

## **Preserving Cultural Heritage and Creating Economic Stability after the Nepal Earthquake**

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**Abstract:** During the summer of 2015, after my freshman year at The Pennsylvania State University, I was given the opportunity to spend about a month in Nepal where I worked at a non-governmental organization and created a project that would help Gatlang, a village that was horribly damaged by the earthquakes that struck Nepal in April and May of 2015. A few short weeks in Nepal were enough to change my perspective on the world forever. I still think about how lucky I am to have been granted an experience that most people could never dream of having. Even more than this, I realize how lucky I am to have never been forced to cope with the devastation of any disaster of the magnitude of the Nepal earthquake.

*Keywords:* Cultural Preservation; Disaster Relief; Nepal

doi:10.18113/P8ik260044

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### **Preserving Cultural Heritage and Creating Economic Stability after the Nepal Earthquake**

During the summer of 2015, after my freshman year at the Pennsylvania State University, I was given the opportunity to spend about a month in Nepal, where I worked at a non-governmental organization and created a project that would help Gatlang, a village that was horribly damaged by the earthquakes that struck Nepal in April and May of 2015. A few short weeks in Nepal were enough to change my perspective on the world forever. I still think about how lucky I am to have been granted an experience that most people could never dream of having. Even more than this, I realize how lucky I am to have never been forced to cope with the devastation of any disaster of the magnitude of the Nepal earthquake.

My journey first began when I met Dr. Pasang Sherpa on my very first day of college. She was the instructor for my introductory cultural anthropology class.

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Like so many students in their first year of college, I was unsure of what I wanted to study, much less what kind of career I saw myself pursuing in the future. When Dr. Sherpa briefly described her research on climate change and its effects on Sherpa populations, I was instantly interested, and, although I was a shy new student, I decided I wanted to learn more. Under the direction of Dr. Sherpa, I ended up doing a fall semester research project about the radio communication of indigenous youths. I also took more anthropology classes, including one about the peoples of South Asia. This was my favorite class because the subject was new and extremely fascinating to me. Most of the classes I had taken in the past had focused on the history and cultures of the Western world. Studying cultural anthropology showed me the rich diversity of cultures that exists everywhere, especially outside of the places I was familiar with. The more I learned, particularly about indigenous populations, the more I wanted to know. I worked with Dr. Sherpa and planned to continue my research over the summer by travelling to Nepal and spending time with Sherpa populations. I was very eager to travel and continue exploring a subject and a region that I had become so passionate about. I submitted many proposals to fund my trip and everything seemed to be going well. All of this changed when Nepal was struck by a massive earthquake on April 25, 2015, killing thousands of people. I thought my hopes of travel to Nepal were over, and I was devastated that the country whose rich culture I was so fascinated by was suddenly filled with such chaos and destruction.

After the spring semester ended, I began a quiet summer at home, but, to my surprise, I received an email that funds were still available for my trip. Now, my trip had a new mission. Instead of conducting research, I would travel to Nepal to help with community rebuilding efforts. Thanks to Dr. Sherpa, I was able to work with Mountain Spirit, a Nepalese non-governmental organization led by her father, Dr. Mingma Sherpa. This organization's goal is to assist people living in the mountainous regions of northern Nepal.

I had never been on an airplane by myself, and now I was about to travel half way around the world solo. To say I was nervous would be an understatement. When I finally reached Kathmandu, I stayed with Dr. Sherpa's family, who did everything they could to make me feel at home in an unfamiliar place. The city of Kathmandu is huge and sprawling, unlike any place I had ever been before. I loved my time in the city, with its many World Heritage Sites, museums, and markets. It was heartbreaking to see the Boudhanath stupa, the biggest and oldest stupa in Nepal, covered in scaffolding while undergoing repairs. Many homes and businesses in

the city were also destroyed. Though I expected this, it was impossible to prepare myself for some of the destruction I saw.



*Kathmandu*



*Kathmandu*

For me, the most upsetting sights were on the road from Kathmandu to Gatlang Village, which is where I worked on my project. Many small villages and single homes that we passed on the bus ride were reduced to rubble. There were entire towns of people living in tents, unable to begin reconstruction on their homes due to the monsoon season, which lasts until the end of the summer. I was filled with emotions on the long bus ride into the mountains. I was shocked to see evidence of many mountain landslides, which had torn apart the road in some places. I was in awe of the natural beauty of the Himalayas, but I was heartbroken to see the lack of shelter and resources for many people affected by the earthquakes. After eight hours on a bus, followed by two hours of hiking where the road was too unreliable, I arrived in Gatlang Village, accompanied by Durga Tamang. Durga was born and grew up in this village, where he now runs a trekking company, as well as a small NGO. I originally met Durga in Kathmandu, where he lives part-time and his children attend school. It was there that we initially talked about ideas for my project in Gatlang. Most of my background information about Gatlang Village and the region comes from Durga Tamang, who was not only a knowledgeable guide, but a kind host and friend.

### **Background**

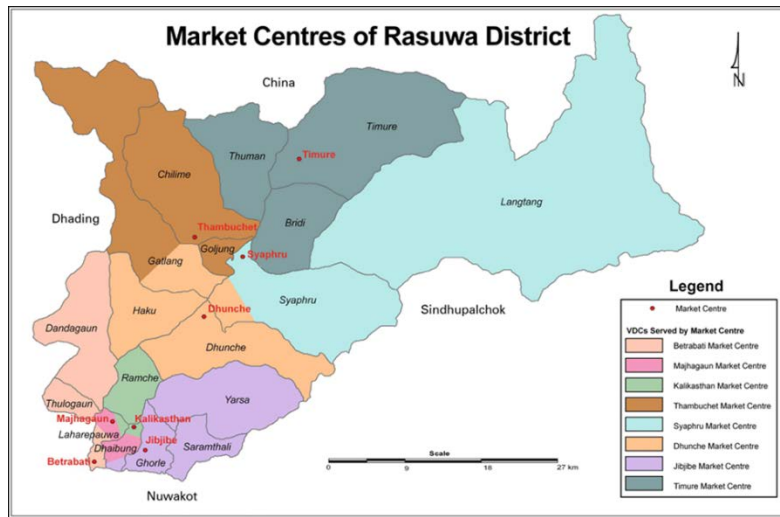
Gatlang Village is a small community in the Rasuwa District in the Bagmati Zone of Northern Nepal and is one of several villages in the Gatlang Village Development Committee (VDC), an area known for the Tamang Heritage Trail.

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This eight-day trekking route, as well as other trails in the area, has become increasingly popular with tourists from around the world. At an altitude of 2300 meters (6900 ft.), Gatlang village has beautiful views of Langtang Lirung and surrounding mountains. The trekking and tourism industry in this area is relatively new, however, as the Rasuwa District is remote, about eight hours by bus from the capital city of Kathmandu. Therefore, communities such as Gatlang Village have historically relied on agriculture as the main sector of their economy. The introduction of the tourism industry in 2003 has brought notable economic growth to the villages of Rasuwa, including Gatlang, which is one of the stops along the Tamang Heritage Trail.

Though located in a remote region, Gatlang Village does have road access to Kathmandu. This access is due to a project undertaken about three decades ago by the Nepalese government. This mountainous region is known to be rich in natural resources, which has attracted the interest of Nepalis, as well as outsiders that are trying to make a profit. Thirty years ago, an Indian company, in partnership with the Nepalese government, sent funding for the construction of a road. Nepal then sent members of its military to build a road from Kathmandu to the Gatlang area so that materials, including zinc and other minerals, could be extracted from the Ganesh Himal Mountain. Since the Nepalese government completed this project, it has been easier for locals to access Kathmandu and, eventually, easier for tourists to access Gatlang. The very same road is still in use today and has never undergone any major renovations.

Gatlang Village has between three hundred and three hundred and fifty households with a total population of approximately eighteen hundred people. The people in this area are ethnically Tamang and they speak the Tamang language for daily interactions. Surrounding the residential areas are belts of land used for agriculture. The upper belt is used to grow crops such as beans and potatoes, while maize and millet are grown in the lower belt. Most people farm as a means of subsistence and few people are able to profit economically from the crops that they grow. There is a local school, about a five minute walk from the residential area. The school uses the standard Nepali curriculum and offers classes up to grade ten. Situated above the village at 2500 meters (7500 ft.), about an hour walk up the mountainside, is the monastery of Gatlang Village.



Map (Source: <http://swasthyakhabar.com/2014/12/18150.html>)



Gatlang

## Earthquake Effects

The earthquake on April 25 had particularly devastating effects on Gatlang Village because of its close proximity to the epicenter. There were ten casualties within the village. About thirty to forty percent of the houses were completely flattened and another fifty percent were rendered uninhabitable due to damage. The original residential area is completely empty. Even those whose homes were undamaged felt scared to return to them because of the continual aftershocks. The villagers constructed temporary shelters higher up on the mountain, where they will live until the monsoon season ends and rebuilding begins. The school and the

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monastery both sustained significant damage. The monastery was previously two stories high. The top story was completely destroyed by the earthquake and is now nonexistent. The first story was too badly damaged to be salvageable. The roof of the monastery was destroyed and local people constructed a tin roof in order to protect the sacred statues, which, luckily, remained intact inside the building. Gatlang Village is also home to many Tibetan manis and chortens that are estimated to be between seven hundred and eight hundred years old. Chortens are stone structures that memorialize an individual after they have passed away. Manis are similar structures, but are instead inscribed with prayers of protection for the villagers. Several of these structures were reduced to rubble.

In addition to the physical and cultural damage, Gatlang Village is still experiencing the economic effects of the earthquake. Before the earthquake, some villagers relied on the growing tourism industry and the economy was increasingly stable. Afterwards, however, the economy was plunged into turmoil. During the 2014 season, an estimated fifteen hundred tourists traveled through Gatlang Village. The upcoming tourist season in October 2015 was not expected to be nearly as promising. Several governments around the world advised their citizens against travel to Nepal. Widespread media coverage also frightened away many potential tourists. Additionally, landslides occurred in neighboring regions; one that was particularly deadly in Langtang valley destroyed an entire village. These landslides dissuaded people from traveling to the Rasuwa District, where many people have not only lost their homes, their schools, and their precious religious sites, but also their main source of income.

The Nepalese government did very little to help the people of Gatlang Village. Originally, the government provided the village with 7,000 Nepalese rupees (about 70 USD). Additional contributions brought the total government support to about 22,000 rupees (~220 USD). Several NGOs have provided the village with rice and tarpaulins to serve as temporary shelters. Monasteries in Kathmandu have also done what they can to offer support to the villagers. Despite these efforts, there is inadequate money or resources to restore Gatlang Village.



*Prayer house**Residential home*

### **My Project**

With help from local community leaders, I developed a proposal for the reconstruction of the monastery in Gatlang Village, as well as the construction of several new buildings, including a Thangka painting school (a traditional Tibetan painting style), an orphanage, and an Amchi medical center (a traditional Tibetan healer).

The monastery is an extremely important cultural center for both Gatlang Village and the surrounding villages. The exact age of the monastery is a mystery, even to the locals, but it has been estimated that it could be over one thousand years old. About five hundred years ago, the monastery was moved to its current location, where it has a prominent view of the village below. The people of Gatlang follow the Kagyukpa School of Tibetan Buddhism. They hold rituals at the monastery on the tenth, fifteenth, twenty-fifth, and thirtieth of each month, as well as on full and new moons. Two or three times each year, people travel to this monastery from several villages in order to take part in Buddhist festivals. The current monastery had never undergone renovations and was becoming too small to host the considerable number of people it serves. Earthquake destruction had rendered the monastery unusable. There are only two monks living in and taking care of the monastery. An additional twenty to twenty-five monks live in the village below, as there is no room to house them in the monastery. The monastery has always been used only for celebratory purposes, as there is also no space for classrooms in which to train monks.

One of the reasons the Gatlang monastery is so important is because of a nearby lake, known by local people as Chodingmo. This lake is thought to be home to powerful water spirits and is an extremely important part of the Buddhist faith of the villagers. One or two times per year, the lake hosts large festivals for worshipping water gods. These are attended not only by local villagers, but also by people from surrounding areas. Even Hindus believe the lake to be sacred. When the Nepalese military was constructing the road to Gatlang, several Hindu men spotted a snake in the lake. This was an auspicious sign, as snakes hold important symbolism in the Hindu faith. Some view the snake as a form of the goddess Parvati. Thus, the lake is also referred to as Parvati Kund. The lake is only a five minute walk from the monastery. This close proximity adds to the importance of the monastery for both the people of Gatlang and those from surrounding villages.



*Monastery*



*Monastery*



*Prayer wheel*



*Stupas*





*Monastery caretaker*

## Conclusion

There were many moments during my trip to Nepal when I was exposed to unfamiliar sights and sounds, moments when I stepped out of my comfort zone and soaked in new experiences. But, as I sat in a potato field in rural Nepal, overlooking the picturesque Himalayas, I felt incredibly comfortable and at home. I spent only a few days in Gatlang Village, but, while I was there, I harvested potatoes in the field, visited a yak cheese factory, and met schoolchildren who asked me about life in America. I had experiences that many people never imagine, and, for that, I am thankful. I was inspired by all of the people I met, both in Gatlang Village and in Kathmandu. They were so kind and welcoming, even though many of them had recently lost everything because of the earthquake. I am especially thankful to Dr. Sherpa and her family, who made this entire experience possible for me.

My time in Nepal has inspired me to spend the rest of my life exploring, learning, and, most importantly, helping others. I think I learned as much in one month in Nepal as in an entire semester of college. I see now that the best way to learn about a culture or a place is to actually experience it. I hope to focus my studies on indigenous cultures of South and Central Asia. I aspire to work for a non-governmental organization and to help people displaced by natural disasters and political crises.



**Kylie Rose Doran** is currently a junior at the Pennsylvania State University. She is a Schreyer scholar majoring in anthropology and Russian with minors in Arabic and history. Kylie is one of the founding members of Penn State's Student Society for Indigenous Knowledge and hopes to continue researching indigenous communities around the world. She is also an active member of several other organizations on campus, including [Penn State Alternative Breaks](#) and [Lion Scouts](#). After graduation, she plans to attend graduate school and eventually earn a PhD.