

Sunaina Panthy

Community as a Path to Mental Healing

In most of Nepal's villages, afternoons are a time when life slows down. After finishing their daily chores, villagers often head to the fields, where the day's work continues in a quieter, yet steady rhythm. Our group joined them, pretending to be locals, blending in with the scenery.

We wandered into the fields, greeting the villagers as if we were long-lost neighbours. "We're here to work in the fields too," we'd say. They'd reply warmly, "Oh, you're someone's son, and you're someone's daughter," and then ask, "Where is your daughter-in-law?" Others would say, "Are you going to collect firewood later?" and we'd reply, "She's here to look after the goats. We're the daughters from that house near the river below." Sometimes they'd say, "Isn't that the son of the big man from the upper village?" Our conversations were light-hearted, a mixture of truth and jest that piqued their curiosity. We let it build until we finally revealed that we were actually a theatre troupe, preparing to perform at the *chautara* - the village square. The revelation brought laughter, breaking the ice and connecting us in shared amusement. Even so, some people still looked at us suspiciously, not fully trusting us.

Every day, we performed three plays in different villages. We'd start in the soft morning light, continue under the blazing midday sun, and end at dusk as the sun set. Nepal's geography, with its towering mountains and deep valleys, made travel difficult. During the monsoon season, landslides and mud made roads nearly impassable. But these challenges only strengthened our resolve. We travelled from the vegetable fields of Makwanpur to the highland villages of Rasuwa, the hilly parts of Gorkha, the festival in Sindhupalchowk, the villages in Kavre, the *chautaras* of Nuwakot to the temples of Lalitpur, during the *lakhe* Jatra of Bhaktapur, and in public spaces in Kathmandu. Each location added to our journey.

The monsoon rains were constant, drumming on our makeshift shelters. Yet, neither rain nor mud could dampen the spirits of the villagers who gathered to watch our performances. Their attendance, despite the weather, reminded us of the power of storytelling.

After each performance, we'd reveal ourselves as actors, and the villagers would laugh at how we had fooled them. In those moments, the line between actor and audience disappeared, and we all became part of the same story.

Our work also took us to schools, where children greeted us with wide eyes and open hearts. They were our most enthusiastic audience, and we performed plays that reflected their own lives, touching on themes of trauma, mental health, and the fear of living in an earthquake-prone land. Listening to the children's



Sunaina Panthy in a gender-based drama in earthquake affected areas in Nepal highlighting the situation of women and girls. Photo: Ben Dagani

stories, we often wondered how to compose ourselves and how to fully listen to their traumatic recollections. In some schools, we heard about a 5-year-old child who had lost her entire family, while in other cases, a mother had been buried at home. Some children had fathers crushed by their houses, while others had lost brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, grandparents, or close relatives, friends, and neighbours. Each had a tale of sorrow and loss. Through our performances, we aimed to do more than entertain; we wanted to offer comfort and healing through the language of theatre.

After watching the play, the children shared stories that reflected their mental state during the natural disaster. Among many traumatic and hopeless accounts, some students gave positive feedback. The children's responses were heartfelt. One said, "The earthquake has taught us the importance of uplifting our spirits." Another added, "We shouldn't panic during an earthquake; we should stay with our guardians." Their words echoed the lessons we incorporated into our plays, highlighting the importance of listening to and understanding one another.

Even now, when I think about that day, April 25, 2015, a Saturday afternoon, as I stood on the trembling ground during the earthquake, I remember how vehicles came to a halt, people prayed, and the air was filled with fear. The sudden shaking of the ground, the moment that disrupted our stable foundation, left all of us feeling utterly helpless. What could we do? Who could we turn to? How could we manage our emotions and the situation at hand? And even more, how could we take care of our families, neighbours, and children? The condition of the sick, the elderly, pregnant women, and new mothers was even more fragile in such a crisis. There was no place to stay, no food to eat, and the ground kept shaking about twenty-five to thirty times a day, sometimes with strong tremors, sometimes weaker. I remember it all vividly. Later, local, national, and international support for food and tents started to arrive, but the loss of beloved family members, friends, homes, and belongings brought emotional turmoil and pessimism about the future, leading to deeper mental devastation. We quickly realised the need to focus on mental health. Then, two weeks later, while rehearsing a play about the April 2015 earthquake, the ground shook again. We clung to each other, forming a human chain of resilience in the face of nature's fury.

In the months and years that followed, the earth continued to tremble, but so did our determination. We became more than actors; we became part of the healing process. Over two years, we performed four different stories: at first based on a real story; then drama for children; gender-based violence; and later how to build houses that were earthquake resilient. In total we performed more than 500 times in communities devastated by the earthquake. Each performance was a small step towards recovery, a reminder that even in the darkest times, there is light.

Through our performances, we offered more than just entertainment; we offered hope. We showed that even when life is shattered, the pieces can be picked up and put back together. Those left behind can find strength in each other, and in the face of overwhelming loss, there is always a way forward.