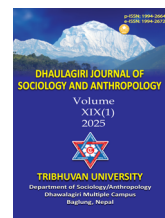


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Narrating the 2015 Nepal Earthquake: Experiences, Disaster Subjectivities, and Resistant Agency

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Article Info

Received: April 10, 2025

Revised received: June 9, 2025

Accepted: June 25, 2025

Available online: June 30, 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/dsaj.v19i1.77681>**Abstract**

This paper examines the detailed narratives and experiences of survivors of the 2015 Nepal earthquake, capturing their vivid accounts of where they were, what they felt, and how they reacted in the immediate aftermath. Drawing on local people's embodied narratives as a crucial site of disaster memory, it illustrates how storytelling becomes a means through which they make and remake their post-disaster world inhabitable and comfortable again. These narratives offer insights into how solidarity and unity initially shaped survival efforts and reveal how, as large-scale aid began to arrive, perceptions of unfairness, injustice, and fraud in its distribution led to growing dissatisfaction among villagers. In doing so, the paper further shows how relief distribution deepened social divisions, reinforcing *Tol* (area) membership as a criterion for receiving aid and fragmenting the community into lower and upper *Tol*. Based on ten months of ethnographic research—including semi-structured interviews and key informant interviews—conducted for my PhD dissertation between 2019 and 2024 in the villages of Kot, Gunsa, and Dhaph (Panchpokhari Thangpal Rural Municipality, Sindhupalchok), this ethnography contributes to disaster anthropology in Nepal. It examines how locals collectively experienced suffering (pain as subjectivity) and, crucially, how they transformed this suffering into an agentic force. Rather than remaining passive aid recipients, they deployed their extended kinship networks to counteract social divisions and mitigate suffering during the aid distribution process.

Keywords: agency, disaster, embodied narratives/experiences, subjectivities,

Introduction

In this paper, I discuss the narratives and experiences of the survivors of the 2015 Nepal earthquake, focusing on how they make and remake a post-earthquake social world that is inhabitable and comfortable again. I examine their distinct narratives and testimonies concerning their locations at the time, perceptions, suffering, mutual help, and solidarity. In doing so, I further explore how local people narrate their disaster subjectivities or collective suffering, and the agency they deployed to overcome it.

On April 25, 2015, Nepal's central mountains were hit by an earthquake measuring 7.8 on the Richter scale.

Gorkha district, northwest of Kathmandu, was the epicenter. Seventeen days later, on 12 May 2015, a 7.3 magnitude earthquake hit the Dolakha district, around 140 kilometers east of the Gorkha epicenter. According to the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA), 8970 lives were lost and 22,300 people were seriously injured ([Tamang et al., 2020](#), p.15).

When I visited my fieldwork sites in April 2019 and began talking with the local people, they recounted how they had initially experienced the earthquake, struggling to grasp what was happening. The tremors were so intense that they couldn't stand; they had to cling to bushes or a small tree for support. Some feared the earth would crack



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wide open, swallowing them. In an instant, they watched their homes and roads crumble, leaving only piles of stone and a cloud of dust. Their village lay in ruins. They told me they couldn't have their usual evening meal and went hungry. The next day, they searched the debris for their grains, pots, and pans. Soon after, they tended to the bodies of their relatives and animals. Later, they devised a way to build a sturdier shelter, salvaging wooden pillars from the wreckage of their old homes. One of the important aspects of this management was that it was done in solidarity, collectively. They were helping each other in a spirit of mutual trust, unity, and solidarity.

In the meantime, they also began receiving relief from religious figures, such as the Lama (Tamang ritual specialist), and local health posts. This gave them a sense of reassurance and confidence that they would survive during chaos. Within a few days, even more aid arrived from outside, with government relief being the first to come on a large scale. However, as large-scale aid began to be parachuted in and distributed through various institutions, misunderstandings arose among the villagers regarding the lower and upper Tol (area). Gradually, their "solidarity, unity" (Gamburd, 2014) and sense of "brotherhood" (Oliver-Smith, 1999) began to wane. The locals told me they suffered and felt 'pain' or that their 'hearts were broken' when their adjacent Tol fellows refused to share the relief with them. Some 'hid' aid supplies and created divisions, labeling groups as upper and lower Tol even in a time of crisis. In such a case, both Tol fellows began channeling their kinship networks abroad to bring much-needed aid to the village. In this context, my ethnography aims to contribute to the anthropology of disaster studies in Nepal by highlighting how local people, along with their relatives abroad, 'socially' felt the pain or suffering during the time of crisis, particularly when they were denied such aid. It particularly explores how such "collective pain"—or the subjectivities formed during the disaster—can be "agentive rather than merely a passive state" (Samuels, 2016, p.821).

As a student of 'disaster anthropology,' I began to explore why we need to study how and why local people narrate their embodied experiences of the first moment of the 2015 Nepal earthquake in the post-disaster context, and how they overcame the disaster disorder or subjectivities created during the crisis. These questions are relevant and important because very few disaster studies produced in the post-2015 earthquake context seem to have focused on how local people make their social world "inhabitable" and "comfortable" again through their "embodied narratives and experiences" (Samuels, 2016, p. 810).

The disaster studies produced in the context of the 2015 Nepal earthquake—by both Nepali and foreign scholars alike—have focused more on the reconstruction process, government tranche distribution policies, their impacts, and, to some extent, their failure to take into account the socio-cultural and economic milieu of locals while

executing such policies (Hutt, Leighty, & Lotter, 2021; Shneiderman et al., 2023; Spoon et al., 2019; Tamang et al., 2020). One of the serious critiques of these scholarly works (e.g., Hutt, Leighty, & Lotter, 2021) is that they have not adequately focused on the "various experiences" of the earthquakes and their immediate aftermath (Nawa, 2022). Rather, their main focus has been on "the diverse, twisted, and entangled political and socio-cultural processes of the following five years, during which various people of diverse positionalities, have negotiated with each other to *reimagine and reconstruct their past, present, and future*" (Nawa, 2022, p. 213; emphasis added).

Disaster anthropologists have shown how, as this ethnography also shows, disaster studies are not limited to the study of the 'financial', state's reconstruction policies' effects in the reconstruction phase. In the global context, they have demonstrated how the aftermath resurfaces the pre-existing "social grammar" (Oliver-Smith, 1999); i.e., how the society gets divided in terms of class, caste, and ethnicity during the time of aid relief distribution whether it was in Peru earthquake of 1971 (Oliver-Smith, 1999) or in the South Asian context such as 2001 Gujarat earthquake (Simpson, 2013) and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami's devastating impact in Sri Lanka (Gamburd, 2014). And, some have shown how disaster disorder creates "local people's subjectivities" or suffering, and how they turn such collective suffering into an agentive force to resist and overcome it.

In doing so, disaster anthropologists have shown the importance and used their interlocutors' "embodied narratives and experiences" (Samuels, 2014; Gamburd, 2014). For example, drawing on the embodied experiences of her interlocutors of Banda Aceh (Indonesia), the survivors of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the anthropologist Annemarie Samuels (2016) discusses the importance of "embodied narratives as a crucial site of disaster memory and a social way of remaking the post-disaster world." Samuels observes that approaches to narratives help us both to order experience and to give it a temporal integration because they help us make sense of "troubling experiences" through "emplotment and by connecting personal experience to cultural context" (Recoeur, 1984, as cited in Samuels, 2016, p.810). And, "narrative is a fundamental human way of giving meaning to experience" (Garro & Mattingly, 2000, p.1, as cited in Samuels, 2016, p.810). This paper draws on the ethnographic studies and theoretical discussions presented by disaster anthropologists Samuels (2016) and Gamburd (2014) in parallel, to discuss the embodied narratives and experiences of the 2015 Nepal earthquake survivors.

Field Sites and Research Methods

This paper is based on data I collected for my PhD dissertation research between 2019 and 2024. The research took place in three villages—Thangpal Kot, Thangpal

Dhap, and Thangpal Gunsa—located in the Panchpokhari Thangpal Rural Municipality (hereafter only *Gaupalika*) in Sindhupalchok District, Nepal. I employed qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, field observations, life histories, and Key informant interviews. I also used quantitative data from other sources.

The Gaupalika has a total population of 20,997 people, with 10,614 males (50.6%) and 10,383 females (49.4%). According to the 2021 census, there are 10 different social groups living in the area. The largest group is the Tamang, making up 68.4% of the population. Other groups include Chhetri (4.3%), Newar (4.3%), Hyolmo (3.8%), Sanyasi (2.8%), Biswokarma (2.7%), Brahman (1.9%), Mijar (1.9%), Pariyar (1.3%), and Gurung (1.1%). Most people in the Gaupalika follow Buddhism—14,788 individuals or 70.4%. Hinduism is the second most common religion, with 5,877 followers (28.0%). There are also 314 Christians (1.5%) and 13 people (0.1%) who follow the Bon religion (Census, 2021).

The Gaupalika's 'official' records regarding human casualties show a total of 703 deaths and 813 injuries within the Gaupalika. Among these, Kot recorded 48 deaths and 15 injuries, followed by Gunsa with 47 deaths and 223 injuries. In Dhap, 114 people died and 297 were injured (PTRM, p.113).

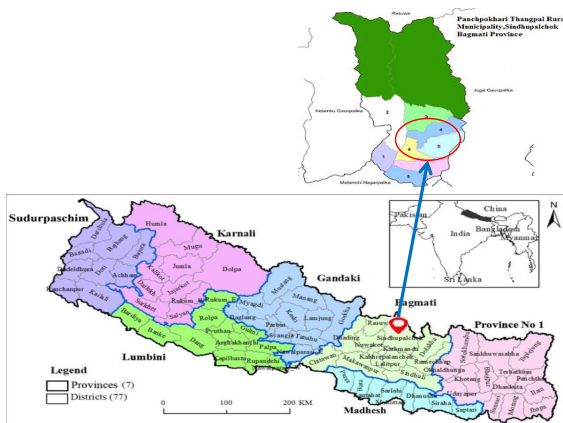


Figure 1: Map of the field site.

Recounting the Experiences of the First Day

While recounting their experiences and memories of the initial moment of the 2015 earthquake with me, on that particular day, the local people shared that they were in their farm fields, somebody was preparing meals, cooking meat at noon after slaughtering goats and participating village rituals, their children were watching TV, and some were working at a construction site in another village. When the earthquake struck, they found everything damaged and turned into debris—houses and settlements. The vibration of the earthquake was so strong that they could not stand when the ground began shaking. At that moment, landslides occurred everywhere, and trees were seen falling across the villages. When they looked across the villages, everything was shaking, buildings were

crumbling, and dust was everywhere. Thick clouds of dust from collapsed houses and landslides covered the villages. They recalled that “the dust was as thick as the fog of the winter season.”

Bhunu Waiba, a senior local of Kot, narrated the event. He had just arrived at his house after working on the farm with his wife on that day. He was feeling stomach pain and taking rest. While cooking the meal, his wife had asked him to “go to the kitchen and sleep there.” He denied her advice. He rather went to the toilet due to the pain in his stomach. Then, he heard a strange sound like “Swaraang!” He hastily looked around his back side, but saw nothing! Having seen nothing, no sooner had he just started coming down from the ladder, then it began shaking the ground. He narrated:

When I was coming down, I just could think that if I were in the toilet, the stones would hit my head. I would die then. Then, I jumped off the ladder. I forgot to go to the toilet. The stomach's pain also disappeared [Laughter...]. I returned from the toilet.

I jumped up on the upper terrace and reached the place where the sound had come. But again, I returned to the door to take my wife. But I could not enter the house due to the strong shaking. It kept shaking on and on! I said to my wife ‘Budhi [wife], a big earthquake occurred.’ I kept on saying ‘Come out at once’. But my wife's one leg was inside the door, and the other one remained outside the door. When it shook again, she would reach another corner (Laughter...). Then, I pulled her out of the door forcefully. After I pulled her out, we went to the terrace field and sat down, grabbing a small bush tree together [showing how they were being shaken due to the vibration].

It did not let us stand up! I said [to his wife], ‘Look, don't worry. This whole ground is going down. It is just going to crack wide!’ All the houses collapsed at once. There was a dusty environment everywhere, and every village we looked at around. After some time, we came home with the help of a small stick. When we reached near home, we saw everything was on the terrace, sir. Everything was mixed in the soil. Everything got ruined. Everything was ‘leveled’ on the soil. Rice and millet flour were just finished. I was planning to go to the mill to husk the rice that evening. (Interview; January 9, 2020)

The experiences of Bhunu Wiaba highlight the unexpected nature of the earthquake. It left them bewildered, uncertain whether they would survive or perish in that moment. The tremors were so violent that they couldn't stand, fearing the earth or soil would crack wide open, swallowing them. However, even in that horrible moment, he decided to rescue his wife.

H. B. Tamang, a senior resident of Dhap village in his early seventies, was trying to escape from his house with his granddaughter when he became trapped at the front door. A large stone struck his granddaughter near

the ladder, killing her. He told me he survived because he lay face down on the ground as the debris covered him. "I would be dead if I had lain facing up the sky," he said. In that moment, he prayed, "Oh... God, let me get out of this and see the world once again!" Later, his neighbors found him and pulled him from the debris by his arms. He narrated:

When I was taken outside, I thought, "I would rather have died there! Why did they pull me out"? I thought like that. [After knowing his arm and leg got broken]. I thought that if I had died in the debris, I would not have to live like this, fractured [Nep. 'Apaang'], as I had to die one day anyway! Later, they brought me to the open space, then I started seeing people fractured, crying, and carried in sacks. I started hearing about someone's death, another death, a fellow's death, a relative's death-and again, I realized that at least I did not die! Later, I was taken to Chauni Hospital in Kathmandu. I got X-rayed and found that my arm and leg bone was broken. It took a year for me to recover. (Interview; December 22, 2021)

In the above-mentioned experience of H. B. Tamang, at the right moment, he compares his bodily situation as being 'fractured' compared to his normal body just before that. It makes him feel sad, even it was better to die than live in such a fractured condition. But when he began seeing more injured, fractured people around him, it gave him solace that he was not the only one who was hit by the earthquake.

The local women's narratives and experiences show that their feelings and concerns are socially and gendered shaped. For example, the experiences of Urgen and Meena tell us about how they were worried about the food/meal and shelter for their family members and relatives. Urgen would usually come to Meena's house and often talk to me. On a sunny January 2020, I requested that they share their first-day experience of the earthquake and the moment. Their narratives illuminate that they searched for pots and pans, grains from debris, and how their family members made temporary shelters in the evening.

On that day, Urgen was in a neighboring house, carrying her two grandchildren. Her daughter-in-law (Nep. *Buhari*) and husband carried compost manure to the field. Urgen further narrated:

I became speechless (Nep. 'dang paryo') right at that time, sir. It came like *hurung-rung*... no sooner had I hardly escaped from the sitting place, I saw no single house stood straight! When I looked back at my house, it was fine. The cowshed was also fine. But when I looked carefully, the house walls were broken. It came like shaking everything around us, sir. Exactly, I thought it was an earthquake.

In a relieved tone, she further said, "I didn't escape, sir. I just remained carrying those babies. I went to the fallow land after some time. It turned out less shaking, then." She said, "Wherever I looked around, I could see

stones only! There was no road in the village, if you look at it. My house didn't collapse completely, but it became like a *Dharap* (snare). Everybody's house collapsed completely, sir." There was heavy rain in the evening. They sought some tarpaulin in the neighboring houses. They made a temporary shelter out of tarpaulin, and three family members stayed together under it for one month. Regarding my question about what they ate that evening to get through the next moment, she told me that she managed some rice from her wrecked house, and the members of three families ate it by making *Khole* (liquid rice). She told me her Buhari fetched water. She said, "We cooked in a big pot. We could not take out the butter. We added just salt to khole and ate it like cow and buffalo. We were 17-18 people altogether." Meena was, meanwhile, listening to our conversation, and she also shared her experiences of afterwards they endured: She said, "We would feel like walking in a dream due to the fear of repeated aftershocks. ... We were almost mad. We thought we would face such bad things forever" (Interview; January 7, 2020).

From Urgen's experiences about the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, we find that the event and shaking of the earthquake were 'unexpected' to her as she became 'dang' or speechless, motionless, a reactionless state of mind in which it did not work properly to react to the ongoing events. Like Bhunu, within 'seconds', she saw a completely changed world or a damaged world. There was no sign of roads or any old houses straight. It was completely erased. She found her house like a snare or *dharap*. The sources of safety in which they used to dwell had been just erased. In the evening, they could not eat rice, their usual food, and had to eat 'khole,' a kind of compromise in intake, because everything was buried under the rubble. It was a kind of disruption of long-standing habits, as well as the social-cultural and natural order (Gamburd, 2014).

Those people who had gone to work at nearby construction sites as laborers returned to their homes in the evenings and nights, while others who were working in another village or district returned the next day or even weeks later to care for their family members. They said they ran for days and weeks on foot, as all roads were destroyed, to reach their homes as quickly as possible due to the fear of casualties among their family members. For example, Maila Gole, a resident of Gunsa, shared his experience of traveling from Rasuwa to his village for three days. Topko Waiba, a man in his seventies, worked in *Baruwa* village (across the Indrawati River) and arrived at his village, Kot, 'crawling' in the evening. Along with his fellow laborers, they had been digging a pond. The house owner had brought their midday lunch at around 11:30 am, and they were about to rest after eating. Suddenly, they heard a loud noise—'Guttungtung' - and the ground began to shake. He narrated:

After that, I ran away, leaving my slipper, bag at the workplace. I kept on coming on the way. I saw stones,

and a wooden log approached me. Look! I saw trees, landslides coming down, and houses falling down as I was climbing up to the road. Finally, I reached the top where Gumba was located. As soon as I reached there, the Gumba crumbled down at once. Then I got more scared thinking that I was going to die. I saw people were dying, somebody crying, while I was coming to my village from Baruwa.

I thought that my sons, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren were also killed. And, I thought I would rather die; but save my wife. I thought I kept running all the way, but nothing hit me. It took four hours, but I reached home by crawling in the evening. I felt dizzy and I could not talk to anybody. (Interview; January 6, 2020)

When he arrived in his village, he neither got to eat nor take shelter. They could not eat food, only had tea. He said they did not even have the salt to make tea: “We didn’t have the physical strength. We could not have food three times during the earthquake. From where would we get it? We were scared due to the aftershocks and did not feel hungry.” He experienced that the old people were often seen trembling and shivering. One of the common themes of Bhunu and Topko, who faced great trouble at the moment, was their thoughts about their family members.¹

Drawing on her interlocutors’ narratives and experiences, Gamburd (2014) also observes how “... Tsunami created a great deal of fear for the safety of loved ones.” She further describes the vivid scene of the tsunami scene through the narratives and experiences of her interlocutors who preferred “war than the tsunami.” It was because, they said, “in war, at least you find or know who is dead and where it happened. With the tsunami, no one knew anything!” (p.23).

While highlighting the importance of remembering disasters through various expressions such as songs, poems, prayers, and a tsunami museum, Samuels (2016, p. 810) further observes that “embodied narratives are a crucial site of disaster memory and a social way of remaking the post-disaster world.” Samuels demonstrates that the embodied narratives of disaster survivors “integrate the horrible experiences with the embodied memories that permeate their post-disaster everyday life.” In this way, “conveying bodily experiences through tsunami narrative (or earthquake in the Thangpal case) can be seen as part of an effort to reclaim comfortable relations with the world, thereby making a post-tsunami everyday.” Acknowledging the role of narratives helps create “meaning” and “a shared world, enabling people to simply ‘be-with’ others” (Zigon, 2012, as cited in Samuels, 2016, p. 810).

Similarly, my interlocutors—such as Bhunu, H.B. Waiba, Topko, Urgen, and Meena mentioned above—and their bodily gestures, such as how the earthquake shook

them, how they ran and made efforts for their lives and dear ones even in such a horrible moment, or did not run because they became motionless, reflect how they were trying to engage in making a social way of remaking the post-disaster world comfortable. For example, Bhunu often laughed as he recalled the horrible moment—how he “forgot” to go to the toilet, how he rescued his wife, how he got bewildered when he saw nothing straight—while sharing his experiences during our extended conversations. This is a sign of how his embodied memories permeate his post-disaster everyday life and his ongoing effort to be comfortable in that post-disaster everyday. In Samuels’ (2016) terms, this act of sharing experiences in the post-disaster context allowed them to feel “comfortable,” or to “be-with-others,” and to shape a “post-disaster everyday world” to feel more comfortable.

Making Everyday Life ‘Inhabitable Again’

The local people told me that they could manage the dead bodies on the following day. But the aftershocks were occurring time and again. It used to be a big aftershock. There were 48 dead people in Lower and Upper Kot Gaun together. Most of the villagers died in their own houses. The dead bodies were buried in the pit. Villagers’ cattle were buried under the debris. The situation was so bleak that they could neither extract the needed firewood from the nearby field nor the jungle nor from the covered by debris in the collapsed houses for the cremation and cooking. They lacked the weapons to cut such stuff. So, due to the lack of firewood, only two to four dead people were cremated, but most of the dead bodies were buried. People lamented that they could not cremate and build everyone’s tomb. According to local Tamang, it is considered to be ritually ‘auspicious’ to cremate their relatives’ dead bodies. Dead people could not get the Lama ritual. Even the Lama was scared due to the aftershocks. People in Gunsu buried even eight dead bodies in a single pit. People in Baruwa village buried even eleven dead bodies in a single pit. Most of the survivors in Baruwa escaped to Kathmandu, leaving their homes and property to the villagers. The remaining villagers dug the pit and buried the dead bodies.

Dorje Tamang, a resident of upper Kot Gaun, shared his experiences with me about how they managed their relatives’ dead bodies and dead animals after the earthquake. At that time, he was the chairperson of Wada Nagarik Manch-WNM, an informal ‘all-party members’ forum, in the absence of locally elected representatives for nearly two decades in Nepal. According to him, they could make temporary shelters with a tarpaulin roof on the big vegetable garden on the following day. They managed to find some wood to make a pillar out of the damaged house. They spread dried hay over the ground, covered it with some other bed sheets, and slept on it.

On the following days, some of the villagers began searching for whatever grains remained in the debris. They found two sisters’ dead bodies in the same house’s rubble.

1. See Khattri (2021, pp. 5–6) for accounts of the Tamang communities in the villages of *Tiru* and *Gogane*, located in Rasuwa district, Nepal adjacent to Sindhupalchok.

The elder was a primary school teacher, and the younger was in class eight. He looked after the dead bodies and could not eat anything the whole night. He said, “They (sisters) died at noon today, and till the following day, I didn’t eat anything. That’s why I felt dizzy. Then, my mother managed to eat something, giving me some energy. Some other friends had *raksi*, and then we started working hastily.” He further narrated:

There is a crematorium located on the western side of the village. Somebody began digging a pit, somebody took the dead body to the pit, and other people began searching the dead bodies under the debris. We were afraid of the contamination and bad smell of the dead bodies [he squeezes his face]. We finished searching for and cremating the dead bodies till 5 pm. We could not take out the dead body of an old woman in lower Kot Gaun due to the heavy debris. But her dead body was taken out two days later.

On the third day, we settled into managing the dead bodies of animals such as cows, goats, and buffalo. We even put eight goats in a single pit. After all this work, we remained in the tunnel shelter for 13 days. Those without a tarpaulin took refuge on the nearby school ground [open place]. However, the school was also broken.

After a discussion among the neighbors, we villagers started making a little bit stronger cottage turn by turn instead of staying in a tarpaulin. We made our shelter turn by turn. We put strong pillars out of our destroyed house, and you can still see them somewhere in the village. Finally, villagers made my shelter on the 14th day. I brought a broiler chicken for the helper fellows and made a feast. Those families whose shelter had been prepared began shifting into the new and strong shelter, and I finally shifted. (Interview; August 19, 2019)

The disaster survivors like Dorje share their stories and experiences to make the post-disaster everyday life “inhabitable again” and to “feel and regain existential comfort” (Samuels, 2016). Samuels argues that discussing the embodied telling, narratives, and re-enactment of the bodily experiences of the tsunami survivors, are “attempt to make the everyday inhabitable again” because “these narratives contribute to regaining at least some existential comfort even though this inhabitable everyday may still be shot with grief, hazard, and uncertainty” (Das, 2007, p.216, as cited in Samuels, 2016, p. 811).

Through this long conversation with Dorje, we understand many things about the initial moment, damages, its effects, how they coped, managed, and helped each other on the first day, how they shared the food and shelter in the evening among the close relatives, the effects of the earthquake from the first day to the recovery of the local people. Then, in the next steps, the villagers came up with a decision to manage and handle the villagers’ dead bodies, including the animals, due to the fear of another

catastrophe in case of contamination and carcass smells, which could add to another problem for the villagers. It was a sign of psychological/mental strength from the recovery compared to the first-day situation. Finally, the villagers came up with a better idea for settling in a slightly stronger shelter. They built a somewhat stronger shelter using raw materials from their collapsed houses, working turn by turn. It took another two weeks for the entire village to construct a form of ‘strong’ and ‘safe’ temporary shelter. This process reflects the continued sense of communal unity and solidarity as they rose from the devastation.

One of the most painful moments during the search, discovery, and burial of the dead bodies, Dorje told me, was when they had to bury the bodies of children. It gave them “goosebumps” (Samuels, 2016) or a cold feeling in their heart (Nep. ‘man chiso hunu’). The “disaster’s extraordinariness” differs according to the nature of the hazards and local context. For example, according to Samuels (2016), the extraordinariness of the disaster among the Aceh people, especially the women, was the “experience of nudity.” Her woman interlocutors described their shocking post-tsunami experience as “seeing the nakedness of those around them, both dead and living.” She further observes that, “covering the private parts of dead bodies while searching for their loved ones made covering naked bodies one of the first actions people undertook in the remaking of the post-tsunami social world” (p.814).

Dorje’s narratives highlight the crucial role of solidarity, help, brotherhood, and unity among kin, family members, and neighbors. However, this solidarity and brotherhood did not last long, even in the Thangpal villages. In the following sub-section, I examine the narratives and experiences of the locals to illustrate how solidarity and brotherhood began to erode as relief arrived. I also explore how this disorder gave rise to “collective subjectivities,” suffering, or “pain” and how local people deployed their agency (kinship networks) to resist and overcome such collective suffering (Samuels, 2016).

In this context, I use the term ‘agency’ to refer to the notion of “...all individuals have the moral capacity and responsibility to act for themselves.” Because unlike the “Marxian notion of history as dominated by collective forces,” it [individual agency] focuses on the “spread of the belief in the *autonomous and responsible subject*, a key feature of today’s neoliberal capitalism and mode of governance” (Asad, 2000, p. 30, as cited in Lorenzo & Payne, 2012, p. 366; emphasis added). The individual agency has a certain “political claim,” which grants “a certain amount of political power, resistance,² and political

2. The anthropologist Laura M. Ahearn (2004 [2001]) cautions us that “agency” is not “free will.” According to Ahearn, although scholars often use “agency as a synonym for resistance,” we should also recognize that “agentive acts may also involve complicity with, accommodation to, or reinforcement of the status quo—sometimes all at the same time” (Ortner, 1995, as cited in Ahearn, 2004 [2001],

influence to those who are commonly considered to be devoid of any” (Durham, 2008, as cited in [Lorenzo & Payne, 2012](#), p. 367). In sum, I use the term agency in the following discussion to refer to the social actor full of “consciousness” and “responsibility,” in which individual efforts are directed to the “positive moral goals,” and “strive teleologically towards self-empowerment, responsibility, and constructive action” (Asad, 2000, as cited in [Lorenzo & Payne, 2012](#), p. 367).

One of the defining characteristics of the Thangpal villages has been the historical trend of “circular migration”³ ([Shrestha, 2001](#) [1990]), especially to road construction sites in various Indian territories and Bhutan, and more recently to the Gulf countries. There are historical, social, economic-political, and topographical aspects that have consistently placed them in a vulnerable position. They had to migrate as their traditional livelihood pattern, such as pastoralism and agriculture in a limited land, could not sustain the needs of the increased family members. For example, almost all four generations of the same family have been engaged in a continuous process of circular migration to adjust to the “capitalist penetration” ([Shrestha, 2001](#) [1990]).

Mass circular migration from the Thangpal villages reflects both their vulnerability and the negative effects of the neoliberal economy or “capitalist penetration” ([Shrestha, 2001](#) [1990], p. 48). In this context, I aim to show how these historical migration trends—and continued connections to the village, even through social media like Facebook, Messenger, and Viber—helped people cope with their suffering during times of crisis. In other words, during the crisis, Thangpal villagers used their extended kinship networks or close relatives living abroad as a form of agency to deal with the subjectivities created during the crisis by bringing relief to the village.

Disaster Subjectivities and Agency

The locals told me that people were helpful to each other, sharing food, water, and shelter, and assisting families whose relatives had died, were injured, or needed aid. Most local shops were damaged, faced shortages, and had even been burglarized. They said some shopkeepers hiked food prices despite the crisis. On the following day, they received scant aid relief from some religious persons/groups, such as some Lama, and institutions. The Lama of *Manekharka* first provided foodstuffs such as four packets of noodles, *Dalmot* to each family in the village within two days. They received the aid relief worth ‘seven hundred rupees’, which was immediately distributed by the Lama. The nearby health post also provided some grain flour to children (Field note; August 19, 2019).

While the local kins, and relatives were helping each

other in the time of crisis, the Nepal Army brought the first aid relief into the village via ‘a big Puma helicopter.’ It came after one week. They remembered that the Army asked them for help to collect the stuff in a common place, and they informed the locals that they would distribute it later. The locals helped the Army personnel to collect the parachuted aid relief, such as food, tarpaulins, clothes, sandals, pots, and pans in a ‘central’ point. But they did not get it later. Meena Tamang shared her experiences, “They sent many relief supplies, sir. We thought that all that relief stuff was for us only. But it was for all the people, even to Bhothang, Gunsal!” She further told me that the aid was not ‘properly’ distributed amongst the villagers despite their involvement and help to collect the aid stuff at a ‘central point.’ I heard such complaints from many other locals.

The detailed accounts and experiences of Gore Tamang and Dorje Tamang, belonging to lower and upper Kot Gaun, respectively, further illuminate these issues. Gore Tamang, in his early fifties, is a farmer and runs a small ‘business’ to make a living in the village. Gore said that the members of WNM were actively involved in receiving and distributing the aid, both inside and outside the world, as the aid began pouring into the village. They committed some frauds who were supposed to befriend the government personnel to hide the aid, distribute it amongst their ‘near and dears’, and discriminate against other relatives belonging to another Tol. Gore blamed that some of them heard to have sold the stuff as it became superfluous and useless to them. Gore shared his experiences:

We, [the locals], faced a harsh time for around one week.

We took shelter on this road (showing the road in front of his house). The government was said to have sent some relief in a big Puma Helicopter. It dropped tarpaulins and foodstuffs. Some villagers also got injured due to the hit by the stuff dropped by the Helicopter. The cunning leaders had hidden it somewhere. They took the tarpaulins as soon as it was dropped on the ground. We thought that the packet/bundle contained just a few tarpaulins, but later we learned that it had around 70 tarpaulins in a single bundle! People got together and took all the relief stuff to a common (safe place). But some local leaders opined that it would be better to take it into the premises of *Taltule* School. Then we took the aid there. It contained food, clothes, tarpaulins, and shoes. (Interview; January 6, 2020)

Gore said they kept waiting for a long time, day and night (with the hope of finding the relief stuff). He said the ‘cunning leaders’ decided to hide the aid stuff from public access and distribute it secretly to their ‘near and dears.’ He narrated further:

If I am your relative, you give me three sacks of rice, two tarpaulins, and some pairs of shoes. It happened accordingly. Later, some people happened to see that the potatoes, onions were already rotten. But they did not distribute it to the needy people. ...I never heard that even a single person [not related to leaders] got that

p. 55; see also [Ahrean \(2001\)](#) for more detail discussion).

3. See [Bishop \(1998, Chapter Four\)](#) for more detail on circular migration of the Yolmo people of Melemchi, Sindhupalchok district.

relief. Nobody told me that they received any relief. Even the needy family could not get relief. (Interview; January 6, 2020)

The experiences of Gore Tamang suggest dissatisfaction rose within the hearts of villagers like Gore, who felt that he could not get his 'proper' share from the Army aid even though he had helped them collect the aid at a 'central point' for the two villagers, i.e., lower and upper Kot Gaun.

It was a politically 'vacuum' time; i.e. absence of elected local government as it had been almost two decades since the local election had not taken place in Nepal (due to the Maoist 'People's War'). So, there was no local representative or government. It was *Sachib*, the secretary of the Village Development Committee-VDC who had the sole authority to decide the economic plan and policies, and allocation of the budget. More than that, it was the WNM, which was also a local stakeholder in the power-sharing and decision-making process. So, many local people blamed them for being responsible for the fraud, mismanagement, and misappropriation of the aid. Amidst such misunderstanding, Gore further told me how they channeled their kinship network when they failed to receive or were denied access to relief collected at the 'central point', the government aid. He further narrated:

The upper Kot Gaun villagers got more aid relief than we did. Here, we got more private relief (sent by relatives) [than the government. Those people who lived in Delhi, Israel, and Dubai sent trucks of relief in the later period. When they [upper Kot Gaun villagers] didn't share their relief with us, we also didn't share our portions to them sent by our relatives for us. They kept looking at us! Sometimes two trucks, sometimes three trucks of relief were unloaded every day. When the village fellows heard the news that we could not get the relief sent to us in the village, they became furious about such ill activities. When they heard this news, they thought that 'they underestimated our Tol fellows.' Then, somebody sent one truck, and another added one more truck. Some added other 60 sacks of rice, somebody 70 sacks of rice' like that. *They would call us on mobile* [to know about the happenings]. When the mobile service got active, we would go to Kathmandu. Some villagers sent us money, and we bought relief stuffs such as rice, sugar, oil, and salt. We loaded them in the truck in Kathmandu then brought them back to our village. (Interview; January 6, 2020; emphasis added)

The above-mentioned narratives tell us why they did not share the relief sent exclusively for them by their fellow villagers living abroad. Because Gore said their relatives also heard how their fellow villagers did not receive the aid. He said, "This discrimination or fraud in the relief distribution process had broken their heart" [Nep. 'man dukhayo']; i.e., a kind of collective pain. Most importantly, they became able to use their communication services and communicate with their relatives abroad within three days.

It eased them to connect to their relatives abroad.

According to Gore, there was a security guard to protect the aid relief. He doubted the purpose of the 'security concerns' of the leaders, that they did it together for their benefit, not for the villagers. However, he asked the security guard whether the food stuff would be distributed amongst the villagers. The security guard also admitted that it would be distributed later. But, later the food stuff disappeared from the place where it was stored. He further narrated:

No villagers got even a single grain of rice from the government relief. *Then, the villagers were shocked!* ...If the reliefs brought by the Nepal Army had been distributed properly, the foreign aid [sent by village fellows] would not have come into the village; *their hearts would not have been broken* [Nep. 'man dukhayo']. They became angry and sad. (Interview; January 6, 2020; emphasis added)

Gore's observations and narratives suggest how they deployed their kinship networks to bring aid relief to the village. In other words, when misunderstandings occurred among the villagers, people began channeling their kin relations based on the Tol, close relatives, and clan members and started receiving aid accordingly. Consequently, Tol membership became a marker of relief distribution and access because the unfair, unjust relief distribution event caused their 'hearts to be broken', including their relatives abroad.

I now turn to the narrative of Dorje Tamang. In his mid-fifties, Dorje accepted that the local leaders, representatives of the local political party, and government officials didn't do a 'fair' duty. He said, "The government failed to stop all these things, and that was the worst thing he felt sad about! Only the 'able' could manage and buy at that time." But during several conversations with him, I did not hear that *sachib* committed fraud in the time of chaos while distributing the aid, as Gore blamed the responsible people. He narrated the event:

...After that (one week), we started receiving little relief. *People seemed to be selfish at that time.* There was a misunderstanding among the villagers on how to distribute the relief brought by the Nepal Army in the lower Kot Gau. They [lower Tol fellows] kept the relief in their premises and control. An Israel-based organization brought relief for both Wards [upper and lower Kot]. Still, the Ward 1 (lower Kot Gaun) fellows did not allow them to come the Ward no. 2 saying "This relief is sent from our relatives" and distributed the three sacks of rice amongst the 22 families [please refer to the narrative of Gore]. They got *Rajma Daal*, salt, sugar, and 15 soaps for a single family! We have a group consisting of 52 families in the upper Kot Gau. It was registered in 1995, but they don't have registered groups. They differentiated two families belonging to our group, saying they belonged to the upper Kot Gau group. So, the two families adjacent

to their house could not get the relief. Did you see it? [Gesturing to me. I just nodded my head]. They were their neighboring fellows, but could not receive saying that they belonged to the upper group. Then, disputes appeared among the villagers. Some Buhari became furious and were about to fight with each other. What to do then? I persuaded them, saying, “Do not fight. Greedy people will never be satisfied. Don’t worry.” (Interview; August 19, 2019)

Dorje told me that, as a religious man, he felt it was his duty to help the village fellows. He persuaded his fellow people that he would bring some relief. Then he went to Manekhark to see a relative sister and asked her for the mobile number of his young relative brother. He was working in an organization in Kathmandu. Though it was Saturday, Dorje called him: “You see, there is a quarrel between those who have received *raahat* and those who have not, in the village. Anyhow, do send us some relief at once. He said, ‘Ok.’ He brought two trucks of relief later.”

Dorje said he had to include the neighbors of *Manekhark, Bojhini, Dandakhark, and Kot Gau*. They had to count and share it with them. According to him, they were about to distribute one sack of rice, two packets of salt, one liter of oil, and a little bit of *daal* to each family of his Tol. Then, some 4-5 persons came from lower Kot Gau, the former receivers, and urged that they should also get some shares. He further narrated:

Then, I became angry and protested to them, saying, “It’s ok. How much do you need now? You all ate three sacks of rice each family just a few days ago. You didn’t give even a single grain to these village fellows. You think you should only live, and the rest should die? Look, today I called for this aid, joining my two hands and distributing one sack of rice to each family, then you are looking for your share! What a rascal you are! Don’t talk such nasty things before me.” I further scolded them, saying, ‘You are a rascal, and you distributed and ate the relief that came from Dubai [and Israel] amongst you! Some reliefs were stored in a cemented house which was supposed to be distributed later, and some of you burglarized and ate it without anyone’s notice.’ They returned, saying nothing. (Interview; August 19, 2019)

In her book titled *The Golden Wave* about the aftermath of the Indian Ocean Tsunami, which took place in December 2004, and affected thirteen countries including Sri Lanka, the anthropologist M.R. Gamburd (2014) documents the experiences of the Sri Lankan people regarding “the immediate aftermath of the disaster-turmoil, damage, and death followed by community solidarity...” Gamburd highlights the “feeling of an unusual sense of ‘solidarity, equality, unity, interconnection and oneness’ and how ‘humanity prevailed over the division based on religion, ethnicity, class, and caste; and helped each other regardless of whether they are men or women, locals or foreigners.’” In other words, people became just human beings rather

than being men or women, strangers or relatives, at least for a short moment. However, she further observes that the “sense of unity, equality, and solidarity” lasted only a few weeks. The perceptions of their “friends and enemies reconfigured shortly after the 2004 tsunami, or division again appeared, especially when the aids are transported to the village” (Gamburd, 2014, pp.24-25).

The narratives of Dorje show how they managed the debris, dead bodies of the villagers, and animals due to the fear of contamination from another disaster (Nep. *Mahamari*) in the initial phase. They also constructed a temporary shelter and moved into it turn by turn. Up to this point, they acted in unity, solidarity, and with a sense of “brotherhood” (Oliver-Smith, 1999). In a similar vein, Dorje’s narrative also suggests the unfair and unjust process of relief distribution, and how unity, solidarity, and brotherhood gradually waned; how the perception of friends and enemies was reconfigured; and how divisions based on Tol appeared among the locals shortly after external relief was transported to the villages. Moreover, his narrative further suggests how he handled the situation by calling his relative in Kathmandu to bring rahat and distributing the aids to his village fellows fairly and without discrimination. This contrasted with the lower Kot villagers, who distributed and ‘ate’ the rahat in a biased and selfish manner.

This account highlights not only his ‘agency’ but also the “moral construction of self and other” as a social worker (Gamburd, 2014, p.138). According to Gamburd (2014, p.28), individuals like Dorje “craft their sense of self and their place in society” through narratives and by remembering and bearing witness to the crisis. It is because, Gamburd further observes that, “When people talk about entitlement and accountability, they simultaneously craft their own identity as moral agents. Narratives about misappropriation and corruption often contain stock characters—a villain, a victim, and a hero (Sampson, 2005, p.111, as cited in Gamburd, 2014, p.158). In the above-mentioned narrative, Dorje uses the term ‘rascal’ (as a ‘villain’) to refer to his fellow villagers who supposedly ‘ate’ the relief without sharing it with them. His narratives suggest how they also channeled their kinship networks to evade the chaos and misunderstanding to provide aid and relief to their Tol fellow.

In the South Asian context, scholars have shown how aid distribution raises moral and legal concerns, particularly as ‘informal aid’ is channeled through diaspora networks (Rutten, 2001) and religious institutions before and after government aid reaches disaster-affected areas and communities (Simpson, 2013; Gamburd, 2014). This occurs because the ‘Golden wave’ of such relief often surpasses the government’s capacity to manage it effectively. In this regard, Gamburd observes that “Disasters simultaneously increase citizens’ needs and decrease the ability of governments and other institutions to meet those needs.” And, “External assistance can help

local authorities in this regard, but windfalls in relief... aid can also increase the risk of (perceived) fraud, corruption, mismanagement and dispossession by the government and its cronies, aggravating the plight of the most vulnerable and grievances against authorities" (Gamburd, 2014, p.158).

In the case of Thangpal as well, when the rahat was kept in a 'central place'⁴ (in the premise of a local primary school) and the 'power' of distribution was centralized in the hands of the members of WNM, which caused the marginalization of the local people. People felt their fellow villagers treated them as 'passive recipients' of aid. In such a situation, the lower Kot villagers seemed to have challenged and questioned the 'hierarchy' and 'discipline'⁵ set by the leaders. For that, they began channeling their kins/family members' network abroad for the rahat. On the other hand, one of the lower Kot village fellows also did not share their relief with the upper Tol; then, Dorje also initiated aid relief from his close relatives. Because it caused him pain, and he had to begin bringing the rahat to stop the 'quarrel' amongst his Buhari or fellow sisters. These activities had 'broken their hearts,' i.e., it caused a kind of collective suffering or 'pain.' In both cases mentioned above, their activities had broken their village fellows' hearts.

Put it in another way. The narratives of the disaster's disorder can teach us "lessons about the making and remaking of post-disaster subjectivities" (Samuels, 2016, p.819). In disaster studies, the concept of "pain" (in the above Kot Gaun case, 'heartbroken' due to the partial/unjust relief distribution activities) should be taken as "agentive rather than mere passive state." Drawing on Talal Asad's concept of pain, Samuels argues that "*Pain is lived relationally, socially*, and is thus not only the private experience of a supposedly integral human body." But "this relationality, in which interactions with others shape ways of living sanely through suffering" (2003, p. 79 as

cited in Samuels, 2016, p.821; emphasis added). Following Samuels' observation, we can say that if aid had been distributed fairly and justly, the hearts of Kot villagers and their fellow villagers living abroad would not have been 'broken,' nor would they have felt the 'pain.' This was not merely a private pain endured by an individual during the crisis but rather a form of social or collective pain caused by divisions among fellow villagers in the name of lower and upper Tol. Those residing abroad also experienced this pain 'socially.' In response, aid was gathered through collective efforts, with cash contributions sent for shared distribution, reflecting how they experienced and addressed pain socially and collectively, both in local communities and abroad. In the Thangpal case as well, 'social pain' did not remain a 'mere passive state' but became 'agentive' for the locals. In sum, Kot villagers demonstrated that they were not 'passive' recipients of government and external rahat controlled by certain cunning leaders.

The anthropologist Gamburd (2014) suggests paying close attention to narrators' social, economic, and political positions. She argues that the more individual-centric a story is, the more descriptive and layered it becomes. Gamburd observes that "anthropologists hear many narratives from informants. Sometimes, the line between facts and fiction is difficult to discern." In this context, she emphasizes the importance of "holistic, longitudinal, and character-rich" research conducted in "a particular place and period, long before and after aid workers arrived and departed from the area" (p. 195). Drawing from Gamburd's (2014) observation, in the following section, I explore the narratives and experiences of D. Tamang, a resident of lower Kot Gaun in his mid-thirties, to provide a more persuasive interpretation and analysis of the same event. Having been friends with him for seven years, his narratives particularly shed light on some 'technical' aspects behind the conflict.

Reconstructing 'Self-Image' and Cultivating Social 'Attunement'

D. Tamang has been my friend since I first visited Thangpal villages in April 2019. He runs a homestay. He is an active communist cadre at the Gauapalika level. When I asked him to share his experiences about the 2015 earthquake, such as the initial phase, trauma, recovery, and relief distribution process, the blame Gore and other locals had put on the then members of the 'relief distribution committee,' in which he was also a member. During an extended conversation in his house, he shared the following experience and tried to give me a 'real background'.

As a 'rahat distribution committee member,' they decided to collect the aid in a 'central point' to distribute equally amongst the villagers. Then even his father came forward and opposed him, saying he couldn't take the relief to another place than the one where it was dropped or collected.' His father scolded him for being 'dumb' to take away the relief from his own Tol to another one. His

4. Drawing on governance scholars' idea of "control and governmentality," Gamburd discusses how the "temporary camps turn into the arena for power, control and governance," (Foucault, 1979; de Alwis, 2009; Bastian, 2009; Hedman, 2009, as cited in Gamburd, 2014, p.56). According to Gamburd, "by promulgating rules over people and places, those who administer to a crisis establish their authority while shaping the behavior and self-image of the people in their charge." It is because that "venues of control are venues for the exercise of power" (Foucault, 1979, pp.195-98; 1994, as cited in Gamburd, 2014, p.56), and "aids are the most elegant exercise of power" though it seems to be "entirely altruistic" but "it is unrecognizable, concealed, [and] supremely inconspicuous" (de Alwis, 2009, p.125 as cited in Gamburd, 2014, p.56).

5. Disaster scholars have shown how "Aid can quickly become a form of discipline, and humanitarian relief efforts are rife with governance structures (de Alwis, 2009, p.122; Bastian, 2009, p.242; Hedman, 2009, p.143, as cited in Gamburd, 2014, p.56).

father even ‘kicked’ him angrily in front of the villagers. He further narrated the story:

Humans are strange beings [in an ironic tone]. The relief had been sent to 80-90 households. [Relief distribution] It is not like selling rice in a packet in a shop. They had to make a line, wait for their turn, and when it got delayed, they complained against us.

There was a misunderstanding that if an NGO brought rice, it was distributed according to the number of households. In such cases, a family of just two or even up to ten received one sack of rice equally. It caused us problems in distributing the relief.

According to him, he was the ‘focal person’ in his Ward. He noticed that those with many families were at a loss due to the distribution of ‘equality’ and felt injustice. Then, they decided to distribute the aid, even a small quantity of relief, based on the kilogram [not a whole sack]. People did not like this idea as they received whole sacks of rice. He narrated:

There came the Army Captain, who consulted with us. According to our information, he dropped some reliefs. The Army dropped tarpaulins and other foodstuffs, too. However, they could not aim to drop the relief in the exact place due to the lack of location information. Some stuff got dropped in the farm fields around five hundred meters from the settlements. The big helicopter seemed to need more airspace to make just a round. So, it would go up to Gunsa when it makes a round. We collected the relief in the collection center. But the village fellow did not agree with me to distribute it with the other Ward’s fellow. There was a misunderstanding. I told them that the remaining/leftover rice could be sent to other villagers after distributing it as per our household in our Tol. The Tol fellow protested against me. *Even my father kicked me in front of the Army Captain, saying, “You mula (rascal), you send the rice to other places sent for here, us!”* (Interview; September 7, 2023; emphasis added)

From D. Tamang’s experience, we get a sense of ‘control’ and ‘governance’ because people were reluctant to ‘make the line’ or wait for their ‘turn’ to receive rahat. He said it was not like ‘purchasing a packet of rice from a shop.’ He told the rahat supplies were dispersed, requiring collection at a ‘central point’ since the pilot could not determine the ‘exact’ drop location. The villagers had to assist in gathering the aid relief dropped by the Nepal Army, as it was scattered. This was not just a social or political issue but also a technical one—dispersed supplies had to be centralized for effective distribution. Later, they encountered difficulties distributing the relief equally among individuals within families. When he attempted to share the ‘leftover’ rahat with a neighboring village fellow, his father became furious and ‘kicked’ him in front of the villagers.

Comparing the narratives and experiences of Gore and D. Tamang, both from the same Tol, it becomes evident

that conflicts and misunderstandings arose among the Tol fellows regarding the reception of rahat from government agencies, its collection at a ‘central point,’ and its distribution. From the perspective of the relief distributors, the conflict stemmed from their neighbors’ ‘greed,’ as they preferred rahat to be distributed at the household level rather than among individual family members, leading to misunderstandings. People appeared increasingly greedy, unwilling to share with their neighboring fellows.

According to Samuels (2016, p. 811), disaster narratives “temporarily integrate past embodied experiences and present and future concerns with the experiences of storytelling.” Drawing from Jarrett Zigon, Samuels argues that narratives most significantly reveal how “individuals intersubjectively live in their world together”; in this sense, “narrative interactions are primarily struggles to regain comfortable relations with others and the world.” Therefore, storytelling or sharing disaster experiences becomes an effort “to keep going or attempts to regain attunement with the world” (Zigon, 2012, as cited in Samuels, 2016, p. 811; emphasis added). In this context, if we examine D. Tamang’s words during our conversation, we find that he was trying to regain comfortable relations with others and society (at least with an ethnographer and close friend) in the post-disaster period. He shared his stories as an effort to “keep going,” as a socially “conscious” and “responsible” moral agent (Lorenzo & Payne, 2012, p.367), to regain attunement with the world. For instance, he recounted an embarrassing moment when his father publicly opposed his idea of sending aid to other places and ‘kicked’ him in front of the villagers and government officials. Unlike his father, D. Tamang wanted to distribute the ‘leftover’ relief to neighboring villagers, highlighting a key point of tension in the distribution process.

Conclusion

Most disaster studies produced in the context of the 2015 Nepal earthquake have not moved beyond the realm of the reconstruction process ‘effects’, such as the political, financial, and socio-cultural ramifications for local people. These studies often fail to consider the locals’ first-hand experiences, particularly how they retell their embodied experiences in the post-earthquake context. In this regard, my ethnography examines how local people make and remake their post-disaster social world inhabitable and comfortable again through their embodied narratives and experiences of the 2015 Nepal earthquake.

As agency scholars suggest, individuals possess the moral capacity, consciousness, and responsibility to act as autonomous subjects within neoliberal capitalism. In this context, this ethnography contributes to widening our understanding of how the ‘passive’ recipients of aid—or the locals—connected to their extended kinship networks or relatives residing across the globe through social media to evade the unfair and unjust relief distribution

process. They actively deployed their collective pain as an agentive force to challenge and resist these subjectivities, demonstrating that they are not merely passive recipients of aid.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not Applicable.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable.

Availability of Data and Materials

The data are available.

Competing Interests

No competing interest.

Funding

This paper is based on the ethnographic field research conducted for my PhD dissertation. My PhD research was funded by Fondation de France-FDF, a Paris-based philanthropic institution exclusively focused on disaster, reconstruction, and rehabilitation. I declare that the institution had no role in designing the research issues and themes, or in the methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

Authors' contributions

The author is the primary researcher and is solely responsible for framing the paper, analyzing the data, interpreting the results, reviewing relevant literature, and refining the manuscript.

Use of AI

I declare that all the data used in this paper are entirely human-generated.

Acknowledgments

I am foremost grateful to the Thangpal villagers, who were always open, curious, and supportive of my work. Due to space limitations and the large number of people involved, I mention only a few individuals who generously shared their time, ideas, experiences, and knowledge with me. I am grateful to Sita Ram Gole, Tirtha Bahadur Gole, Man Bahadur Gole, and Surya Chandra Lal Gole in Gunsa; and to Dokdok and Mina Pakhrin, Koko Pakhrin, Bhunu Waiba, Purna Bahadur Waiba, and Surje Pakhrin in Kot. My sincere thanks to Sangita Thebe Limbu for sharing her insights from her ongoing research and for her academic input, which helped shape this article in its current form. I also thank Lagan Rai and Sujin Lohorung for their extended conversations and suggestions. I am thankful to Lal Kumari Roka for creating map of the field site for me. Thanks are

also due to the two anonymous reviewers whose feedback helped improve this article. Finally, I would like to express my deep gratitude to my PhD supervisors, Janak Rai (TU) and Marie Lecomte-Tilouine (CNRS Senior Researcher), for their guidance and support throughout this research. I am solely responsible for any shortcomings in this article.

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