

Nepal Langtang

- Paradise Lost

Matti Munnukka

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PARADISE LOST**

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by Annukka Klinge

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Foreword

On April 24, 2015 at 11:56 am, Nepal was shaken by an earthquake with a magnitude of 7.8. Its epicentre was in the province of Gorkha, halfway between the cities of Kathmandu and Pokhara. Even though the epicentre was more than a hundred kilometres away from Langtang, its effects were felt very strongly there. At the height of about 6000 metres, huge blocks of ice were split off from the hanging glaciers of the highest mountain in the region, Langtang Lirung. They fell hundreds of metres downwards and hit the ground with tremendous force, causing ice, stones and landslides to pass over cliffs and land in the valley of Langtang, smothering and destroying Langtang, Ghorela Tabela and other villages nearly three kilometres lower, and a large part of Langtang's upper valley between the villages. The landslides caused strong pyroclastic air and dust flow, which destroyed forests also on the hillside opposite. At least half of the 435 inhabitants of the village of Langtang and many travellers died within a couple of minutes of the earthquake. Only some of the bodies have been recovered, since numerous aftershocks endangered the lives of the remaining inhabitants and rescue personnel. At the end, it was decided that all the inhabitants of the valley would be evacuated for the duration of the summer monsoon, and rescue efforts would be suspended.

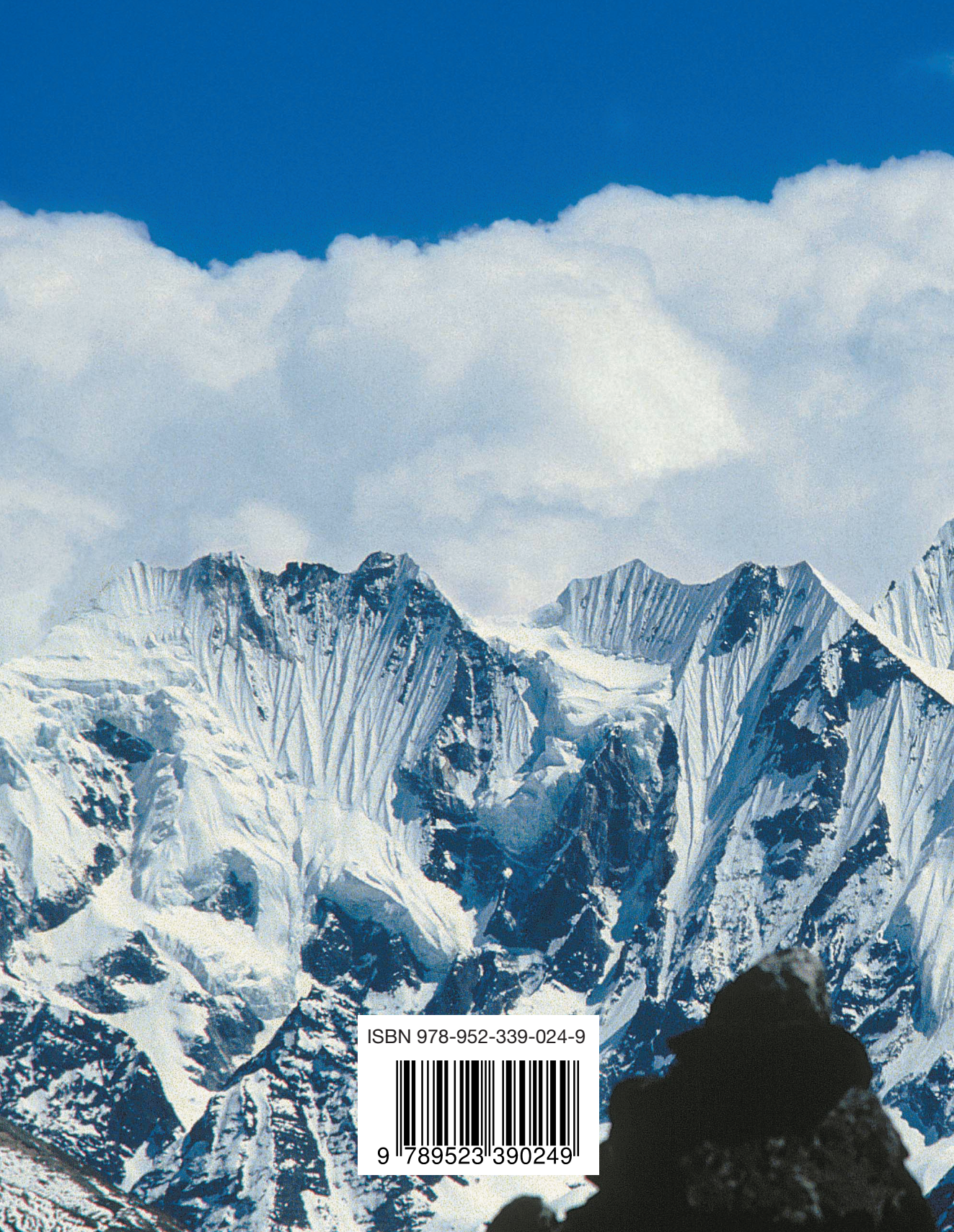
Nepal has been prone to earthquakes ever since the Indian tectonic plate collided with the Asian plate about 45 million years ago. In the collision, the Indian plate was pushed under the Asian plate. As a result, lighter types of rock in the frontal parts of the Asian plate were squeezed upwards like toothpaste from a tube, and the Himalayan Mountains were born. The Himalayas still rise upwards at the rate of two metres per century. The thrust force creates pressure within the earth, and these are released in the form of big earthquakes every 75 years or so.

Langtang was an uninhabited mountain valley for the first ten thousand years after the Ice Age. The upper valley, running from east to west, was originally V-shaped, but was worked by the Ice Age into a U-shape, giving birth to the valley of Langtang. As the ice withdrew and the climate warmed, the bottom of the valley was shaped by currents formed by the melting ice and by ice itself into the shape it has today. In the last ten thousand years, Langtang valley has been shaken by many earthquakes,

which have caused numerous ice, snow and landslides. They have shaped in many ways the surface earth of the valley. The first earthquake we know about took place in the year 1255. According to research by French geologists (Laurent Bollinger and others), its epicentre was northeast of Kathmandu. In 1344, 89 years later, the next big earthquake hit the other end of the same fault line, in the Nepalese Himalayas to the west of Kathmandu. After that there were no earthquakes for six hundred years, before the big quake of 1934, whose epicentre was in the same place as the 1255 earthquake. At a congress held in the spring of 2015 in Kathmandu, French geologists prophesied that another large earthquake is imminent in the same fault line to the west of Kathmandu, just as in 1344. Only a couple of weeks later the French prophecy was fulfilled. This time the earthquakes took place 81 years from each other.

Thus, the valley of Langtang has been shaken in the last millennium by three big earthquakes, in 1255, 1934 and in 2015. In 1255 the valley was almost certainly uninhabited, in 1934 there were at most twenty families living in the village of Langtang, and the valley had not even been properly charted. When H.W. Tilman visited in 1949, as the first Western person to do so, there were altogether 30 families living there. When I was trekking there for the first time in 1985, the village of Langtang was still much in the same state. There were only two small guesthouses for trekkers. Both of them had been operating only for a few years. State guesthouses had been opened in Kyenzin Gompa and Ghorela Tabela to take care of trekkers. Further down in the river valley there were two more small guesthouses. In the next three decades the number of travellers grew rapidly, and this year in the village of Langtang alone there were 55 hotels, which were all destroyed as a result of the earthquake. The village of Langtang, which had been built in a precarious place to begin with, was completely destroyed.

I first travelled to India and Nepal in the summer of 1984. That was a hair-raising trip which included a great deal of trouble and hardship. Half a year after returning home, in the winter of 1985, I couldn't hold myself back any longer and impulsively bought airplane tickets to Nepal in the middle of my university semester. A week later I was already in Kathmandu and went trekking in Langtang for two weeks. This book describes that trip in February-March 1985.



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