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*Langtang*

# Rebirth after the catastrophe



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***Access April 2015 Ashok Bhurtyal, Dushala Adhikari on vitamin A in Nepal here***
***Access May 2015 Ashok Bhurtyal Vision here***
***Access 5 May 2015 New York Times on Langtang here***
***Access 17 May 2015 The Guardian on Langtang here***




*Our country of Nepal is between India to the south and China to the north. Langtang is circled. The capital city of Kathmandu where we live is starred*

*Kathmandu.* The earthquakes on 25 April and 12 May have changed life here forever. Our report here is about the village of Langtang, in the mountains north of Kathmandu. The utter destruction of Langtang by a massive ice and rockfall and avalanche caused by the first earthquake has been *news all round the world.* As a family we (Ashok and Dushala) have a special reason to experience intense sadness at the obliteration of Langtang, which we visited most recently in early April this year and which was a special second home for us. Dozens of friends and colleagues who we knew as our grandmothers and grandfather, aunts and uncles, sisters and brothers, also of our little girl Aayushi, are dead. We do not know how to describe our grief.



*The village of Langtang, 3500 metres, as it was until April. We visited and worked with the people of Langtang regularly since 2003*

*Photograph: Dushala Adhikari*



*The Langtang valley has many Himalayan mountains to the north. This is Langtang Lirung, at 7,234 metres – picture taken in early April*

*Photograph: Ashok Bhurtyal*

***Learning from the people***

There is another reason for us to be writing about Langtang here in *WN*. We visited Langtang regularly since 2003, and researched and wrote papers always with the generous support of the villagers, on their way of life, how they ensured food security in difficult circumstances, and their knowledge of how to protect the health of their children.

What we came to realise is that we had more to learn from them about nutrition – or nourishment, in the full sense of the word as expressed in *WN* – than we had to teach them. As country people who have lived in the same place for many generations, they had deep knowledge of the value of very many plants for food and for medicine. Much of what they knew is not in textbooks. This is not a reason to doubt what they said and did. In Box 1 below we give an example of their closeness to other components of the living world. It stands to reason that country people will discover what local plants protect against deficiency, with vitamin A because they need to see in the dark. This is one of many reasons we have welcomed statements from the official International Conference on Nutrition *Framework for Action* (1*):*

> Strengthen local food production and processing, especially by smallholders and family farmers, giving special attention to women's empowerment.
>
> Promote the diversification of crops including underutilised traditional crops, more production of fruits and vegetables, and appropriate production of animal-source products as needed, applying sustainable food production and natural resource management practices.

What we have also learned from the people of Langtang is how to live wisely and well. By their example they have taught us the ethics we will always hold dear. This is their gift and their legacy to us. We will always remember.

*Box 1*

## The children of Langtang and the Nepali highlands



*Children of Langtang. The Nepali uplands are not reached by the vitamin A supplementation programmes. But there Is now no evidence of widespread clinical vitamin A deficiency there*

*This is an edited from the April WN commentary by Ashok and Dushala on vitamin A.*

One lesson we learned from our work in Langtang and working with the people, is that settled communities, including those living in difficult circumstances, know how to look after themselves. Thus, many Nepali parents have always protected their children against vitamin A deficiency in their own ways. Our own daughter Aayushi has not received vitamin A capsules although this is required as government policy. She is among the nearly 10 per cent of Nepali children who do not take these capsules. She is recognised as physically and intellectually more advanced than her peers of similar social and economic position, who are given vitamin A capsules twice a year. So what does she eat? We prepare all her meals at home, from grains, legumes, vegetables, and fruits grown in villages by ordinary farmers, which we buy in the local market where labourers buy their fresh foods.

Besides our daughter, we have seen many children in the mountain communities of Nepal such as those in the Langtang valley, who never receive Nepal's most common health and nutrition intervention – the high dose vitamin A capsules. But they are not night-blind. They do not exhibit more deficiencies than those shown by children given vitamin A supplements. So what do they eat? They eat indigenous foods grown in their own villages and wild foods collected frequently from nearby forests or grasslands in their Himalayas. Parents there have always known the value of these plants, centuries before retinol and carotenoids were discovered. Three of our own pictures of some of these foods are shown above.

Impoverished communities are usually in need of and appreciate basic primary health care of the type that helps them to help themselves. But they are resourceful.

***The history of Langtang***



*Centuries-old houses in the Langtang valley show the indigenous skills that local communities have developed over many generations.*

*Photograph: Ashok Bhurtyal*

Nature-human interaction in Langtang started over a thousand years ago when Tibetans from the north discovered the *Beyul* (hidden valley) of Langtang, following the trail of the great shaggy bovid the wild yak (which they came to believe was divine incarnation, showing them the road to prosperity). Over the centuries, people gained knowledge, mastered skills and developed wisdom that enabled them to adopt a way of living that respects the natural environment, maintaining symbiotic relationship with other forms of life such as plants, animals, birds and insects.

By 1954 Langtang was 'discovered' also by explorers from the south, some of whom later recommended that the natural treasures of Langtang be protected (2). The Langtang National Park was gazetted in 1976 to conserve the natural resources, promote tourism and restrict and redefine local people's lives to fit with the park's conservation goals. Tourism gradually started to flourish as more and more visitors found Langtang unique compared with other places.

By the early 2000s, Langtang was the third most popular trekking destination in Nepal, following Everest and the Annapurna regions, and in 2014 alone, the Langtang National Park had over 100,000 visitors. But the economic benefits of tourism were not appropriately channelled in the best interests of the people of Langtang, who have been protecting the place throughout the centuries of their living there. Much more has always needed to be done to achieve the full potential of complementarity between organised attempts to conserve nature, and people's necessary ways to secure their livelihoods (3).



*Recently built tourist hotels and resting houses can be seen here within Langtang village. They were all destroyed in the April avalanche*

*Photograph: Dushala Adhikari*

The Langtang people experimented with the 'market' approach to tourism, but with much cost to the natural resources such as the forest. With tourism increasingly becoming a source of substantial income, traditional occupations such as herding yaks, sheep and farming cereals and vegetables became less attractive. With the onslaught by consumerist market economy, coupled with more money becoming available, traditional dresses became worn mostly only by women and the elderly.

In the past few years, the number of hotels and hostels increased sharply. Many of these new constructions were built copying urban designs popular in Kathmandu, with little or no consideration for the traditional architecture of Langtang. With growing tourism, traditional ways of life were eroding. All these things were threatening the long developed and adapted relationship between nature and the Langtang people. Then came the earthquake.

### *The devastation*

On 25 April an earthquake of 7.6 on the Richter scale, the worst in Nepal since 1934, violently shook 35 out of 75 districts of the country, killing more than10,000 people, injuring very many more, and displacing 2.8 million people from their destroyed or damaged houses (4). In the Langtang valley the earthquake caused a vast avalanche of ice and rock from Mt Langtang Lirung, burying and obliterating the village. More than 400 people including locals, health workers, tourists and their guides and porters were buried under ice and rock. Most died, some were dug out. Survivors struggled with little external support and suffered several more avalanches in the subsequent two weeks.



*Photograph taken of the avalanche following the earthquake that obliterated Langtang village, with only traces of human settlement left behind*

*Photograph: Faye Kennedy*

Avalanches are not new in Langtang. Travellers and locals have told us that the Langtang Lirung range has experienced avalanches more frequently than other mountains of Nepal. We have ourselves seen some. In 2007, a bigger one fell on the Numthang rivulet, a little east from Langtang village.

Karma Ringbu Chuzang, our greatest source of knowledge about Langtang, missing since the earthquake, recalled memories of stories told by his grandparents that massive avalanches approximately two and half centuries ago, are why there is nearly a hundred metres of altitude difference between the settlements of Langtang and Mundu. Despite such warnings much needed preparation to reduce the catastrophic effects of avalanches was not done, owing to governmental apathy and the faith of the local people. This was unwise. There are for example glaciers overhanging local settlements in the upper Langtang valley. These will break off one day.

As we write, several big though smaller avalanches have followed the aftershocks of the first earthquake in the two-week period from 25 April, affecting all the ten settlements of the valley. Meanwhile about 100 survivors of the 500 villagers of Langtang have searched for their loved ones and also for household items, amid snow storms. They are very resilient people and are already planning to reconstruct.

### *Rebirth*

Instead of passively grieving the losses, the Langtang people are right now exploring all sorts of ways to transform pain and suffering into collective strengths for the recreation of their village.

*Box 2*

## Grandmother and her yaks



*A grandmother of Langtang milking one of her yaks. Despite losing sons and daughters and grandchildren in the earthquake and avalanche she was determined to stay in Langtang.*

Two weeks after the first avalanche, the old lady above (photographed by Hans Nilsson) was expected to be airlifted by a rescue helicopter and brought to Kathmandu. Government officials told her that it was too risky in Langtang because of frequent avalanches that have devastated or damaged all ten settlements in the valley. She was about to board the helicopter, but then her yaks came running close to her, crying at her and caressing her with their necks. She could not abandon her yaks and so did not board the helicopter. For the next three days, this grandmother of several children who have been left parentless by the avalanche went back to temporary cowsheds, milked her yaks and fed her grandchildren – yak milk, potatoes she dug out from the only remaining farmland, and wild vegetables collected from across the gushing Langtang river. The yaks wept with emotion, so did the grandmother and her remaining grandchildren.

*Courage and resilience*

Eventually airlifted to Kathmandu, she constantly thought of her yaks, calves, sheep and chicken. 'There is no one in Langtang now' (as all the other survivors were evacuated) 'to take care of my livestock. I want to go back, feed my animals, milk them as they need. I know the mountains and the avalanches... I will survive in the mountains but not in this hot, dirty and alien city. If I don't survive, I will die with my animals there'. When we went to dress her wounds in an open field shelter in Kathmandu, she recognised us immediately – 'please get me back to Langtang. No one in this alien city understands my language, except you people'. She wept. Her grandchildren wept. We wept together.

This old lady in her mid-seventies thinks it is a betrayal for her livestock to leave them alone in Langtang. She has all the energy and courage to struggle for life in the middle of a series of earthquakes and avalanches, in which her sons, daughters, sons in law and several of her grandchildren have died. Yet she is determined to go back to her homeland to search for her missing ones in the ice and rock debris and take care of her animals and her remaining grandchildren. But state officials, now resourced by donors and partners, do not seem to be thinking of the future of the people of Langtang and no doubt with good intentions in effect has evicted the survivors. We are inspired by the honesty and respect for nature of the people of Langtang.



*Wild asparagus, and buckwheat bread being made*
*Children in Kyangjin at lunch– cereals, pulses, vegetables, pickled herbs.*

*Photographs: Dushala Adhikari, Ashok Bhurtyal*

In the immediate term, the surviving villagers are planning to relocate to safer space in the upper Langtang valley. After initial explorations, they have identified a wider section of the valley, east of the Kyangjin monastery, at almost 4,000 metres. They want to go back to the old way of making small, inexpensive but strong houses.

The authorities have evacuated all survivors from Langtang, citing risk of further avalanches. They and some tourists are interested to help fund reconstruction of houses in Langtang. Such support needs to reinforce the traditional style of making houses which have minimal environmental impact while allowing optimal comfort for human inhabitation. One thing is for sure. Langtang people are determined not to construct any more multi-storey lodges. Instead they are thinking of small cottages.

In the longer term, we friends of the people of Langtang intend to support all efforts to restore the equilibrium in which the people have lived in harmony with nature, including animals and all living creatures. This includes revitalisation of traditional livelihood strategies such as animal husbandry and agronomy, and harvesting timber and non-timber forest products in such ways that do not create extinction of species. It includes promotion of sustainable and ecological tourism, but not heavily commercialised tourism at the expense of the environment. It also includes



*Some of the thousands of plants and flowers of the Langtang valley. The people have always known their value for food and for healing*

*Photographs: Dushala Adhikari, Ashok Bhurtyal*

rethinking nature conservation by the Langtang National Park. Ever since the park has been established there has been a conflict between the interests of Langtang people and those of the park authorities (3). Langtang people have for centuries managed to live in their sacred valley as protectors and custodians of its hidden treasures and all life there. The authorities however, identified them as the greatest problem to conservation (2). It is astounding, disappointing, and obviously wrong to perceive the people who have protected the forest, waters and pastures for centuries as an obstacle to nature conservation.

### *Food and nutrition*

The Langtang people are rich in many ways. One is their food culture. They get food from many sources. Agriculture provides them with milk and milk products (such as yak yoghurt, cheese), grains (such as buckwheat, barley) and potato. They also collect wild foods such as mushrooms, wild vegetables from high pastures and the forest, wild fruits and berries. Cultivated and collected foods have been sufficient for the Langtang people and are sustainable. There is no need for external aid in terms of food items or nutritional supplements. There is much more to be said on this.

In the more than ten years of our work with the people of Langtang, we have never seen a single undernourished child. Elderly people also appeared well nourished. There has never been discrimination against women in favour of men being better fed. Pregnant women and mothers of infants have been fed with a special meal made of vegetables, legumes, cereals, eggs, and a small amount of yak meat, all boiled in a thick soup of wild herbs having medicinal properties (5).



*In late winter, barley balls are eaten during the Tibetan New Year celebrations. Wild flowers are commonly used to make pickles or are cooked as vegetables*

*Photographs: Ashok Bhurtyal*

Throughout the history of their civilisation, the Langtang people have rebuilt their society and renewed their relationship with nature, during and after every big disaster such as avalanches which have many times over the centuries changed the landscape of the valley. We are sure that they will prove successful.

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## Status

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