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Research

How the Meaning of Home Changed Since the Earthquake in 2015 in Kathmandu?

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Abstract

This article takes shape from my research which is grounded in themes from the anthropology of home. This fiend of study explores how people experience and give meaning to domestic space across different cultural, historical and natural contexts. The aim I set was to study and to analyze the social and structural changes resulting from the earthquake that occurred in 2015 in Kathmandu, Nepal. The research question sought to analyze how this event influenced the perception of home, home-making practices, and the reconstruction of a sense of home among the affected individuals. It was considered the cultural dynamics, local responses, and the long-term impacts on the reconfiguration of housing identity. This is anethnographyI conducted between February and May of 2024.This field work allowed me to collect direct testimonies through in-depth interviews and informal conversations with residents. The core of this article is to observe how the perception of home has changed in the aftermath of the 2015 earthquake. Through interviews who directly experiences the event, it emerged that home is not only a physical structure, but is a space of emotional resilience and symbolic reconstruction.

Keywords: Anthropology, anthropology of home, earthquake in Nepal, ethnography

Area of Study

I conducted the research in Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. The area of Kathmandu I frequented the most was Thamel, the central part of the city, as three of my interlocutors lived in this area.

Thamel is the most touristic place of Kathmandu, and during the 2015 earthquake the buildings in this district were particularly affected. Besides Thamel, I made several visits to Patan, located at the south of Kathmandu, and Bhaktapur, in the northwest. These two areas are the historical parts of the city. In both locations, I participated in a guided tour, during which a local guide explained the centuries-old history of these areas and the changes that took place after the 2015 earthquake.

While I was living in the capital, I was hosted and I lived by a Nepali family, with whom I had connected during my first visit to Nepal, in 2019. That year, I met Pasang, the father of the family, as he had been the guide for my group. During the visit, I had the opportunity to get to know her daughter Dolma, with whom I became friend and have remained in contact.

Criteria of Relevance

The theme of my research can provide a useful and reflective contribution to the academic anthropological discourse, as I believe it is important to understand how traumatic events, such as the unexpected arrival of an earthquake, can have long-term effects on the identity of a society (Dhakal, 2019). The home is not merely a physical space but represents a secure place, a symbol of stability and belonging. Home is a space in which people that live inside perceive the world around them in a unique way. Exploring how the concept of home changes following a catastrophic event allows for an analysis of social and cultural reconstruction processes. This process of reconstruction also involves the reconstruction of identity, belonging, and emotional security (Ligi, 2009). I also consider it essential to understand how every drastic event is experienced differently in each place and society, despite the common denominator is the same (ivi). The social frameworks, which are characterized by different cultural contexts, influence relationships and interpretations of events, even traumatic ones. As Ligi (ivi, p. 4) states, “Disasters are experiences of every generation, but in recent decades, the way we perceive and respond to these phenomena is changing”. It isinteresting to observe how the socio-cultural components of a disastrous event are conceptualized in different interpretative models. Anthropological translation represents an intersubjective process in which the meanings that will be translated emerge through the ethnographic interaction between the anthropologist and their informants (ibid.). This study, therefore, not only enriches anthropological understanding but can also guide the design of interventions that respect and value the cultural specificities of the communities involved. By examining how the community perceive and rebuild the sense of home following the earthquake we gain a deeper appreciation of the complex ways in which social dynamics shape the process of recovery.

Methodology

Talking about the methodology I used the qualitative research. My study is largely based on participant observation. During the ethnography, I took photosof the places, the streets, and the houses. A key aspect of my research involved the recorded interviews of my four interlocutors. Before starting the conversations, I prepared a series of questions, which I modified according to the responses that the interlocutors gave to me. Thus, the interviews were semi-structured. I aimed to consider the gender and age of my interlocutors to study how these characteristics

might have influenced the theme of my research. I therefore sought an adult male, Rajesh, an adult female, Monicia, a young male, Poojeshand a young woman Sachita. With Rajesh, Poojesh and Sachita the used language was English, differently with Monicia I had to recruita interpreter that helped us to translate the words from English to Nepali and from Nepali to English.

Initially, my plan for recruiting interlocutors was to focus on people who had lost their homes and were forced to rebuild. However, I faced significant challenges in finding people with these specific characteristics. As a result,I slightly modified my selection criteria to include anyone who had experienced the earthquake.

Alongside the interviews, my field research was based on the daily writing of a field journal or jotting, a tool that allowed me to transcribe the events of the day, reflect on the day's experiences, note the habits of the population, the smells, the colors, and the various features of Kathmandu. In order to further immerse myself in the local community, I began regularly visiting the Boudhanath Stupa, a place where all Buddhists go to pray. I actively participated in local life, dining with my friend Dolma in non-touristy locations. I was invited to lunches and dinners by family friends and had the opportunity to attend two traditional Sherpa weddings.

The Sesmic City: History and Anthropological Perspective

In 2015, on April 25, at 11:56 am, a powerful earthquake with magnitude of 7.8 on the Richter scale,strucked the central mountains of Nepal. The epicenter was located in the Gorkha district, at northwest of Kathmandu (Raj&Gautam, 2015). Some weeks later, on May 12, 2015, another earthquake of magnitude 7.3 hit the Dolakha district, approximately 140 km east of the Gorkha epicenter. Following this episode, more than 300 aftershocks, occurred in the months (ibid). These aftershocks triggered numerous landslides and rockfalls in the mountainous areas, leading to road closures and hindering rescue operations, resulting in further losses (Swathi& Venkataramana, 2016).

The destruction was catastrophic, it caused not only environmental damages such as landslides, avalanches, and flooding but it also killed and injured many people. According to the Nepal Reconstruction Authority (NRA), 8,970 people lost their lives, and 22,300 were seriously injured. Physical infrastructure such as homes, cultural monuments, animal sheds, community buildings, and irrigation channels also suffered significant damage. The NRA reports that 800,000 houses were destroyed or damaged. Approximately 750 cultural heritage sites, 1,200 monasteries, 8,680 school buildings, and 1,197 healthcare institutions were damaged, pushing 5.4 million people below the poverty line (Mukta et al., 2020, p.13). The majority of the damaged buildings were made by stone or brick masonry structures with wooden frames (Swathi &Venkataramana, 2016).

Going back in time, one of the most significant challenge that Kathmandu Valley had to face throughout history has been the series of seismic disasters that have affected it (Marahatta, Pokharel, 2013). Nepal is ranked as the 20th most disaster-prone country in the world, the 11th most at risk of earthquake damage. The Valley of Kathmandu has the highest seismic risk among all 21 megacities in the world, as it lies in a very active seismic zone with a high hazard intensity

(Rimal et al., 2017). Seismic activity in Nepal is caused by the continental collision between the Indo-Australian and Eurasian plates; the Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau were formed by this collision. Thus, in the central Himalayan region, earthquakes from reverse faulting are the most common (Hoissan et al., 2015).

The first documented seismic event in the Kathmandu Valley occurred on December 24, 1223 (Marahatta, 2009). A subsequent earthquake struck in June 1255, killing King Abhaya Malla, who was reigning at the time, along with one-third of the population. Throughout history, Nepal has experiences numerous earthquakes, each causing significant damage in the Himalayan Valley (ivi).Therefore, it is important to study and consider the social structure and architectural history of the region. Over time, the people of Nepal began constructing their homes with seismic risk in mind. Indeed, the use of mud, brick, and wood in construction increases the potential for material recycling. However, in the past century and a half, technology construction has been increasingly influenced by Western methods (Ranjitkar, 2006). "In Nepal, most of the buildings are constructed with walls made of sun-dried or fired bricks or stone with mud mortar, and the structure is primarily wood. These types of buildings have flexible floors and roofs and are predominantly built in rural areas" (Swathi & Venkataramana, 2016).

An important aspect related to these new materials is that once they are destroyed, they cannot be reused (Ranjitkar, 2006). It is interesting to note how some people I interacted with during the fieldwork, have described the houses built with stones and mud as the least secure in the event of an earthquake, while the previously mentioned text explains the reasoning behind this kind of construction methods.

An important factor to consider is the exponential growth of the urbanization in the capital, which has seen the number of houses grow since 1970, caused by the significant growth of the population (Thapa, Murayama, Ale 2008). Several individuals I spoke with, explained that although many people leave Kathmandu every day to move to other countries, the capital of Nepal remains highly populated. This is because people from rural areas have been migrating to the city in recent years to take advantage of better employment opportunities. At the same time, people migrating abroad often build their homes before leaving, ensuring that upon their return, they will have a house waiting for them. "Following Rajesh's advice […], I went to observe the movements at the airport. As I had been told, there are indeed many young Nepalese departing. The arrivals section, however, mostly sees tourists dressed with trekking gear" (Field Diary, March 23, 2024).

Since the 2015 earthquake, Kathmandu has become very modernized. Traditional-style houses are now difficult to find. In some areas, such as Kirtipur, in the south of Kathmandu, the government has implemented regulations regarding this topic: if people wants to build a new house, it must be constructed in the traditional style.

One question I asked was: why, if most of my interlocutors complain that after the earthquake, it is necessary to have land, an open space to stay safe, does the surface area of Kathmandu now have so many houses? What would happen if an earthquake struck Kathmandu today?

Where could people take shelter? In this regard, anthropology of disasters, helps to observe and understand how a disaster in a specific place directly depends on the prevailing risk perception in the society, in relation to dangerous events (Ligi, 2009). Disasters are easier to recognize than define. Recognizing a disaster when one is involved is different from providing a specific definition. Disasters are complex and multifactorial phenomena, and how they are defined by the different cultures is important. The choice of definitions impacts the ability to build appropriate disaster theories and, the ability to act effectively. Definitions of disaster are important but they reduce the complexity of the event to the physical characteristics of the agents and their effects in terms of damage to property and people. These are the only factors considered in disaster analysis, as there is never a linear relationship between the intensity of the impact and the severity of the damage (Ligi, 2016).

If an extreme event occurs with the same intensity and similar variables in two different social systems, the resulting damages are never identical and are difficult to compare. This happens because the damage does not depend only on the physical characteristics of the event, but largely arises from the social reactions triggered during and after the crisis, influenced by the local culture of the affected area. The meaning of disaster should not be attributed to the event itself, but rather considered within the context of the social system. Thus, a disaster can be defined as "the type and degree of social disintegration that follows the impact of a destructive agent on a human community" (Ligi, 2009).

Field research allowed me to observe how the 2015 earthquake was a complex event, not reducible to the mere definition of a "natural disaster," since behind this event lie a series of social reactions that help to understand the full scope of its consequences.A catastrophe reveals many details of the society it affects: it shows some societies as fragile, others as resilient, and still others as anti-fragile, capable not only of withstanding the disaster but also emerging stronger from it (Ferguson, 2021). "Nepalese have long known that they live in a seismic zone. Earthquakes have a lethal reputation deeply ingrained in public consciousness" (Mukta, Shakya, Pradhan, Gurung, Mabuhang 2020, p.1). Earthquakes are remembered as devastatingeventsthat have historicallycausedloss, displacement, and transformation. Their "lethalreputation" is part of a collective consciousness shaped by bothlivedexperiences and intergenerationalknowledge. In thisway, the danger of earthquakes isculturallyrecognized, and, in some cases, ritualized.

My research project aims to contribute to disaster anthropology studies, with particular focus on the perception of the home, emphasizing individual experience rather than generalizing the entire community. This approach stems from the understanding that every person I have interacted with carries a unique story. Reducing the impact of the 2015 earthquake on the entire society limits the understanding of individual experiences.

Anthropology of Home

From this section of the article we come into the heart of the research, but before starting to analyze what I discovered during the fieldwork I think is important to focus to a question that can help us understand what the anthropology of the home is: is it possible to differentiate a space

built by humans and one that is not? Why do the products of human constructions differ from the structures made by other animals? These questions, posed by Tim Ingold, are answered in his book *The Ecology of Culture* (2001). At the beginning of his idea, the author compares the shell of a mollusk, the den of a beaver, and a human dwelling as examples for studying the different forms of architecture. He concludes that the difference between these does not lie in the act of construction itself, but in the origins of the design that governs the building process. The design of the beaver's den and the mollusk's shell "are expressions of the same genotype, meaning they are part of the genetic effects that transcend the organism's body" (Ingold, 2004, p.116). In contrast, humans are the authors of their own designs; their homes are built through processes of decision-making and selection of ideas. Human constructions always involve a plan; "it is to this plan […] that we refer when we say a house is built rather than simply formed" (ibid.). Ingold critique the dichotomous view between building and living in a space, according to which one first designs and constructs and only later inhabits. He proposes that the design cannot exist without the experience of living. The anthropologist asserts that the moment of designing and the practical moment of inhabiting cannot be separated because designing is intrinsically linked to the experience of living. "The essence of the perspective of building is that worlds are already made before we live in them; […] acts of dwelling are preceded by acts of building the world" (ibid., p.121). Even when humans create new objects, these reflect an innate understanding of being in the world. Ingold critiques the Darwinian view of classical genetics, according to which the genetic code is the only determinant for the actions of living beings. Instead, he proposes an approach based on developmental biology, where constant interaction with the environment activates or inhibits certain expressions of the genetic code. Thus, even an animal like the beaver builds its dam not only due to genetic instinct but also because it lives in a specific environment (ibid.). It is interesting to note that, "people don't import their own ideas, designs, or mental representations into the world[…]. Because they already live in the world can they think the thoughts they think" (ibid., p.135).

To study the home from an anthropological perspective there's the need to an analysis of the dwelling as a human-made environment, thus considering its material and concrete aspects.

> "Any basic definition of a home conceptualizes general connections between: 1. An object, the house, a concrete, material, visible artifact composed of parts, more or less structured; 2. Two types of human action: building, of which the house-object would be the finished product, and dwelling, which would be the goal or function of the house-object" (Ligi, 2003, pp. 115-116).

Everything that can be defined as "home" is connected in three aspects: as a social structure, in terms of the placement of buildings relative to kinship structure; as a belief system, relating to rituals concerning the foundation, protection, and abandonment of the home; and finally, in terms of emotions, as an intimate, affective space, not just a metric one. "A home is therefore much more than a simple physical structure; it is not just the container of social processes, but as a network of boundaries, controls, and powers, it is itself a social process" (ibid., p.126). The

home is a space that changes the way of existence and perceives the surrounding world. It is born through acts of selection, through gestures that choose a set of objects and people that will give life to a unique and privileged world: one's own place.

The home is not a static space but a process that requires work. The form of the house, its dimensions, and the location where it is built are decided by individuals in relation to the models enacted by society through years of experience, taking into account the economy, the geographical environment, the climate, and the materials available. Homes can be built with bricks, stone, mud or snow. People who build the house participate not only in a material sense but also in an imaginative sense, as before it is constructed, the house has already been imagined (Castelli Gattinara et al., 1981).

> "The house and its meaning are actively realized through daily activities and routines undertaken to establish and articulate the home, such as cooking, cleaning, relaxing, and eating. However, the ability of inhabitants to engage in domestic activities depends on the behavior and decisions of multiple actors situated on scales beyond the family, such as the street in which they live, the neighborhood, and the nation. This is because the home is not separate from the public and political world, but is constituted through them as well" (Sou, Webber, 2021, pp.3-4).

Every person lives within a sensory universe tied to their personal history. "Our sensory perceptions, intertwined with meanings, draw the fluctuating boundaries of the environment in which we live, defining its extent and flavor" (Le Breton, 2006, p.13). The senses create a prism of meanings related to the place in which one finds themselves, expressing the sensitivity of the individual. Through the smells, sounds, and colors, so different from what I was used to seeing, I gathered important information about the place where I lived. Anthropology allows to be aware of what lies behind the physical structure of a house: the domestic spaces, the housing structure, are places full of cultural, social, and symbolic meanings. Through the anthropology of the home, is it possibleto analyze family and social dynamics. In Nepal, the home "is almost never a nuclear unit, but is tied to an extended family. […] The house is always part of the family, and the family traverses the house" (Staid, 2021, incipit). The house where I stayed was composed of a nuclear family, but the paternal relatives live just a few minutes' walk from their home, and almost every day they gather to share meals or simply spend time together.

> "The house, […] offers us the opportunity to investigate private, intimate relationships that are part of a life made up of routinized activities and established habits. Within it are strict divisions of space and roles, technical evolutions of objects and adaptations to their use, arrangements that underline the class belonging of the family group. Together with the objects, the rooms, the furniture, are the people, who move within these spaces and build their identity" (Meloni, 2014, p.419).

The Conception of Home from my Interlocutors

The composition of the home ofmy first interlocutor Rajesh, is different, as he lives with his two children, wife, brother, and, before their passing, his parents. Likewise, Poojesh, before the death of his paternal grandparents, lived with his nuclear family, paternal uncles and aunts, and paternal grandparents. In Nepal, cousins are often referred to as brothers or sisters. The family structure follows a patrilineal system, and it is common for the household to be patrilocal, meaning that the woman, once married, moves to live with her husband's relatives. The Austrian artist and architect Friedensreich Hundertwasser claimed that humans possess three skins: their own, their clothes, and their home. All three skins need to grow, update, and change. If the third skin, the home, does not evolve alongside the others, it dies (Staid, 2021, beginning). Poojesh explains that before his paternal grandfather passed away, he lived with his nuclear family, paternal uncles and aunts with their respective spouses and children, and his paternal grandparents. Following his grandfather's death, Poojesh's father and his brothers moved out of their parents' house to live with their nuclear families. Today, Poojesh resides in a modern home, located across from the site of the old house, which was destroyed in the 2015 earthquake.

> "The way and place people live define a space in which one can build their identity and culture. Living represents an essential action of humankind. 'Living' takes on the sense of taking care of oneself and others" (ibid.).

The houses I had the opportunity to visit share a common feature of being multi-storied. I noticed a similarity in the colors and space management between the houses of my Sherpa relatives on the outskirts of Kathmandu, while Rajesh's house in the city center is more sectorized, with each room separated by narrow hallways and cement stairs. I found a striking analogy with Rajesh's house in the residence of a man, also of Newar ethnicity, whom I met shortly before returning from the field. The opportunity to visit several houses belonging to families of different ethnicities led me to realize that the style of the house and its location within the city are correlated with the ethnic background and, presumably, the socio-economic status of the individuals. However, the 2015 earthquake destroyed many traditional houses, eradicating thousands of personal spaces and memories. Most of the houses, once built with red clay bricks and carved wood, have been replaced by modern buildings made with reinforced concrete, industrial bricks, and steel. During a guided tour of Bhaktapur, the guide explained that, following the earthquake, it would be impossible to rebuild all the houses in the traditional Newar style, as they are costly, especially due to the intricate wood carvings that depict religious and cultural motifs.

A house is much more than a physical structure where individuals live; "the house is a relationship between material and imaginative realms, a process in which physical location, materiality, emotions, and ideas are interconnected and influence one another" (Blunt, 2006, p. 309). Rajesh tells me that, during his days, when he is not at work at the school office, he spends much time at home, as there are not many activities outside of his working hours: "After we finish working, we don't have many options. Yes, there are places we could go instead of staying at home, but... if we went to a restaurant, it would be too expensive; if we went to a bar, that too would be too

expensive. Going every day wouldn't be possible, sometimes it's fine, but usually, we stay at home with family" (interview with Rajesh, March 12, 2024). The activities he engages in at home are primarily domestic. In his own words: "Like people my age, I clean the house, you know, this way I spend my time" (ibid.). Reflecting on the houses I visited, where domestic chores were shared equally between men and women, I ask my interlocutor for his comment on this matter. He responds, "Yes, you know, culturally, the kitchen is a space for girls, it's for women. This idea is slowly being abandoned... now both men and women clean and cook" (ibid.). Another important characteristic Rajesh carries out within his home is hosting relatives and friends. Not particularly fond of bars and restaurants, Rajesh often invites his relatives and his wife's relatives to spend time together in his home. Thus, the house becomes a place for leisure, where moments can be shared with friends.

Similarly, Poojesh, after working hours, returns home and "takes care" of his parents and sister. Usually, he is the one who cooks for his family. "I must say that my house and my family mean everything to me" (interview, April 15, 2024), he tells me with a smile.

Sachita's story illustrates the significance of the home for the people who live in it. Within a patrilocal society, her story is unusual. Since childhood, Sachita showed a strong attachment to her maternal grandparents' home, where she loved spending time, often crying whenever she had to say goodbye and return to live with her parents. This painful separation led her mother to make the unusual decision to let her continue living with her mom's parents. Sachita explains that she remained in her matrilocal home until the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, when she returned to her parents' patrilocal home. The decision to live in her matrilocal home made me reflect on the importance of personal relationships within the home. In a society where it is customary for women to move to their husband's relatives' house after marriage, Sachita's story allows us to understand the uniqueness of the individual, even within this context. Every family, every house, has its own story, which cannot be generalized and placed into a singular, univocal container simply because they belong to the same country or religion.

Monicia tells me that in her life she has changed many houses. Firstly she lived with her parents and siblings, then, after marriage, she moved into her husband's parents' house. However, this cohabitation lasted only a few years due to the difficult relationship with her parentsin-laws. The couple then moved into an apartment without relatives in the village of Gurkha, and after a few years, their family expanded with the birth oftheir two daughters, Praktri and Patricia. After the earthquake, Monicia moved in her current home, located to the north of Kathmandu. "Monicia and her daughters' house is not far from where I live. […] The house has two rooms. Entering through the front door, there is the kitchen, which contains a table, a cooking area, a cabinet with plates, cutlery, pots, and a mattress placed near the table for sitting. The walls are covered with a layer of plastic. The wall dividing the kitchen from the bedroom is made of wood, adorned with English and Nepali writings and drawings made by the children. Crossing the door, through the left, there is the bedroom. This room contains three large beds, each placed on a different side of the room. The floor is covered with a large blue carpet decorated with flowers. Against the wall

opposite the kitchen, the only one without a bed, is a wooden cabinet containing clothes and school books for the daughters. Above the mother's bed, on a shelf, are four photographs: one of her daughters, one of her husband, another of her with her husband, and the last one of her with her daughters. Next to the photos I can see some artificial flowers. In the corner of the room, there is a small prayer area: a small altar dedicated to Hindu Gods" (Field Diary, April 26, 2024). A noteworthy detail in Monicia's account is the "sense" of home that the cows in the barn next to her house convey to her. She explains that, in Gurkha, there was also a barn near her house, so living in a similar situation, not so common in Kathmandu, reminds her of the past when she lived in the village with her husband.

An important feature I noticed during my fieldwork is the difference in how Nepali people perceive the term "my home" compared to the place they live. If the house is owned, it is referred to as "mine own home," whereas if the house is rented, it is not perceived as own home despite being the place where they live, but merely as a place to reside. This perception of the home as "own" only when purchased, connects with an interesting point made by Ingold:

> "The essence of the perspective on building is that worlds are already made before we live in them; in other words, that acts of habitation are preceded by acts of building the world... Humans inhabit various houses of culture, prefabricated on a universal natural ground, which also includes the universals of human nature" (Ingold, 2004, p. 121).

The way of thinking about the home, the way houses are constructed, and the perception of them integrate seamlessly into the pre-existing natural environment. Building is a continuous process in a place that is inhabited. This is particularly evident in the case of an earthquake, which disrupts the idea of living and constructing. The sudden change can alter the building materials and forms of habitation. The question that I have asked myself, and that is at the heart of this article is: how has the perception of the home changed following a catastrophe like the 2015 earthquake? The home is the anthropological space par excellence, the place where human beings live. How does its meaning change following a drastic event that strips away all certainties, including own's safe place?

How the Meaning of Home Changed after the 2015 Earthquake

As the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard asserts in his seminal work *The Poetics of Space*, the home is our corner of the world; it is our first universe (2006). To inhabit a space means to invest it with desires, memories, and future aspirations, turning it into a place where a person can identify themselves and recognize their existence within it (Staid, 2021). Human beings need symbols that are embedded within the body of ethnographic description (Geertz, 1987).

But what happens if this safe space, this place of memories, personal belongings, and loved ones, were to disappear in an instant? Or what if a catastrophic event, such as an earthquake, called into question the idea of home as a place of comfort? How might a 7.8 magnitude earthquake change the perception of home for those who experienced this terrifying event?

I was curious to know if and how, after the earthquake, people had started to experience their homes differently, or if the quake had not changed the concept of home.

I posed my research question to my four interlocutors I worked with, and the responses I received were very different. Before I began asking the questions, I had a possible idea of how the answers would unfold, but I did not expect such a wide range of responses. This discrepancy allowed me to be cautious about generalizing my ethnographic query into a single answer.

When I asked, "Do you think the meaning of home changed after the earthquake?", Sachita responded affirmatively. For her, the value placed on her home had shifted because the weeks spent living in a tent made her appreciate and understand the importance of having a home, a roof under which to shelter during rainy days. Sachita explains that, for her, home is a safe place, a comforting environment. I was surprised by this answer, as I had assumed that the earthquake would have created a sense of detachment between the community and their homes. Sachita, smiling, surprised me with a response that I found quite insightful: "If I have to die during an earthquake, I think I could also die outside the walls of my house, so why do I need to have the fear my own home?" (interview with Sachita, April 10, 2024, my emphasis). Forher, home has become an even more meaningful and secure place compared to before the earthquake. The distance from her personal belongings and comforts within the home allowed her to notice and appreciate what she owns even more. The way people construct domestic spaces and the meaning they assign to them, directly influences their behavior. Home is often described as a refuge, a safe space where people can relax. This concept of home is grounded in various related ideas, including the distinction between public and private space. According to this view, the inner or enclosed space of the home represents a comfortable and secure space, while the external world is perceived as dangerous and threatening. There are numerous performance expectations for people in the external space, such as work, political engagements, and non-familial relationships (Mallett, 2004).

In contrast, Rajesh's response was very different. For him, after the earthquake, home is no longer a safe place. "During the earthquake, we abandoned our homes, you know, we were in open spaces. People think the house is a safe place […], so why did we go to open spaces?" (interview with Rajesh, March 12, 2024). Rajesh continues by explaining that he never imagined he would live through such a drastic event as the 2015 earthquake. Although Rajesh does not specify what meaning he attached to the home before the earthquake, he confesses that his perception of it changed after the catastrophe. He adds shortly after: "I realized that for many people, home is everything, home is a safe place to, uh, shelter from difficulties, to shelter from the rain, well, it's not like that […], the house is also a kind of enemy" (ibid.). Rajesh thus acknowledges that for many people, home holds a positive meaning, but for him, it does not. The event made him reflect on what most people consider a safe place, while for him it is a vulnerable space, where he does not feel calm or protected. "In the months following the earthquake, three, four months, if we had to enter our house, oh my God, we could have died" (ibid.). Rajesh is emotionally deeply engaged in answering this question. Having seen people trapped and dying in their homes, led him to develop a negative view of what home means.

However, with no alternatives, he found himself compelled to return to live in his home. What he hopes, in the event of another earthquake, is to find himself in an open place, far from houses. He explains that, in his view, human nature leads people to forget, so it's easier to continue living their lives within their homes, even though they are aware of the inherent danger in them.

The fear of returning home suggests a personal perception of the risk linked to the earthquake event. The feeling of insecurity regarding home can prompt a deeper reflection on the significance of the house as a safe and identity-defining place. The earthquake, in this case, calls into question the emotional and symbolic connection an individual has with their living space. For Rajesh, after witnessing homes collapse and people trapped in their homes, the meaning of home has taken on a negative value.

A fascinating conversation I had with Monicia regarding her perception of home revealed some unexpected insights. Initially, I was certain that, due to a linguistic misunderstanding, I had not fully communicated my questionabout how and whether the meaning of home had changed after the 2015 earthquake. Our interpreter Dolma conveyed Monicia's answer in Nepali: "She thinks so, the meaning of home has changed, especially due to the generations, nine years have passed since the earthquake, so yes, for her the meaning of home has changed because the generations have changed" (interview with Monicia, April 20, 2024, my emphasis). Not entirely satisfied with this response, I decided to delve deeper during our second interview. Monicia added: "In my parents' house, in the houses of people from their generation, there were no phones, there was no internet, there were none of these gadgets. But today, with the new generation, there's television, phones, and in this regard, Monicia wonders how homes will be in the future" (interview with Monicia, April 26, 2024, my emphasis). From this response, I understood that the meaning Monicia attaches to home is more related to the objects that occupy it rather than the safety or fear that the place conveys. At the beginning I thought that Monicia has understood the question, and perhaps it was me that expected a different answer that spoke more about sensations and the emotional perception of home. As we continued the conversation, including during subsequent meetings, what stood out the most in our talks was Monicia's love for her daughters. She repeatedly expressed that her greatest desire was to see Praktri and Patricia grow with healthy values, hoping they would be generous toward others. What I have come to paraphrase from my meetings with Monicia is that, for her, "home" are her daughters. Throughout her life, Monicia has moved many times, but she never dwelled on discussing these changes in her homes. However, she insists on making me understand the importance her daughters have in her life. "Definitions of home are broad and do not necessarily refer to home as a fixed dwelling […]. Several scholars have challenged this dominant definition to show how home could be a feeling or a configuration of relationships" (Pink et al., 2017, pp. 12–13, digital format).

Poojesh is the only one of my four interlocutors who responded negatively to my research question. "The meaning I give to home is the same, because before the earthquake we were in the house to… sleep, be with the family, eat (laughing)… after the earthquake, I continue

doing the same things" (interview with Poojesh, April 15, 2024, my emphasis). I realize that, like Sachita, Poojesh also attributes a positive value to home, seeing it as a safe space, a place where he can spend time with his family. His words remind me of a conversation I had with a Nepali man I met in Lumbini and again in Kathmandu: "For him, the perception of home hasn't changed, because for him, home is his family, and his family wasn't affected by the earthquake" (Field Diary, April 21, 2024). Home, then, should be understood as a configuration of people, things, and processes in constant change (Pink, 2017).

Conclusion

I would like to conclude this articleby identifying a common thread that ties together the stories of the four interlocutors. Although their responses to my research question were quite different, this diversity offered a valuable insight: even though all four were present during the same event, their previous experiences in life shaped the way they reflected on it, each highlighting different aspects. Everyone brought their own personal history, which influenced how they reacted to the same traumatic moment. This contrast is particular evident between Sachita and Rajeev, because for her the earthquake strengthened her attachment to her home, which now she perceives as an even safer and more protective place than before. Rajeev, on the other hand, experienced a rupture in his sense of domestic security, and so he no longer views his home as a safe space. These opposing perceptions reflect the complexity of emotional and psychological responses to disaster.

Nonetheless, one issue emerged as a shared concern: in the days and months following the earthquake, all of them emphasized the crucial importance of having access to open spaces; fields, camps, or any area free of surrounding buildings. These spaces provided a sense of safety when built structures were no longer trustworthy.

Today, Kathmandu tells a very different story. The city is increasingly saturated with buildings, and new constructions continue to rise. This is largely due to the constant influx of people migrating from rural areas to the capital in search of better opportunities. At the same time, many residents who have moved abroad still choose to build homes in Kathmandu, driven by the idea that in the future they'll return to live in their homeland. During my fieldwork, I repeatedly encountered concerns about this ongoing densification. "Where would we go now if happen an earthquake that big again?" Rajeev asked. This unrelenting urban expansion raises serious concerns about future disaster preparedness. If another earthquake were to strike, it is difficult to envision a scenario in which people could quickly find safe open areas to gather. The scarcity of such spaces makes it hard to see a secure future for the city's inhabitants in the event of another major seismic event. These testimonies underscore a paradox: while the earthquake revealed the vital role of opening a space in case of a new earthquake, the years that followed the 2015 shake, saw a pattern of reconstruction that often neglected this lesson. Reflecting on this theme, if another earthquake were to strike, it is difficult to envision a scenario in which people could quickly find a safe open space. The scarcity of this spaces challenges not only the practical emergency response, but also the sense of security that the notion of "home" is meant to provide.

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