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Navigating agency: An account on youth organizing in post-earthquake Nepal

This study is based on research on the topic of youth agency in the context of post-earthquake organizing with young people in Nepal. It aims to explore the meaning and experience of 'youth agency' by associating it with young people's personal and socio-cultural spheres. By identifying and analyzing young people's individual perceptions and experiences of agency, it will also explore how agency can act as catalyst for social change. The study uses ethnographic and auto-ethnographic methods to explore how the self is in an ongoing interaction with society to produce meanings and interpretations of agency in relation to social structures. The findings of this research show that agency is purely individual in nature and represents the inner drive and strength to follow one's convictions and values. Although individual in nature, the social structures and institutions help construct youth agency, and therefore, youth agency is multilayered and intersectional. It exists at personal, interpersonal, family, community and larger structural levels and also intersects with gender, caste, class, ethnicity and religion. The findings also demonstrate that youths in Nepal have a great sense of agency because they have a very strong drive to follow their beliefs and values despite socio-cultural restrictions and limitations. Post-earthquake youth organizing indicates how Nepalese youths could channel their individual agency into a collective form for the common cause of the nation and thus initiate a huge social

change. Finally, this study shows that it is only through the constant interplay between agency and social structures that the long and continuous process of social change can be materialized. Therefore, a harmonious balance between youth agency and social structure needs to be maintained in order to achieve lasting and positive social change.



Navigating agency: An Account on Youth Organizing in Post-earthquake

Nepal

Sujeena Shakya

Introduction

The massive earthquake that hit Nepal on 25 April 2015 caused the loss of thousands of lives and millions of properties along with the loss of Nepalese cultural and natural heritage. It also spread terror and confusion throughout the nation. Along with the physical and psychological/emotional chaos, the earthquake also exposed the inadequacy and inefficiency of the government and bureaucracy.

One significant aspect of the aftermath of disaster was a surge in youth agency as depicted by massive youth volunteerism and community organizing with thousands of youths, local communities, and civil society organizations emerging as strong and unified bodies to assist in the post-disaster relief and reconstruction. In fact, in many cases, young people and community members were the first to respond to the rescue operations, and their presence is still dominant with many civil society and community based organizations working independently or in collaboration with different government bodies and international aid organizations to assist in the process of rehabilitation and reconstruction. Over 50,000 youth volunteers were actively involved in the capital alone, engaged in a wide range of activities—from cleaning up roads and setting up toilets at temporary shelters to distributing medical supplies. At least 3,000 youths were on the ground in each of the 29 affected districts of Nepal. Nepali youth from across the globe were also engaged in raising funds and collecting relief materials for earthquake victims.



Crowd funding sites as well as social media were used at a massive scale as effective tools for fundraising and spreading information. Youths affiliated themselves with different youth clubs, local organizations, NGOs and other civil societies for post disaster relief and rehabilitation. Political parties too mobilized their young cadres in relief operations. The enhanced sense of agency, altruism and solidarity displayed by Nepalese young people in the face of crisis, is in itself an achievement for a country which is struggling with political transition, social inequality and ethnic conflict.

This research focuses on the study of agency among Nepalese youths as depicted through the massive organizing of youth for disaster relief and rehabilitation in the wake of the devastating earthquake. By doing so, it clarifies the meaning of agency in young people's lives, discerns how they associate agency in everyday life, distinguishes the factors and external drivers that enhance their sense of agency, and investigates the role of youth organizing through various civil society organizations, NGOs, state actors and the media in defining their experience of agency. This study also analyses how the sense of agency is affected by the socio-cultural context of Nepal with its unequal social structures and divisions. Thus, by identifying and analyzing individual perceptions of young people and their experiences of agency in the post-earthquake situation, it explores how, for youth, agency can act as a catalyst for social change.

Agency among youths is multi-layered and intersectional. It is defined and shaped on the basis of personal, interpersonal, community (family), institutional (marriage, education, work), socio-cultural and structural/systemic levels. At the same time, agency among youth is not a stand-alone phenomenon. It intersects with gender, religion, caste, class, ethnicity and culture, and all these socio-cultural structures interact with each other to produce, to restrict, as well as to reproduce youth agency.



Personal Insights/Experiences of Agency

Agency as a personal phenomena

Agency can be interpreted in a personal form by associating it with their inner beliefs, capacities, identity, decision-making power and freedom of expression and action. It is a personal capacity to think as well as to act and initiate actions, which defines one's identity as well as their freedom and capacity to make decisions. However, this personal power can take a collective form and bring huge social changes. In order for the youths to exercise their agency in a collective form to bring social changes, it is necessary for them to build their personal agency first, through proper awareness and access to opportunities of education and employment. Thus, the importance of internal agency has been emphasized as the basic foundation for guiding the thoughts and actions of youths. Agency can only take a collective form when youths have strong personal or internal agency which is exercised in a positive and collective form to bring social reforms.

Socialization process in determining youth agency

Socialization is the process through which the values and norms of the society are internalized in one's life. In the context of Nepal, this process of socialization is characterized by strict adherence to the traditional cultural and social norms and beliefs, through which one decides



what is right and wrong. The process of doing so, instils a sense of fear or guilt when one cannot adhere to these values and norms.

This sense of fear of wrongdoing or of going against the social norms is instilled from a very early age, and the after-effects of this fear is dominant until a later period or even throughout life. It affects young people's level of confidence, their thinking and perspectives as well as their ability to take action. So the socialization process has a very deep impact on the lives of youth, and socialization based on fear of going against social norms makes youth under-confident and unwilling to advocate for themselves and their beliefs.

Role of family and friends in determining youth agency

Family support therefore appears essential for youths in all phases of life, especially while deciding which career to pursue. Many young people risk ending up in careers they have no interest in and may ruin their entire lives just because of family pressure or lack of support. Similarly, friends bring diversity in life. Making friends with diverse group of friends helps young people to understand and internalize diverse perspectives, helping them expand their level of thinking, making them more welcoming and accepting of diverse ideas and ways of life.

On the other hand, if the family is very restrictive, it can affect youth in two different ways. Young people can either become very repressed and under-confident in presenting their views and taking a stand. Alternatively, they can develop internal agency and become inspired to rebel against the traditional mindset of their family, and lobby for reforms and changes, either in an aggressive or in a peaceful manner.

Role of society, culture and environment in determining youth agency



We grow up in society and our existence is inextricably tied with the society we grow up in. Our society gives us values, morals and principles. A child sees the world through the eyes of the society it grows up in. So we cannot imagine our lives without our society. However the kind of society we grow up in makes a huge difference in shaping our immediate environment such as family, friends, relatives, economic, social and/or political institutions. Society can restrict or enhance our agency, and in both these ways, it defines and directs youth agency. If a society is very restrictive but youths have greater agency, then they will rise to change the society. If the youths do not have greater sense of agency, society will repress them and force them to act according to societal obligations. On the other hand, if society is very supportive, it will strengthen and inspire the youths to come together and contribute significantly for further development of their society. Society and youth can influence each other. When enacted, youth agency can change society while the social structure also affects youth agency. So there needs to be a balance between the two in order to create a healthy environment for youths to acquire agency as well as for society to embark on the journey towards positive change and development.

Likewise, there is a close relationship between society and culture. Culture determines the social norms and values and vice versa. Both culture and society work together to impose various restrictions on youths in the name of following socio-cultural norms and regulations. As the following participant describes, young people may follow these norms out of fear rather than from faith in values. When faith is replaced by fear, it becomes a form of compulsion or burden, which will ultimately create imbalance in the social and cultural system.

Although Nepalese society has evolved significantly with the passage of time, there are still many customs that are still blindly followed in the name of continuity of our cultural beliefs and



systems. Women still do not enter the kitchen and cook, and avoid visiting religious places during menstruation, believing that they are impure during this time. In many rural areas, the conditions are much worse. Women are not even allowed to sleep in bed—they either sleep on the floor or even worse, in a cowshed. These cultural beliefs and customs tend to create a sense of fear in people—that God will punish them or something bad will happen if they do not follow these rituals. So faith in culture is replaced by fear of going against cultural norms, which is neither natural nor positive. All these social and cultural restrictions as well as a sense of moral obligation to please one's family and society prevent youths from exploring their full potential, and therefore it limits their confidence and an independent outlook towards life. Only when this fear can be replaced by faith, can positive changes be imagined.

Agency Post-Disaster

Disaster and Youth Organizing

One significant aspect of the aftermath of disaster was a surge in youth agency as depicted by massive youth volunteerism and community organizing with thousands of youths, local communities and civil society organizations emerging as strong and unified bodies to assist in the post disaster relief and reconstruction. In fact, in many cases, young people were the first ones to respond to the rescue operations, and their presence is still dominant in many civil society and community based organizations working independently or in collaboration with different government bodies and international aid organizations to assist in the process of rehabilitation and reconstruction.

Association of Youth Organizations of Nepal (AYON), as the umbrella body for youth organizations in Nepal, launched a relief campaign called #Act4Quake through which thousands



of youths were mobilized to provide relief work in the nine most affected districts immediately after the earthquake.

The sense of awareness and immediate initiation and action displayed by the youths immediately after the disaster show that they had internalized the situation very well, and had a strong realization of their responsibility as youth during the critical phase. That could be the reason why they did not wait for anyone to tell them to go and serve. Young people initiated action from their own sense of agency, and contributed in every possible way, starting from the individual level.

This initiation from the individual level took a collective form, as the earthquake became a trigger factor to bring youth together and inspire them to work for a greater cause. Young people from diverse professional, ethnic, economic and social backgrounds united together for a common cause, and this unity made them more strong, positive and inspired to serve their community at the time of need.

The idea of youth contributing from their own fields and professions at a time of national need is very empowering in itself. It is not necessary to become a social worker or a relief worker in order to help. Even doctors, engineers, businessmen, fundraisers can help from their respective fields and professions. When youth from diverse professional backgrounds come together, it results in a greater sharing and exchange of ideas and expertise, resulting in greater connectedness and broader understanding.



And this massive youth organizing, which started from the individual level and took a collective form would not have been possible if the family members of youths had not supported them. This understanding shown by the family members also shows that they also realized the need of the hour was greater than the risks involved. It shows that the family members also had a great sense of responsibility and service towards the community. They could empathize with the condition of people living in the remotest parts of the country, who were also hit hard by the disaster but were often neglected. Many young people went to these remote areas despite the danger of the aftershocks and did what they could to offer relief to the people there.

The disaster brought many changes in the lives of youth. It brought a realization for many young people of their immense potential, and became an emotional and personal journey of self-discovery and transformation. The earthquake was an eye opener to many young people offering valuable insights. It made them realize the value of life, it united them, made them more generous and humble, and it also made them think about what they could do for their country. As a result, they gained much respect and appreciation from the community, which further enhanced their sense of responsibility and humility towards the community.

And this sense of service resulted in massive youth organizing not only from within the country, but also from various countries like India, America, Australia and others where many Nepalese youth reside. Young people came up with various innovative measures to raise funds by using social media and organizing fund raising events. They wanted to make sure that funds were collected and used in a way that benefited affected people in an efficient way, so they developed various innovative measures of fundraising. They were supported not only by Nepalese but



people from different nationalities. The earthquake became an international humanitarian issue rather than just a national crisis.

Thus the earthquake united youth in a common cause, and in the process they could explore and enhance their own potential. This massive youth organizing in the wake of the earthquake also changed society's perspective towards youth and society became more respectful of youth. Thus young people enhanced their agency during this critical phase and became important actors in the social change process.

The Role of Stakeholders

Government and bureaucracy

The earthquake crudely exposed the inadequacy and inefficiency of the government and bureaucracy. The government's failure to address the mass impact immediately after the devastating disaster, their decision to channel the funds through the PM's Disaster Relief Fund, their unwelcoming responses to aid workers, and their inability to manage and allocate the resources for relief operations led to a negative image of the government on both national and international fronts. Not only that, the government later introduced various complicated rules (such as the one door policy which demanded the channelizing of all relief materials and funds through the government authority only) while conducting the relief and reconstructions works which unnecessarily delayed the process. These political restrictions demotivated many youth.

The government's complete absence from the scene when the whole nation and even international communities had come together to help in the hour of national crisis was one of the biggest proofs of the government's failure.



However, the Nepal Police and Nepal Army did exceptional work by saving thousands of lives during the relief operations. Their selfless service and responsibility were highly appreciated by the public. Although they were a part of the government, they were very responsible and quick to respond during the immediate rescue phase.

One of the interesting developments that took place on the political front during the disaster was the rise and active involvement of a youth political party called Bibeksheel Nepali in the disaster relief phase. This demonstrates that youth may contribute significantly through politics. Nepal's politics has generally been limited to older generations. The age group (16-40 years) of youth has also been determined in a way that accommodates more people at the later stages of youth, giving very little opportunity for younger youths to participate. The country has only one youth political party (Bibeksheel Nepali) established very recently and very few young political leaders. Thus, there is a need to incorporate young leaders into politics in order to bring a huge political reformation.

Media

The media communicated about the earthquake in an effective way by becoming one of the major sources of information during the disaster. In particular, Radio Nepal and social media (facebook and twitter) became a platform for sharing information as well as connecting and networking of people for fund raising and relief operations, and helped immensely in the massive organization of youth. It also promoted selfless service among youth. However, concerns were also raised about bias and lack of coverage of the rural areas.



While the state-owned Radio Nepal and social media became the first point of contact and information, the failure of other media to provide any services to the public shows that the media of the country is not equipped and trained to operate in such emergency situations.

During the disaster, young people utilized social media to its fullest. Not only did it provide information, it served as a common platform for youth to organize themselves, to raise funds as well as to monitor the wrongdoings of other stakeholders. It became a watchdog for the society and government in the truest sense.

However, there were concerns raised about the limited reach of the media, with its focus on urban areas in general and Kathmandu in particular. One of the reasons for this could be the lack of access to computers and internet in rural parts of the country. Those who had access to these services were the urban youth in particular who used it heavily, and the issues they raised naturally concerned their own urban surroundings.

Civil society

Civil society organizations also played an important role during the disaster. They brought youth together and provided a platform for them to act. The civil society organizations themselves were also inspired by the individual efforts of youths and together they contributed in a more efficient manner.

Similarly, the concept of localization was promoted by many civil society organizations including AYON, which became very effective during disaster relief and reconstruction. When leadership is given to the locals, it creates a sense of ownership among them. It is also easy to build trust as well as implement programs using local knowledge, skills and expertise. When



outsiders suddenly enter a community, its members may not welcome their presence, ideas and opinions.

Another important contribution of civil society organizations was promotion of the spirit of volunteerism. This brought thousands of youths together to give back to society without any expectation of receiving something in return. Some well-funded organizations offered generous allowances which impacted on volunteers.

When the civil society organizations started receiving a lot of funds from the international non-government organizations, they began giving lavish allowances not only to the volunteers but also to locals mobilized in disaster relief and reconstruction. This brought a lot of negative conceptions as well as unnecessary expectations from the civil society organizations, among both volunteers and community members. Many got involved in the relief operations for the allowances alone and were not committed to selflessly helping the community.

Disaster and its social and religious aspects

The earthquake was not just a natural disaster—it also exposed the social inequality evident in Nepalese society. While it united the communities irrespective of their castes and class, it also brought disruptions in social and personal relationships in some families.

Although people from diverse backgrounds came together to help each other during the disaster, the social inequality and hierarchy in Nepalese society is so deeply rooted that it will take a long time to reduce prejudices associated with caste, class and ethnicity. These prejudices may spread hatred and create a dysfunctional society where people from diverse backgrounds are overtly or silently in conflict with each other.



The earthquake was also attributed with religious connotations. Some people even took the disaster as a sign from God to express anger at the wrongdoings of the people. This religious interpretation of the earthquake shows that there is still an older generation who interpret natural phenomena from a religious perspective. It shows that Nepalese society is still influenced by superstitious beliefs.

Thus, the earthquake acted as a mirror to reflect many aspects in relation to Nepalese culture, religion, caste and ethnicity. While it brought people together in many families and communities, it also highlighted divisions and classifications or exposed the already existing divisions in a more crude form.

Politicization of the disaster and the issue of accountability

The disaster also became heavily politicized and the issues of accountability and transparency were critical. In many places relatives of the politicians were the first ones to receive benefits.

The government introduced the concept of **LDRC** in order to decentralize authority and to ensure efficient disaster relief operations at the local and grassroots level. However, the structure in itself became highly politicized, with the local political party members misusing funds for their vested interests. This raised important concerns on the accountability of both the local and



national state actors, and whether or not there were any authorities to monitor their accountability and transparency. Many needy people in the remote areas of the country did not receive any benefits at all due to this political interference and many youths and others who sent hard-earned funds did not even receive any information about what was done with their funds.

This shows that irresponsibility and lack of accountability of the state structures not only inside the country but also outside, can have far-reaching consequences. It not only demotivated youth who had put their heart and soul into the cause, it left a very negative and lasting image of the government structure, and built on the frustration and hatred towards the state mechanism, which could also be very detrimental.

Community cohesion and nationalism

One of the biggest impacts of the earthquake was the way it brought people together, irrespective of different cultures, castes, languages, ethnic, cultural and economic backgrounds to serve for the nation. It greatly enhanced the sense of patriotism and nationalism especially amongst youth.

People from various walks of life came voluntarily to offer help, which shows their sense of responsibility towards the community. Although Nepalese society is highly divided on caste and economic lines, during this time of emergency, many people kept their differences aside and



came together to help each other, which is one significant aspect of the disaster. There was a strong sense of community cohesion and nationalism, which could not be broken down by the narrow walls of caste, class or ethnicity.

Similarly, everyone served selflessly during the disaster. It was not only young people who served selflessly, even the community members who were affected by the disaster were willing, as described below, to give all they could spare, which shows a very strong sense of humanity and community bonding.

Thus, the feeling of selflessness and community cohesion united sectors and groups within communities. Community members offered what they could and together, they rose amidst the rubble to build a strong and unified nation. It united the nation of diversity in a true sense, at the community level.

Socio-cultural Institutions/Structures/Systems and Youth Agency

Youth and marriage

Young people in Nepal face a lot of family and social pressure to marry. There are also many restrictions and taboos associated with marriage due to which many youth (especially females and those from rural areas) marry at a very early age, without completing their higher education, with no proper career goals to strive for, and finally end up their whole lives fulfilling the family, social and cultural roles and expectations, which is repressing them silently.



Nepalese culture is such that youth and marriage always come together. Once youths reach their 20s their parents are busy searching for matches for their children. This is particularly so for females because it is believed that if young woman reach the age of 25, they might not find a good husband. So age and gender is defining and shaping social institutions such as marriage, and is restricting youths in many ways. Likewise, marriage is also defined by ethnicity and culture. In the Muslim community, girls are married right after they reach 18.

In Muslim communities, when girls are married at such an early age, they not only have to sacrifice their studies and career, they also have to bear the responsibility of continuing the lineage by giving birth to children at an early age, which exposes them to many health risks.

Marriage is one of the most important social institutions, which not only binds two individuals together but also binds two families and cultures together. However, in Nepal, marriage is regarded as a union between same caste, class and culture only. If a person marries someone from another caste or class, it is considered a violation of socio-cultural and religious norms and values.

The socio-cultural interpretation of this restriction goes back to Nepal's hierarchy-based caste and class system. Nepalese society is a caste and class based society where people from certain caste groups are considered as high caste groups and people from certain caste groups are considered as low castes, and even untouchables. Marriage is prohibited between people of high and low caste and class due to several reasons. The Brahmins, who are considered to be at the top of the caste-based hierarchy interpret it religiously, believing that if people from different



caste groups marry, their generation will become impure which will anger the gods. People have interpreted religion and culture in a misguided way. The caste system in Nepal was originally based on an occupational division. But people interpreted this in ways that introduced various restrictions and taboos, which divided the society. Although this trend is slowly changing with rapid modernization and education, and families are slowly beginning to embrace all castes and cultures, there are certain families who particularly belong to the high caste groups who still insist on same-caste marriage.

Likewise, in marriage, husbands always have a superior position to their wives. This imbalance is particularly evident in Muslim communities where wives rely on their husbands in order to enjoy their independence. Wives are still very dependent on their husbands, and if they do not support them, their whole life is impacted since society and family do not give them the freedom to come forward and take the lead on their own. In that sense, females have to seek their identity and gain respect through their male partners.

Education

Education plays a vital role in enhancing youth agency. However in Nepal, young people have to face a lot of constraints and restrictions in relation to their education due to economic, social, cultural, religious and geographical reasons.



One of the biggest restrictions to education is gender and marriage. In many families, when young females get married, they are expected to give up their education and take up the responsibility of a housewife. Only if their new family is supportive and liberal, are they allowed to pursue their education and career.

In Muslim communities, girls even study in a different type of school called Niswa. The quality of education provided under Niswais much lower in comparison to that of normal schools, and it gives more focus on religious teachings rather than other important aspects of education. One of the reasons for sending girls to Niswa could be the fear of diminishing religious ties and modernization. Their parents might think that if girls are educated in normal schools they might become modernized and rebel against the religious and cultural norms. That is why Muslim girls kept apart from boys and are brought up in isolation by following the Niswa system of education, which ultimately hampers their development and agency.

The education system in Nepal is also very theoretical and based on rote-learning rather than developing critical analysis and creative skills in students, so that many young people face challenges in competing in the national and international job market.

Migration

Youth migration is a very common phenomenon in Nepal. Every year, thousands of youths migrate to the capital city, Kathmandu, or other countries in pursuit of better opportunities. Migration, along with the physical movement from one place to another, brings in a lot of new changes and experiences, such as experiences of exposure and assimilation to a new culture,



society, friend circle, language and a way of thinking and living. So, in a way, it is a very good learning experience for youth.

Moving into a new place brings in new learning and experiences. The new environment shapes young people's thought processes and broadens their outlook towards life. They mix with others from various backgrounds and learn to accept diversity. They can also explore themselves in a more independent way and at a deeper level. Migration can be an empowering experience for youth.

However, youth migration has become a very serious issue for the country as a whole because every year Nepal is losing much of its work force due to the massive flow of youth to foreign countries in search of better opportunities. Most of the youth in rural areas of Nepal migrate to countries like Malaysia or Dubai for work. Some migrate to the capital and city areas. And only the old people are left behind to look after their farms and houses. This could be one of the reasons behind underdevelopment of rural areas.

Structural disparities: A society divided on the lines of caste, ethnicity, religion and gender

Nepalese society is greatly divided on the basis of caste, class, religion, gender and ethnicity. These structural divisions greatly affect one's agency because different cultural and social roles and responsibilities as well as restrictions are imposed on the basis of these divisions. These roles and restrictions are reflected in every aspect including marriage, education, migration, occupation and participation in socio-cultural life.



Belonging to the high caste (Brahmin) and following Hinduism (the major religion) doesn't necessarily mean that one has more rights and privileges. On the contrary, Brahmins might have to face several restrictions due to their strict religious and social beliefs and customs, which adversely affect the agency of Brahmin youth.

Likewise, there is widespread gender discrimination in society, perpetuated by culture, religion and ethnicity. The Muslim community enforces various restrictions on women. They are not allowed to attend the normal schools where men study. They are married at an early age without being able to develop themselves personally and professionally. All these restrictions create a sense of fear in them, from an early age, which remains with them till later period of life and affects their level of confidence and agency.

Although the level of freedom women enjoy is based on caste, religion and class, it can be said that women in general have more restrictions, roles and responsibilities in comparison with men which affects not only important aspects like marriage, family planning, education and career but also simple aspects in everyday life, such as what to wear, how to talk and how to behave.

There are also families from high caste groups that are very liberal so it is not just an issue of caste, religion, ethnicity or gender. One's internal agency and determination, environment and socialization process as well as education and exposure to diverse cultures can help people overcome these social hierarchies and inequalities in everyday lives.



While it is very hard to generalize the complex nature of Nepalese caste and religious system, one's environment, level of education, profession and exposure to the outside world greatly determines what they pass on to the next generation, which can gradually transform the rigid social structures and cultural beliefs.

Conclusion

In this journey of discovery, I found that agency among youth is an inner conviction and strength to follow one's life goals and purpose. It is the driving force of life, which is inextricably bound to one's identity and integrity. In that sense, agency is a purely individual and personal quality or phenomenon. However, agency doesn't exist in isolation. It is constructed by the society, culture, norms, values, social institutions and structures, where it exists over a long time. In fact, agency is multi-layered and intersectional. It exists in individual, interpersonal, family, community and larger societal/structural level. Similarly, it intersects with culture, ethnicity, gender, caste, class, race and religion, which together construct an individual's agency. In other words, while an individual or the self plays a dominant role in exercising agency, the self is directly or indirectly in constant interaction with various units of society such as the family, social institutions, the community and the larger society and social structures. Despite the social construction of individual agency, it is always defined by how an individual responds to social structures and is therefore, ultimately innate to one's identity and values in life. It defines life purposes and gives meaning to life. Therefore, agency is more of an individual and personal quality.



Upon my reflection and analysis of agency among youths in Nepal, I came to realize that the present generation of youths in Nepal have a very strong sense of agency. They have developed a very strong understanding of what they want in life as well as what the society expects of them. Although in many instances, what they want from life and what the society expects of them were totally different, they were strong enough to keep follow their beliefs and conviction in spite of social constraints. Although they felt somewhat frustrated and repressed by the unequal and unjust social system and structures, they had developed a strong sense of personal agency so they could challenge these systems in order to bring social change and reformation. This is evident in the post-earthquake youth uprising, where the youth of the country emerged as strong change agents and creative forces of the nation. By exercising their individual agency, they achieved what the state authorities or organized structures could not. They self-initiated various relief operations and reached some of the remotest and most affected parts of the nation, which shows their strong sense of unity and responsibility towards the nation. Young people were able to channel their individual agency in a collective form for the common cause of providing help and support during national crisis.

Every society is constantly evolving and the process of social change is a long and continuous journey. The role of agency and social structure is vital in this process of social change and transformation. In the context of Nepalese society, there have been huge transformations in political, social, economic and technological spheres over the years. And the country's youth has been an integral part of this transformation. In fact young people have internalized these transformations and have become more informed, aware and empowered, contributing to the construction of their strong individual agency. However the old social structures and institutions



have not been able adapt to the needs of current generation. This is where a gap between individual agency and social structure has been created. For instance, the older generation is still leading the country. The bureaucratic system of the country is still based on an old hierarchical culture. The education system of the country continues to prioritize theoretical knowledge. Thus the youth of the country feel themselves to be paralyzed by the social structures and systems because there is no place for them to exercise their agency. This results in a form of social conflict between young people's individual agency and larger social structures. However, it is only through the constant interplay/conflict between agency and social structure that old and rigid structures can be reformed and the process of social change and transformation manifested. Post-earthquake youth organizing is an example of this process. The earthquake became a catalyst not only to enhance youth agency but also to enhance the process of social change and reformation.

There is evidently a need to find a harmonious balance between youth agency and social structure in order to channel the immense potential of youth towards a positive social change and transformation. Young people need to keep building and exercising their individual agency despite social and cultural limitations. They should also realize that social change is a lengthy process and that they should be able to constructively lead this change process through their inner agency. On the other hand, society should be more understanding and liberal towards its youth. Social structures and institutions can support youth agency by giving them space, and a platform to exercise their agency.



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