016 Census,” Statistics Canada, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/hltfst/imm/Table.cfm?Lang=E&T=21&Geo=01&SP=1&view=1&age=10&sex=1>.

²⁰ Constitution of Nepal 2015, Part 2, Citizenship, Article 14.

²¹ Draft of new Citizenship Act, 2018, status of the Citizenship Amendment Bill, 2019, <http://hr.parliament.gov.np/np/bills/DJJonSoL>.

of the Nepali state towards recognizing their desire to remain legally connected to their Nepali roots. Implementation is still emergent and, as with citizenship documentation in Nepal in general,²² it often remains difficult to maintain this dual identity in practice.

Bhutanese and Tibetan communities are also linked to the Nepali diaspora as some of these communities' members have connections either with Nepal or with the Nepali language. The Bhutanese diaspora mainly includes Bhutanese citizens of Nepali linguistic and cultural origin. Many of them came to North America as refugees after spending several years in the refugee camps in eastern Nepal.²³ They had fled to Nepal after Bhutan imposed stricter citizenship rules and introduced detailed cultural codes inconsistent with their customs and traditions. On the other hand, Tibetan diaspora members in Canada with Nepali connections mainly include Tibetans who fled Tibet following the fourteenth Dalai Lama's escape to India in 1959 and eventually settled in Nepal. These Tibetans, who lived in Nepal before migrating to Canada, have learned the Nepali language and adopted local customs while in Nepal.²⁴ They continue to maintain a distinctive Tibetan identity as well as strong links with their Nepali counterparts in Canada.

NEPALI COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

In order to understand how Nepali Canadians in British Columbia responded to the 2015 earthquakes, we must first understand the landscape of local Nepali community organizations. Although Nepali immigrants first landed in British Columbia in the early 1980s, there were no formal community organizations that they could call their own until the late 1990s. In 1998, a few community leaders formally established the Nepal Cultural Society of British Columbia with the primary purpose of promoting Nepali culture and identity and assisting community members in their transition to the Canadian milieu.²⁵ Since its inception, the NCSBC has remained as an umbrella organization for people of Nepali origin living in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia.

²² Barbara Grossman-Thompson and Dannah Dennis, "Citizenship in the Name of the Mother: Nationalism, Social Exclusion, and Gender in Contemporary Nepal," *Positions: Asia Critique* 25, no. 4 (2017): 795–820.

²³ Béatrice Halsouet, "Nepali-Speaking Bhutanese Refugees in Canada: How to Be Hindu in a Regional Quebecois City?" *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* 43 (2013): 36–51.

²⁴ Carole McGranahan, "Refusal as Political Practice: Citizenship, Sovereignty, and Tibetan Refugee Status," *American Ethnologist* 45, no. 3 (2018): 367–79.

²⁵ "About Us," Nepal Cultural Society of British Columbia, <http://ncsbc.org/>.

As the population of Nepalis in British Columbia grew over time, so did the diversity in personal and group interests. As a result, small groups of people started opening new organizations to promote their own special interests. The Nepal Library Foundation (NLF) was registered in 2005 as a charitable organization. Its mission is to establish libraries in Nepal, particularly in remote areas without access to such community reading facilities.²⁶ Several other organizations were established in subsequent years, before the 2015 earthquakes. For example, the Nepal Heritage Charity Foundation of British Columbia (NHCF) and the Nepali Canadian Women's Society of British Columbia (NCWSBC) in 2009,²⁷ the Canada Nepal Education Foundation (CAN) in 2011, and the Jhigu Palaa Society in 2015, among others. In 2016, two new organizations were added to this growing list of Nepali-based organizations in British Columbia: the Hindu Buddhist Foundation of Canada (HBFC) and the Canada Nepal Friendship Association (CANFACS).²⁸

Among these organizations, the HBFC has been highly successful in fundraising; the deep-rooted feeling of a need for its own community centre or temple propelled the HBFC to raise over \$200,000 in donations since its inception. This eventually culminated in the 2018 purchase of a home in Surrey that has recently been converted into a Hindu temple. Nepali Hindus in British Columbia can now claim that they have their own temple. Before the establishment of this temple, most Nepalis of Hindu faith used to visit Laxmi Narayan temple in Surrey, a centre of worship for Hindus from India.²⁹ With the establishment of their own temple, most Nepali Hindus have given up visiting this Surrey temple. How this new development will change the dynamics of the relationship between Nepali Hindus and their Indian counterparts is yet to be seen. The establishment of their own temple has to some extent allowed Nepali Hindus to distinguish themselves from mainstream Indian Hindus by providing them with a space in which to develop a sense of national identity within that greater Hindu community. But whether

²⁶ Nepal Library Foundation, <https://nepallibrary.org>.

²⁷ "Nepali Canadian Women's Society of British Columbia," <https://www.facebook.com/NepaliwomeninBC/>.

²⁸ "Background," Hindu Buddhist Foundation of Canada, <http://www.hbfcanda.org/>; "Nepal Friendship and Cultural Society," CANFACS, <https://canadanepalfriendship.wordpress.com/>.

²⁹ According to the 2011 Census of Nepal, 81.3 percent of the country's population reported themselves as Hindu; 9 percent of the population are Buddhist; 4 percent are Muslim; 3 percent follow the indigenous Kirat religion; and 1.4 percent are Christian. There are no data for religious identities within the Nepali Canadian community. For comparable material about Britain's Nepali diaspora, see David N. Gellner, Sondra L. Hausner, Chandra Laksamba, and Krishna P. Adhikari, "Shrines and Identities in Britain's Nepali Diaspora," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 19, no. 1 (2010): 116–46.

the HBFC will be a unifying organization for all Nepalis, irrespective of their religious beliefs, or whether it will remain as a purely religious centre focused primarily on Hindu practices is an open question.

Unlike the HBFC, the NCWSBC and CANFACS are non-religious entities and seek to promote their specific group interests in the community. The NCWSBC, for instance, is a network of women promoting the cause of women and children, whereas CANFACS is a collaborative effort of community members to promote friendship among people of Nepali origin and Canadians at large through cultural exchange and trade linkage. In addition, the Jhigu Palaa Society was established in 2015 with the purpose of helping to improve the living standard of Nepalis affected by the earthquake. Apart from these formally registered organizations, several other ethnicity-based informal cultural groups exist in British Columbia, such as, for example, the MhaPujaBC cultural group. Annually since 2008, this group has celebrated unique elements of the Newari ethnic culture, such as Mha Puja and the Newari new year. A small group of Nepalis with connections to the Tibetan Buddhist faith also celebrates Lhosar, the Tibetan New Year, every year.

Most of these organizations are registered as non-profit entities under the British Columbia Society Act. Some of them, such as the NLF, HBFC, and NHCF, have obtained charity status and can issue tax receipts to individual donors for a specific cause. While most of these organizations are inclusive and open to all community members, the NHCF maintains its status as a non-member-driven organization. In addition, some of these organizations have purely charitable objectives of helping locals and the disadvantaged, while others have used organizations as a means of advancing personal or identity-based group interests.

The segregation of Nepalis into smaller groups based on their respective special interests, political ideology, or ethnicity has both positive and negative impacts. While this proliferation of organizations has allowed these groups to focus on their own special objectives, we have observed that having multiple groups has also worked to diffuse community energy and perhaps weaken the force that a monolithic Nepali community could have in representing itself as a distinctive group at the provincial level. It has also significantly reduced the relevance of the NCSBC as an umbrella organization. This concern was expressed to us by multiple community members with different primary affiliations.

These BC-based organizations are also tied into national and global organizational networks representing the Nepali diaspora and their interests. The Non-Resident Nepali Association (NRNA) is a global

umbrella organization for members of the Nepali diaspora residing around the world (except those living in the South Asian region). It has National Coordination Councils in eighty different countries.³⁰ Non-Resident Nepalis (NRN) Canada represents the interest of the Nepali diaspora living in Canada.³¹ During the earthquake, such global and national organizations raised funds and supported reconstruction efforts in Nepal, but there was no effective coordination between such organizations and locally registered provincial organizations with regard to raising and disbursing funds.

IMMEDIATE EARTHQUAKE RESPONSE

When the devastating earthquakes struck Nepal in April and May 2015, support for the victims came from two main sources in Canada: (1) the Canadian government and institutions, and (2) the Nepali diaspora. The Canadian government raised \$51.7 million through the Nepal Earthquake Relief Fund (NERF). The government's pledge to match private donations made to the fund helped to raise this sum for humanitarian assistance and for long-term recovery and reconstruction efforts in Nepal.³² The Canadian Red Cross raised \$27.4 million to support its various work in Nepal, such as setting up a field hospital, immediate lifesaving assistance, and community health recovery and livelihood support.³³

Nepali diaspora groups all over the world, including in Canada, quickly mobilized their members to disseminate earthquake-related information to the global public and to collect resources to help disaster victims.³⁴ Among the community organizations in British Columbia, the NCSBC played a major role in galvanizing support for immediate relief to victims. First, the NCSBC sought to inform the Canadian public about the nature of the disaster and its impact on ordinary people. For this purpose, its officers spoke with various media outlets about the precise location of the earthquake and its impact on the people living nearby. It also organized two candlelight vigils – one in Vancouver and one in Surrey – to let the public know about the earthquake and the plight of victims in Nepal.

³⁰ Non-Resident Nepali Association (NRNA), <https://www.nrna.org/About-Us>.

³¹ Non-Resident Nepalis (NRN) Canada, <https://www.nrnacanada.org/about-us/>.

³² "Citizenship Canada," Government of Canada (2017), <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/notices/supplementary-immigration-levels-2018.html>.

³³ "Donor Update: Three Years On – Nepal Earthquake," Canadian Red Cross, <https://www.redcross.ca/crc/documents/Nepal-3-Year-EN.pdf>.

³⁴ The Cultural Anthropology Hot Spots Forum, "Aftershocked," offers a range of insights into the immediate response from actors around the globe. See <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/series/aftershocked-reflections-on-the-2015-earthquakes-in-nepal>.



Figure 4. Candlelight vigil for Nepal in front of Vancouver Art Gallery, 29 April 2015. Photo credit: Sara Shneiderman.

Second, it wanted to galvanize community members to do something meaningful to help Nepalis affected by the earthquake. On the day after the 25 April earthquake, the NCSBC reacted swiftly to support the victims by calling for an urgent meeting of all Nepalis living in the Lower Mainland. There was an outpouring of support from all sectors of the community. As scholars have shown in relation to times of crisis elsewhere in South Asia, temples or places of worship are natural locations for diaspora populations to come together and show solidarity for the cause at home. For example, in the wake of the Jammu-Kashmir earthquake in 2005, British Kashmiris raised funds through their mosques in the United Kingdom to help affected people in Kashmir.³⁵ Similarly, putting their cultural and ideological differences aside, over two hundred Nepalis gathered at the Laxmi Narayan Temple of Surrey

³⁵ Rehman and Kalra, "Transnationalism from Below," 35.

to chart a strategy on how to raise funds and send them to help those affected by the quake. Within minutes, several thousand dollars were raised; and many members pledged to volunteer their time to facilitate further fundraising activities. At the time of the earthquakes the HBFC had not yet established its own temple; so the Laxmi Narayan temple's location within a broader South Asian community context not only provided a suitable meeting space but also enabled the Nepali community to develop broader networks at its time of need.

IDENTITY FORMATION AND NETWORKING WITH OTHER COMMUNITIES

Until the earthquake, "Nepali" people remained a largely invisible minority within the greater "South Asian" community in British Columbia. The earthquakes suddenly brought the Nepali diaspora into the limelight: media interest in Nepal after the earthquake gave the Nepali community unexpected exposure all across Canada. Several media outlets relied on NCSBC board members and their representatives in the community to obtain firsthand information about the impact of the earthquake in Nepal.³⁶ Nepali community members and organizations collected information on damage caused by the earthquake, human suffering, and loss from their family members, friends, and relatives back in Nepal and shared this information with the media. Such exposure helped the NCSBC to network with various other organizations and to reach out to the Canadian public for support. Some of the networking activities were as follows.

In collaboration with broader Indo Canadian and South Asian networks, the NCSBC organized a two-day radio-thon with a radio station called Red FM 93.5, which is operated by the South Asian Broadcasting Corporation Inc. Red FM agreed to raise funds for the NCSBC, but, due to its charitable status, the money would be channelled to the Canadian Red Cross. Putting aside their ideological or other differences, many community members volunteered days and nights with Red FM to raise funds. This was a turning point in the fundraising

³⁶ See Maegan Matthews, "Civil Engineering Faculty Builds Change in Nepal," BCIT News (26 March 2018), <https://commons.bcit.ca/news/2018/03/civil-engineering-instructor-helps-turn-natural-disaster-opportunity-change/>; Bethany Lindsay and Tiffany Crawford, "BC's Nepalese Community Frantically Seeking News of Family," *Vancouver Sun* (2015), <http://www.vancouvernews.com/news/nepalese-community-frantically-seeking-news-family/11004741/story.html>; Jon Azpiri, "Members of Vancouver's Nepalese Community Look to Help in Rebuilding Efforts," *Global News*, <https://globalnews.ca/news/1962282/members-of-vancouver-nepalese-community-look-to-help-in-rebuilding-efforts/>.

process: \$411,000 was raised within twelve hours and the Canadian government promised to match the donations.³⁷ Most of the donors were of Punjabi origin and were spread across the Lower Mainland. This was a display of South Asian camaraderie at a time of dire need for one of the South Asian nations. This display of generosity helped Nepalis to adopt a positive image of people of Punjabi origin.

In addition, the NHCF struck a deal with Media Communication Group's FM station to raise over \$200,000. Apart from Red FM and Media Communications, due to their close kinship with their South Asian counterparts, Nepali fundraisers from both the NCSBC and the NHCF found it more comfortable to raise funds in gurudwaras and Hindu temples spread across the Lower Mainland. Thousands of dollars were raised from these locations. Members of the Chinese community in British Columbia also got involved. In Richmond, the Chinese community organized a joint cultural program with the NCSBC, called "Nepal with Heart," to raise funds. A Buddhist foundation based in Richmond also sent a few hundred water filters to victims of the earthquake in rural districts.

In due course, once the relief phase transitioned into recovery and reconstruction, various organizations established longer-term initiatives to support community rebuilding. Local Nepali-run charities such as the Nepal Library Foundation (NLF) Canada organized a fundraising dinner to support a community library and resource centre in one of the schools damaged by the earthquake in Dolakha district, Nepal. The NLF also successfully reached out to a Nepali community organization in Texas – the Nepalese Society of Texas – for support, and it also collaborated with the NCSBC to bring this project to fruition.

The NCSBC representatives also conducted outreach with political leaders, professional organizations, and the military. On the invitation of Jane Shin, a local MLA, NCSBC board members visited the BC legislature in Victoria where they were collectively introduced, and another MLA, Sue Hammel, introduced Nepal and its reconstruction efforts taking place in Nepal. This represented a significant boost for Nepali Canadian visibility in British Columbia in the formal political context of the legislature.

In addition, some local Punjabi Gurudwara volunteers went to Nepal and built low-cost temporary shelters in the affected areas. They also trained local community members in Nepal, teaching them basic skills

³⁷ "Nepal Earthquakes 2015: NCSBC Activities," NCSBC Newsmagazine, 4, Vancouver, April 2016. https://issuu.com/dronarasali/docs/ncsbc_newsmagazine_april_2016.

so that they could build such shelters themselves. A gurudwara in New Westminster organized a small fundraiser at which the NCSBC president, Anil Pradhan, and Nepal consul general, Chris Considine, were present. The Rose Foundation, a physicians' organization in British Columbia, invited NCSBC representatives and organized a fundraising drive to support the victims of earthquake in Nepal. Finally, the NCSBC organized a talk program with a Canadian Armed Forces representative who was part of the Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) deployed to Nepal to show its appreciation for their involvement in relief operations. The community gave a plaque to an army officer who was on the ground with the DART team providing immediate relief soon after the disaster. These examples demonstrate how the experience of responding to the disaster created the unexpected benefit of offering multiple opportunities for the Nepali Canadian community to demonstrate its presence within diverse cultural and political contexts across the province.

DISBURSING FUNDS

The NCSBC engaged community members in consultation on the issue of how to funnel the funds raised to effectively assist those who were most affected.³⁸ Community members offered different ideas on their preferred mechanism for disbursing funds. While some proposed to deploy or send NCSBC member volunteers to carry out the relief work themselves, others preferred to funnel the funds through the Nepal government-created Prime Minister's Disaster Relief Fund. Those in support of sending donations to the Prime Minister's Fund argued that the government was better equipped to provide support in times of such extreme emergency. Others were skeptical about this approach as they viewed the government and the bureaucracy in Nepal as corrupt and ineffective, and feared that funds would not reach the intended beneficiaries. This disagreement over how to channel the funds became a sticking point and a source of friction among the community members. To some extent, these differences stemmed from ideological differences between the two groups: those who supported the ruling party of the prime minister and those who opposed it. Many community members did not have a high level of trust in the ability of the government to channel the resources in an effective and timely manner. Existing literature on

³⁸ Kathleen Newland, "Voice after Exit: Diaspora Advocacy," Migration Policy Institute, *Diasporas and Development Policy Project*, USAid, 2010, 1–28, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/voice-after-exit-diaspora-advocacy>.

the Nepali diaspora also emphasizes the widespread lack of trust between the global diaspora population and the government of Nepal.³⁹ Such disjunctures between diaspora communities and their current home government in times of disaster are not limited to the Nepali case. For instance, this kind of skepticism was also evident among members of the British Kashmiri diaspora, who viewed the funds set up by the Pakistani prime minister and the Azad Kashmiri prime minister after the earthquake of 2005 with some suspicion.⁴⁰ Indeed, the lack of trust in government machinery and its ability to disburse funds in a timely and efficient manner reverberates across many South Asian communities.⁴¹

Ultimately, the NCSBC decided to mainly work with the Canadian Red Cross (CRC) in raising and disbursing funds, and it signed a memorandum of understanding with that group. This approach had two immediate benefits. First, individual donors were able to get a tax receipt from the CRC for their donation amount once the NCSBC submitted the collected funds and names of individual donors to the Red Cross. Second, the CRC had the advantage of having an established organizational structure and the experience of having worked in similar situations elsewhere in the world. The BC Nepali diaspora's decision to rely on an established non-governmental organization like the CRC demonstrates its preference for a formal disaster relief governance model. The British Kashmiri diaspora, on the other hand, sent an imam to the earthquake region to disburse funds in order to ensure that the affected communities would be helped quickly and effectively. In both instances, however, the diaspora community's desire to opt for a non-governmental entity reflects its concern that a corrupt home government might misuse funds. In spite of the NCSBC's primary working relationship with the CRC, it also donated some money directly to the Prime Minister's Disaster Relief Fund. Further, it contributed some funds to the NLF-led project to build a community library and resource centre adjacent to a school in Dolakha that was destroyed during the earthquake.

Another source of division within the community was that between the NCSBC and the NHCF. In view of the charitable status of the NHCF, the NCSBC proposed they work together to raise funds collaboratively; however, the NHCF declined. This divulged a further rupture within the Nepali community. This disagreement had little to do with diverging views on how to channel the funds; rather, it was motivated by personal

³⁹ See Shivakoti, "When Disaster Hits Home," 14.

⁴⁰ Rehman and Kalra, "Transnationalism from Below," 320.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 318.

disagreements between the parties involved, demonstrating how these can affect organizational collaboration for a common cause. As the talks with the NHCF broke down, the NCSBC struck a deal with the CRC with regard both to raising and to disbursing funds. Some community members felt that the NCSBC was unable to channel the raised funds as promised or desired by the donors. Since the funds raised in the name of the NCSBC went directly to the CRC, it was natural for the former to lose control over their disbursement. However, the NCSBC obtained regular updates from the CRC regarding its operations in Nepal using the funds generated by the BC community. While the NCSBC was able to disburse all the raised funds in two years, the NHCF was slow: three years after the quake not all its funds had been disbursed.

The sense of urgency and unity that arose in the aftermath of the quake quickly evaporated.⁴² As the organizations raised funds separately and disbursed them mainly through various organizations/entities (such as the CRC, the Prime Minister's Earthquake Relief Fund, and local schools and community organizations in Nepal), some community members claimed that the donors could not see how their funds were being used to help earthquake victims. Consequently, a few individuals raised funds on their own and disbursed them directly to the victims of earthquake. Among these individuals, the works of two women from the Nepali diaspora in British Columbia, Eva Pradhan and Sabita Shrestha, are noteworthy. Right after the second earthquake on 12 May 2015, they travelled to many rural earthquake-affected areas and distributed relief supplies to those most in need. They also helped build 138 temporary shelters in six different earthquake-affected villages.⁴³ This shows how dedicated individuals can be as, if not more, effective than groups or organizations fraught with multiple conflicting interests and viewpoints. At the same time, NRN organizations have also been critiqued for their approach to reconstruction in Nepal, demonstrating how diaspora organizations and individuals may also have difficulty understanding operating conditions on the ground.⁴⁴

Whether relief efforts are channelled through individuals or organizations, the issues of accountability, transparency, and speed of disbursement become paramount. How do you hold the organizations

⁴² This parallels the experiences of Sri Lankan communities after the 2004 tsunami, as documented in Michele Gamburd, *The Golden Wave: Culture and Politics after Sri Lanka's Tsunami Disaster* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

⁴³ "A Richmond Woman's Trip to Earthquake Ravaged Nepal Was an Eye Opener," *Richmond Review*, 17 June 2015, 1.

⁴⁴ Abha Lal, "A Ghost Settlement in Gorkha," *Record* (2019), <https://www.recordnepal.com/wire/features/a-ghost-settlement-in-gorkha/>.

and individuals residing in a foreign country accountable for their fundraising activities in their country of residence, and for disbursing them in a country like Nepal, where the mechanisms of both governments and NGOs are often difficult to assess? Can you make the act of disbursing funds transparent when individuals and organizations act independently without any verification mechanism? In addition, when the disbursement process is very slow, how do you assess the effectiveness of funds in contributing to relief and reconstruction? These questions are important but are beyond the scope of this article. Clearly, they should be addressed in future research.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the 2015 earthquakes created both opportunities and challenges for the Nepali Canadian community of British Columbia. The devastating 2015 earthquake in Nepal provided an opportunity for the community as a whole to become more visible as a Nepali Canadian minority within the broader South Asian community. This visibility resulted from the sudden exposure of community organizations, such as the NCSBC, to the media in the aftermath of the earthquakes, and their ability to launch effective fundraising initiatives within the broader South Asian community, particularly with the support of well-established Punjabi organizations. The visibility also resulted from the Nepali community's ability to work with a few other non-South Asian communities in collecting and disbursing resources for those affected in Nepal.

In this way, the disaster forged unity and made the Nepali Canadian community in British Columbia more visible to the Canadian public. However, this achievement was short-lived as, ultimately, the momentum generated by new visibility and the availability of resources set the stage for existing cleavages *within* the community to widen, as manifested in the debates over how to raise/disburse NCSBC relief funds and the subsequent proliferation of new organizations. Thus, while a moment like the 2015 earthquake can be a turning point for forging alliances among diaspora members, it can also bring dormant ideological differences and disagreements into the open.

There are multiple organizations around the world representing the interests of the Nepali diaspora community, including those in Canada and British Columbia. Yet there was a lack of broader collaboration among these entities. Our observations of Nepali diaspora organizations

in British Columbia demonstrate that, despite some willingness to work together for a common cause, organizations tend to work independently. The unity demonstrated by some organizations appears transient, and they largely reverted to their separate jurisdictions after the immediate crisis had passed. Although constant collaboration could strengthen the organizational resolve to do something meaningful for the diaspora population, is such collaboration possible in the absence of an emergency in the home country? Will such collaboration occur only when another disaster strikes?

This article raises the possibility of exploring the opportunities and challenges faced by various Nepali diaspora communities across Canada in their efforts to help Nepal after the 2015 earthquakes. Further research is needed to explore the nuances of class, ethnicity, religion, and gender dynamics within and among Nepali diaspora communities, and the relationships between these vectors of difference and patterns of collaboration among Nepali diaspora organizations located in various parts of the world. Did the 2015 earthquakes present similar opportunities and challenges to all Nepali diaspora communities? Or were such circumstances contextual, specific to their demographic makeup and host country dynamics? Such broader studies may enable diaspora communities to learn from the past and to be better prepared for future disasters in their countries of origin.