

RESEARCH PAPER

Countering Local Disaster Capitalism: Lessons from Nepal's Indigenous People

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Abstract: Disaster capitalism creates political and economic space for neoliberal projects to benefit the wealthy disproportionately while marginalizing Indigenous groups. This paper examines how and the extent to which local disaster capitalism has affected Indigenous communities in Nepal's Kathmandu Valley, as they recover from the 2015 earthquakes, and how local disaster capitalism ought to be countered. Based on an in-depth analysis of local disaster capitalism in Rudrayani Guthi, Nepal, the findings of this study demonstrate that Indigenous peoples have been negatively affected by state-sponsored disaster recovery schemes, whereas wealthy people and businesses have benefitted from them. Such schemes focus on “physical reconstruction” and “economic development”, dispossessing Indigenous lands to pave the way for housing, motorways, greenfield urban development, and hydropower. Many Indigenous groups are forced to be part of such schemes, while local disaster capitalism continues in the name of “disaster recovery”. The paper highlights the unfortunate reality of the local disaster capitalism taking shape and destroying Indigenous lives and livelihoods. The paper concludes by offering some principles used by Indigenous peoples while countering local disaster capitalism through confrontations with powerful actors and while protecting their land during the process of disaster recovery.

Keywords: Disasters, Disaster Governance, Indigenous Knowledge, Disaster Risk Reduction, Political Ecology

1. INTRODUCTION

Disasters often create a political and economic space for neoliberal projects to benefit the wealthy disproportionately while marginalizing or exploiting Indigenous and poor people. This phenomenon is generally labelled as

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“disaster capitalism”. The concept emerged due to the concurrent rise of disasters worldwide and increasing globalization and neoliberalization in the 1990s. “Disaster capitalism” is a term coined by the noted journalist, Naomi Klein, in 2007. In Klein’s book, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007), disaster capitalism is defined as an “orchestrated raid on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities” (6). Disaster recovery processes are viewed through various lenses, including as windows of opportunity to introduce political reforms and as occasions for the corporate class to capitalize on disasters (Klein 2007). The relationship between disasters and neoliberalism has received widespread attention from scholars worldwide, wherein the dominant narrative (Wrights, Kelman, and Dodds 2021; Imperiale and Vanclay 2020; Sandoval *et al.* 2020; García López 2020) focuses on economic growth and development as the only means to address growing economic inequities, ignoring the dangers associated with the uncontrolled exploitation of land and Indigenous peoples. However, the effects of disaster capitalism extend beyond the economy and can destroy Indigenous peoples’ culture, identity, and sense of belonging. It can devastate the environment and penalize Indigenous peoples—who safeguard more than 80% of the world’s remaining biodiversity and live sustainably on the land—by destroying local wetlands, seascapes, and landscapes (Ibrahimpašić, Perdikaris, and Rebecca 2022). Disasters can create winners and losers, and it is Indigenous and marginalized local communities who are most exposed to the negative impacts of disaster capitalism at the local level, also known as local disaster capitalism.

In Nepal, Indigenous peoples are struggling to recover from the 2015 earthquakes perhaps because of the pressures of local disaster capitalism. On April 25, 2015, at 11:59 AM, Nepal was struck by a deadly earthquake of magnitude 7.8 on the Richter Scale. As people were adjusting and living through many small aftershocks, a massive aftershock of magnitude 7.3 on the Richter Scale hit again on May 12 at 12:50 PM, causing more casualties and damage. The epicentre of the first earthquake was in Barpak, Gorkha. The epicentre of the second earthquake was at the border of Dolakha and Sindupalchowk. These earthquakes killed 8,896 people, injured 22,302 people, destroyed 6,04,930 houses, and partially damaged 2,88,856 homes (NPC 2015). Altogether, 3 million people were affected, and the estimated economic damage was about US\$ 7 billion, which is approximately one-third of Nepal’s gross domestic product (NPC 2015). In response to the disasters, many international donors, Nepali government agencies, NGOs, and communities, both within and outside Nepal, tried to help the Nepali people

recover from the earthquakes. Yet, it has been widely reported that the response was delayed, the government was not held accountable (Shrestha and Pathranarakul 2018), women were mistreated (Rai-Paudyal 2016), and Indigenous people were neglected (Shrestha *et al.* 2019).

Disasters affect everyone, but not everyone is impacted equally. Indigenous peoples in Nepal suffered disproportionately following the earthquakes in 2015. According to Nepal's census data, Nepal's Indigenous peoples—also known as *Adivasi janajati*—who have been excluded socially, economically, and politically for centuries (Gurung 2019), comprise 35.4% of the total population (CBS 2011).¹ These people are highly marginalized and are subject to poverty, landlessness, and a lack of decision-making powers (Gurung 2019; Bhattachan 2021). Lama and Tamang (2018) claim that the Tamang population suffered the most because of the earthquakes. Over 700 villages are estimated to have been affected in these areas where Indigenous Tamang peoples represent the majority of the population. Further, in Gorkha, where the earthquakes affected the Indigenous Gurung community, households headed by Indigenous women suffered significant damage in terms of death, injury, displacement, and impact on other livelihood assets. There were reports that Indigenous women and girls faced an increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence (Rosul *et al.* 2015). The Newars from Kathmandu Valley were also highly affected by these earthquakes. A report published by Himalayan Human Rights Monitors (HimRights) features the stories of Newar women who lost their houses and were living in temporary shelters because of the earthquake. Many women also reported having no source of income and a lack of support from the local government (HimRights 2017), making recovery difficult.

This paper aims to investigate: a) how and the extent to which local disaster capitalism is unfolding within Indigenous communities in Khokana, Nepal; b) what challenges Indigenous peoples are facing in confronting local disaster capitalism while protecting their land during disaster recovery processes; and c) how local disaster capitalism can be countered using Indigenous knowledge and practices.

The paper includes five key sections. Following the introduction, Section 2 engages with the literature on disaster capitalism and Indigenous peoples. Section 3 outlines the research methodology and introduces the case study site, Rudrayani Guthi, which is an Indigenous Newar Guthi in Kathmandu Valley. Section 4 presents the findings on the local disaster capitalism ongoing in Rudrayani Guthi, Khokana. Section 5 highlights and analyses the reasons for the local disaster capitalism taking shape and destroying

¹ This is the latest census data available in Nepal.

Indigenous lives and livelihoods. The paper concludes by offering some principles used by Indigenous peoples to counter local disaster capitalism, while confronting powerful actors and protecting their land during the process of disaster recovery.

2. DISASTER CAPITALISM AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Disasters create economic and political space for neoliberal projects. The term “disaster capitalism” is used by Klein (2007) in her book, *The Shock Doctrine*, in which she explores how capitalism came to dominate the world by leveraging natural disasters or other calamities. The book was turned into a documentary film in 2009, in which she argues that neoliberal, free-market policies are deeply engrained in many western countries today because of a deliberate strategy she calls “shock therapy”. The therapy, according to Klein, centres on the exploitation of national crises to push through controversial policies while peoples are too emotionally and physically distracted by disasters to mount an effective resistance. Therefore, disaster researchers refer to disaster capitalism as “second disasters” (Gunewardena and Schuller 2008), which disproportionately impact marginalized communities and make their recovery process more difficult (Schuller and Maldonado 2016).

There have been numerous cases of disaster capitalism worldwide under the guise of disaster recovery and reconstruction. The origins of disaster capitalism stretch back at least into the early 1970s, when neoliberal economic policies were implemented in Chile following the establishment of Pinochet’s dictatorship. Notably, these policies continue to be promoted and implemented following major disaster events in recent years, such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and the 2010 Haiti earthquake, among others (Yee 2018). After the earthquake in Haiti, Haiti was “open for business” (Schuller and Maldonado 2016, 65): the telecommunications industry was privatized, the lands of local farmers were cleared for development projects, and a proposal was floated to promote high-end tourism in Ile-a-Vache, an island in Haiti’s south coast (Schuller and Maldonado 2016). Similarly, two days after Hurricane Irma in Barbuda (2017), the residents were evacuated from the island, and it was declared ruined. The Barbudans believe that the forced evacuation was done to grab their land, as a massive US\$ 200 million resort was proposed to be constructed on the same island by Norbu, a hospitality group owned by actor Robert De Niro (Wright *et al.* 2021). Further, Fluor—a multinational US construction company that had been a top contractor in Iraq after the Iraq War as well as in New Orleans after hurricane Katrina (Klein 2007)—was given a \$1.2 billion contract by the United States Army Corps of Engineers to reconstruct the electricity grid after hurricane Maria (2017) in Puerto Rico. These examples show how powerful bodies such as governments and businesses profit from disasters at the expense of local

communities. The concept of disaster capitalism has received mixed reactions. Some criticize it for blending free market ideals with predatory corporate behaviour and simplifying political phenomena, while others laud it as compelling and defining work. Nevertheless, Klein argues that “countries are shocked – by wars, terror attacks, coups d’état and natural disasters. And then they are shocked again – by corporations and politicians who exploit the fear and disorientation of this first shock to push through economic shock therapy” (2007, 25). Thus, it is vital to understand that disasters create winners and losers, and that local communities, such as Indigenous peoples, are left at the losing margin.

Indigenous peoples tend to suffer disproportionately from disaster capitalism. There have been numerous instances of Indigenous peoples being displaced and dispossessed from their land after disasters. For example, after major disasters, tourism is often prioritized as a driver of the recovery process. These catastrophic events are used by opportunistic tourism investors to grab land from Indigenous communities that have been temporarily or permanently relocated after the disaster. This happened in Thailand following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami (Neef 2021) and in the Philippines following typhoon Haiyan in 2013 (Yamada, Cabaljaio, and Imasa 2017). The governments of these countries were quick to establish no-building zones along the coast—ostensibly to safeguard local Indigenous communities—but they later exempted resorts and other tourism infrastructure from the buffer zone regulations. Similarly, after the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami in India, the Tamil Nadu state government sought to restrict local community resettlement in this zone, refusing to help families living up to 200 meters from the high tide line, unless they agreed to give up their land and move to new settlement areas beyond the buffer zone (Leonard 2007, 59). This meant that numerous Indigenous fishing villages, which were dependent on the sea for their survival, had to be relocated inland, away from their source of livelihood, leaving the coastal strip open for future large-scale tourism development. In Mindanao, Philippines, similar dispossession of land occurred in quake-hit areas and landslide- and flood-prone areas. Communities of farmers, fisherfolk, and Indigenous peoples were barred from returning to their lands. Most lands declared to be “no build zones” were located within vast ancestral lands, and they were recategorized without the consent of Indigenous peoples (Imbong 2020). Various Native American communities, such as the Hopi tribe (Curran 2023) and Karuk and Yurok peoples (Marks-Block and Tripp 2021) have been subject to land dispossession due to increasing climate change hazards and centralized state regulations undermining Indigenous disaster governance processes (Marks-Block and Tripp 2021). Woodard and

O'Connor (2019) call this an act of colonization, which is “motivated by an imperialist desire to acquire land and greater resources” (92). The fundamental consequence of this process is the alienation of Indigenous peoples from their land (Woodard and O'Connor 2019).

Disaster capitalism causes Indigenous peoples to experience not only physical and economic losses but also social and cultural losses, as land is not merely an economic asset for Indigenous farmers. They have a special social and cultural relationship with their land—their Indigenous self is “fused” with their land (Durie 2005, 137), which helps them survive and gives them hope (Taiban, Lin, and Ko 2020). For example, Indigenous Newar peoples in Nepal lean on their culture and festivals for disaster recovery. These festivals are deeply connected to Indigenous lands (Bajracharya *et al.* 2022). Similarly, Kutia Kondhs—an Indigenous community in Odisha, India—celebrate the *Burland Yatra* festival during the post-harvest season in February and March to please the gods of nature in times of climate crisis. The community believes that the agricultural landscape is not simply meant for producing food and supporting livelihoods—it is also central to their belief systems, traditions, and culture (Saxena 2020). Indigenous festivals allow for an understanding of long-standing human–environment interactions, as Indigenous peoples think of human beings and the environment as an interlinked system. Therefore, disaster capitalism has social and cultural impacts on Indigenous peoples.

Though disaster capitalism refers to political and economic processes that take advantage of mass trauma to impose neoliberal capitalist economic policies, exacerbating socioeconomic divisions, the concept fails to account for the influence of pre-disaster vulnerability and the history of Indigenous disaster survivors. When examining the relationship of disaster capitalism with Indigenous people, the analysis would be incomplete if only the impact of neo-liberalization after disaster was considered. As explained by Rivera (2020), Indigenous studies recognize that the main reason for the poor coverage of Indigenous peoples in disaster response processes is their structural erasure through “procedural vulnerability” (Veland *et al.* 2013; Hsu, Howitt, and Fiona 2015) and “deep colonising” (Rose 1996). Procedural vulnerability “arises from people’s (and peoples’) relationships to power rather than environment and how power is exercised” (Hsu *et al.* 2015, 309). For example, the researchers who flooded the archipelago following hurricane Maria lacked an in-depth understanding of Puerto Rico’s colonial history and status and thus concluded that Puerto Rico’s current post-disaster issues were related only to neoliberalism and the resulting national debt, without understanding why extreme neoliberalism exists in the country at all. However, when we tie hurricane Maria to centuries of hurricanes and disaster

colonialism, it becomes evident that the type of governmental nonresponse Puerto Rico is currently experiencing mirrors what happened following many previous hurricanes, even before US neoliberalism. Instead, nonresponse is often tied to continuing efforts to colonize the archipelago (Rivera 2020). Therefore, it is critical to recentre the focus on colonialism, disallowing race-blind and ahistorical views of disaster. However, this aspect of disasters continues to be understudied with regards to the Indigenous peoples of the Global South. To fill this gap, this paper examines the incidence of disaster capitalism and its impact on marginalized Indigenous peoples in Nepal.

3. RESEARCH METHODS: INDIGENOUS POLITICAL ECOLOGY AS AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

An Indigenous political ecological approach is used as the analytical framework for this research. This approach is centred on unequal power relations, which enables us to critically analyse how disasters affect everyone, but not everyone is affected equally, as people's capacities to respond to disasters vary. Indigenous people's experiences and struggles with disasters are different; their knowledge, institutions, and practices to cope with and recover from disasters are different from those of non-Indigenous peoples. However, many state policies and formal institutions are developed paying little or no consideration to the struggles of Indigenous peoples on the ground. After all, Indigenous cultures have been alive for a long time, and their presence compels us to learn from them and to imagine a more resilient society. The issue of marginalization is pervasive, and so are the calls for engaging with Indigenous peoples, amidst the highly unequal power relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, wherein political and economic structures at multiple scales largely support the cause and interests of non-Indigenous peoples. This very inequality and systematic marginalization make the political ecological approach a compelling mode of thinking for this analysis. The political ecological approach offers insights for integrating both, people and the environmental aspects of a disaster, in an enquiry into ecology and political economy (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987). As Carney (1993) asserts, it is a research framework (Carney 1993) and "more a method of analysis than a theory" (Peluso 1992, 51). Thus, a political ecological approach appropriate to the research objectives was chosen.

This research adopts an engaged research paradigm because Indigenous peoples are not just passive participants but also active co-contributors. This approach enables us to design a research process with multiple methods and analyses geared towards understanding Indigenous peoples. The research and data collection were designed and undertaken through a collective effort, involving the researcher, two local Newar research assistants, and several Newar women and men from the case study sites. The author of this paper

is a Newar woman who experienced the Nepal earthquakes first-hand, has an active and sustained relationship with the Indigenous peoples in Khokana, and has developed research ideas with Newar farmers in the study area. The research focuses on Newari peoples due to the cultural specificities of the community and the knowledge of Newar women and men whose experiences have been systemically ignored. To ensure that the Indigenous peoples were involved from the start of this research, research problems were identified with their help, methods were devised with their inputs, and their perspectives were placed at the centre of this research. In this sense, this is engaged research with Indigenous peoples.

The Newar community is one of the 59 officially recognized Indigenous communities of Nepal. Within Newar communities, Guthi² is a social organization that has existed for thousands of years and shapes and supports individuals and families within Newar communities. Guthi is integral to every Newar, as it maintains and preserves their social and cultural life. Guthi and its members are affected by, and respond to, earthquakes in Nepal in different ways, and this research aims to unpack their experiences. A Newar Guthi, known as Rudrayani Guthi, in Khokana, was studied in this research. This Guthi was selected because: a) they are renowned for their rich culture, knowledge, and economic practices and are primarily responsible for organizing an important festival, *Sikali Jatra*, and other *jatras* in Khokana; b) the Guthi belongs to Indigenous farmers, and they have a special relationship with their land; c) the Guthi peoples were highly affected by the Nepal earthquakes in 2015 and are still struggling to recover; and d) the Guthi peoples are negatively affected by state-sponsored development projects in Khokana, making their disaster recovery more difficult.

I started my fieldwork in November 2020 by engaging two Newar research assistants from the case study site. The data collection process continued during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which a blended approach was adopted. The research assistants conducted face-to-face interviews with the participants, and the author was present as much as possible during data collection through digital platforms. Community workshops were conducted with the Guthi leaders at the case study site to discuss the data collection process. A data collection plan was then developed with the guidance of Guthi leaders. The household interviewing process started in January 2021. Twenty-eight household interviews were conducted with the female heads of Rudrayani Guthi, during which they shared their disaster experiences and

² Guthi is a vibrant institution that has persisted and changed over time. It is engrained within the culture, identity, and heritage of millions of Newar peoples in Nepal.

recovery process. They also shared their perspective on how their livelihood and culture are at risk of collapsing due to the ongoing development projects in Khokana. Thirty-four key informant interviews were conducted with respondents within and outside the Guthi. The respondents included male Guthi members,³ government officials, and Indigenous activists. Public policies and strategies were discussed with government and non-government officials, whereas issues related to Indigenous people in Nepal were discussed with Indigenous activists. Similarly, focus group discussions were conducted with a women's group called Karyabinayak Pau Samuha. Verbal consent was taken from each participant before starting the interviews.

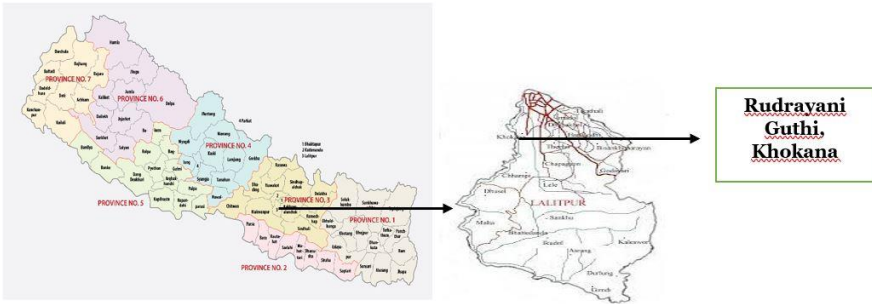
4. CASE STUDY ANALYSIS: LOCAL DISASTER CAPITALISM IN RUDRAYANI GUTHI, KHOKANA

Khokana, a traditional Indigenous Newari village situated about 10 km south of the city of Kathmandu, was severely impacted by the Nepal earthquakes. Around 90% of the houses were damaged (Gautam 2017). Even today, eight years since 2015, the Indigenous peoples of Khokana are struggling to recover from the earthquakes. This community is in crisis as the Nepal government has launched large development projects in the region—including the Kathmandu–Terai Expressway (commonly known as Fast Track), Outer Ring Road, Bagmati Corridor, Satellite City, and a high-tension power line—all in the name of faster recovery from disasters and to enhance the economic development of the country. The Fast Track is particularly contentious among Indigenous Newars in Khokana, as some 6 km of the Fast Track will slice through their farmlands (CEmSoJ 2020). These projects were initially proposed in 2008. However, the process was speeded up after the earthquakes as part of the disaster recovery and economic development scheme, when the government issued a land valuation price in March 2016. The price allotted by the government was only about 10% of the actual market price of the land. As Indigenous farmers desperately needed money to reconstruct their houses, which had been damaged by the earthquakes, they were compelled to sell their land at low prices. The government,

Guthi is a male-oriented Newar institution. There are 46 households in Rudrayani Guthi. Only one male from each household can participate in the Guthi. Therefore, the number of households is equal to the number of members. One of the main reasons for conducting household interviews with female household heads was to get the perspectives of Indigenous women on the issue of disaster capitalism in Khokana. Their perspectives are valuable primarily for two reasons: a) Indigenous women in Khokana consider themselves farmers, having a close cultural, social, and psychological relationship with their land; and b) Newar Guthi is a male-oriented institution in which men's knowledge and voices are considered important. Women play a subordinate role to male members (who are mostly their fathers or husbands or brothers). Hence, it is very rare that their voices are considered. Therefore, I selected the eldest female members of the households in Rudrayani Guthi.

construction companies, and land traders grabbed the opportunity to “buy” the Indigenous people’s lands.

Figure 1: Map of Nepal Showing the Case Study Site Rudrayani Guthi in Khokana, Lalitpur



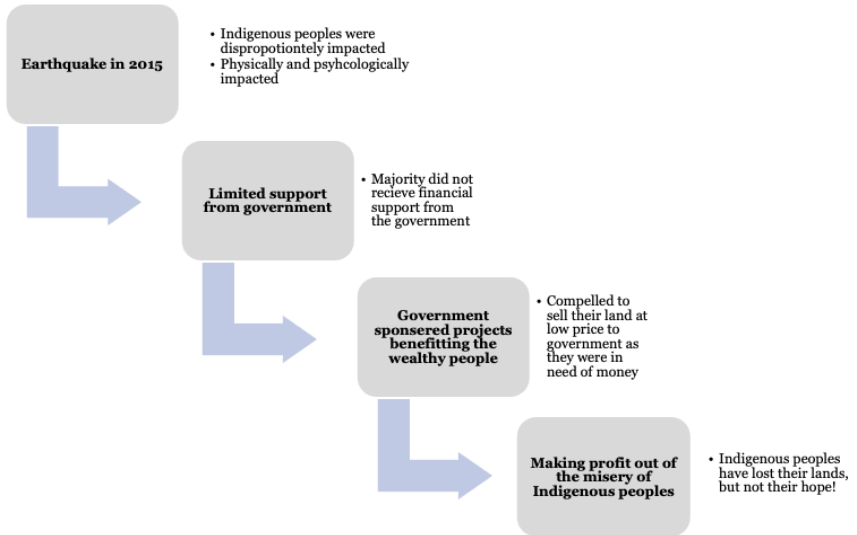
Source: Author (2023)

The loss of land for the Indigenous peoples of Khokana is not just about the loss of economic assets. They have deep-seated historical, social, and cultural relationships with their land—they believe that their Indigenous self is “fused” with their land (Durie 2005, 137). These development projects have negatively affected the livelihood and culture of Khokana. Moreover, the lands allocated for these development projects are the most fertile in Khokana. The Indigenous peoples in Khokana continue to practise agriculture as their primary occupation. However, as their land is gone, agriculture as a source of livelihood has now collapsed. Further, the significance of land has reduced over time to just an economic asset due to the complex land tenure system⁴ designed by a Hindu ruler in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This land tenure system encouraged Nepali elites to buy the land, who then allowed Indigenous farmers to work on it for a rental income. Later, the commoditization of land increased, since

⁴ Before 1950, the land tenure system in Nepal was informal but complex. Various types of land tenure existed, such as Raikar, Birta, Jagir, Rakam, Guthi, and Kipat. Under Raikar, an individual owned a taxable parcel of land and could legally sell the land. Under Birta, Jagir, and Rakam, the state used to grant land to individuals for their bravery, loyalty, services, or as salary. In addition, customary land tenure systems, such as Guthi and Kipat, were managed by the Indigenous Newar and Limbu communities, respectively (Nepal and Marasini 2018). The Nepalese democratic revolution of 1951 brought about a massive political-economic transformation. Many institutional structures established by the feudal Rana Regime were removed, and new structures were established in the 1960s, such as the promulgation of the Land Reform Act 1964, under which land tenures such as Birta, Jagir, Rakam, and Kipat were abolished.

landowners remained predominantly absentee landlords interested only in ownership and revenue generation and not what the land could produce (Adhikari 2011).

Figure 2: Timeline of occurrence of local disaster capitalism in Rudrayani Guthi, Khokana



Source: Author (2023)

Apart from disrupting Indigenous peoples' livelihoods, these development projects also have the potential to affect their culture. The Indigenous land informs their "identity, customs, language, lore, and rituals" (Durie 2005, 137). Various festivals celebrated in Khokana are attached to land. One of the festivals is Sikali Jatra,⁵ which is celebrated by Newar farmers annually in September/October. Initially, the Fast Track project was proposed where the Sikali Jatra is performed. After several protests, the route was changed. However, people in Khokana are sceptical and do not trust the government. They believe that if the project continues, it can take over the Sikali Jatra route in the future.

⁵ Jatra refers to street festivals or carnivals that Newar communities celebrate, mainly in Kathmandu Valley, where chariots are pulled through the streets of Kathmandu, celebrating Newar gods and Newar culture. Newar Jatras are lively and have high energy, as they incorporate music, dance, and Newari cuisines. During Jatras, different Newar groups from different castes come together, make necessary arrangements, and celebrate. Jatras are one of the primary reasons for strong social cohesion in Newar communities.

Figure 2 shows how and why Indigenous communities were forced to sell their land at a below-market price rate and how wealthy people benefitted from the government's devaluation of the land in the name of disaster recovery and economic development.

4.1 Misplaced Recovery Practice: Physical versus Social Recovery

We interviewed 28 participants from Rudrayani Guthi, Khokana. The participants were the female heads of households. During our interview sessions, the primary question asked was “How did you experience the Nepal earthquakes in 2015?” Most of them started their answers by describing the physical damage. The houses of most of the participants had been damaged. Many participants had also sustained physical injuries during the earthquakes.

The interviews started with a description of physical impacts, but well into the conversation, participants shared how they were impacted psychologically and emotionally. Indigenous peoples are concerned about the government's focus on reconstructing buildings, regarding which they have deep-seated fears—the recovery efforts ignore social and psychological damage. The focus on physical reconstruction has allowed contractors and businesses to enter the region while doing little actual work but making a lot of money.

Many women shared how they had feared for their families, especially their children, as most of the participants were mothers and grandmothers. In every story they shared, there was a mention of their children or grandchildren and how scared they were for them. A participant shared the long-term psychological effects the earthquakes had on her and how scared she was for her children. She said:

At the time of the earthquake, my second baby was three months old. Just a few minutes before the earthquake, I had sent my elder daughter to my mother's house. When the earthquake happened, the only thing I could think of was the safety of my daughter. Stressed, I held my three-month-old baby and ran towards my mother's house. On the way, people from my neighbourhood tried to stop me and said they will go and get information about my daughter. Later, I was informed that my daughter was safe. This incident caused me a lot of trauma for a long period. I had anxiety for over a year after the earthquake. (Female participant in Rudrayani Guthi, 2021)

Despite the long-term psychological impact of the earthquake on the Indigenous women in Rudrayani Guthi, participants stated that the government and external organizations favoured the local elites—who are wealthy people—and primarily focused on the reconstruction of buildings, roads, and infrastructure. Immediately after the earthquake, by enforcing the

Essential Services Operation Act, 1957, under the Central Natural Disaster Relief Committee (CRC), essential goods and services, such as food, hygiene, clothes, and tents/tarpaulins, were distributed in the affected regions. The Government of Nepal (GoN) announced that it would support the rebuilding of damaged houses, public infrastructure, and heritage buildings. The state's Post-Disaster Needs Assessment estimated a need of US\$ 9.38 billion for the five-year reconstruction and rehabilitation plan (NPC 2015). GoN, through the Nepal Reconstruction Authority (NRA), began planning an owner-driven approach to the reconstruction. The programme distributed NPR 300,000⁶ in three tranches for the completion of compliant construction: NPR 50,000 upon signing the agreement with GoN, a further NPR 150,000 upon completing the foundation, and a final NPR 100,000 after finishing the walls (HRRP 2018). An “earthquake victim’s family identity card” was issued to listed victims, with listed the damages caused and was used as the basis to provide state resources.

Almost all the participants’ houses were damaged. However, the results show that many participants (17 out of 28 participants) did not receive the earthquake victim’s family identity card and subsequently the reconstruction grant. The participants expressed their concern that the local government was partial and discriminatory in its distribution of government relief and reconstruction funds. Many participants complained that some local elites, who had more than one house, received funds due to strong political connections. These participants felt that the process was unfair. A participant expressed:

The whole relief and reconstruction process from the government and other non-government organizations is not fair. The ones who are wealthy and have connections got as much help as possible whereas those who are poor and are shy did not even get a single penny. In my opinion, the whole process was unjust. (Female participant in Khokana, 2021)

The discrimination persisted within the Guthi as well. For example, one woman emotionally expressed how the Guthi members discriminated against her and her family due to her financially weak situation. Even though all the members in Rudrayani Guthi belong to farming communities, some members own vast lands while others do not. This unequal financial condition has created a power imbalance within Rudrayani Guthi. The participant shared that she is still living in a cracked house and has not received help from the government or any other organization. She emotionally explained:

⁶ The currency rate was US\$ 1 = NRs 118.82 on June 28, 2021.

Poor people do not get help within or outside the community. No one cares about poor people. Here in Khokana, people gathered and went to get help during the earthquake. But no one invited or asked me to join them. Though we are Guthi members, none of the other Guthi members showed any concern or asked how we are managing or surviving. We are poor and we do not have land like them. Therefore, we are discriminated against by other Guthi members. The discrimination by our people is very hurtful. (Female participant in Khokana, 2021)

This physical and project-oriented recovery practice has neglected Indigenous culture, tradition, and festivals, which play an important role in the psychological recovery of Indigenous Newars in Rudrayani Guthi. This argument was also supported by local government officials⁷ in Khokana. In this context, one of the male Newar government officials from Rudrayani Guthi shared:

If we look at the government sector, we hardly see any people with a “flat nose”⁸ (Indigenous peoples). Moreover, they are very difficult to find in higher posts. If Indigenous people are not in policy decision-making positions, do you think the policies will consider them? To make policy, the policymaker or decision-maker should have experience. If Indigenous persons are present in policymaking processes, then Indigenous experiences, struggles, and knowledge are shared and considered. But as Indigenous peoples rarely occupy such positions, Indigenous issues are not conveyed and not included in policy development. Those in policymaking positions (non-Indigenous peoples) do not have any experience of Indigenous issues; therefore, they are not considered. Until Indigenous participation increases in policymaking processes, policies and practices will barely consider Indigenous issues.

Further, a female Newar government official shared that Indigenous peoples, particularly Indigenous women, are seldom involved in policymaking process; hence, their experiences, needs, and aspirations are ignored.

Immediately after the earthquake, participants in Rudrayani Guthi celebrated a unique festival known as *Saya Puja*. During this festival, an event—known

⁷ The local government officials in Khokana belong to the Newar community. During the interview process, they shared their disappointment with the state’s disaster recovery process as it neglected Indigenous values, culture, and ways of recovering.

⁸ Most Brahmins and Chettris have pointed noses, which are considered one of their special features in Nepal. On the contrary, most of the Indigenous communities, such as Newars, Gurungs, Lamas, and Tamangs, have flat noses and are mocked for that.

as *Chyama*⁹ *Puja*—is organized, in which prayers are offered asking for forgiveness for any human misbehaviour towards the environment.

Figure 3: Sikali Jatra in Khokana, organized by Rudrayani Guthi



Source: The Kathmandu Post (2018)

The festivals and culture of Rudrayani Guthi are deeply connected with the land and agricultural practices. In the case study site, there is a culture of celebrating Sikali Jatra, which is performed by the Rudrayani Guthi members in September/October every year.

The main purpose of celebrating Sikali Jatra is to protect *Kbona desh* (Khokana) from catastrophes, disasters, and calamities. Also, this Jatra is very

⁹ *Chyama* means apology in Nepali Bhasa. In the Newar community, it is believed that disasters or any catastrophe occurs when God is angry with humans. During a Chyama Puja, people pray to God and ask for forgiveness for any misbehaviour by human beings.

important to us farmers, as we celebrate the post-harvest season with our families and relatives. (Local male resident, key informant in Rudrayani Guthi, 2021).

However, many participants were compelled to sell their land at very low prices to contractors, as they did not get sufficient or timely financial aid from the state:

After the earthquake, we sold our land at a very low price to reconstruct our damaged houses. Our land is significant as our livelihood and culture are attached to it. But we had to give it up. Looking at the current situation, if a big earthquake occurs again, I think we will not recover from the loss. We will be out on the streets, as we will not have our house to live in or food to eat, and there will be no land to save us. (Female participants from Rudrayani Guthi, 2021)

The findings show that Indigenous people in Khokana did not receive sufficient and timely financial aid to build their houses, and their fear and anxiety were not recognized. The project-oriented approach of the government favoured businesses and contractors, compelling villagers to sell their land below the market price. Some local businessmen and external contractors seized the opportunity to grab land, delinking the historical relationship between the people and land. These project-oriented, market-driven, and state-supported recovery practices provide short-term economic aid but cause long-term damage for the community.

4.2 Rationalizing Development Projects as a Part of Disaster Recovery

The findings show that under the guise of disaster recovery, Indigenous peoples have been forced into another crisis as the GoN is moving ahead with the construction of multiple development projects in the region, such as the Fast Track, Outer Ring Road, Bagmati Corridor, Satellite City, and a high-tension power line.

The participants of Rudrayani Guthi strongly believe that the government is using this crisis as a window of opportunity to take over Indigenous land at a low price. The lands of many participants have also been included as part of the allocated area for development projects—some have already sold for a very low amount. One of the female participants shared that she was compelled to sell her land as she desperately needed money. She emotionally shared the following:

I have sold my land to the government for very less value. I did not get any compensation from the government after the earthquake. My house was completely damaged. I stayed in that damaged house for three years. But I

could not further risk our lives. So, I sold my land and reconstructed my house. What to do? I had no other option. (Female participant in Rudrayani Guthi, 2021)

Further, land mafias associated with political parties have been scaring residents. Respondents shared that they have been warned to “Sell off your land now, or you won’t get any money later”. People are afraid that their land will be taken by the government in the future and they will not be given compensation. As a result, about 40% of the land¹⁰ has already been “given” to the government. Moreover, some influential people, who are not from Khokana, have bought hectares of land in the surrounding areas for residential and commercial development. However, these lands have not been allotted for development projects. Only the lands of Indigenous farmers have been allotted for developmental projects. This has convinced Indigenous farmers in Rudrayani Guthi that the government is exploiting them as they do not have political power. Further, land ownership by non-Indigenous elites poses a threat to the Indigenous Newar culture and festivals, which are mostly associated with the land of Rudrayani Guthi.

These development projects will impact the livelihood and culture of Khokana negatively. The lands allocated for development projects are the most fertile in the region. When the government takes these lands, Indigenous peoples will suffer unemployment and food insecurity. These development projects have the potential to damage the local culture. For example, the Fast Track project was initially proposed where the Sikali Jatra is usually performed. Therefore, people protested the government’s decision. One respondent said:

The Fast Track project should not have been brought here. We have been protesting this project for many years, but the government does not care. Implementing this project will completely erase our culture. Khokana is a traditional village with a distinct culture and tradition, all associated with the land. I am not against the development project, but why Khokana? This project could have been implemented through another route, but we cannot shift our village to another place. (Female participant in Rudrayani Guthi, 2021).

10 This information is based on the conversation with the residents in Rudrayani Guthi, Khokana, during my visit in June 2022.

Figure 4: Land Allotted for Development Projects in Khokana



Source: Author, 2022

After several protests, the route was slightly changed. However, the participants are sceptical and do not trust the government. The Indigenous people fear that the government will take their land with almost no consultation and with minimal compensation at a time when the security of their lives and livelihoods are at stake. Under the pretext of as being of national interest, these projects were spearheaded by the Nepal government in order to secure loans from international organizations such as the World Bank. Most respondents opined that corruption and commission collection are at the heart of these projects. For international donors, the development of big infrastructure and the creation of jobs are often seen as a disaster recovery initiative that “helps” the Nepal government—and, consequently, the Nepali people—even though most of this so-called “help” is offered at a high interest rate. The interests of the government and international agencies are overarching in such projects, while Indigenous communities are forced to become alienated from their land to make way for the interests of these external organizations.

4.3 Resisting Government-initiated Initiatives

Land is not just an economic resource for Indigenous people in Khokana. They have a “social, cultural, and physical relationship with land,” as stated by Dr Om Gurung, an Indigenous scholar and activist, during a key informant interview. The state’s plans to use fertile land for the construction of an express highway and other development projects are giving rise to local movements in Khokana.

The female participants in Rudrayani Guthi consider themselves farmers; 20 out of 28 participants identified themselves as farmers. These Newar women have a special social and cultural relationship with their land. This relationship is deep, as the cultural and social activities of Rudrayani Guthi are associated with land and agricultural practices. Therefore, not only Newar men, but also Newar women in Rudrayani Guthi, are at the forefront of movements resisting development projects.

Figure 5: Farmers Protest Development Projects in Khokana on National Paddy Day on June 29, 2020



Source: The Kathmadu Post (2020)

One participant shared her frustration with the Fast Track project in Khokana,

Since our childhood, we have been working on our farmland. Farming is the only skill we have. But look at what's happening here. The Fast Track project is taking away our land. We are in crisis as the earthquake took away our houses and now Fast Track is taking our land. (Female participants in Rudrayani Guthi, 2021)

Another participant shared about the resistance:

Newars have always been shy and have the habit of tolerating ill treatment from the state. However, once the tolerance level is exceeded, we come forward and fight for our rights. Now, the tolerance level has been exceeded, as they have attacked our culture, heritage, and knowledge. We won't keep quiet now. We will raise our voices, and I think it will be a problem for the state. (Female participant in Rudrayani Guthi, 2021)

There have been situations where clashes have erupted between the residents of Khokana and the police. A local male Indigenous activist from Rudrayani Guthi shared an incident that happened on National Paddy Plantation Day on June 29, 2020, when Newar farmers were out in their fields with their tools to plant paddy as a sign of protest, but the police intervened and forced them out of the land (Dhungana 2020).

Among the many women groups in Khokana, *Karyabinayak Pau Samuha* was formed after the earthquakes.¹¹ This self-initiated women's group produces candies from a local fruit called *lapsi*. The group was formed to earn money to rebuild their damaged houses by selling candy. However, the group has now become an activist group opposing development projects. The members work to create awareness, especially among women in Khokana, about the negative social, economic, and cultural impacts of development projects.

During the focus group discussion with group members, one of them shared:

¹¹ Karyabinayak Paun Samuha is a group of Newar women who are engaged in producing local fruit candy as a business. The business was started after the earthquakes in 2015, under an NGO, Soko Dev's initiative. The members shared the financial and psychological difficulties they had experienced after the earthquake. They shared that the group was started to help their families rebuild their houses. During the conversation, they proudly shared how they had earned their first incomes. They said that now they do not have to rely on their husbands for petty cash. One of the women shared her joy on buying a gift for her mother on Mother's Day with her own money. They shared how the group has helped them forget the trauma of the earthquakes, as they would meet every day and share their sadness, pain, and difficulties. This innovative business is not only helping them recover from the earthquakes financially, but it is also helping them recover psychologically and is empowering them.

We are trying to convince women in Khokana not to sell their land to the government. We are also actively participating in the local movement against the government. Recently, they tried to construct a wall for the Fast Track. But we held a protest where we laid down on the construction site. We risked our lives to stop the construction process. In the end, they stopped the process and, till today, have not restarted the construction. We are very proud that we could contribute to the Indigenous movement in Khokana. (Female member of Karyabinayak Pau Samuha, June 2022)

Figure 6: Local Movement by the Indigenous Women from Karyabinayak Pau Samuha Against Development Projects



Source: Pictures shared by a participant from Karyabinayak Pau Samaj in 2022

During the time of crisis following the earthquakes, the Nepal government has enabled international agencies, businesses, and wealthy individuals to seize Indigenous farmers' lands in Khokana in the name of development and disaster recovery, but the Indigenous farmers are fighting for their land.

5. ANALYSIS: UNPACKING LOCAL DISASTER CAPITALISM

Klein (2007) argues in *The Shock Doctrine* that disaster capitalism emerges and is sustained when wealthy elites exploit crises, such as major natural disasters, to reap profits and deepen inequality, while affected populations are still in

shock. In the case of the Indigenous farmers of Rudrayani Guthi in Khokana, Indigenous peoples suffered a range of impacts due to the earthquakes, from the physical destruction of their houses to fear, anxiety, and uncertainties, leading to heightened social and psychological impacts. They had limited or no access to government financial aid for physical and social reconstruction. Further, they experienced the negative social and cultural impacts of untimely and misplaced state-sponsored development projects, while they were still struggling to recover from the 2015 earthquakes. International donors and Nepal's bureaucracy supported the market-driven and project-oriented approach to disaster recovery, with little recognition of the Indigenous culture and their connection to land. There was something for everyone—broader public good for the government; interest and leverage for donors; profit and money for businesses; and for Indigenous communities, some money for their lands sold at a price lower than the market rate. The central issue here is that in pursuing the so-called “opportunity”, wealthy people and organizations are making money at the expense of the long-term interests of Indigenous peoples. This is a classic case of disaster capitalism. Now, the question arises: Why are Indigenous peoples experiencing local disaster capitalism in Nepal? There are at least three reasons:

- a) misrecognition of Indigenous knowledge and knowledge hegemony,
- b) the powerlessness of Indigenous institutions to respond to external pressures, and
- c) power of tokenism.

Local disaster capitalism has emerged and sustained due to a failure to recognize Indigenous knowledge, while the hegemony of western knowledge continues to shape what is considered a “good development and disaster recovery” and how this should be done. According to McCarthy,

knowledge is best conceived and studied as culture, and the various types of social knowledges communicate and signal social meanings – such as meanings about power and pleasure, beauty and death, goodness, and danger. As powerful cultural forms, knowledges also constitute meanings and create entirely new objects and social practices. (1996, 1)

Knowledge is experiences and culture. This paper's findings show that Indigenous peoples have been impacted psychologically as well as socially, in addition to suffering physical impacts. The coping and recovery process of Indigenous peoples is aligned with their Indigenous culture, norms, and practices. However, there is a widespread disengagement between Nepal's disaster recovery and local realities because of the systemic neglect of Indigenous people's experiences and culture in the state's disaster recovery process. This disrespect for Indigenous knowledge is also seen in the

encroachment of Guthi lands in the name of development in Rudrayani Guthi. Indigenous land is not just an economic resource for Indigenous farmers in Rudrayani Guthi; it is also deeply related to their knowledge system, institutions, culture, festivals, and norms. Nevertheless, the government's approach is informed by the neoliberal political economy, and western knowledge sees Indigenous land merely as a monetary value-generating resource.

The second key reason why disaster capitalism persists is the powerlessness of Indigenous institutions. The idea of powerlessness is linked to Marx's theory of socialism, wherein some people have power while others do not (Young and Allen 2011). The "powerless" are dominated by the ruling class and take orders and rarely have the right to give them. As mentioned above, the coping and recovery process of Indigenous peoples is aligned with Indigenous institutions, culture, norms, and practices, which are deeply connected to their land. Indigenous institutions, such as Guthi, play a significant role in sustaining the Newar culture and festivals, thereby preserving their land. However, the neoliberal political economy and market institutions have a limited capacity to engage with and make sense of Indigenous institutions. Instead, dominant market institutions enable profit-making—at the expense of the many not-for-profit initiatives of Indigenous peoples—and land-grabbing. Neoliberal market institutions often portray Indigenous institutions, knowledge, and cultures as primitive and subsistence-oriented, not fit for purpose in the "modern" world. These institutions experience oppression, discrimination, and exclusion. This makes Indigenous institutions powerless in the face of big businesses, globalization, and western governments. Indigenous peoples are rendered voiceless and powerless in their own lands.

The powerlessness of Indigenous institutions also has a historical root. Nepal was ruled by Hindu monarchs for 240 years. The Kingdom of Nepal has claimed that Nepal is the only "Hindu kingdom" globally, ignoring the existence of Indigenous peoples and their institutions and culture. Hindu monarchs and other rulers promulgated this belief for 240 years through the codification of Hindu laws and the imposition of the Nepali language and Nepali Hindu culture (Gurung 2019; Bhattachan 2021). Sen (2015) argues that as the monarchs and other rulers were affiliated with Hinduism, they institutionalized the hill variant of Hinduism and imposed a Hindu caste system, thus structuring Nepali society into a hierarchy of superior/inferior and pure/impure. Today, caste-based discrimination is outlawed, but it is still deeply embedded in Nepal, heavily dictating the social behaviour of Nepali people (Jones and Boyd 2011). Despite a federal government being formed in 2018, the delineation of power at the local level is still in a transition phase.

Nepal is still controlled by a handful of powerful elites belonging to the Bahun and Chettri communities, who do not fully appreciate the new constitution's spirit. There is still no clarity regarding the power exercised by the three levels of the government, thereby affecting the implementation of development policies, plans, and programmes at the local level. Nepali society is still structured according to the Hindu caste system, which allows certain groups to impose ritualistic claims of being more superior or pure compared to others. This ritual power is not only justified by the Hindu caste system, but the dominant low caste groups have also internalized their powerless position in society, resulting in the continuous exclusion of Indigenous peoples, women, and Dalits from national social, cultural, economic, and political life (Gurung 2019).

The third reason for disaster capitalism is tokenistic Indigenous participation. We undoubtedly live in the era of the so-called “participation revolution” (Ganuza, Baiocchi, and Summers 2016, 328). Participation—giving a voice to citizens in public affairs—has become the theme of countless international conferences, government projects, and policy reforms. Indigenous participation is at the centre of much recent contemporary political thinking (Belfer *et al.* 2019). Further, in 2007, the United Nations adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The declaration recognizes Indigenous peoples and their right to participate in the state's political life (Xanthaki and O'Sullivan 2009). However, research has questioned the implementation of these international agreements. Pirsoul (2019) argues that the rights discussed in these international agreements offer very few tangible benefits to Indigenous people and are usually reduced to bureaucratic requirements that defeat the purpose and intent of the right to consultation. For example, the legal requirement for prior consultation is reduced to a brief meeting with a few Indigenous leaders. These consultations are usually not focused on an exchange of ideas between equals, where Indigenous communities provide equal input as governmental authorities or investors in the decision-making process. They are, instead, reduced to an administrative bureaucratic requirement to convince Indigenous people to accept decisions that have already been taken (Sierra-Camargo 2017).

6. COUNTERING LOCAL DISASTER CAPITALISM: “INVENTING SPACES”

The imposition of development projects has not stopped Indigenous peoples from resisting and contesting such processes. Indigenous peoples are actively raising their voices against these developing projects. Not just men, but women from Rudrayani Guthi are also actively participating in protesting development projects. These Indigenous women identify as “farmers” who have a special social, cultural, and psychological relationship with the land.

Hence, they are at the forefront of the resistance against the state-imposed development projects. This shows that they are not just passive victims of disaster capitalism. These local Indigenous movements invent spaces where “on the one hand, the movement challenges official decision-making processes while demanding inclusion on their terms. On the other, they are constructing alternative spaces and forms of Indigenous collective power and, to some extent, with allied movements” (Powless 2012, 412).

Indigenous knowledge, institutions, and participation are marginalized, leading to disaster capitalism. However, they are also creating “space” for their Indigenous knowledge, institutions, and participation through local Indigenous movements. “Political space” is not only something taken up, assumed, or filled, but something that can be created, opened, and reshaped (Gerard 2014) where “collective action is mobilised in a way that does not require the sanction of governmental authorities” (Jayasuriya and Rodan 2007, 786). It is about moving out of a constrained and isolated space, widening the scope of action, multiplying potential sites for engagement, and Indigenous people growing organically, in a self-realizing way: in confidence, capacity, and well-being. As said by one of the Indigenous activists:

the local Indigenous peoples have started to realize the importance of the Indigenous movement. It is important to be grounded in local Indigenous movements and voice our thoughts, where the existence and resistance should be shown by the natives themselves like the locals of Khokana.

The local Indigenous movement in Khokana has created a window of opportunity, or a policy window (Dover 2005), to challenge the status quo (Miraftab 2004) and counter dominant discourses and existing power relations (Alund and Schierup 2018). This “invented space” moves apart from the relative “comfort” of the inviting space and enters a counterhegemonic battlefield (Wise 2018), thus challenging the existing nature of tokenistic participation.

Inventing space for participation is one of the solutions to the issue of tokenistic participation. But the question now is, “Who will invent space?” The paper’s findings show that there are people at the case study site who are actively and genuinely working to invent space for participation. These people may be men or women, but they believe the state must recognize their knowledge and innovation. Examples include Karyabinayak Pau Samuha, which has created space to express the concerns of Indigenous women. Such people can be called Indigenous champions “who are progressive individuals and groups having a real commitment, compassion, resources and networks for bringing about positive change in disaster recovery” (Shrestha *et al.* 2019, 214). These champions often navigate through politics and the political

economy, mediate powerful interests, and often push against power structures that are continuing to marginalize many. These Indigenous champions can play the role of connectors who have conviction (Shrestha *et al.* 2019, 214) and can foster long-term collaboration, coordination, and co-production of knowledge (Satizábal *et al.* 2022, 11).

7. CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates that disasters create a political and economic space for neoliberal projects to benefit the wealthy disproportionately while marginalizing Indigenous peoples. The discourse highlights: a) the occurrence of “disaster capitalism” worldwide, creating winners and losers, and b) that local communities, such as Indigenous peoples, are marginalized in the process. However, debates on disaster capitalism and Indigenous peoples emphasize that the concept of “disaster capitalism” does not adequately account for the influence of pre-disaster vulnerability and the history of Indigenous disaster survivors, thus presenting a race-blind and ahistorical view of disasters. Based on an in-depth analysis of local disaster capitalism in Rudrayani Guthi, Nepal, the paper’s findings demonstrate that Indigenous peoples were disproportionately impacted by the 2015 Nepal earthquakes physically, psychologically, and emotionally. However, the government-initiated recovery process is disconnected from Indigenous people’s disaster recovery process, with a misplaced focus on “physical reconstruction”. Indigenous people have difficulty accessing government support, but they have ways of coping and recovering from disasters. Indigenous knowledge, institutions, and cultures play a critical role in addressing the needs and aspirations Indigenous men and women. These Indigenous knowledge, institutions, and culture are deeply connected to Indigenous land. However, the government has been eyeing this Indigenous land for various development projects, uprooting Indigenous peoples from their ancestral land, depriving them of their means of livelihood, and destroying their rich culture and traditions. As demonstrated in the findings, there is a strong indication that local disaster capitalism is unfolding in Rudrayani Guthi. Therefore, it is critical to understand these instances from an Indigenous perspective. It is important to analyse the reasons for local disaster capitalism—a) disrespect of Indigenous knowledge, b) the powerlessness of Indigenous institutions, and c) tokenistic participation—which can be challenged by inventing spaces for Indigenous voice by mobilizing Indigenous champions.

Ethics Statement: I hereby confirm that this study complies with requirements of ethical approvals from the institutional ethics committee for the conduct of this research.

Data Availability statement: The data used to support this research cannot be shared openly to protect the privacy of study participants and is stated in the paper.

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