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Bhimsen's folly

The tower should be reconstructed with scientific plans, not with nationalistic fervour

- ABHI SUBEDI (/author/abhi+subedi), Kathmandu

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Feb 21, 2016-The post-quake Nepali state occasionally gives signals of waking up, as though with a splash of consciousness to restore the lost morale of the Nepali people, who are still reeling under the weight of difficulties of high magnitude. The human cost of last year's massive earthquake is colossal. The time span from that fatal day to the present has been the worst in the entire history of Nepal. Thousands of people lost their lives in that earthquake. Its impact on politics was huge. Parties that were adamant reduced their intransigence and agreed to create and promulgate a constitution. But the Madhesi parties did not accept it. With a long and harsh blockade of supplies from India, the agitation and mysticism surrounding geo-religious and political interests made the situation worse. Although the sufferings of the earthquake victims were approached from a minimalist position, making the constitution acceptable to all appeared to receive broader attention.

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(A)pathetic state

However, the state's indifference to the sufferings of the victims of the calamities and those of the common people of Madhes and hills looked almost unbelievable. The ordeal invited chaos. A strange sense of seeking order in chaos and accepting that as the order of the day became a dominant force in Nepali politico-ethical psyche. Oil became the synecdoche of a bizarre political consciousness, of identity politics and of the Nepal-India legendary and close ties.

According to poets and political analysts, the nation lived by selling petrol in the black market. After India released the supply, ironically, the black marketeers who are there in all political parties, governments and small businesses, appear to operate even more comfortably. Despite India's easy supply of oil, the sadistic profiteers are perpetuating the warlike situation. Petrol jerkins and gas cylinders are carried about in the open.

A number of earthquake victims have died from cold. Others have bravely declared that they would not wait for any help from the government. The irony is that the major bulk of the aid has come, or stands promised, from the generous world. Something is wrong (eulogised form) in the state of Denmark, goes the opening sentence in Shakespeare's Hamlet. Something is wrong in the state of Nepal, too. Bridges struck by the quake remain broken. The ancient heritage sites remain in rubble. Many precious monuments, icons and wooden structures were dumped with the rubble. The nation started debating about its priorities.

The most natural psyche at such moments is to emerge out of the rubble. Nations that have suffered from calamities and hit by human-made catastrophes rise like a phoenix from the ashes. But nations that rise from the rubble have one thing in common—strong human bonding and a sense of renouncement of selfishness. Calamities should make people honest. But seeing the course of events and trends in Nepal, we began to suspect that honesty and human bonding received the least priority in these hard times. But something is emerging! We should listen and wait. A strong sense of nationalism is being epitomised in the Dharahara (the Bhimsen tower) metaphor. Suddenly, almost overnight, we have heard that the nation has decided to erect the Bhimsen tower. The government and leaders will donate their precious one-month salary for the symbolic act of erecting Dharahara. They will make it possible by galvanising energy through such generous acts. I remember the expression 'the iconic structure' for Dharahara used by the Society of Nepalese Architects. Senior architect Sudarsan Raj Tiwari in his essay "Two Nepalese Monuments" calls Dharahara—hara being the evocation of Shiva—the monumental structure that was built to make up for the humiliation Nepal suffered in the Sugauli Treaty of 1816. He indicates that Queen Lalit Tripurasundari, who gave Mukhtiar Bhimsen Thapa the permission to build it, was sensitive enough to realise that it was needed to alleviate the pain of humiliation. Dharahara was built in 1826 but was ripped by the big earthquake of 1933. It was restored with the same spirit again.

Misplaced priorities

Architect Tiwari says that Hector Oldfield, a British surgeon at the Kathmandu Residency from 1850-1873, was 'astonished' by the feats of its architecture in his remarkable memoirs published in his illustrated book Sketches from Nepal, but he called it 'Bhimsen's folly'. Such ambivalence of the colonial time expressions are productively analysed by an Indian-born theorist Homi K Bhabha, which is not a subject of discussion here. Whether or not the monument erected in the nondescript corner of the Kathmandu polis awed the Britishers in India, its emotional value for the natives was, and as can be seen, massive. I commented earlier, "I have certain caveats about priorities. The reconstruction of Bhimsen Tower is essential but this monument should be treated a little differently...I would like to put the construction of Bhimsen Tower under a different scheme than those of the other heritage sites in terms of the intangible value of culture" ('Dreams to rebuild', August 23, Page 7).

Building Dharahara by evoking passionate fervour is a nationalist project, and this idea is tinged with an unannounced longing of the people in power to go down in history as the makers of this monument. That is an absurd psyche if anybody is acting with that today. The colossal tragedy suffered by the earthquake victims is not addressed; the centuries-old renowned cultural sites that tell a history of people, culture, politics, power and aesthetics still lie in rubble; the economy is ridiculously and without resistance being run by black marketeers; the responsible people and political leaders, cartels and syndicates are hatching schemes to make money at the cost of the people. Rebuilding Dharahara by shifting attention away from all the above is an unbelievable absurdity. The tower should be reconstructed with scientific plans, not with nationalistic fervour. Any other act will be a folly. There is no alternative to acting with priorities in any task of cultural restoration.

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