

And It Shook All

By: Syeda A. Rizvi

Non-Fiction

It was the pale autumn morning of October 8th, 2005. I was preparing breakfast and listening to the sounds of automobiles in the streets. The loud music coming from my neighbor's house overpowered the honking of the cars. The doorbell rang; my dad was back from his morning walk. He smiled and said; "Hameed's son is back from boarding school, now we will enjoy rock music daily." He turned on the TV, and I left him and mom talking in the living room.

From the kitchen window, I looked at the pomegranate tree. Some sparrows were sitting on its thin branches. The red birdhouse looked as beautiful and as prominent as ever. I decided to put some food in it. At that very moment, I felt the earth stirring beneath my feet. I held the kitchen counter with both my hands to keep myself from falling. I heard my mom's scream; she and dad were running out of the room. In an instant we were in the backyard; everything was shaking, and the birds had forsaken the trees. It was not windy, but the thin branches of the pomegranate tree were swaying in the air as if some invisible hand shook them. The red birdhouse fell on the ground with a bang and smashed into pieces.

It was an earthquake, the most unpredictable phenomenon in the world.

Surprise, But Not a Good One!

Robert Reitherman, the author of *Earthquakes and Engineering: An International History*, explains that an earthquake is distinct from other natural disasters because of its unpredictable nature. In his essay, "Earthquake Mythology" he compares an earthquake with other natural hazards,

In storms, for example, the wind starts to blow, then it blows harder. The sky darkens. There is some thunder and lightning, then more. The storm does not pounce on us all at once,

unannounced. A flood is usually preceded by prolonged rainfall. The wildfire is understandable as a large-scale version of the fires humans built in their caves and campsites since Paleolithic time. But earthquakes, unless preceded by a number of small foreshocks (and more often, a small earthquake leads to nothing larger), come without warning and are easily conceptualized as something supernatural.

The element of surprise in the earthquake of October 8th caused more than 87,000 deaths.

Plates

Lahore, the city in which I grew up, experiences mild tremors once or twice a year. When I was a little girl, the tremors hit the city several times during one year. Whenever the earth shook, everyone ran out of their houses into an open space. After every tremor, my father checked the walls and the roof of the house. Once I asked him about the cause and reason of an earthquake. He told me that the earth is situated on plates, and when they move and collide the result is an earthquake. I was so fascinated with the image of the plate, that I put a piece of cake on a plate and shook it until it fell. That was my self-created earthquake.

Years later, when I saw the real destruction caused by the movement of plates, I was frightened.

Banyan Tree

My grandparents lived in a small village named Alipur. I often visited them during summer vacation. The Hawaii (house) was spacious, with a big central yard. There was a fountain in the middle, and I loved to see the birds bathing in the water during a hot summer noon. It was my grandfather's routine to go for an evening walk. Sometimes he took me with him. A quarter of a mile from home, there was a big maidan (ground) and in the middle of that maidan was a Banyan tree. It was one tree but looked like a cluster of trees. When any of the areal roots of a Banyan tree touches the ground, it gradually develops into a trunk, and over

years and decades, it becomes impossible to recognize the original trunk. It was one tree with a lot of trunks shading the ground around it. The remarkable phenomenon of the Banyan tree was its dark and cool shade. An old man sat in the shade of the tree on a crumpled, dusty, brown rug. Sometimes he looked like a part of the tree. Like the other village people, grandpa gave him food. He never bothered to greet anyone and never did he say thanks. At that time, I thought he was crazy because his finger was usually pointed to the sky. He often repeated one sentence, "You may never know what will happen next - every day brings a surprise."

On the 8th, thousands of people going for work did not know that they were looking at the faces of their loved ones for the last time.

Anger of Earth

My grandma told me a story once, which stated that crimes and misdeeds always leave a scar on the Earth's heart. Whenever she sees innocence suffering, she is pained. When she sees something good, she breaths softly, and it is the invigorating breeze everyone enjoys. An increase in crime deepens the wounds on the Earth's heart. Her pain and anger grows enormously, and she sobs. Her sobs cause the tremors. When she sees that her warning is unheeded and people are not ready to mend their ways, she cries. When she cries, her body shakes, shaking everything along with it.

By the 15th of October, the death toll had risen to more than 106,000. I wondered how intense Earth's anger was?

The Music Stopped!

On the 8th, the earth started shaking at 8:50 in the morning. Dad, mom, and I were standing in the backyard. My dad looked at my widely opened eyes, held my hand and said, "It will end in a few seconds, don't worry." My eyes were fixed on the wall surrounding our house. In an instant, it swayed and, bending like the back of a ninety-year-old man, collapsed. The bricks, scattered widely by the violence of the earth, crushed the flowerbeds. The earthquake was not silent. It sounded as if dozens of trucks were

moving inside the ground. The music from Hameed's house was still audible in the cracking and smashing of the earthquake. I heard my mom's scream; I looked at her finger pointing toward Hameed's house. Like an autumn leaf, the whole building shook and fell. The noise was deafening, the cloud of dust arising from the rubble choked us. The music stopped.

The earthquake lasted for almost three minutes. Those were the longest and most unforgettable three minutes in the lives of thousands of people.

Does it really matter?

In Japanese mythology, Namazu is a giant catfish. It lives in the depth of the ocean. When it wriggles, an earthquake occurs. In Greek mythology, Poseidon, the god of the sea, carries a trident or a Spearfish. Poseidon's one name is Earthshaker. Whenever he strikes the ground with his trident, the earth shakes.

In Indian mythology, four elephants standing on the back of turtle are carrying the earth. The turtle is riding a Cobra. All are standing still. When one of these animals is exhausted, it moves and earth trembles and shakes.

Aristotle explained the reason behind the phenomenon of the earthquake in an entirely different way. A combination of rain, wind, and heat creates an earthquake. The earth in itself is dry, and the moisture comes from rain. The sunlight warms the rainwater, which in return produces wind. The rainwater also penetrates into the deeper layers of the earth. The heat of the sun converts the water into vapors and wind in the underground caverns. When this wind blows, it creates an earthquake.

Karl Steinbrugge, professor of structural design at the University of California, and the author of *Earthquakes, Volcanoes, and Tsunami: An Anatomy of Hazards* mentions, "The supernatural in one form or another has dominated the explanations of earthquakes and their effects until the development of the science of seismology."

No matter what the cause of an earthquake is; whenever it occurs, it leaves behind unforgettable tales of woe and sorrow. The earthquake of October 8th displaced 2.8 million people.

Magnitude

The earthquake was one of the most devastating natural disasters in the history of Pakistan. The tremors, which marked 8.2 on the Richter scale, ran throughout the country. The quake was shallow, only fifteen miles deep, but that was why it caused such enormous damage.

The Northern area of Pakistan is a mountainous region, and the devastation caused by the earthquake in that area was colossal. The infrastructure was so severely damaged that the villages and hamlets in the valleys became almost inaccessible. The schools and offices usually opened at 8 in the morning, and the earthquake started at 8:50. Thousands of children studying in their classrooms were buried under the rubble of their schools. The emergency arrangements of the hospitals were insufficient to deal with the crisis. Moreover, many hospital buildings had also collapsed.

Entire towns and villages were effaced from the surface of the earth.

Empty Valley

Two days after the earthquake hit the country; the government announced that volunteers would be needed to provide relief to the northern area, and I decided to go. The distance between Lahore and Muzzafarabad (the capital city of the northern area) is about 314 miles. Typically, it takes about six hours to reach there. But at that time, it took us twelve hours to reach the periphery of the city. The property and infrastructure damage along the road in the affected area was enormous. However, the temporary bridges and by-pass roads built by the army made the journey possible. At some places, damaged vehicles were piled up. The Army relief team, the first ones to reach that area, had pulled those vehicles from underneath the boulders and had removed the bodies from them. As we were traveling, one of my fellow volunteers pointed to a valley and said, "This is where Balakot once stood." I looked out of the window of the bus and saw a desolate ruin.

In the winter of 2004, I visited Balakot on a class trip. It was a small hilly town located at the base of a mountain, with a

population of nearly 30,000. Balakot was a central marketplace in the area and was famous for its resorts, lakes, and springs. The view of the valley from the top of the mountain was pictorial. The winding road curled around the mountain like a vine. The rows of houses on the sides of the mountains reaching the bed of the deep valley looked picturesque. Wreaths of smoke were curling up from the chimneys of many houses, as people in the village burnt wood to keep their houses warm and for cooking. The air of the village had a hint of the smell of burning wood.

The earthquake erased the flourishing town. Not even a single person in Balakot survived. The air smelled of death.

Water

Our team reached the relief camp at night. The Army's Disaster Management Group had settled the relief camp. It was a small city built of tents. One comparatively large tent was the emergency field hospital, with the facility to perform emergency surgery. Our group leader told us that we had twenty-four-hour access to the supplies area. It contained food and water, blankets, bedding and some warm clothes (mostly government-supplied, along with some public donations). While looking at the quilts, I remembered that on our way to the relief camp I had seen small groups of people who had lit fires to keep themselves warm. Maybe all of them had lost their homes. The temperature of the northern area in October falls to subzero, and snowfall starts in early November. It was freezing.

During the first day in the camp, our supplies seemed sufficient. But every passing hour brought some more victims to the camp. At that time, I realized that the most precious element was the water. It finished quickly. It was the duty of our group to make a list of required items, and water was always at the top of the list. Every day two trucks loaded with water bottles arrived from Islamabad. The supply became insufficient because the earthquake had completely damaged the water supply of Muzaffarabad. On the third day, the water crisis reached its zenith. The people of the city had also come for water, and their queue seemed miles long. Water finished in an instant. The Chief of the Army's Disaster

Management Group arrived to control the situation, spoke about the extent of the damage, and promised that the government was doing their utmost to fix the situation.

On the fifth day of our stay, two bodies were brought to the camp. According to the doctor, the cause of death was dehydration.

A Visit to the Village

My parents and I visited Alipur in 2007 after the death of my grandfather. In the spacious central yard, the sparrows were bathing in the water. The summer heat was intense. We stayed there for a few hours and took grandma with us on our way back. I told my dad that I wanted to see the Banyan tree.

The trees had grown some more trunks, and the shade had deepened. The place of the old man under the Banyan tree was empty, but I could still imagine him sitting there in tattered clothes and saying, "You may never know what will happen tomorrow, every day brings a surprise."