

Resilient Solidarities: Community Based Responses to Covid-19 in Darjeeling

Debarati Sen and Rinzi Lama

Abstract

This paper, in describing the community-based measures undertaken during the pandemic in a tea plantation in rural Darjeeling foregrounds the efficiency of the *samaj* as an institution in building resilience and enforcing solidarity among the rural community in the region. The public health crisis in 2020 led the community in Darjeeling to reflect upon and face the inadequacies of the region with its preexisting vulnerabilities. Drawing from the shared sense of place and the communal identity, the *samaj* evolved as one of the most meaningful institutions in undertaking support initiatives and providing care to migrants returning to their plantation area homes. It was the malleability of the *samaj* which enabled it to mobilize other collective forms like youth groups, SHGs, NGOs, local schools that helped mitigate the pandemic related crises in rural Darjeeling. The durability and ubiquity of the *samaj* was the basis of resilient solidarities and collective agency.

Author Profiles

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Introduction

The global pandemic affected mainstream and socio-economically challenged places in India in divergent ways. Chronic state neglect of Darjeeling is not news for locals; what has received no attention is how plantation communities in rural Darjeeling sustain themselves under challenging socio-economic circumstances exacerbated by the global pandemic. With high rates of out-migration and workers from Darjeeling located and traveling between COVID-19 hotspot megacities like Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, combined with the paucity of plantation medical facilities, communities in Darjeeling have had their resilience tested during and after the global pandemic. In this paper we offer instances of how pre-existing collective ties at the local and regional scales have helped mitigate some of the pandemic related crises. We demonstrate why communities have defaulted to village-based institutions and local NGOs for relief.

Since the announcement of the pandemic in West Bengal in early 2020, rural communities in Darjeeling, West Bengal have been taking voluntary action to prevent the spread of the virus in their respective areas. The *samaj*, a territory specific collective that works for the welfare of the people and extends support to the community during times of need, has been instrumental in undertaking the preventive measures during the pandemic. We detail the modalities of how the *samaj* works as we lay out our findings but we would like to emphasize here that a *samaj* is a unique collective form common in Darjeeling and in other areas where Indian Nepalis reside. Drew and Rai define the *samaj* as, “community organizations that are often made up of multi-ethnic residents living in close proximity to one another. These neighborhood groups provide support networks that help mitigate a variety of resource vulnerabilities and economic struggles, as well as shocks associated with life cycle events such as births, weddings, and funerals” (Drew and Rai 2018, 220). The *samaj* is not the same as *jati* based cultural/religious collectives in rural areas through which groups such as Tamangs, Gurungs, Rais aim to hold on to their traditional *jati*-based identities.

The *samaj* also engendered new local youth formations within the villages like the youth and the elderly coming together from within to work for the local communities. Apart from the immediate concern of the pandemic which was limited to safety and curtailment of the spread of the virus, the collectives were reflective of the long-term impact of the pandemic on the already vulnerable communities of tea plantation or “tea garden” areas. The unique challenges of the pandemic and lockdown propelled communities to reflect on the pre-existing feeling around ‘lack’ of basic infrastructural facilities in the area as they undertook measures to fight the pandemic. Questions of employment of migrants who had returned to the villages in the context of already existing lack of employment opportunities within the state, the vulnerabilities of tea garden workers and precarity about the possible future of the youth and children in the area were some of the key concerns that motivated the youth groups and elders to initiate more discussion and planning and undertake measures. These measures often included formation of working groups of elderly male residents, youth groups to mentor and motivate the next generation in their communities. We

include two brief comments from community residents about their organizing work to demonstrate their goals:

I take the youth of the village for treks and camping; for them they don't know what trekking is, what camping is, what fishing is.....they don't know. I used to take them..... they would be a little exposed from their monotonous life. We opened Balasun youth association against covid-19. We coordinated it ourselves as well; I and Chamling sir's son. It worked as well; all the things we had to do in the village, it went fine.

All of us 60 + people used to work for social causes. Now we have formed a committee with president, vice-president, secretary and everything else. We did this because the present generation we see are not bothered about their future, do not care about their parents, "atteri" (obstinate), drink & smoke... so seeing all these bad habits, we decided that we needed to show them the way, and took it upon ourselves.

The case of Darjeeling and the work of various local collectives provides an opportunity for understanding the durability of institutional resilience and emerging forms of community based resilient solidarities. Further it enables us to understand what forms of assistance are best suited when a public health crisis affects a fragile district where natural disasters, lack of medical facilities, and youth unemployment have been chronic. The pandemic engendered a sense of moral obligation or duty that led to instrumental collective initiatives since 2020. This sentiment was shared by all--the young and the elderly who were living in the area, and the returning migrants who faced housing and medical crises in places of employment. Narratives point to heightened perception of a shared sense of place based communal identity they drew from past and present resilient initiatives among the rural communities.

This paper is based on the phone interviews conducted among the principals, teachers, and community members in Darjeeling between 2020 and 2021. The conversations were based on the voluntary participation of respondents during the pandemic. Both authors were and continue to be part of the implementation and evaluation of a child mental health initiative, Tealeaf (Teachers Leading the Frontlines)¹ in Darjeeling Himalayas. Initiated in 2019, this project is a school-based mental health intervention aimed at training school teachers of low-cost private schools of Darjeeling Himalaya as care providers for children in low-cost schools. The research team for this work includes members from Darjeeling Ladenla Road PRERNA (DLRP) a Darjeeling based non-profit and the authors of this paper.

When the pandemic was announced by the Government of India and the State of West Bengal on March 16, 2020 there was a sudden closure of all educational institutions in the region in an effort to control the spread of COVID-19. With the closure, there was a necessary shift in the Tealeaf research team's focus to a community-based response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The conversations that are a part of the current narrative are derived from the telephonic interviews

¹ The research team from DLRP included Priscilla Giri, Choden Dukpa, Surekha Bhattarai, Arpana Thapa, Catherine Canavan and Emma O'Brien. The research team along with the authors were involved in the process of planning, and formulating the research questions, the interview guide and transcription during the pandemic. Interviews were conducted by Priscilla Giri, Choden Dukpa, Surekha Bhattarai, Arpana Thapa, and Rinzi Lama.

that focused on the pandemic and the crisis response at the community level. In the context of heightened anxiety and panic due to COVID-19, online mental health-related training for the principals and teachers was conducted by the DLRP team after the lockdown in March 2020. The training was aimed at providing the teachers and principals with additional skills in community-based mental health support how to check-in with both children and adults who may be struggling during this time. The phone interviews were specifically aimed at reaching out to volunteer teachers who had undergone COVID-19-related training through DLRP and other teachers who participated in training and/or through contacts of these volunteer teachers through snowballing. Due to the lockdown, the outreach and interviews could not be in person. However, the research team and authors are familiar with the complexity of life in Darjeeling due to their long-term research and advocacy interests. We have used the real name of the plantation, but interlocutors' real names have been concealed using initials and/or pseudonyms.

Situating Resilience

A typical way in which resilience is operationalized in development practice is through measurements of household income and possibilities of income diversification. For instance, in a recent study of gender differences in vulnerability and resilience to shocks, including climate change and climate variability for Peru, Brazil and Mexico (which together account for more than half the population in Latin America), vulnerability and resilience indicators were measured by a combination of the level of household incomes per capita and the degree of diversification of these incomes. Thus, households which simultaneously have incomes which are below the national poverty line, and which are poorly diversified (Diversification Index below 0.5) are classified as highly vulnerable, whereas households which have highly diversified incomes above the poverty line are classified as highly resilient. The analysis also shows that female headed households in all three countries tend to be less vulnerable and more resilient than male headed households, even though the former usually have lower education levels (Andersen et al 2017).

Almazan et al (2018) in their study of typhoon related vulnerability of populations reported that natural disasters are steadily increasing, yet there is limited previous research explicitly exploring the predictors of disaster resiliency among older people from typhoon-hit provinces. This case study examined the relationships between life satisfaction, attitude, spirituality, and locus of control towards resilience among older adult Typhoon Haiyan survivors. A descriptive correlational design was conducted among these survivors in the Eastern Philippines. Standard multiple linear regression analysis was used in the study. The findings indicated that spirituality and attitude were significant predictors of the survivors' resiliency. The spirituality and positive attitudes of the older adults were associated with disaster resiliency among the typhoon survivors. Thus, the findings suggest the need for nurse gerontologists to promote spirituality and encourage positive attitudes among older adults. Once again, we see evidence of studies emphasizing a more holistic look at forms of resilience and path to attaining such resilience.

Despite the noted futurity and desire to build and control for better disaster preparedness and harm contain (Choi 2013; Cons & Eilenberg 2019), existing institutional arrangements with built in safety nets are often elided or not significantly factored in despite such institutions episodically delivering safety nets and support over recent history. This is where place based qualitative

research yields fruitful results in demonstrating the history of resilience work that exists in communities. Our case study based on qualitative and ethnographic interviews in one major tea plantation in the Darjeeling district presents an opportunity to document this type of grounded and deep-rooted institutional resilience. Our findings in this paper are also informed by Anthropological frameworks on human agency and the value of ethnographic and long-term community-based research in exploring the dimensions of human agency that provide pointers to collective agency and resilience. Moving beyond perspectives that just focus on economic resilience (as the type referenced above) or adaptation, our case underscores the need for socio-culturally situated attention to institutional resilience based on cultural systems. Our study builds on works like that of Archer et al (2020) and others (like Cons and Eilenberg 2019) that question the overemphasis on futurity in resilience thinking and policy and the shortsightedness of “disaster studies.”

COVID-19 and Plantation Life in Darjeeling

Tea plantations are the mainstay of economic life in Darjeeling apart from tourism and timber trade. While tourism came to a complete halt in 2020 when the Government of India announced the lockdown, plantation work and economic life around plantations went through ebbs and flows of adjusting to a new normal but also relying on informal safety nets which have become part of “everyday sustainability” (Sen 2017) in Darjeeling. While plantations in the Darjeeling district have different forms of medical infrastructure, plantation workers in post-independence Darjeeling have learned to make do with very little medical help that is available to them from dispensaries.

In these circumstances intersecting forms of vulnerability (relate to health and economic wellbeing) one could observe place-based narratives about small points of comparative advantage in plantation life. Residents of Balasun tea plantation demonstrate a level of narrative resilience through placemaking. But what the narratives reveal are forms of enduring institutional resilience.

Despite the stigma of being plantation workers, everyday vulnerabilities and marginal feelings as ethnic minorities, men and women dependent on the plantation for income and housing have constructed a meaningful relationship with it to create a sense of rootedness and community. The sense of “*hamro kamaan*” (our tea garden) and “*hamro gaon-basti*” (our village) resonates among the people. This sense of our tea garden further translates to the social relationships that this place allows like one with “*hamro burra sahib*” (our manager) and “*hamro daju bhai didi bahiniharu*” (our brothers and sisters) implying community members from the tea garden. This sense of “*hamro*” here is reflective of the sense of belonging on which rests the various initiatives undertaken by the community in Balasun during this unprecedented medical crisis due to the global pandemic. It is this collectively shared meaningful relationship with the place that motivated people to work for the wellbeing of the village and its people.

Ironically, despite being tied to plantation life by work and residence, the narratives we include here demonstrate a sense of ‘being free’ when the lockdown curtailed daily activities and human contact in its early days. The isolation of plantations (from major towns in Darjeeling district) resulted in narratives about the “free environment...people had the habit of walking and roaming around freely.” This sense of freedom of Balasun where people did not have sadness or stress

"*shok/surta*" prior to the pandemic stands witness to the fact of how people view the pandemic situation – as a "*ghatak mahamari*" (lethal pandemic). The pre-existing vulnerabilities of tea workers prior to COVID-19 were not life threatening and as they emphasize, they were unafraid "*nischint.*" Even when the pandemic was announced at the national level, it took a while for people in Balasun to construe it as "*hamro*" (our) problem or the problem of "*gaon-ghar-samaj*" (village-home-community). Until they faced the situation of return of the "*hamro prawasi daju bhai didi bahini*" (our migrant brothers and sisters) who had out-migrated to earn their living "*roji roti,*" COVID-19 for them was a problem of the city folks who they were watching on their televisions. It was only when the out-migrated population started coming back to the plantation area that it became an issue of Balasun and only then there was a felt need among the community members to plan their activities.

The return of the out-migrants also engendered fear among plantation area residents. The fear was not limited to the possibility of being infected, but foreseeing a situation where infection would lead people to lose their livelihood. The following comment we recorded captures this line of thinking common in many plantation areas during the first phase of the pandemic, "... fear is, if anyone gets infected and if the tea garden shuts down completely it will lead to a bigger problem."

There was also a palpable fear of plantations closing for large periods of time and wage loss. People already had the recent memory of a protracted strike of 104 days in the Hills in 2017, as a part of the demand for a separate state of Gorkhaland that led to shutting down of tea estates. After 104 days some tea gardens were sold by big planters that had an impact on workers' livelihood. Malnutrition, unemployment and human trafficking and lack of accessibility to government welfare schemes are a part of the narrative of the tea gardens of Darjeeling. Thus, shutting down the tea garden during the pandemic was feared by everyone in the community. The tea garden was shut during the initial phase until it was reopened following the safety protocols outlined by the government.

The loss of livelihood had other impacts in the lives of tea plantation workers. Education of children was being impacted. Balasun, which has three government schools and one low-cost private school, was shut since March 2020. Since most of the parents of young children work in the tea garden, the shutting down of the tea garden and its reopening with 50 percent workforce had led to many laborers losing their daily wage. This has had an impact on the low-cost private school teachers from the area who have not been able to get their salary since March—parents of their pupils just could not afford to pay their fees. There was also fear among schools, if this would lead many teachers to leave the school or look for alternatives outside the area.

Along with the seven states designated as "North-East" India, out-migration has been a ubiquitous feature of Darjeeling's economic reality, even from working tea plantations like Balasun. Non-payment or curtailment of wages, denial of statutory benefits like denial of provident funds, bonus and lack of provisions for necessary living and health standards has led people in the tea estates to move out of plantations in search of better employment and security. Despite wage reform, to make ends meet men and women migrate minimally to Siliguri, other major cities in India, the Gulf Countries, Southeast Asia and beyond. Foreign migration is considered a special opportunity with the lure of remittances in a more stable and reputed international currency.

Opportunities like MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), which has a wage of INR 191 per day, is preferred by people within the area as compared to INR 176 per day in the tea estate (as additional family income). Apart from people working in the tea gardens today, most do not aspire to work in tea gardens given the insecurity and uncertainty of the plantation. The MGNREGA work opportunity is commonly referred to by residents of Darjeeling as “100 days” or “100 *din ko kam* (days of work).”²

During the month of March and April 2020 when the nationwide lockdown was announced people who out-migrated to earn their livelihood started coming back to the village. The return of migrant community members was of great concern for the people living in confined ‘safe’ spaces of the tea garden; the fear of being infected accompanied concerns for a loved one’s safe return. The situation demanded a collective effort on the part of the community to combat the situation. It was then that the residents of the area – *samaj* members, local intellectuals, senior citizens, youth members and the manager of the tea garden, ‘*bara sahib*,’ collaboratively undertook the responsibility of working for the safe return of the out-migrants and maintaining the safety of the village community. Despite the fear among the people, the approach towards the out-migrants has been positive, as demonstrated in the following comment: “it may have been difficult for them [migrant population] to live as migrants “*prawasi*” in other places “*pardesh*,” so they are coming back home in the “*ghar farka abhiyaan*”(coming back home mission).” Residents of Balasun plantation emphasized strongly in conversations that the people who were returning home were none other than their own “*bhai-bahini*” (our brothers and sisters), implying people belonging to their community and utmost care was taken by the people to handle the situation. In many places in Darjeeling today, plantation communities are seen as mini sovereign units where management is hegemonic “*sarkar*” (government). These types of narratives were very common:

in the current situation when our *daju* brothers and sisters “*bhai/didi/bahini*” who were working outside for their living for “*aas/baas/kapaas*”(hope/shelter/clothing)...the “*prawasi*” who have come back, all were in good position. So, one of the needs that they [*prawasi*] are facing is the need for them to carry on with their livelihood and support their families...But if anyone gets infected, tea garden will shut down, that is our fear. If the tea garden is shut, many families will get affected “*banda parnu sakcha*”.

This sense of community seen in Balasun is not limited to people of Nepali origin in India, but is drawn from the place they have inhabited for many generations. It is the tea garden or the “*kaman*” that provides them with this sense of place from which they draw their identity. Place and identity do not only encompass the people inhabiting the tea garden today, but extends to those who were living there in the past, and to the people who left the place for alternative livelihoods and are now coming back home. Thus, the concerns for the community were not limited to providing quarantine facilities to protect the place and people living in the tea garden and also raise concerns for the future of the people living in the tea plantation.

² The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was passed in 2005 and aimed at enhancing the livelihood security of households in rural areas. Under it, the MGNREGS is a demand-driven scheme that guarantees 100 days of unskilled work per year for every rural household that wants it, covering all districts in the country except those with a 100% urban population. <https://www.thehindu.com/business/Economy/explained-the-funding-and-demand-for-mgnrega/article66454860.ece>

prawasi daju-bhai-didi-bahini..how should we uplift them...how to provide an opportunity?...there are more than 100 who have come back home. Even those who were away for a long time, who would not come home, have come back to their own village, which is a good thing. When we meet them and ask what they plan to do, they say that now they will do some job here itself even if it is small and stay here. They realize that there is a *samaj* and even if we have to live on fermented leafy vegetables “*gundruk*” and work on roads and in road making “*dhunga mura, bato ghato ma kaam garera bhaye pani*”, we intend to stay here.

Samaj, one of the key geographically specific community based organization in Balasun became the “*abhibhawak*” – guardian, during the pandemic situation. With a total of 18 *samajs* in Balasun area, it was also acknowledged that COVID-19 situation enforced unity among the *samajs* who otherwise were in conflict. The crucial role of the *samaj* during COVID-19 is emphasized and a new kind of environment seems to have developed in the village and also forms of community-based peacebuilding (Sen, Skalli and Junker 2018). Evident from this reflection below:

I do see a new kind of awareness “*naya kisimko chetna*” – there was no unity earlier but now each one is united “*ekta ma ayea*” and they feel that they can do something. Even those who were coming back were able to understand the significance of village-home-community institution “*gaon, ghar, samaj*” and the kind of support they provide and a sense of duty “*kartavya*” that we must give back towards the *samaj* - so an understanding between each other is visible which was not there in the past.

Stability is almost always retrospective. Meaning making has always been collective and consensual and constitutive of the social, political, cultural and the historical makeup of any place. It is within these grounded webs of meanings that memories and events become registers to understand their place and plantation workers’ relationship to that place. Physical, emotional, and experiential realities and the social relationship among the people of Balasun played a crucial role in taking resilient measures during the pandemic situation. Since March 2020 various informal groups of youth, senior citizens have come together to work on different issues concerning the people – unemployment, insecurity in plantation work therefore aspiring for avenues other than labor work like preparation of youth for recruitment in the army or getting youth interested in sports as a career opportunity, among others. Even for those who have come back with the intent to remain in Balasun in future, residents are trying to look for avenues for them to have some form of engagement and livelihood in Balasun or nearby areas.

As much as the case of Balasun stands as one of the success stories during COVID-19, the community of Balasun is not without differential power relationships where different actors have been equipped with different bargaining power during the pandemic situation. Nevertheless, resilience of a community in a place moves beyond relief measures alone but is the way in which the place and the community gets constructed in space and time to undertake those measures and render it successful.

***Samaj*: Its Operation and Alliance with other Collectives in Rural Plantation Areas**

In the previous section we have emphasized that processes of resilience building that are place-based and collective are recognized as being the most impactful in times of crisis. Evidence of forms of collective grounded resilience building was also available to us in narrative form as emergent from the analysis of interviews below. Most notable in the context of this paper is the emphasis on institutional resilience.

Researchers explored unpaid community level organizing and care work in the context of COVID 19 in more urban context (Rai et al 2022), but in the middle of a pandemic in rural eastern Himalayas, the critical community level care work was sustained by local institutions like the *samaj* which do not receive any financial support from the local government or international organizations. The *samaj* as an institution is multi-dimensional and exists along with *ghumauri* groups (plantation based women's mutual aid groups, see Sen 2017), Self Help Groups (SHGs). They also operate in areas with panchayats (rural) and non-panchayat areas (urban areas, see Drew and Rai 2018). In rural areas of Darjeeling where residents are often navigating isolating mountainous terrain, the *samaj* is critical for information exchange, conducting life cycle rituals in the absence of male relatives because of major outmigration. They also stand as community-based collateral in partnering to get scheme-based loans from the local panchayats and may provide the base for the formation of SHGs.

Ultimately, what makes *samaj* resilient is its durability and ubiquity in the cultural context of rural Darjeeling and the base of resilient solidarities and collective agency demonstrated at the beginning and continuing through the pandemic. The structure of the *samaj* is based on a collective agreement between a few families and it can share alliances with or spawn a youth group. The diversity in its structure and operations has also resulted in its durability as evident from these interviews in this plantation area as well as existing research conducted by both authors and supported by findings from existing research on *samaj* work in Darjeeling district (see Drew and Rai 2018).

When enquiring about the legacy of community support and the *samaj* in Darjeeling, one interlocutor recounts the following about the institution's role in fighting corruption:

So, to help the common people get their rights, to try and get rid of corruption at the various departments. How to fight corruption, we are “*kammar kaseko*” (resolute/determined) to do this. To do this we need to have meta bodies; because in corruption, it's not just them but also people from the higher levels for e.g: Block Development Officer, magistrates... we hear things about them as well. When we studied it more, we found the Bengal government itself a part of it. ...for all these things we formed the group. At the same time even the youths have formed a group. They have also made the groups for the same reasons.

This reflection by a plantation community member draws attention to how the *samaj* in a way prepares ground for youth mobilization. The latter became a ubiquitous and important feature in the context of return migration during the peak of COVID. There is further evidence of the fission and fusion between youth mobilization and *samaj* work. While plantations overwhelmingly employ women, community mobilization and organizing often centers on finding gainful

employment opportunities for men locally or establishing connections for migration (Sen 2017, Subba 2018). In the context of the racial stereotyping of Gorkha youth in mainstream India, the *samaj* plays an important role in providing direction and positive motivation to returning youth especially since most of them rely on India's growing private retail and corporate sector with tenuous labor contracts (Karlsson and Kikon 2017, Sen 2021).

While it may not be a prominent feature of the constitution of *samaj* in urban areas, in rural areas of Darjeeling (or even peri-urban ones), the *samaj* may acquire a caste character particularly in plantations where two hundred years ago caste-based migration took place from Nepal, with a particular preponderance of middle caste in this migration stream (Rai, Limbu, Tamang, Gurung, Magar are dominant among them). In Darjeeling, Nepalis also refer to these caste groups through the word *jati*. *Jati* homogenous residential patterns are still found in plantation areas; based on such dynamics, a *samaj* may have a preponderance of a certain *jati* (like *Rai Limbus* in one village or *Gurung* and *Tamangs* in another). What emerged as salient through the process of research is self-conscious attempts by *samaj* leaders to transcend caste based cultural work and diversify into new collective formations to meet situational needs as seen below in the comments from this interlocutor:

Our area is made up of Buddhists and other backward castes (OBCs). There is this system called "*bhai sarao*." In other places *bhai sarao* means when all the 'Tamangs' and only the Tamangs get together and make a *samaj* or when only the 'Rais' become a group and make a *samaj*. We have the same thing in Ragbhu Bustee where they have *bhai sarao* where Tamang make a *samaj* of their own and another caste makes their own *samaj*. But in *Teen Gharay* which is my area, I am one of those who is the founding member of the *samaj*. What we have done in our area is that we have included all the people in one *samaj* because we know that if we cut a person belonging to the caste or Tamang or Rai group, all will bleed the same blood. So in my area all the Tamang, Rai, Limbu caste are in the group together. Even during weddings and other functions, even the *dajus* (big brothers) here with me know that all of us help out and there are no restrictions.

Fundraising, quarantine huts, spreading awareness often in conjunction with Self Help Groups (through local Panchayats or NGOs) is a regular feature of work done by a *samaj*. It is evident from this next excerpt from a group conversation where different interlocutors emphasize these dimensions of the presence of a local *samaj* in everyday life.

Interviewer: So they came from the quarantine center, the isolation center; who set up the facility sir?

NK: The facilitythe youth and some from the *samaj* have played a major role in that; and some of the "*daju-bhais*" in the *samaj* need to be seriously thanked, I see that. Because of that there is a kind of confidence; it's like even if we catch it, we'll be able to do something; we have that hope. Everyone's a little conscious.

Interviewer: Is the quarantine house in your locality established as one of the initiatives of the local *samaj*?

AT: Yes, everything is made by the *samaj*. The sanitization process has also started and it is done by the *samaj* too. On 27th March one of the SHG (Self Help Group) of our locality did a 1km sanitization and on the 14th of this month another round of sanitization was done by the *samaj*, and on this Sunday, which date was it? The 27th?

I: Yes.

AT: On Sunday it was done by Bhushan B who does service in Nagaland as a police officer, sent us a sum of three thousand rupees asking us to sanitize the village (gaon). He sent it with his own free will, we did not ask him for it. The entire family stays in Nagaland but he sent the money to sanitize the area. With that money we sanitized the entire area and the quarantine house. When this was done, we even called all the channels. It took place this Sunday. I feel it was the 27th.

Interviewer- So have you all arranged quarantine house or quarantine facility for them (those who come back) in your village?

R- Yes, yes. We, meaning us from “*gau-samaj*” have not made a quarantine center but from the side of the “*samaj*,” we have been told that those family members who have stayed outside... suppose they come back they will be kept in home quarantine. We won’t “*alakkai*” (separate) them so even us the people of “*gau-samaj*” will also go to the family members and cooperate....

MS: Each “*samaj*” will open their own centers. Our “*samaj*” hasn’t opened because no one has come from outside here. The person I was telling you about; it was done by his “*samaj*”. Others also help, like the SHG, there’s a self help group which helps as well at the center. Their “*samaj*” members do duty at the center.

These narratives and conversation insights presented below demonstrate the *samaj*’s relationship with other collective forms like youth groups, SHGs, NGOs, local schools, etc. It is also evident that in the height of the pandemic-induced social distancing phase the *samaj* became a critical node in information and services exchanged between political parties and other group formations. The narrative below demonstrates this:

AT: Now how and what do I say. Ummm, right now everything is given to the *samaj* and the *samaj* tells us things and informs us. Earlier we had a mass meeting where all the notices and information were shared with us. But right now because of social distancing it is not possible to hold such meetings. So now we have an executive body that makes decisions, and we get notified about it. Firstly when this entire thing started about this sickness and when we had students coming back from outside places, that time there was a gathering and a meeting where the school along with 12 *samajs* along with the political party Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha of the Sonada wing organized a meeting where they discussed issues like, what should we do or how should we handle our kids (currently living out of station) who are coming back home to us. We of course were going to welcome them with open arms and would not keep them at arm’s length and discriminate against them. We would embrace them, but at the same time we would also keep in mind the correct ways and safety measures to be taken when these children would come home. Starting from their treatment to the places

they would stay, increase awareness in our village. There are many small children in the village, and we were told how we should handle and keep these young children. The duties of the village and the villagers were mentioned as well as how the people are supposed to behave with these children who would come home. This was needed because in our society there are still many people who discriminate and do have the '*che che, dur dur*' (shame shame, stay far away from me) attitude because our *samaj* is of that temperament. How should we handle and manage our children, such instructions were passed on from above and the other 11 *samajs* were told about it. They even held a meeting in my village. The quarantine centers were made and the online form filling for the children who come back home (from out of station) were also filled by our Samaj. When our children come back, the first party to know about their whereabouts is the president of the *samaj*.

I guess our meetings were successful and fruitful and that is why we were able to make proper quarantine centers. It was the Samaj that moved forward and that is why we could achieve all of this. If we were left on our own and had to do it ourselves it would not have been possible and that is why we can fight with this current disease. This is all that I know (laughs)

T: The Samaj, ASHAs and SHG, these bodies are working at Tindharia and the villagers are very happy and there have been no problems. If anything comes up we ourselves run out and look into it.

Interviewer: Um...ok...this surveillance committee you were talking about sir; was this surveillance committee formed from the "*samaj*" sir?

MC: No...no this isn't from the *samaj*, but people from all of the area of Mungpoo; from the health department to the police department to all the "*samaj's*" from the villages...their representatives are there. They collect information and wherever there are infected areas they go there and decide what and how things have to be done. They ready the things for isolation, all of these things, they do it.

Interviewer: Oh...yes...yes...So this type of committee was made this year or was it there last year too?

MC: As soon as the lockdown began, last year, right? It was happening everywhere so it was decided that even in Mungpoo there should be a group who would be surveying. There was planning between all the "*samaj's*", unions and clubs and then we started it last year.

Apparent in the exchange above is community level surveillance of health, hygiene, and keeping critical information flowing about possible ways of protection from the pandemic. Samaj's collaborated with youth clubs, government departments, NGOs and political parties. The transcript above also reveals that government supported ASHAs (Accredited Social Health Activist) and ICDS (Integrated Child Development Scheme) could not reach many rural communities in rural Darjeeling even if they were effective in some parts of the country. The fear of being infected and contaminated was real in the context of the return of youth to villages from all parts of India. One also sees a conscious effort by some to rise above purity-pollution based caste differences which

are quite common in rural plantation areas of Darjeeling and caste-endogamous marriages are very common in Darjeeling.

Conclusion

I wonder what might be gained with a more granular (read: ethnographic) understanding of disaster? How do we accomplish such a fine-grained view (and without fetishizing or sensationalizing the human tragedy linked to these disasters? (McMahan 2013, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/disaster-provocation>)

Drawing inspiration from McMahan's appeal, our goal in this article has been to provide an un-fetishized and culturally and historically situated view of community level institutional resilience and resilient solidarity building in the face of a great disaster—COVID 19. Rural plantation communities in Darjeeling have learned to live with disasters, whether they be acute water shortage, perennial landslides (whose intensity has increased as result of changing climate and depletion of forests in this region), strikes, political violence and turmoil, chronic unemployment, lack of sound medical infrastructure (especially in rural areas). These disasters are challenges that take place in the context of general marginalization of Nepali people within the nation (Chettri 2018 a; Chettri 2018 b; Lama 2020, Sen 2021, Sen 2017). Our insights from ethnographic research conducted in a large and prominent rural plantation area during the peak of the pandemic factors in our respective long term research findings taking place over multiple decades on plantations, local institutions, rural development, and healing traditions. Apart from providing grounded evidence of the workings of a unique local institution in rural Darjeeling, what we are also demonstrating in this paper is our agreement with what feminist scholars of peace and conflict like Cynthia Enloe (2000) and Malathi De Alwis (2008) have always emphasized: the importance of everyday peacebuilding and mundane nature of laboring for peace and harmony which become legible in times of global crisis. The recurring appeal by *samaj* members to rise above the caste-based divisions and care for their migrant family members distressed return to villages provides strong evidence of such everyday peacebuilding. In Darjeeling, Nepali ethnic minorities (who migrated here 200 years ago to work in British tea plantations) have developed types of institutional resilience to combat economic, cultural, and political marginality within West Bengal and India. The *samaj* is and continues to be a meaningful institution that can bring women and men to give labor and time to solidarity building, containing youth frustrations and anxiety during the epic return migration within India during an unprecedented global pandemic. The malleability of the *samaj* is what lends itself to augmenting community resilience and creating safety nets as well as COVID preventing surveillance practices in a time of great medical confusion.

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