

SADF Podcast S3E6 Edited Transcript

Restoring Peace After Nepal's Gen Z Uprising: Can Restorative Justice Help Nepal Heal?

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This transcript has been lightly edited for clarity, grammar and readability while preserving the substance and character of the original conversation.

Tapas Kanti Baul

Welcome to the SADF Podcast. I'm your host, Tapas Kanti Bal.

In this episode, we turn our attention to Nepal, a country still reeling from the seismic Gen Z uprising that shook its political foundations earlier this month.

What began as youth-led protests against corruption and a controversial social media ban quickly escalated into one of the most violent political upheavals in Nepal's recent history. More than 70 people were killed, thousands were injured, and key institutions, including the Supreme Court and Parliament, were vandalised or destroyed.

The uprising forced the resignation of Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli and, in a historic move, former Chief Justice Sushila Karki was appointed interim Prime Minister. The government now faces the daunting task of rebuilding trust, infrastructure and national unity ahead of elections scheduled for March 2026.

But how can a deeply fractured society move forward? Can restorative justice offer a path towards healing, accountability and reconciliation?

To explore these questions, I am joined by Ram Tiwari, a leading voice on restorative justice in South Asia.

Ram is the Founder and Chair of the Nepal Forum for Restorative Justice, a pioneering organisation working to establish transformative justice systems in Nepal and beyond. The Nepal Forum for Restorative Justice has been at the forefront of initiatives combining traditional community mechanisms with modern restorative practices, seeking to reimagine justice and recraft peace together.

We will discuss how restorative justice can help Nepal navigate the aftermath of the Gen Z uprising, rebuild public trust and foster a culture of tolerance and accountability.

Welcome, Ram Tiwari. I hope you and your family are well during this difficult time.

Ram Tiwari

Thank you. Thank you so much for having me.

We have been fine. Our families have been fine, although that is not to say we were not affected. My children were also very affected by these events, but now we have slowly begun returning to a condition of normalcy.

Tapas Kanti Baul

Could you begin by briefly explaining what restorative justice means in the context of political violence and social upheaval?

Ram Tiwari

Sometimes people interpret restorative justice very literally and say that it means restoring what was lost through an act of violence, conflict or crime.

But we understand it in a deeper sense.

In the present situation in Nepal, we are not trying to restore buildings, nor can we restore the lives of the people who became martyrs and whose lives were lost. We cannot restore those things.

What we can ask is: how do we restore trust, dignity and humanity among people?

We also need to look at the needs that were expressed through this movement. We have to restore people's trust that those needs can be met.

In very simple terms, restorative justice is about justice for those who have been harmed and accountability for those who have caused that harm.

It places relationships at the centre. It does not merely look for punitive measures, although restorative and punitive approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is primarily about justice for the stakeholders who have been affected.

Tapas Kanti Baul

One reason SADF — the South Asia Democratic Forum — and I are interested in restorative justice is precisely the point you have made.

The main objective of a restorative justice process is not simply to inflict punishment. The objective is to create peace and, I would say, a degree of satisfaction between the victim and the perpetrator in response to the damage caused by a crime or an event.

I remember from one of your lectures a video in which the family of a victim and the murderer sat together. In the end, the family forgave the murderer, and this brought a peaceful conclusion to the process.

I also remember you making the point that if we continue taking an eye for an eye and a finger for a finger, eventually there will be no eyes left with which to see the world and no fingers left with which to point at one another.

That idea is one of the foundations for today's conversation.

You have already been assessing the psychological and social climate in Nepal following the Gen Z uprising. What is your assessment of the country's current psychological and social condition?

Ram Tiwari

Reconciliation between different parties does not happen overnight.

It comes after a long process of preparation: a willingness to engage in dialogue, a willingness to apologise and a willingness to accept accountability.

It also does not mean that people who cause harm should not be punished. Someone may go to prison, serve a sentence and later be given the opportunity to apologise to those they harmed.

It would be very mechanical to imagine that a killing takes place one day and everybody simply forgives one another the next.

We have also seen this in Nepal's history, particularly following the ten-year conflict. Although punitive measures exist, there are communities that have found ways to move forward.

Victims do need punishment as one form of justice. But they also need more than punishment. They need reparation. They need ways of moving forward.

You mentioned earlier that more than 70 people were killed in Nepal. At some point, there is a danger that we will begin to forget the meaning behind those numbers.

But those numbers are not simply numbers.

There are families still living with tears and fear. Seventy lives were lost, but you could also say that 70 worlds were lost.

Each represented the hopes that a family had placed in a child or another loved one. Those hopes will now never be fulfilled because of the protests, the violence and the killings.

Even if we do not immediately identify the perpetrators, we need to understand that these families require reparative, emotional and psychosocial support now.

Their support systems may have disappeared. In some cases, nobody seems to feel accountable for the irreparable harm caused to them.

That is why victims have to be placed at the centre.

Whether or not we immediately identify the perpetrators or the people responsible for the killings, the victims come first.

There are also injured people and their families. Fear is widespread among families and communities. In restorative justice, our conception of the victim extends to all those affected in these ways.

As for Nepal's psycho-emotional state, I would say that we are still reeling from what happened. It is extremely fresh in our minds.

There is a great deal of uncertainty. Even I do not know what is going to happen tomorrow.

A fast-paced revolution and demands for fast-paced change create expectations for fast-paced results once a new government is formed. But we have not seen those results yet, and people are already becoming frustrated.

More than ten days have passed and nothing substantial has happened. Nobody has been brought to justice. Nobody has assumed accountability.

We see victims and their families crying, grieving and largely left on their own.

The government has provided monetary compensation of 1.5 million rupees, but I do not think that is a particularly restorative response.

When you attach a standard monetary amount to somebody's life and then forget all the non-monetary and emotional harms experienced by victims and their families, you miss a very important dimension of justice.

That is where restorative justice becomes useful.

We want healing. We want accountability. And we want victims firmly at the centre.

Tapas Kanti Baul

What happens after the uprising is also important.

We have seen in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and now Nepal that substantial amounts of public property can be destroyed during such upheavals. In Nepal, for example, institutions such as the Supreme Court and Parliament were damaged.

Can restorative justice also address this kind of symbolic and material damage?

Ram Tiwari

I certainly think there can be processes through which we discuss the collective loss caused when these buildings are destroyed.

Today, I wrote on Facebook that we are calculating something like two trillion rupees in losses from vandalism and arson. But we sometimes fail to consider the simple fact that you could not bring back a single lost life with two trillion rupees — or even 200 trillion.

Loss of life is incomparable.

I am not trying to compare the destruction of buildings with the loss of lives. Buildings can generally be rebuilt.

These were government buildings, and I think there is also a reason why rage was directed towards government buildings. Certain places were targeted rather than others for a reason.

One of those reasons is that people did not feel that justice was being delivered in the way they needed it to be.

Justice had become very ceremonial, bureaucratic, top-down, prosecutorial and adversarial.

Had people felt that justice truly belonged to them, I do not think the rage against the Supreme Court would have been so strong.

I am a lawyer, so I am certainly not denying the importance of the Supreme Court as an institution. But what burned was a building.

The Supreme Court itself continues to operate. Justices have returned to the bench, and there is another large building behind the old one. Physical infrastructure can be recovered.

What concerns me much more is accountability, because accountability can suddenly slip from our collective attention.

Nobody may eventually stand up and say: “I was responsible for this, and I am sorry for what happened to your families.”

If nobody does that, it becomes an enormous insult to the people whose lives were lost.

Tapas Kanti Baul

What would you propose in terms of introducing a restorative justice process after the uprising?

What should the government do? How should it proceed, and who should be involved?

Ram Tiwari

I believe the current government, because it now represents the state, should publicly acknowledge the harm caused to victims.

It should also publicly apologise.

The bureaucracy, the police and the machinery of government are all part of the state apparatus. It was this same state apparatus under which these irreparable losses occurred.

So the government should apologise.

It should also ensure that accountability will be established.

But even before that, it should speak to the victims or establish mechanisms for understanding what victims are experiencing emotionally and psychosocially.

The response must therefore include more than monetary support. We need to ask victims what they actually need.

I think that is the first step.

At community and local levels, there have also been disputes and divisions involving political parties and different stakeholders.

Sooner or later, we will need some form of community-based reconciliation — or at least dialogue and restorative circles.

At the same time, this was not primarily a communal or ethnic conflict. It was largely a conflict driven by frustration with corruption and related problems.

So I would not say that the divisions within communities themselves run particularly deep.

One important division has emerged between Gen Z and others who later blamed Gen Z for the arson and destruction. That is an area in which we may need reconciliation.

We can already see political parties beginning to describe Gen Z protesters as terrorists and blaming them for what happened.

Tapas Kanti Baul

And not only that.

Former Prime Minister Oli has openly suggested that there were elements carrying sniper rifles or other weapons and has claimed that the police did not use lethal weapons.

So we are seeing not only criticism of Gen Z, but also the emergence of an alternative narrative around what happened.

Meanwhile, the underlying issues of corruption among the political parties and nepotism risk being pushed aside.

Ram Tiwari

Yes. And I think it is deeply insulting simply to say there was infiltration and that the authorities never gave an order to use force.

The government had a duty to protect civilians.

It also had a duty to prevent infiltration if that was occurring. It remained the caretaker government during this period.

So where was the state?

You cannot simply be dismissive of people's needs when so many lives have been lost forever.

Even if there was infiltration, and even if there were people involved who were not members of Gen Z, that does not by itself justify shooting people.

That is not how you demonstrate honesty, and it is not how you earn trust.

Tapas Kanti Baul

The use of lethal force is legally permissible only under exceptional circumstances and subject to strict limitations.

There may be circumstances involving self-defence or the protection of another person's life, but that does not give anyone a licence to kill people en masse.

This brings us back to something crucial that you mentioned: admission.

Political parties need to be able to admit that certain things they did were wrong and say that, in future, they will act differently.

One could also argue that young protesters should recognise situations in which violence should have been avoided and instead commit themselves to rebuilding the country peacefully.

Admission, in that sense, becomes an important first step towards healing.

Ram Tiwari

I would still hesitate to compare the loss of lives with the destruction of buildings.

Buildings can be repaired if you have the money. Can you repair the lives of the people who were killed? No. They are gone forever.

So I do not think Gen Z, as a whole, necessarily owes the government an apology.

The destruction was an expression of frustration.

Why were some buildings targeted and not others? There is a reason.

It reflected a lack of accessibility, a lack of recognition of people's power and the failure to place people at the centre.

I am not saying everything that happened was good. And I am not advocating anarchy.

I am saying that there are systemic reasons why these events took place.

The police and the courts were targeted for reasons that we have to understand.

Should the political parties acknowledge their role? Yes.

But even before that, the current government should do so because it represents the state.

From a restorative justice perspective, we should understand these events as symptoms of something larger.

They are unmet needs expressed in different forms.

The uprising therefore gives us an opportunity to ask what needs to change: poverty, exclusion, lack of political and institutional accountability, lack of good governance and the failure to place people at the centre.

Those were among the unmet needs expressed through protest and violence.

We should treat this as an opportunity for transformation.

Peace should not simply mean the absence of overt conflict achieved through force. There must be justice. There must be structural peace, rather than merely what we call negative peace.

Tapas Kanti Baul

What should Nepal do now to rebuild trust between its judiciary, law-enforcement agencies and citizens following such a profound breakdown?

Ram Tiwari

Let me begin with the judiciary.

The judiciary has become very detached from people. The distance and hierarchy between institutions and citizens have grown, and frustration with the courts has increased.

This is not only my personal view. Government reports have also shown dissatisfaction among victims with court outcomes.

We have not seen sufficient accountability.

So on the one hand, victims are dissatisfied. They are supposedly the people the justice system is meant to serve.

On the other hand, wrongdoers often do not feel genuinely accountable.

So what purpose is the court serving if victims do not feel justice has been done and those who caused harm do not feel accountable?

We also see recidivism and repeated forms of crime. Structural violence continues against certain groups, while the courts remain distant from realities on the ground.

Since Nepal entered federalism in 2015, there has been greater space for local governments to operate in ways that respond directly to people's needs.

Perhaps that can be strengthened.

The judiciary can become more people-centred.

Corruption within the judiciary has also been discussed extensively, including within judicial circles themselves, and that problem has to be addressed.

I am not saying nothing has been done.

I am saying much more needs to be done if trust is to be regained.

Tapas Kanti Baul

Would a Truth and Reconciliation Commission be a good idea at this stage, or would you favour a more decentralised approach?

Ram Tiwari

I think we can have both.

Geographically, many of the killings happened here in Kathmandu, and many of the families whose relatives were killed live here.

So we need some form of truth and reconciliation process, or an inquiry commission.

First, it should listen to the wounds of victims and their families.

Second, it should establish accountability.

At the same time, in a decentralised system, there should also be efforts to create community-based dialogue and peacebuilding processes.

The loss of more than 70 lives represents an enormous moment in the history of a country.

There should therefore also be some form of memorialisation and recognition by the state.

That recognition can send a message across the entire country.

Trust can be rebuilt, but not without placing victims at the centre.

In restorative justice we sometimes speak about what we call the **HEART spectrum**: healing, empowerment, accountability, restoration and transformation.

The most urgent needs are healing and empowerment for victims because, for many of them, everything disappeared in a fraction of a second.

Then we need accountability.

We cannot simply allow people to walk around the country dismissing what happened or describing everything as terrorism.

We also need the restoration of humanity and respect.

And finally, we have to understand why this happened and transform the conditions that produced it.

This uprising did not emerge overnight. There was long-standing frustration, which ultimately found expression through the protests and the Gen Z movement.

As a practitioner and student of peace and conflict, I therefore see this as an opportunity to do something bigger and deeper.

Tapas Kanti Baul

There must also be risks associated with misapplying restorative justice.

What are those risks in a politically charged environment such as Nepal, and how should they be addressed?

Ram Tiwari

The greatest risk is that many people do not understand what restorative justice actually is.

People sometimes think it means refusing to punish anyone, being soft on crime, simply asking for apologies and forgiveness, or rejecting incarceration.

That is a very simplistic and, in many ways, misguided understanding.

Restorative justice is about ensuring that people who have been harmed feel that justice has been served, while also ensuring accountability for those responsible for causing the harm.

We can certainly establish inquiry commissions or a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

After very careful preparation, we can also create spaces in which victims and offenders can meet and engage in dialogue.

These processes can exist alongside other punitive or accountability measures.

The objective is for a victim to be able to feel: “The loss of my son has been recognised,” or “The loss of my daughter has been recognised.”

That recognition requires a much deeper sense of accountability.

Civil society organisations and trained facilitators can play an important role here.

This may sound idealistic, but we cannot simply say: “The past is the past. Let bygones be bygones.”

In restorative justice, we sometimes say that a person may eventually become an **ex-offender**, but a victim can never become an **ex-victim**.

Tapas Kanti Baul

That is a very powerful distinction.

What message would you give to young Nepalese people who want to contribute to peace and to building a society with less corruption?

Ram Tiwari

First, I respect the courage they have shown.

They had the courage to express what they needed, and thanks to them we have seen changes in the country.

So I thank them. I am grateful to them.

They have also shown us a path towards justice.

I want to assure them that we will remain on their side and that their calls for accountability must be addressed.

This is not a moment in which we can simply become neutral or impartial.

It is a moment in which we have to stand on the side of justice, on the side of victims and on the side of those who are suffering.

Young people have created hope in this country.

They are not only warriors. I would call them **peace warriors**.

So I thank Gen Z and all those who stood behind this movement.

Tapas Kanti Baul

Before we close, one final question has just occurred to me.

How can restorative justice be used to address crimes such as corruption? These are major, structural crimes.

Ram Tiwari

In restorative justice, we do not claim that restorative justice is a panacea.

It is not a solution to everything.

It becomes particularly relevant when individuals or communities have been deeply affected by acts of violence, crime or conflict.

In the case of corruption, which is widespread in this country, other mechanisms may also be necessary, especially measures centred more directly on accountability.

But when corruption produces deep social and emotional wounds, restorative practices may still have a role.

Restorative circles, for example, can bring forward the voices of poor people and people living at the margins. They can place those voices at the centre and ask what those communities need and expect.

Because of corruption, someone living in a very rural village may fail to receive medicine costing only 100 rupees.

That is an extraordinarily inhuman way for a state to treat its own citizens.

It reflects a profound lack of accountability by the state and government.

Restorative processes can at least help bring those voices into the public conversation.

Tapas Kanti Baul

Thank you very much.

Nepal stands at a crossroads.

The conversation around justice must evolve beyond punishment and retribution alone.

Restorative justice offers a framework for healing — not only for victims and perpetrators, but for entire communities fractured by violence and mistrust.

We hope today's discussion with Ram Tiwari has shed light on the possibilities for reconciliation and peacebuilding in Nepal.

If you would like to learn more about the **Nepal Forum for Restorative Justice**, please visit its website.

Stay tuned for more episodes from the South Asia Democratic Forum as we continue to explore the challenges and hopes surrounding South Asia's democratic transitions.

Until next time, I'm Tapas Kanti Bal. Thank you for listening.

Ram Tiwari

Thank you for having me, and thank you for the great work you are doing.