

Special Section Research Article

The Tin State

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Abstract

What does change look, sound, and feel like? After Nepal's 2015 earthquakes, everything is remade in tin. Walking through this newly reflective landscape, we see how things are transformed in both material and political terms, as post-disaster reconstruction proceeds in tandem with the process of post-conflict federal restructuring. This short piece of flash ethnography takes us beyond the immediate destruction and trauma into the sensory world of the post-earthquake 'tin state', offering a view into how people experience the long-term shifts in sensibility that both environmental and social change provoke.

Keywords

Flash ethnography; Nepal; disaster; development; political transition; earthquake

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Older brother's temporary shelter

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Tin used to be for rooves. The sound of rain shattering against corrugated galvanized iron (CGI) was a status symbol. Only those with regular access to cash could replace the thatch, which absorbed the wet staccato of monsoon. Some opted for locally mined slate roof tiles—even more expensive than tin—but stone, too, swallowed the sound of water. Tin was more *nouveau riche*, garish in its loudness. Not only in sound, but also in color, adorned in bright green or blue paint competing with the trees and sky.

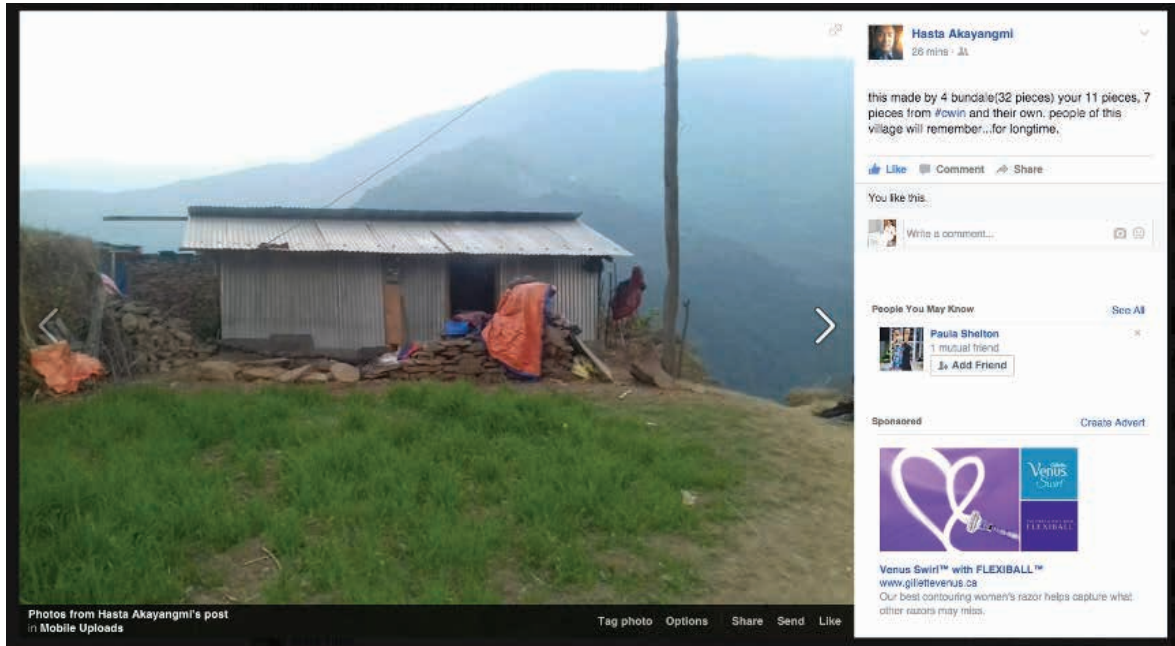
All this changed after Nepal's 2015 earthquakes. With the old mud, stone, and thatch houses brought to their knees, suddenly everything was made of tin. House walls, toilets (not only the walls, but the basin itself), schools (now called Temporary Learning Centres), tables, goat sheds, electric meter boxes, chicken coops, community buildings, even mattresses.

"Welcome to our *jasta rajya*," says older brother with a twinkle in his eye, as we walk through this reflective landscape. "Welcome to our tin state." He knows that I know the area well, after 20 years of living

with his and other families. But now he assumes the authoritative air of a trekking guide showing his client the sights for the first time. His seemingly simple words hold a double entendre.

It is a tin state in the material sense—an emergent built environment structured almost entirely by this single metallic form. But it is also a tin state in the political sense, held together by ad hoc solutions. It is August 2015, four months since the Gorkha Earthquake on April 25, and a month before Nepal's new constitution will finally be promulgated on September 20, after a nearly decade-long process of political transition following the end of the Maoist-state civil conflict in 2006.

I know older brother to be a critical observer of local politics who maintains a rare neutrality that gains the respect of all parties, and suddenly see that he is reminding me of the fragile dynamism of everything: the ongoing political process, the structures in which he and others live, the very land on which we stand. Things change fast. Whatever I thought I



Hasta Akyangmi's Facebook post, dated January 14, 2016.

understood from my last visit just weeks before the earthquake is now radically different—but not only because of the seismic tremor. As we look out over the *jasta rajya* glinting in the sun on the hill-sides below, we both begin to laugh, at the absurd impossibility of truly understanding anything before it changes, I think. It is both the same place and a new place, all at once.

Sheets repurposed from destroyed houses are coupled with shiny new lengths of metal, composited to provide immediate functionality, yet without tried and tested foundations. The resulting shelters incorporate detritus from both immediate post-disaster relief efforts and the last several years of development initiatives. As I visit friends around the village, I notice plastic rice sacks from the World Food Programme providing extra waterproofing between layers of tin; cardboard boxes from the Korean government making good seating mats; scraps of USAID tents “from the American people” serving as latrine doors. These circumstances enable creativity, but also leave space for negotiation between interests, some more benevolent than others. A friend’s father asks, “Why do outsiders think that satisfaction can be bought with a toothbrush?”

We received so many ‘hygiene kits’ from different organizations right after the earthquake... but we had no water to brush our teeth with since our water lines were ruptured ... Who will fix that?”

The gauzy webs of social media intertwine with the harsh materiality of the tin landscape. Telling stories of survival, asking for support, honoring the dead, seeking those missing—all of this is digitally mediated on devices lovingly bought with remittance income or distributed by NGOs. Older brother himself is not too active on Facebook or Twitter, being of the over-50 generation who finds new technology generally off-putting, but he enjoys it when his teenage son shares his feed. “I can see what relatives, friends, and neighbours are thinking,” he notes, “maybe even what my son is thinking.”

I too find Facebook newly reassuring when I return to Canada. It gives me a way to stay connected. Hasta Akyangmi’s Facebook post, for instance, dated January 14, 2016, brings me straight into the mechanics of the *jasta rajya*.

Building *each* such shelter requires at least four bundles of corrugated iron. Hasta’s post is addressed to the informal networks

mobilized to procure “your 11 pieces”: a collective of international donors collaborating with the logistical know-how and commitment of a Kathmandu-based group of young urban Nepalis and long-term resident foreigners. Thanks for the “7 pieces” are directed to CWIN, a well-established NGO. All of these pieces are added to bundles already distributed by the international organizations officially charged with delivering relief. The *jasta rajya* belongs to all of these individuals and organizations, encompassing their ways of knowing in its familiar structural form.

No one notices the sound of rain on the roof anymore.

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