

The Year We Didn't Dance

Teej with Laliguras, and the sisterhood that carried us through a hard year for Nepal

By **Alina Roy** · Chicagoland

We practiced for weeks. Then, when Teej came, we decided not to dance.

It's taken me a while to write about that evening.

For me, Teej has always been a celebration of Nepali sisterhood. I've been part of Laliguras for more than two years, and every Teej has meant red saris, green pote, music and a lot of laughter. This year was different.

On August 26, a glacier collapsed above Langtang and sent water and debris rushing down the Trishuli River, sweeping away villages in Rasuwa and Nuwakot. More than 1,400 people died, and thousands are still missing. For weeks, the news filled our phones. Our people back home were suffering, and here we were in Chicago, unable to do anything for them. One night I caught myself asking:

म यहाँ अमेरिकामा के गर्दैछु?

What am I even doing here?

Through all of this, a group of us had been rehearsing a dance for Teej.

Ramana Bhauju had never danced before, but she signed up anyway because she wanted to push herself. She was so nervous about missing a step that she lost sleep over it, and she kept practicing despite the pressure of her job.

Meena Bhauju, our all-rounder, kept simplifying the steps so the rest of us could follow along.

Resika Bhauju made every rehearsal fun, as she always does. When we practiced at her house, she made sure no one went home hungry, cooking us a full dinner afterward.

Nodana Bhauju came all the way from downtown to the suburbs late at night, just to rehearse with us for an hour. You could see how much this meant to her.

Sumnima Bhauju wanted to dance so much that she joined a practice session, but her feet wouldn't let her continue. She didn't walk away. She volunteered to help with our props instead.

Somewhere along the way, those rehearsals became about much more than the dance.

Then the news from Nepal got worse, and a difficult question came up. Should we hold Teej at all? Everyone was grieving. There were long, painful conversations, but by then it was too late to cancel or reschedule. Many women chose to stay home, and I don't blame them.

In the end, the Laliguras team made a tough decision. The event would go ahead, not as a celebration, but as a fundraiser for Nepal. It wasn't an easy call, and I'm grateful they made it.

We canceled our dance, but we didn't stay home. We went anyway.

There were speeches that night, and plenty of tears. But we leaned on each other, and we stayed strong.

One of those speeches was mine. I wanted to thank the team for replanning everything at the last minute, and to share something I truly believe, which was:

सानो सानो सहयोग मिलेर नै ठूलो फरक पर्छ।

Small acts of help, joined together, make a big difference.

On behalf of my business, Alina Roy Homes, I brought a small gift for every woman there, a ring holder, with my wishes for Teej. It wasn't much, but on such a heavy night, it was nice to see people smile. I sat back down feeling proud that I'd spoken.

By the end of the night, the people in that room had raised more than \$10,000 for flood victims in Nepal. After weeks of feeling helpless, we had finally done something for home.

हामी नाचेनौं, तर एकअर्काको बल बन्यौं।

We didn't dance, but we became each other's strength.

I've always liked that our group is named after Lali Guras, Nepal's national flower, the red rhododendron that grows on the roughest hillsides. That night, the name made more sense to me than ever.

The kids took part in the evening too. They put on a short play about someone who has just arrived from Nepal and tries to talk with Nepali kids here, who can't understand a word. It hit close to home, because many of our children are growing up without our language. That's a big reason the Laliguras Nepali School exists. And that night, even the kids seemed to understand what was happening in Nepal, and why we needed each other.

Laliguras isn't only for the kids, though. It's for women like me too. I moved to the US at 19, without my parents. Before last year's Laliguras Teej Pooja, I honestly didn't know what to bring. Members in our group chat shared lists of what we needed and where to buy it. At the pooja, the priest walked us through every step, and the women around me explained what each ritual meant, the way my mother would have if she'd been here.

That's when it really sank in:

यहाँ आफूले बनाएको सर्कल नै आफ्नो परिवार हो।

The circle you build here becomes your family.

Jyoti Didi started Laliguras so that women like us would have a place where we feel important, loved and safe. For me, that's exactly what it has been.

The need in Nepal hasn't gone away. Families there are still rebuilding. Whatever you can give, however small, still counts.

So, what am I doing here in the US? I'm building a family. Laliguras is a big part of it.

We never performed that dance. But we showed up, for Nepal and for each other.

हरेक वर्ष तीजले मलाई मेरो समुदायसँग अझ नजिक बनाउँछ। यो वर्ष मैले त्यसको कारण बुझें।

Every year, Teej brings me closer to my community. This year, I finally understood why.

— Alina Roy