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Community and Resilience among Sherpas in the Post-Earthquake Everest Region

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Community and Resilience among Sherpas in the Post-Earthquake Everest Region

Pasang Yangjee Sherpa

In this article, I examine how residents of the Mount Everest region of Nepal responded after two major earthquakes occurred on April 25th and May 12th, 2015. This article is based on my participant-observation of discussions among Sherpas, on-foot surveys of earthquake damage, and the experiences of residents, which I recorded in Pharak, between the two major seismic events. I also reviewed institutional activities and reports that pertained to the Everest region and spoke at length with other Sherpas. In these discussions, the boundaries of 'community' were both fluid and self-understood. A 'sense of community' and 'resilience' emerged as salient themes, and provided an analytical framework to understand the Sherpa communities' responses to these earthquakes. The case studies presented herein are selected based on my direct engagement with them. The narratives present critical social responses to the process of relief and recovery and illustrate Sherpa resilience.

'Resilience,' as an analytical lens, also reveals the residents' ambivalent attitudes about the situation. Although the community was highly aware of devastation and post-earthquake recovery needs, 'external' discussions of these topics were subdued. This article then addresses how 'internal' Sherpa discussions arose as a response to external portrayals of the Everest region, a popular tourism destination, as a 'non-affected' or 'less-affected' earthquake zone. Interactions and discussions that took place 'externally' were unidirectional and top-down, wherein the villagers were at the receiving end, and often absent. While internal discussions strengthened the community's ability to rebuild itself, external discussions were instrumental in diverting large-scale relief and rebuilding assistance, not only from the region, but from the entire Solukhumbu district.

Keywords: earthquake, community, resilience, Sherpas, tourism.

Introduction

On April 25, 2015, I received a phone call in Pennsylvania from a friend informing me about the massive earthquake in Nepal. As I scrolled down my Facebook page, I saw a picture of the Dharahara tower in Kathmandu, reduced to rubble. In that moment, I realized that the city where I grew up was no more. Within minutes, news from our villages in the Everest region also started to appear on Facebook. Distraught by the news, my husband and I flew to Nepal five days later. We then headed to Pharak, where my family is from, to document damages. This article is a product of that visit and subsequent conversations among us, the Sherpas from Khumbu and Pharak. In this article, I take the position of a distant observer as I present my observations and analyze the situation, but I also remain personally affected by the devastation.

Specifically, this article explores community discussions of devastation that residents of the Mount Everest region in northeast Nepal experienced after two major earthquakes occurred in their homeland in 2015 (the first on April 25th, and the second on May 12th). I examine how the community responded through my own participant-observation of discussions among the Sherpas who were both from, or living in, the Everest region. These discussions took place in multiple locations, including social media sites, and centered on the survey of loss, rescue, relief, and rebuilding efforts. Sherpas in Khumbu, Pharak, Kathmandu, and diaspora communities voluntarily engaged in these discussions. Social media sites, particularly Facebook, served as indispensable platforms where residents could share pictures and stories from their different locations. I also conducted an on-foot survey from May 4-11, 2015, to assess the earthquake damage and record the post-earthquake experiences of Pharak residents. I also reviewed institutional activities and reports that pertained to the Sherpas of the Everest region.

Now, two years after the disaster, further reflection on my discussions with other Sherpas illustrates that a 'sense of community' and 'resilience' were the salient driving forces for the community's responses. As themes, a 'sense of community' and 'resilience' provide theoretical framework to understand how this community responded in the aftermath of the 2015 earthquakes. McMillan and Chavis' (1986: 9) description of a 'sense of community' is useful in this context. They describe this sensibility as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together." However, in the case of post-earthquake Sherpa experiences the definition of

'community' kept morphing depending on the time and situation; subsequently, this sense of community was also adjusted to reflect this morphing definition. Communities were at once 'territorial,' and 'relational' (Gusfield 1975), and not mutually exclusive. Territories were defined at different scales—village, region, VDC (Village Development Committee), district—and there were different sets of relationships involved in identifying what constituted 'communities.' In our discussions, sometimes we talked about one community, at other times we spoke of many communities, and often we discussed more than one kind of community woven together in our conversations without distinguishing them. The 'fluid boundaries' (Fisher 2001) of communities were self-understood by each member, and our discussions concentrated on supporting this shifting collective in its various forms.

Resilience in the context of the post-earthquake Everest region represented the ability of people to 'bounce back' after the disaster, in the context of a 'new normal.' I use McFarlane and Norris' (2006: 4) definition of disaster—a traumatic event, collectively experienced, with an acute onset, and time delimited; attributed to natural cause—to discuss resilience and the new normal for the Sherpas. Norris et al. (2008: 130) define resilience as "a set of processes linking a set of adaptive capacities to a positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation after a disturbance." As a framework for understanding and building strong communities, Norris et al. (2008: 146) points out that the scientific value of resilience 'lies in whether it leads to novel hypotheses about the characteristics of—and relations between—stressors, various adaptive capacities, and wellness over time.' I argue that an analysis of the Sherpas' discussions leads us to better understand the contemporary socio-economic and demographic situation of the region, and the availability or lack thereof of resources as well as the interplay between durable social networks and this concept of resilience.

I begin with an exploration of how different communities of the Mount Everest region documented loss, coordinated relief, and engaged in rebuilding homes, community structures, and the local economy. The cases presented here are based on my direct experience and communication with community members. In other words, this article does not introduce every relief and rebuilding effort that took place in the region. I then present critical community responses to the process of relief and recovery. The two themes—sense of community and resilience—appear throughout my discussion, as I reflect on how they emerged and transformed over time.

The Mount Everest region considered here includes three governmental administrative units, the Village Development Committees (VDCs), within the Solukhumbu district: Khumjung, Namche, and Chaurikharka.

to the government of Nepal's 2011 census, the combined area of these three VDCs has a population of 7,161 individuals, contains 1,999 households, and is a total of 1,478 sq. km.

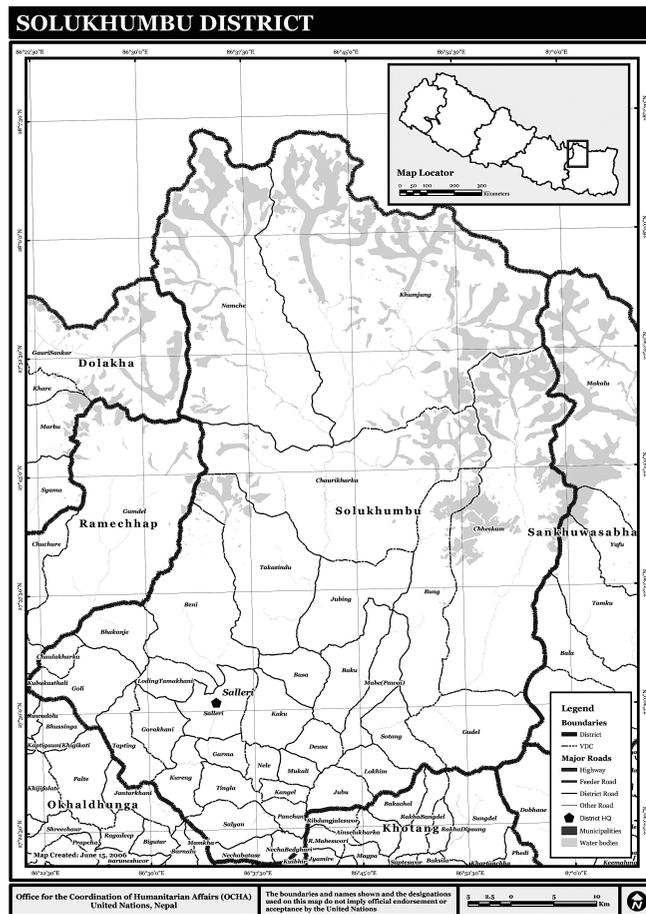


Figure 1. Map of Solukhumbu District Showing VDCs.

<<http://www.un.org.np/maps/district-maps/eastern/Solukhumbu.pdf>>

The area overseen by the Khumjung and Namche VDCs are locally known as Khumbu. The area overseen by Chaurikharka VDC is locally known as Pharak. The residents of the Everest region use either Khumbu or Pharak, the Sherpa names, or the name of their individual VDCs, depending on the context of their conversation. According

to the Nepal Human Development Report 2014 produced by the government of Nepal and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Solukhumbu has a Human Development Index (HDI) value of 0.502, which puts it in the higher range, just below Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Bhaktapur, and at the same level with Palpa, Tanahu, and Mustang. According to UNDP, HDI is a “summary measure of average achievement in key dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable and have a decent standard of living” (UNDP 2016).

Documenting Loss

One week after the devastating earthquake of April 25, the #Khumbuearthquakerelief page was created on Facebook to try to create a comprehensive survey of loss, and to support coordination of relief efforts in the region. Prior to creating this page, residents and travelers were sharing pictures and stories on their personal Facebook pages. Reports from Chaurikharka and the Thame villages, accompanied with pictures, showed that most of the houses had been flattened in the earthquake. Residents of villages like Jorsalle and Benkar, on the other hand, were silent. For those learning about the situation solely from Facebook, in the first several days it appeared that only two villages were badly affected. The lack of access to social media, and specific networks limited publicity and ability to connect for villages like Jorsalle, Benkar, and Gumela. Some villagers also consciously limited their presence on social media in order to not inflict pain on their relatives living abroad.

My on-foot survey of the villages in Pharak showed that the earthquake had unevenly affected the region. While some villages suffered limited structural damage, others were completely destroyed. For example, the Chaurikharka

VDCs	Area (sq. km)	Household	Population	Male	Female
Chaurikharka	344.5	968	3709	1872	1837
Namche	431.3	480	1540	807	733
Khumjung	702.2	551	1912	913	999

Figure 2. Three VDCs of the Mount Everest Region. (Nepal Government Census 2011)

village (from which the name of the Chaurikharka VDC originates), was completely destroyed, whereas Lukla, a neighboring village, suffered comparatively minimal structural damage. However, the Lukla hospital, which stands on top of a ridge, suffered substantial loss. Patients were cared for in tents on the lawn during our visit.

In the beginning, those of us based outside the area sought information about the condition of villages on our own, through phone calls. We then publicly circulated the information as quickly as possible on social media sites to inform each other especially the Sherpa diaspora. Our initial conversations, on and off Facebook, focused on how to appropriately measure damage. How do we identify the extent of damage in the villages? General consensus was that damages were not uniform. Based on local estimates, and consultations, villagers were able to identify if their houses were fully damaged, partially damaged, or had minor cracks. Creating common-sense categories to cover the range of damage was a suitable solution in an emergency situation. This data from villagers, along with the socioeconomic situation of each family—which included the availability of financial support from relatives or friends—were deemed necessary to understand overall vulnerability of each household. These data were also useful in organizing the distribution of relief goods and funds at a later stage in the disaster and recovery periods. In the lack of an official guideline from the State, such community-vetted categorization became valuable for individuals and institutions providing assistance.

Ken Noguchi, a renowned Japanese mountaineer, who was in the region during the earthquake, surveyed damages in Khumjung (from which the name for the Khumjung VDC originates) and Khunde villages immediately after the first earthquake. He reported that out of 178 houses, 23 were fully damaged, 50 had damaged walls, 65 had minor damage, and 40 had cracks in the house (GHF website accessed on May 9, 2017). After local consultation, and on-foot survey, I found that in five out of nine Chaurikharka VDC wards (1,3,5,6, and 9), out of 372 households in these wards, 130 houses were severely damaged (unusable without major reconstruction), 24 were moderately damaged (unsafe to live in), and 81 had minor damages (required repairs). During our visit, I also found that the entire village of Jorsalle had to relocate to Monzo until their homes were repaired. In Jorsalle (a village that is locally known as Thumbuk), the earthquake had severely damaged every residential house. One man died instantly from a rock that came rolling from the steep slopes above the village during the earthquake. Monzo, which sits higher up than Jorsalle, became a safe harbor for the villagers of Jorsalle, which sits on a sloping hill above the gushing Dudh Koshi.

In the morning of May 12, 2015, I, along with two team members, traveled from Pharak to Kathmandu after completing the survey visit. My maternal aunt saw us off at the Lukla airport that morning. Hours later, the second major earthquake struck. The next day, she called me on the phone. She was distressed from being helplessly stranded between large boulders as she returned home. She said, “What was standing after the first earthquake is now gone.”

The Greater Himalayas Foundation (GHF) also reported on their website that the second earthquake had caused more destruction causing them to note that the report of damaged homes submitted by the Khumjung and Khunde Earthquake Relief Group (KKERG) based on Ken Noguchi’s numbers had to be revised. Honoring the legacy of the late Mingma Norbu Sherpa, a leading conservationist from Khumbu, the GHF is one of the organizations supporting education in the region. The GHF actively followed earthquake impacts in Khumbu, and provided regular updates on their website about the situation on the ground. They also shared updates about their efforts at delivering emergency relief, and communicating their vision of long-term rebuilding through community consultation. They reported that after the second major earthquake of 7.3 magnitude on May 12, 2015, the epicenter of which was 25 miles from Namche Bazaar, a Khumbu village, many more houses and schools were damaged and destroyed (GHF website accessed on May 9, 2017).

Lhakpa Norbu Sherpa, who was in the region during and after the two major earthquakes, reported that data collected in the Thame Valley (Namche VDC’s wards 4-9) show 93 percent of residential and tourist structures damaged by the earthquake; 66 percent were fully damaged (unusable without major reconstruction) and 27 percent partially damaged (safe to use with repairs) (Sherpa 2015). Despite the documentation of losses on the ground, governmental reports of earthquake-affected zones on a national level appeared showing Solukhumbu as ‘unaffected,’ or ‘less affected.’ Maps were created within months, for the purposes of identifying damage and rebuilding targets. It is notable that these maps portray earthquake-affected zones neatly contained within district boundaries. This representation distorts the realities on the ground, where the impact from the earthquakes did not stop at the district boundaries.

Rebuilding Individual Homes

In addition to documenting loss, our initial conversations then evolved to discussing how to raise and utilize funds to support local families. We were especially concerned about those families that lacked resources or kin

to help. In these conversations, some people participated regularly. Others did not necessarily communicate their opinions publicly but did so privately. These small-scale conversations allowed for individual concerns to be raised, and addressed. However, individuals' participation was affected by their ability or lack thereof to access social networks, on the ground or on social media sites. These conversations were continuous, and spilled from one place to another. Formal gatherings were only one of the many venues, and one of the ways people conversed. Daily conversations with families and friends informed discussions of post-earthquake needs at the community level.

When I visited my aunt's home in Chumoa before the second earthquake, it seemed visibly unharmed. Stones were piled on top of each other and the land was intact. I asked her if her home was damaged. She showed me the cracks in the walls. Stones had fallen from the sides of the structure, but the frame had stood. When stones fell, they were immediately picked up and put back in place. My aunt later hired some men to repair the remaining cracks. Her house is also a teahouse, which she operates during tourist seasons, and the main source of her family's income. It was important to make sure that the house did not look like it was falling apart.

In response to the earthquake, two charitable organizations were registered in Colorado and Washington, in the United States, independently of each other. These organizations, the Sherpa Foundation (SF), and the Thame Sherpa Heritage Fund (TSHF), have focused on providing support to rebuild homes in different parts of the Everest region. "The people in our villages look at us as the light at the end of their tunnel," Pemba Sherpa, founder of the Sherpa Foundation said to a local newspaper in Vail, Colorado (Vail Daily 2015). The *Vail Daily* also wrote that in their first year, the Sherpa Foundation "repaired 96 homes and built 12 more, all for a little more than \$115,000—every penny raised locally...A little money goes a long way in Nepal, and they spend no more than \$7,000 on a home." Pemba describes himself as "just the delivery guy" (ibid.). He explained, "When their homes were devastated, they had no hope. The permanent solution is a home where they can feel safe" (ibid.). Two years later, he continues to raise funds and support his community to rebuild.

Khumbu Sherpa leaders and supporters initiated the TSHF to assist the Thame Valley with local reconstruction, where the villages of Thame-Ong (Lower Thame), Thame-Teng (Upper Thame), and Yulajung were the worst affected. In these communities, the earthquake had reduced the traditional houses made of rock, timber and mud plaster to rubble. These homes were the bedrock of

family livelihoods. The foundation's website describe that these homes "housed three generations—grandparents living with their adult children and grandchildren—and livestock" (accessed on May 14, 2017). They also write that, "Thame leaders, young and old, experts and independent advisors run this organization in order to ensure that resources are distributed in an equitable, sustainable, and culturally sensitive manner." The TSHF partnered with the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH Zurich) for a joint assessment of the Thame Valley to learn about existing building practices, select long-term construction projects, and initiate the design process. The TSHF team hosted co-learning workshops between Thamecho community members and visiting experts to identify local priorities, and to share ideas and knowledge. As the organization describes, "The workshops included practical demonstrations of earthquake and engineering concepts that can help individuals to strengthen their homes as they rebuild" (TSHF website accessed on May 14, 2017).

Yangji Doma Sherpa, a Khumbu resident and the Nepal Project Coordinator of the Sir Edmund Hillary Foundation of Canada, mentioned in her progress report focused on the foundation's earthquake recovery projects that one of the biggest challenges they faced was transporting construction materials to the project sites in Khumbu (SEHF website accessed on May 14, 2017). These materials needed to be flown in to the nearest airport and then carried to the project site, which significantly increased costs and the time needed to begin rebuilding. The short seasonal window for construction also hindered the pace of reconstruction. Lack of qualified local engineers to build earthquake-resistant structures further detracted from these efforts. Yangji Doma Sherpa emphasized that living in temporary shelters in the harsh mountain climate was difficult. Therefore, villagers had no alternative but to rebuild their homes. They did not wait for governmental assistance because it was not certain when it would arrive; and even if it did arrive in time, the government allocated assistance funds would not have been sufficient to rebuild local structures to local standards.

Rebuilding Community Structures

The earthquake has destroyed our place of worship. We need to work together and rebuild it... Before, when the temple stood and our gods were erect, we could not have imagined dismantling the structure even if it were to make it larger. Now, we need to think that the god has given us permission to rebuild it. The god has dismantled itself so we can make it bigger (Monastery Management Committee member, Pema Choeling Gomba, May 10, 2015)

Officially known as Pema Choeling, Rimizung *gompa*, is located in Pharak, and is one of the three major monasteries in the Everest region. It is believed that Khyenpa Dorje, one of the two accomplished younger brothers of Lama Sange Dorje, founded Rimizung several hundred years ago. Khyenpa Dorje was known for his ability to “pile up seven grains of barley and stand a statue of Shakyamuni Buddha upon them” (Wangmo 2008: 11). Every year, hundreds of Pharak residents gather on the grounds of this monastery to receive blessings during the Dumje Festival. I visited the monastery on the day of the Gomba Management Committee’s first meeting after the earthquake. It was a somber morning. We sat on wooden benches in the front yard, which was once a hall with colorful walls and high ceilings. This space was filled with dust, piles of wood, and fallen rocks. The dining hall that stood in front of us, and the kitchen attached to it, were shaky. The young monks, mostly in their early teens, had moved into tents pitched on the vegetable garden. The nuns, who are much older and fewer in number than the monks, had moved in with their relatives. The temple was destroyed, and its sacred statues were broken. Everyone in the meeting was visibly grief-stricken.

On May 13, 2017, managers of the Facebook page of Rimizung Gomba posted pictures and videos of a *puja* prayer ceremony led by His Highness Daktrul Rinpoche and His Highness Napta Rinpoche to bless the new monastery building. On the day of this *puja*, a rainbow appeared around the sun, a very auspicious sign. The Facebook page has since announced that the monastery is now completely restored with a copper roof that was installed on December 16, 2016. Sets of Guru Rinpoche statues, and the interior decorative sacred art on the main level, were completed from the funds received from Pemba Sherpa, head of the Sherpa Foundation. There were many volunteers and supporters who also helped in the behind the scenes rebuilding of the monastery. This progress shows that several hours of meetings, discussions, and continued efforts from the Management Committee and the villagers have come to fruition two years later.

Families in Khumbu had put their limited resources towards repairing their private properties. They started repairing and rebuilding their homes soon after the earthquake in order to prepare for the tourists’ arrival. A badly damaged house is also a source of embarrassment. I was told repeatedly, ‘*Laaj huncha*’ (It will be shameful) to have villagers see a house in such a state. The villagers were thus unable to fully support rebuilding their community structures. Therefore, upon requests from the villagers, the GHF decided to focus on community structures. The KKERG was instrumental in identifying needs and mobiliz-

ing resources on the ground on behalf of the Foundation. The Foundation’s mandate to work in Khumbu, their family ties, and their institutional networks in place facilitated assistance efforts in the region. This allowed the foundation to support the rebuilding of monasteries, sacred structures (*chorten* shrines, etc.), and schools.

The Himalayan Trust Nepal, the longest running non-governmental organization in the Everest region, focused on monitoring and supporting schools throughout Solukhumbu. A survey they conducted had revealed that 227 schools in the Solukhumbu district were damaged: some were totally destroyed, and some sustained partial damage and cracks. The Rebuild Earthquake Damaged Solukhumbu Schools (REDSS) project was implemented to reconstruct and repair school buildings in the district. According to the Himalayan Trust Nepal website, as of April 2017, REDSS had successfully completed their project in seven schools (accessed on May 14, 2017).

The Local Tourism Economy

On July 15, 2015, two months after the second earthquake, Miyamoto Inc., an international group of earthquake and structural engineers, published a report titled *Damage Assessment of Everest Region*. This assessment was proposed by Intrepid Travel, the largest tour operator in Nepal, and was conducted on behalf of the Government of Nepal through the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation (MoCTCA). In this report, the Miyamoto technical team indicated that the Khumbu trekking routes were safe. This report signaled the opening of Everest trekking, which was well received, both locally and nationally, by many in the tourism industry. The villagers in the Everest region needed the local economy to be back on track so that they could have their lives return to normal; this report was seen as a positive step towards achieving that goal.

The Miyamoto report was produced for three main reasons: 1) to develop a baseline of the extent of earthquake-related damage; 2) to provide advice on the overall trekking safety of the routes; and 3) to make recommendations on repairs and risk mitigation. The technical team included an expert structural engineer and a geotechnical engineer. The support team included a professional mountain guide, a project coordinator, and an operations manager. This team used a mix of helicopter flyovers and on-the-ground trekking to assess a total of 15 villages and approximately 710 buildings along the trekking route from June 27 to July 2, 2015. The assessment was conducted in accordance with the Applied Technology Council (ATC)-20, and the Nepal Government’s national guideline for post-earthquake damage assessment, as specified by

the Department of Urban Development and Building Construction (DUDBC). ATC-20 is a guideline used in the United States for post-earthquake building safety evaluation. The report's structural assessment of the Everest region covering Khumbu and Pharak, north of Lukla, reported:

Out of approximately 710 buildings, earthquake damage of structural concern was observed in 120 buildings (17 percent); 83 percent of buildings can be given a green tag per ATC-20/ DUDBC guidelines. It was found that most of the buildings that were damaged can feasibly be repaired (Miyamoto 2015: 7).

These report results also highlight shortages of reconstruction materials, which have slowed the process of repair and rebuilding. This report then recommends completing a detailed risk-assessment study post-monsoon in order to manage the identified risks associated with the geologic hazard. It concludes, "The majority of accommodation structures and trails have sustained minimal damage from the April and May earthquake" (Miyamoto 2015: 9).

In Lhakpa Norbu Sherpa's (2015) article in *The Kathmandu Post*, a national daily newspaper, accessed online, a local tourism professional stated, "having to say Khumbu is unaffected is like a '*runche hanso*' (a forced smile through tears)." Khumbu and Pharak Sherpas found themselves in an ambivalent situation with this report. On the one hand, it was crucial that the local economy recover as soon as possible. On the other hand, much assistance was still needed, especially for those who were struggling even before the earthquake. Lhakpa Norbu Sherpa wrote in his article:

A key issue is that Solukhumbu was not included among the list of critically affected districts, despite the massive damage and destruction that equals some of the 14 districts with this classification. There have been allegations that this is a result of pressure on the government from the tourism lobby, fearful that this categorization would frighten away tourists. Although the intention of this may be good, it does come with significant costs to Solukhumbu earthquake victims—both within the Everest region and in the lower non-tourist areas. This lack of recognition of the impact makes the area ineligible for many types of large-scale relief and reconstruction aid. (Sherpa 2015)

The case of devastation in Solukhumbu, and particularly in the Mount Everest region, faded from national attention soon after the Miyamoto report. In a public event in Kathmandu later that summer, a senior governmental

representative warned that any negative light on the Everest region's tourism industry would be a disservice to the country. The audience was even alerted that it would be anti-national.

Today, the number of tourists' arrival in the Everest region continues to increase. In 2016, the Everest region received more than 35,000 tourists (five times the population of the region). Many teahouses along the main trail to Mount Everest have been repaired with lighter and less expensive materials like the tin walls on the outside, and plywood on the inside.

Critical Community Responses

The Sagarmatha Sarokar Samaj (SSS) describes itself, on their Facebook page, as 'a civil organization representing the people of Namche, Khumjung, Chaurikharka, Jubing, and Taksindo VDCs, established to advocate and support sustainable development, good governance, human rights, and social inclusion.' It was formed shortly before the first earthquake, and presented its letter of demands, advocating for sustainable development in the Everest region, to the then Prime Minister Shushil Koirala. The post-earthquake reality halted the SSS's progress on these previously set goals. The earthquake, however, also opened space on the Web to be critical of how the community reacted to the distribution of emergency relief goods. On May 4, 2015, SSS wrote on their Facebook page:

Ten days passed since the disastrous earthquake. Observation in one remote mountain village revealed that villagers demonstrated incredible level[s] of resourcefulness, courage, and cooperation initially. Those who have access for food and drinks shared with others. They helped each other and worked in a cooperative manner.

The community spirit gradually began to falter once the photographers and relief materials began to arrive. Instead of working on their houses, people began to [chase] noises of helicopters and rumors of relief distribution. They began [to] compete for limited handouts instead of sharing. Signs of tension emerged.

People are grateful to anyone who come[s] forward with support. Your gift is invaluable and will become sources of merit for yourself. But, it needs to be done better:

1. If possible, ask locals what is most needed before purchasing your goods.
2. Please inform the community about the nature and amount of support given.

3. Kindly, do not distribute things directly by yourself unless the recipient is a friend or a family member.
4. Deposit your donations with a local group if it is insufficient to go around.
5. Please, do not ask whole villages to show-up in person to receive your support to save precious time.
6. Let's not make it a photo opportunity.
7. Please leave the donor's name and number so that the community can thank you.

During my visit in May 2015, many villagers shared similar sentiments expressed by SSS. They were carefully monitoring each other during times of relief distribution, and emphasized fairness, and the need to help those most in need first.

The #Khumbuearthquakerelief Facebook page was a reaction to these experiences based on the awareness that the region had suffered considerably, although unevenly, and that there was going to be little, if any, government support. The community treated this page as a platform to come together in coordinating their efforts, and facilitating any assistance programs. The #Khumbuearthquakerelief Facebook page describes its goal as follows:

Khumbu too has been significantly affected, particularly in the villages of upper and lower Thame, twin village of Kunde-Khumjung and Chaurikharka (Dungde) where more than 95% of the houses have been destroyed. However, the destruction in Khumbu remains obscured as the region is relatively inaccessible, it does not fall within the government declared high-risk area, and there has been very little media coverage regarding it. Because of these reasons, the relief support provided by the government has not reach[ed] Khumbu Region yet. Fortunately, a number of individuals and organizations providing relief support and funding in this region have emerged. However, proper need assessment and stratification has to be done so that all the affected people receive support based on their needs. Similarly, the donors should also be aware of different relief materials and support being provided so that duplication is prevented. The goal of this page is to provide information on local assessment, stratification of needs, relief materials, donor infor-

mation and updates. The information provided will hopefully be able to improve coordination between various individuals, local groups, NGOs and foreign donors so that the immediate relief works and further rebuilding process can progress smoothly and eliminate any misunderstandings and communication gaps that may exist.

The #Khumbuearthquakerelief page on Facebook was received as an organic extension of community discussions. New information was frequently uploaded, and this shared space became a reliable source of information in the following days as more community members posted their comments. The page remained active as of May 2017.

Reciprocity

The Mount Everest region is home to an increasing number of residents from diverse ethnic backgrounds. In the last twenty years, as tourism industry continued to expand, the region has witnessed swelling migration into this part of Solukhumbu, which has historically been home of the Sherpas. The demographic characteristic of the region has thus shifted, and became evident while dealing with the post-earthquake relief and recovery. Experiences described below reveal the significance of social networks and reciprocal relationships in times of crisis.

Farak (Pharak) Sherpa Kyidug was one of the first locally-based organizations to mobilize themselves in assisting earthquake-affected community members. As an emergency relief initiative, they collected funds among themselves, bought bags of rice, and distributed them. Later, they became the focal point on the ground in Pharak for donors to identify recipients, and distribute relief goods. The Kyidug was originally established to support the welfare of the Sherpas of Pharak, so they initially decided to distribute the limited goods only to their constituent members, the Sherpas. As the amount of their relief goods grew, and depending on the nature of this relief, they started supporting more residents outside their community.

When the villagers from Jorsalle moved to Monzo, the newer residents decided to separate themselves from the older residents. The newer residents did not want to burden the Monzo villagers, who were themselves strained by the disaster. So, instead of living in teahouse guestrooms, the new residents moved to the nearby school compound, where they camped together. When the topic came up during conversations among villagers, local Sherpas expressed that they appreciated the thoughtfulness of their neighbors.

In Tok Tok, I met a woman who had come to the region with her family, like many others, in search of better economic opportunities. Before the earthquake, she used to look after her goats and ran a small business out of her rented house. When government officials and Pharak village representatives came to survey her losses immediately after the earthquake, they documented damages to the house. In the list of victims of such surveys, renters like the woman were excluded because they did not own any property. Technically for the purposes of the survey, she had not lost anything. In reality, she had suffered a heavy loss. Her livelihood that relied on the day-to-day business she conducted in this house was disrupted. When I met her a week after the first earthquake, she knew she was going to remain financially destitute for a long time. Her migrant-family neighbors had left Pharak for their natal villages, but she could not return. For her and her family, Pharak was now their home base. In their new home, however, they did not have generations of reciprocal relationships with the Sherpa villagers that would have provided the basis for social support she needed in such a time of vulnerability.

Many Sherpas from Solukhumbu volunteered in severely affected parts of Nepal, closer to the epicenter of the earthquakes. One Khumbu resident, a member of an international network of Nepali volunteers, explained to me that she knew her community would be able to support each other. They were going to be fine. Her skillset was useful elsewhere. The Sherpas from the Everest region were resilient, she explained.

Discussion

In the aftermath of the earthquake, the community of Sherpas from Khumbu and Pharak came together. Social media sites allowed Sherpas in different places to connect despite the temporal and spatial distance between them. Through discussions, communities identified needs, pooled resources, and mobilized networks to rebuild themselves. A sense of community brought them together in supporting each other. It made them resilient.

While resilience as a framework has been useful to understand the situation of the Sherpas in the Everest region post-earthquake, it has also exposed the complexities of repairing and rebuilding post-disaster. On the one hand, Sherpa resiliency was apparent. On the other hand, vulnerability of individual households, and those without access to social networks, Sherpas or not, in this apparently resilient region of Nepal were also evident. Thus, it is important to note that the application of resilience as a lens runs the risk of being co-opted “as a basis for

arguing that community-based interventions are unnecessary when, quite the contrary, disasters are times when community resources may require the greatest boost... No community is always vulnerable, for how would it survive, and no community is always resilient” (Norris et al. 2008). The lack of governmental attention to the Everest region, a popular tourist destination with high HDI, and the subsequent omission of the entire Solukhumbu district from the list of critically affected districts illustrates how the perception of resilience can deceptively mask realities on the ground. Needless to say, resilience could thus be expended as a basis for arguing that community-based interventions are unnecessary. However, the experiences of active mobilization of resources and social networks for the Everest region, explored in this article, have shown that community based resources do require the greatest boost in times of disaster.

Finally, the case of the Everest region as discussed here has also revealed an ambivalent situation for the Sherpas. Although the community actively participated in documenting loss in the region, and identified post-earthquake recovery needs, their engagement in ‘external’ discussions of devastation and post-earthquake recovery needs were subdued. In order to return to a ‘new normal,’ the Sherpas needed to ensure a vibrant tourism economy, which is the main source of livelihood for virtually everyone in the region. The Miyamoto report was instrumental to this end, and was therefore welcomed—at least not protested publicly—by the residents of the Everest region even at the cost of diverting attention, and large-scale relief and rebuilding assistance away from not only the Everest region but from the entire Solukhumbu district.

Conclusion

I conclude that community discussions were open—not closed—but they only became ‘internal’ and culturally contained due to the contact with exclusionary external discussions that were unidirectional, and top-down, where the villagers were at the receiving end. It was the internal discussions that recognized the extent of the devastation, and uneven individual needs. It was also the internal discussions that contributed to the community’s capacity to rebuild itself. In all of this, Sherpas’ connections to resourceful social networks, which enabled them to create opportunities to support the villagers were key to their resilience. Their resilience was driven by their sense of community. Looking forward, however, it should be understood that the opportunities are not unlimited, and that social networks are not immune to fatigue.

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