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Unpacking the Covid-19 Rhetorical Situation from a Resilient Diasporic Community Perspective: Some Pedagogical Implications

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Abstract: Covid-19 has exposed us to some of the ugliest realities of our society, most tellingly, existing social and economic inequalities. This time has also put a question mark on the assumed self-superiority, resourcefulness, and preparedness of developed nations to tackle a crisis such as this. Several studies that came out during the pandemic have shed light on racial, political tensions, ecological destruction while also reminding us of our shared globality, shared fate, and future. Especially during the onset of the panic time, conversations were focused on the role of state or region (such as the United States or the European Union) to crisis communicate and to develop control mechanisms (scale up vaccine production, collaborations across nations and regions). However, relatively less attention has gone on how smaller immigrant communities within the Global North have channeled community resources and energies during the time of global panic. This essay takes up the left-out task of paying attention to and learning from an immigrant community in the Global North, namely the Nepali diaspora in Canada. It explores the way the community handled the time of hopelessness, unknowability, stress and anxiety,

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and racial hatred. It resituates “the rhetorical situation” to map how the community responded to pandemic exigencies. It discusses themes gleaned from the community’s engagements during the pandemic and draws research and pedagogical implications.

Keywords: diaspora community, resilience, rhetorical situation, ecological model

The Covid-19 Situation: Mood, mode, manner

The Covid-19 era reminds us of several vulnerabilities, as it also mocks at our claims of progress, such as in medical science research, politics, policies (state and governance), and social justice. This difficult time has highlighted more than ever how inevitably interconnected and interdependent we are as nations, governments, and communities across differences. Certainty, this time has pointed to the need to work together in critical times. Covid-19 has institutions, economies, and governments rethink their current approaches and policies. On the technological front, the Covid era prompted a rise in virtual communication and communities, challenging the default modes of doing work and communication. Communication technologies such as ZOOM made study- and work-from-home (WFH) a new modal. The ZOOM*ification* of communication as a strong *modus operandi* has added flexibility and choices while also requiring users to make adaptations.

More pronouncing than anything else, the Covid era has seen racism at its recent heights, as illustrated not only by the disproportionate number of deaths among African American people but also the rising discrimination in housing, health care and other matters of life. The nadir of racism that shook the entire world was the appalling scene of the savage killing of George Floyd by a white police officer in Minneapolis. In the back of populist, nationalist, ultra-rightist resurgence, the Covid era has marked the height of growing racial tensions particularly in the United States, where hate crimes inflicted upon Asians immigrants, in particular the Chinese, increased in recent times, as novel coronavirus was alleged to have spread from a lab in Wuhan, China. Anti-Asian hate crimes increased 339 percent in 2021 although Black Americans remained the main targeted group of hate crimes (Yam, January 31, 2022) [3]. In response to such surging cases of racism, what the Covid era also shown is the solidarity among BIPOC and other movements coalescing together to decry the dehumanization of specific target groups and clamoring for safety and security of historically oppressed people.

Mapping the Covid rhetorical situation of Nepali diaspora

Any discussion of “rhetorical situation” will be arguably incomplete without mentioning its very proponent Lloyd Bitzer’s (1969) classic essay, “The Rhetorical Situation.” Bitzer was particularly concerned that “situation” was often relegated to mere background or context behind a particular rhetoric and not given a fuller attention it deserved. Offering a serious account of “situation,” Bitzer proposed that to say that rhetoric is situational is to mean:

[3] https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/anti-asian-hate-crimes-increased-339-percent-nationwide-last-year-repo-rcna14282 See https://stopaapihate.org/reports/ for additional news and reports

> (1) rhetorical discourse comes into existence as a response to situation, in the same sense that an answer comes into existence *in* response to a question, or a solution in response to a problem;
>
> (2) a speech is given *rhetorical significance* by the situation, just as a unit of discourse is given significance as answer or *as* solution by the question of problem;
>
> (3) a rhetorical situation must exist as a *necessary condition* of rhetorical discourse, just as a situation must exist as a necessary condition of an answer;
>
> (4) …many rhetorical situations mature and decay without giving birth to rhetorical utterance;
>
> (5) a situation is rhetorical insofar as it needs and invites discourse capable of participating with situation and thereby *altering its reality*;
>
> (6) discourse is rhetorical insofar as it functions (or seeks to function) as *a fitting response* to a situation which needs and invites it. (Bitzer, 1968, pp. 5-6)

Using Bitzer to pivot my own point, the rhetorical situation specific to Covid-19 might be described as both the product of and producing certain rhetorical responses particular to crisis or panic situation. If used interchangeably with "discourse," the rhetorical situation specific to the Covid era could be viewed as both generative of and generating the discourse of panic, racial hatred, and the general sentiment of doom and gloom. The rhetorical situation of this time must be about both the specific ways we are called in to act and live, but, at the same time, it must be more than that: Insofar as it shares with other crisis situations, it also has a generalizability and transcendentality about it--such as the value of sharedness and care and self- and other-responsibility. That is, while the rhetorical situation around Covid 19 has to do with the overall mood of the time; it is more than the sum of the demands and exigencies of the time. Conceived within Bitzer's scope of the rhetorical situation, the Covid rhetorical situation could, then, be incapsulated as the coming together of emotions, moods, energies and the atmosphere of negatives (fear of real death, job and other social insecurity created by growing racial tensions and hate crimes, exacerbation of populism and nationalism), positives (hope that the situation will 'peak' and lives will be better), ongoing desolation (things will remain the same in essence; they will likely change their form), our shared responsibility and care for others, and perhaps a complex mix of these. In this essay, I use the term rhetorical situation, at times preceding with the word "Covid" and "digital", in an ecological and biographical sense (more on this below). Ecological in the sense that situation itself is ecological and encompasses everything of it, within it and around it. The ecological scope of situation will allow us to better appreciate situation's fluidity—while situation is situated, it has the ability to situate other elements.

Methodology

This study spans the most critical period of Covid-19, between 2020 and 2021. The choice of over a year time span was deliberate given that this period marked the intense spread

and saw correspondingly rich community actions and engagements. The source of information was publicly available, publication- and share-permitted, and open-source sites. These included:

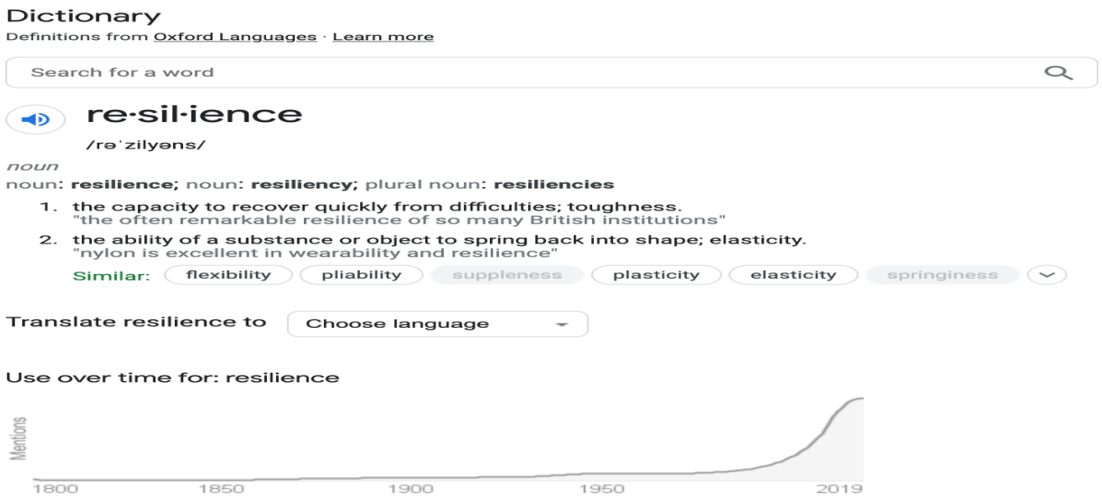
1. Community-run virtual health and wellness initiatives intended to de-stress and digital abstinence.
2. Virtual talks intended to community building through storytelling and literacy engagements (healing, recomposing, providing a sense of belonging)
3. Informational virtual sessions intended to expose misinformation and disinformation and challenge racial hatred inflicted upon Asian Americans

Specifically, I investigated Facebook closed group announcements and information posters and links, YouTube posts of the community virtual sessions, community-run blogzines. I also kept a journal of observations from my participation in some of these sessions. I analyzed the choices—rhetorical and linguistic—that the writers, speakers, and presenters made with respect to time, audience, and medium. I developed themes using open coding, select coding, and thematic coding (Charmaz, 2006). This research does not involve sensitive information and stories. However, include in it are screenshots from some ZOOM sessions. I was granted permission to reproduce and share for the purpose of publication and dissemination.

Community profile: An ethnographic angle

I will start out with what I am calling “community biography.” A brief account on what defines this community in the form of biography will enable us to better appreciate the defining, if always evolving, characters and ethos of the community.

Resilience as a salient Nepali character: A critical community approach



The graph highlights the increasing trend “resilience” over the past decades, with a steady incline in the last two decades. Interchangeably used with flexibility and adaptivity,

resilience is the capacity to recover from difficulties. Resilience in psychology also means self-awareness, and attention-flexibility, letting go of a painful or unforgivable experience and move along by sustaining positive emotion. The American Psychological Association defines resilience as "the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands" (APA). The adaptation process means that experiencer "view and engage with the world, the availability and quality of social resources, and specific coping strategies" (APA). Resilience is at times described as a skill to be acquired. However, it involves a complex process of re-learning and adaptability, one that takes time, history, community, social process(ing), and collective memory.

Resilience is one of Nepali society's defining characters, might I add, its collective ethos, disposition, and identity. In the context of the communities who have had the history of poverty, wars, and ongoing political instability, leading to loss of lives, forced migration, and scores of other stressors, resilience conceivably bears experientially different implications. People's ability to adapt to changes and cope with challenges is deeply infused with and influenced by their status in a society. A community approach to resilience would help us trace better understand the undercurrents and traces affecting its life in that sense, as well as the power dynamics between and among different experiencers. In a cast-based societies such as Nepal and a race-based societies such as the United States, for example, coping flexibility would be different between those who were raised in an upper caste or white family and their social privilege would perhaps have a say on how prepared or ill-prepared they are to life challenges.

In a Western eye, the image of the Nepali is one of those smiling, happy, and welcoming people despite poverty and hardship: "the 'happily spiritual' people with that winning smile even in the face of intense poverty", as Samrat Upadhyay puts it (31 August 2001). Immigrant and diaspora Nepali are described in the same light—as people who can tolerate the hardship of poverty, haplessness, and even statelessness, if we were to talk in contemporary governance parlance. The construct that some people are prepared to tolerance and endure hardships, to manage and outdo stress— would ignore the consequences, namely, the shaping of "ideal minorities" and upholding outdated criminal justice system. The idea, for examples that, Asians can work hard, have a high tolerance level, and set a higher bar of achievement to themselves and their children is a case in point. As one of my students ponders on the consequences of having preconceived notions about Asians,

> When I was applying to college, I was wracked by the same worries, with one key addition: I was nervous about my Asian heritage playing a factor, too. We all know the stereotype that Asians are overachievers, academically oriented, and not particularly charismatic. In a world where many elite colleges consider extracurricular involvement and personality to be just as important as one's grades or test scores, it is easy to wonder: are those stereotypes hurting Asians' chances of getting into college? (Ting, 2019 Nov 17, p. 1)

To reiterate, the consequence of stereotyping a community as naturally capable of certain hardships, such as the perception that the African-American males can tolerate more pain than White people (Plous and Williams, 1995), have repercussions not only on the general social perception but also on the criminal justice system. Additionally, such

stereotyping has led to the process of "responsibilizing" certain communities as the ones who can independently handle critical situations, leaving such communities without institutional support. Regardless, Nepali communities, diasporic or not, have long been understood as a resilient people.

The roots of resilience

Acknowledging that the sources need not be only these, I will provisionally map the resilience of the diasporic community in question primarily in material and sociopsychological grounds.

The material

I. Poverty
II. Governance

Poverty

Whether applying normative and 'objective' development indices such as the Physical Quality of Life Index (PQLI), the Human Development Index (HDI),[4] and the Household Living Standard Survey, there is little denying that many Nepalis are still below the poverty line.[5] According to UNICEF Nepal Poverty Index Report 2021,

> In 2019, 17.4 percent of Nepalis are multidimensionally poor – just under five million persons, and the MPI is 0.074. Across indicators, the highest number of people are deprived in housing materials, clean cooking fuel, years of schooling, assets, and nutrition. Considering the indicator weights, years of schooling and nutritional deprivations contribute most to ongoing multidimensional poverty in Nepal. (para 1)

Against the cautionary note I provided earlier against the tendency to misuse tolerance to racialize and stereotype people, it is yet relevant to ask such questions as are people who have had a history of hardship more tolerant of life changing situations than those who are not? Are they the ones who can better adapt to stressors and strangeness? Would that ability to adapt be stronger among immigrants who face additional new challenges related to language, literacy, and navigating new social and institutional demands?

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[4] The Human Development Index (HDI) comprises of three indicators: (1) life expectancy at birth, as an index of population health and longevity, (2) knowledge and education, as measured by the adult literacy rate and the combined primary, secondary, and tertiary gross enrollment ratio, and (3) the standard of living, as measured by the natural logarithm of gross domestic per capita (GDP) at purchasing power parity (PPP) in USD. (Bhandary, 2008, p.6)

[3.] There is a whole argument to be made, and has been made, if this poverty is internal to itself or is a result of colonialism and other geopolitical factors.

Ian Morris' (2010) *Why the West Rules- for Now*, in which Morris draws on his interdisciplinary knowledge of biology, sociology, and geography to grapple with the reason for the West's rule, can shed some light. Morris introduces two contending theories of the West's rule, for now. What he calls the "long termers" contend that the West was long prepared (locked-in theory), to rule the rest given its distinctive democratic, social, cultural rational tradition. The short termers, contend that West's rule for now is only contingent (luck theory). Morris contrasts the ruling 'traits' of the West with the East—the East is generally represented in the West as having despotic, centralized, and hierarchical social system. Morris complicates the locked-in thesis by taking us back to pre-Opium War China, when China possessed sophisticated socio-political system, and its recent economic rise.

Morris castigates a biological, evolutionist model and proposes a more complicated picture of human development. He rejects the idea that "the West rules today because modern Europeans are the heirs of a genetically superior Neanderthal stock, while Asians descend from the more primitive Homo erectus" (p. 60). Morris makes it clear that explanations which rely on biological factors are "racist" (p. 73). This coheres with scholars invested in Asian history. As the economist and Nobel Laurette Amartya Sen (2005) writes, in *The Argumentative Indian*, "[i]t is very important to avoid the twin pitfalls of (1) taking democracy to be just a gift of the Western world that India simply accepted when it became independent, and (2) assuming that there is something unique in Indian history that makes the country singularly suited to democracy" (p. 13). Sen walks us through the argumentative and rational side of India as gleaned from ancient scripts and practices to substantiate that India is only about tradition as generally portrayed: India is also about secularism, reason and "intellectual pluralism." LuMing Mao (2010) contends that the West is projected as "adaptive, dynamic and having expressive capacity and able to grow and survive spatiotemporal transformations and fluctuations" (p. 410). This is nothing surprising, given that, as Mao explains, even such scholars as Robert Oliver and George Kennedy, who claim to have attempted to read ancient Indian and Chinese communications *in their own terms*, fall in the trap of some sort of evolutionary approach of rhetoric, some sort of deficit model riddled with negative correlation and methodological paradoxes. Kennedy's model, Mao posits, is close to evolutionary Darwinism in which rhetoric progresses linearly from animal communication, Aboriginals, Amerindians, nonliterate cultures to ancient Near Asia, classical China and India to its final destination where it develops into a separate inquiry. That is, although it is all too common for the West to name, adjudicate and analyze its others in deficit and epiphenomenal terms: as having no tradition, history, and existence *in their own right*, some of the communication and rhetorical traditions in these contexts actually pre-existed, other emerged coevally, yet other developed in direct resistance to the Greco-Roman tradition. Equating the separate existence, institutionalization, and early theorization have provided the West with the reasons to self-validate its unique and progressive character (Neupane, 2020). And Morris contends astutely, "Eastern thought was just as rational and liberal as Western, and Western thought was just as mystical and authoritarian as Eastern" (p. 261).

Interestingly and useful for my discussion of resilience, Morris brings in the example of places with "an almost-ideal climate for stimulating people to greatness"[6] versus "the

[6] This with reference to the Yale University geographer Ellsworth Huntington's study of his hometown of New Haven, Connecticut

"too uniformly stimulating" climate of California[7] (p. 30). If we take this example as a case in point, Nepal should be a rich country, which it is not. However, this example of geography and social development having a two-way relation does have two implications here. The geography can simultaneously be a positive and negative contribution to a place's development: Are people stimulated to invent and develop when they see the climate and geography supporting or otherwise? The same question might apply for governance and rule (despotic versus democratic). Is the West progressing because it experienced democratic societies throughout its known history? Certainly not. In fact, as Morris explains, one of the theories of Western progress is that its progress needs to be seen in the light of the eventful history (shifts from feudalism, monarchy to democracy). And there are others defining West's lead after the Opium War in terms of sheer luck or accident. In other words, the developmental theory is not as straightforward at it seems.

All the same, one conclusion I wish to draw provisionally here is that the material progress needs to be seen in relation to other factors that support it. Specifically, as it relates to resilience (or a general disposition, outlook, and worldview), we could argue that resilience is emplaced and this emplacement— what Morris calls "location, location, location" and what Herodotus, the father of Greek history, suggests when he says, "Soft countries breed soft men" (cited in Morris, 2010 p. 30)— could be a powerful social character influencer. But again, this would not warrant any definitive conclusion, because "geographical advances are always ultimately self-defeating. They drive up social development, but in the process social development changes what geography means" (p. 33); because to back up what he sets out to contend, that it is "maps, not chaps" (p. 346) that account for the differences in innovation.

State and Governance

By any indices applicable, Nepal is still very slow in providing its people good governance and a felt sense of state's presence and value in their lives. For the lack of stable and leadership providing governance, average Nepalis have reached a point of disappointment. Unemployment is rising every year. The country has simply become a supplier of workers to many of the developed countries, including the Golf countries. As KC (2022) integrates it in his PhD research in Global Governance,

> 500 Nepalis on an average leave the country for employment daily, and almost two-thirds of them go to the Gulf countries, mainly Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE (Rajauriya, 2015; Agbola and Acupan, 2010). … Almost 85% of the international labour migration between 2008 and 2015 from Nepal occurred in the Gulf countries, such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait (Kapri and Ghimire, 2020).

Whether self-caused or not (The history of colonialism, exploitation and expropriation indicate poverty and lack of self-governance is not necessarily self-induced), grinding poverty, unemployment, resourcelessness and bad governance, has caused a massive outflux of Nepali every year. The implication here is that these material realities have shaped characters, dreams, and hopes of Nepali diaspora. However, if we were to map resilience onto this population in a more complete way, we need to account for realities

[7] Also from Huntington's research

beyond materials alone, but whose basis it is primarily materials—and that is the socio-psychological. I do not mean to draw a clear distinction between the material real and the psychological real here. Doing that would mean creating a dualism that does not hold. In fact, we could say that the material and socio-psychological (discursive and construction of belief and logic) co-operate.

2. The socio-psychological and moral-spiritual: Resituating fateism, karmism, allocentrism

To understand Nepali characters, we must go back to the society's deep defining texts and belief systems. One of the salient cultural imprints that has shaped the worldview of Nepali society, in common with the broader South Asia, is its long-held belief in fate. Along with *karma*, fate works as an ideology that ensures caste-based hierarchy—hence my suffix 'ism'. A belief in fate has had different implications and one area where to see the difference historically is by looking into the system of hierarchy. In a caste-based society, where the upper Brahmins enjoyed what would be identical in the West to the idea of 'the chosen people' or 'manifest destiny', or broadly speaking, race. For the lower caste untouchables, fate fixed and froze any possibility for the deprivileged to go up in social status (Ahuti, 2014; Levine, 1987; Andras, 1979). Fate in this sense is not chance, serendipity, and coincidence. It functions more as an inalienable birth right or birth denial. For the upper caste, even if they were born poor, it was not impossible to change their fate. A lot would depend on what boundaries a society has set for certain people. Identically, as an ideology whose reference can be found in various 'sacred' scripts, *karma* was historically manipulated by the powerful to naturalize the belief that what one has is alright and beyond question because it has been built up that way over time. Karma means consequential (punishment or reward), and it is the inescapable consequence. Of course, there can, and have been, different interpretations of the implications of this theo/ideology. For example, apologist would contend that such a belief promotes values of contentment ("be content with what you have") and embracement ("rejoice the way things are", and so on), values that are more psychological in nature than the one that is supportive of class or caste stratification. Although some might posit that such beliefs could be used for positive motivation, they have had dangerous consequences in history, leading to the naturalization of a caste-based society and muting resistance and action.

While fateism and karmism incentivize the imperative to take things for granted, to be content and complacent with what one has, allocentrism certainly promotes a sense of fellow-feeling and other-centered thinking without sacrificing one's self, which from this moral operative is invariably extended to other selves. The other-drivenness, in which the "other" need not be separate from "self" because the self is not atomistic, has a different meaning when contrasted with individualistic and egocentric traditions. I will refrain from passing a judgement or pitting cultures against one another given the complexity and multiplicity within (e.g., as Western vs Eastern), but one thing that defines Nepali community is its ethics of allocentrism. Stroud (2005), scholar of Indian and Chinese rhetoric, shows how the message of interconnectedness implicated in the *Gita* challenges individualism:

> The *Bhagavad Gita* conveys the important message that one should see him or herself in others; the individual self, contrary to our western heritage, is seen as an illusion blocking enlightenment. This insight into the nature of humanity and existence can be valuable for the empathy that is due to an audience of a public speaking situation. In this text, the real meaning of one's 'self' is conceived in relation to the 'ultimate' Self, personified by Krishna in human guise. It is this Self that is described as "The Self of all beings" (2:30). (p. 153)

Not only Hinduism, according to Bryson (1948), "the fundamental truths on which Buddhism are found are not metaphysical or theological but rather psychological" (2-3). Buddha was always concerned with the human motivation and believed that what satisfies others will also satisfy oneself.

In other words, Buddha sees no conflict between the needs of the self and the others. As Oliver (1971) assesses,

> The Judeo-Christian view emphasize the importance of individual, wholly different from the non-human universe, and destined for eternal and self-conscious continuity. In contrast with both these views, [Buddha] viewed man as being a part of the monistic totality of all being—unable eventually to perceive either the world or himself logically, for he cannot separate himself as observer from what it is that he seeks to observe. (p. 78)

Taking cues from these Western scholars interested in Asian rhetoric, it becomes evident that a community's priorities might be better appraised in terms of their social and moral buildup, their sedimented practices, or what Bourdieu (1980) calls *habitus*. Bourdieu defines habitus as "systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (p. 53). The takeaway from this quote is self-evident: certain structures (social, institutional) produce certain dispositions that are transposable and these dispositions function as structuring mechanisms (structures). Seen in this light, a society is texts- and scripts-deep and its characters and dispositions could be located within those defining texts that have a lasting effect in shaping the society's action and thinking.

3. Migrancy and diasporic resilience

Movement makes people more resilient. In fact, resilience itself is the first condition of movement. Moving, whether voluntary or forced, involves risk of losing what one has: the fear of estrangement, of never belonging; and the anxiety of identity crisis. While the challenges are real, migration also provides people with the opportunity to forge new identities. Migrants live in both the past and the future, following cultural critic Stuart Hall, who writes:

> Cultural identity … is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. … Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of

> ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past (p. 225)

Although Hall's redefinition of cultural identity above is a response to an essentialist line of thinking about identity as "rooted", pure and recoverable, this quote supports the assumption that migrancy and diaspora identity have a defining effect of how a community responds to a particular crisis and the value of "resilience" specific to the community.

Themes gleaned from across community-run initiatives, workshops, and programs

This section illustrates the rhetorical and linguistic situations pervading discussions, activities, and actions within the community during Covid-19. I present my observations from community-run virtual health and wellness initiatives intended to de-stress and digital abstinence, virtual talks intended to community building through storytelling and literacy engagements (healing, recomposing, providing a sense of belonging), and informational virtual sessions intended to expose misinformation and disinformation and challenge racial hatred inflicted upon Asian Americans. I was interested in the rhetorical and linguistic choices the writers, speakers, and presenters made with respect to the specificities of time, audience, and medium.

The rhetorical

Within an ecological framework of the rhetorical situation discussed in the beginning of this essay, the rhetorical aspects of the said community's virtual engagement consisted of the overall mood of doom and gloom versus this community's resilience and patience. The rhetorical aspects also included presenters' awareness of audience, attention to timeliness, and the need to establish ethos by appealing to audience's realities, values, and culture. The strong message of care and care ethics— of "being there when members most need it"— was reflected in a range of community-led activities including identifying the needs of a specific category within the community (for example, visa students and newly arrived members) and supporting them with material and psychological needs. Online and virtual activities in the form of yoga, meditation, spiritual, and holistic interaction sessions placed emphasis on self- and other-care and self- and other-reflection.

An additional aspect included the source of rhetoric, in the sense of content and appeals. Speakers and facilitators frequently referenced Hindu and Buddhist texts and scripts to bolster their ethos by tapping into audience's cultural roots. For the speakers to be persuasive, it was important to show to their audience evidence of their knowledge of ancient wisdom reflecting their own and audience's shared cultures. Evidence of presenters' care for the part of who made them, their cultural identity, has had a special significance in diaspora. Reference to ancient texts not only established presenters' credibility, but also suggested that they respected the audience's psychological and moral needs. However, it was crucial that the presenters also present evidence of an open disposition, one that understands the intertextuality and sharedness of our situatedness in the world. Showing an appreciation of the particularity of one's own being and while also reasserting our interconnected to others around us was a winning move.

Another important aspect was recontextualization or relocalization. Presenters sought connections in matters that were new to them in their new home in Canada by relocating examples to a new place. Doing this served the memory need and the desire to return to the past while using past and present to set a new future. This in turn served the dual function of cultural identity—namely "becoming" and "being" and "past" and "future", going by Hall's assessment. Notable here is the nature of this diaspora. Such a recontextualizing rhetorical move holds a special value for this community. Nepali diaspora is a largely voluntary migrant community. As Agnew (2005), the editor of *Diaspora Memory and Identity: A Search for Home*, writes:

> The term diaspora has been expanded to incorporate situations that are not associated with forced dispersals or a desire to return. For example, the South Asian diaspora is not characterized by its orientation to roots nor its desire for a permanent return to the homeland. Rather …it is defined by its ability to recreate a culture in diverse locations. Diasporas can thus denote a transnational sense of self and community and create an understanding of ethnicity and ethnic bonds that transcends the borders and boundaries of nation states. Yet, the individual living in the diaspora experiences a dynamic tension every day between living 'here' and remembering 'there,' between memories of places of origin and entanglements with places of residence, and between the metaphorical and the physical home.

As such, Nepali diaspora is not totally occupied with the sense of loss, nostalgia, and a lifelong desire to *return*. This does not mean they are not affected by their past and memory. Contrarily, they resituate their past in a new context and constantly and actively recreate a new situation. In a way what the presenters' natural approach to try to connect their past with the present and relocate and recast the old in the new light and the new in the old light illustrates Agnew's observation. At times, speakers transcended a particular cultural and religious boundary to impress themselves as interfaith advocates. They drew generously from Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and philosophies of all strands spanning the East and the West. Finding common concerns across regions and religions is a strong persuasive choice when addressing an educated audience that the community comprises of.[8]

Community leaders and participating members also widely shared facts and figures aiming to update the community of vaccines and other important news. The overall ethos was "sharing is caring." And this made a perfect sense at a time when hoaxes, conspiracy theories, misinformation, and disinformation were rife. Links to useful resources specifically targeting parents of younger children were circulated widely. The ethos of these links lied in the community's felt need to support its members while at the same time be a part of support system in the larger context of the pandemic. This amplified the point that communities can act as a liaison of the state and be effective at that given its roles in identifying and filtering matters as per the community needs.

[8] Most Nepali immigrated to Canada as Federal Skilled Workers, with most holding graduate degrees and most very cosmopolitan in their outlook.

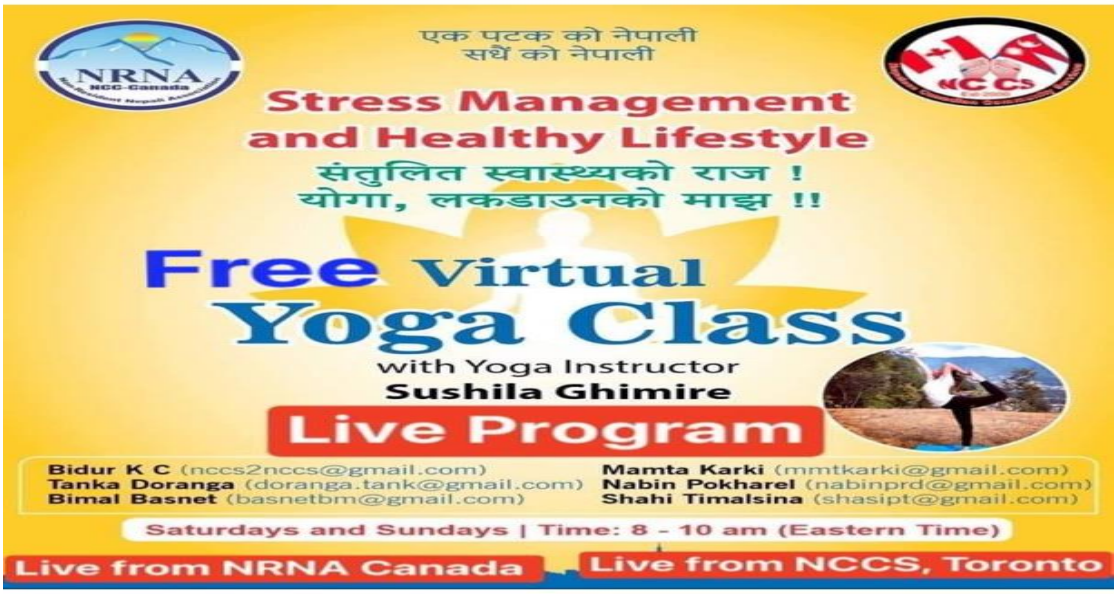
The linguistic

The choice of language revealed an interesting perspective on language crossing in a world that is increasingly transnational and translingual. Presenters and respondents used English in their serious presentations involving slides, concepts, data, and figures. Other more casual sessions, such as yoga, saw a generous switching, crossing, and translating between the home language (Nepali), English, and Hindi and Sanskrit. Presenters sparingly used Nepali when doing a presentation; however, they tended to use a code-switched version during Q&As and discussions. Using English only would mean they do not care or wanted to show off their English or rely too heavily on their knowledge expertise. Being open to language fluidity meant that they were spontaneous and natural about how one speaks in a multilingual context and addressing second generations. Using English would also bolster their credibility as more educated and knowledgeable scholars. The choice of language revealed the rhetorical and persuasive aspect of the language users given a specific task and topic.

De-stressing, balancing, and wellbeing yoga/meditation trainings

Through frequent yoga and meditation sessions during the peaks of pandemic, presenters gave community members a sense of belonging, care, and destressing opportunities. This was especially effective during the lock-down period, as several participants felt positively about these sessions. Amid the news of mounting hospitalization and death and dearth of beds and vaccines, when parents were struggling with new needs and demands from their bored children, who felt bored and trapped, this community self-mobilized resources, combining yoga experts and intermediate practitioners and sending links to manage kids during lockdowns.

As a participant to some of these yoga and meditation sessions, I found them to be excellent healthy lifestyle education opportunities one could have during the lockdown. These sessions were interactive and participatory, spreading positive emotions and vibes. Run by a Canada Nepalese Community Services, a part of Non-residential Nepali Association Canada, this pamphlet has a slogan at the top with the message written in Nepali script: “Once you are a Nepali, you are always a Nepali.” The emphasis here is not so much on the idea of rootedness and fixity of identity as would be the case in nostalgic diasporic identity, but on the collective, communitarian sense that being a Nepali represents. This message is important as a gentle reminder that Nepali communities carry deep collective cultural values and ethos wherever they are, even in, what scholars commonly agree, the individual-izing West. Underlying this slogan is also a sense that we need to put together our collective effort to fight a crisis such as the Covid-19.



The next Nepali script we see is:
"सन्तुलित स्वास्थ्यको राज
योगा लकडाउनको माझ"

which translates as (and here's the problem of translation—it will lose the poetic and rhymical quality of the original text. I have added "sound"—which is not in the original text, but adding this does not distort the original message—in the end to at least half rhyme in the translation):

Yoga for a balanced health and sound
In the middle of lockdown

Screenshot of a yoga session interaction[9]

[9] https://fb.watch/eaSbcwBv1n/

The themes across these sessions were balanced life, redefining success, collective and cooperative principles, self and other care, de-stress, and cultivating positivity in negative times. The talk sessions led by invitees from Nepal (gurus) covered spiritual, ethical, and philosophical concerns. Presenters frequently alluded to the *Bhagvat Gita* from the *Mahabharata* to draw audience's attention on the importance of practicing letting go. An excerpt from the presentation:

> यो न हृष्यति न द्वेष्टि न शोचति न काङ्क्षति |
> शुभाशुभपरित्यागी भक्तिमान्यः स मे प्रियः || 17||
>
> *yo na hṛiṣhyati na dveṣhṭi na śhochati na kāṅkṣhati*
> *śhubhāśhubha-parityāgī bhaktimān yaḥ sa me priyaḥ*
>
> (*Gita*, chapter 12 verse 17),

which translates as

> Those who neither rejoice in mundane pleasures nor despair in worldly sorrows, who neither lament any loss nor desire any gain, who renounce both good and evil deeds, such devoted people are dear to me.

These presentations emphasized balance. Doing one's role without being obsessed with overachievement and understanding one's boundaries and living a balanced and well-regulated life were the focus points. Allusions to the *Gita* is always a powerful reminder in times of crisis:

> There is no point in worrying. What have you lost, that you cry? What did you bring with you that you lost? What did you create that got destroyed? (my translation)

Excerpts like these that a guru adopted in his talk provided reflective moments for the participants at a time when some of the members had lost their relatives and neighbors back in Nepal and when the entire was bemoaning the loss of lives and impending uncertainty. Not to mention that Krisna's counselling, which consists of the *Gita* in the epic *Mahabharata*, is widely endorsed as insightful moral principles by many philosophers and commentators including Christopher Isherwood, T. S. Eliot, Wilhelm von Humboldt, J. Robert Oppenheimer (Sen, 2005).

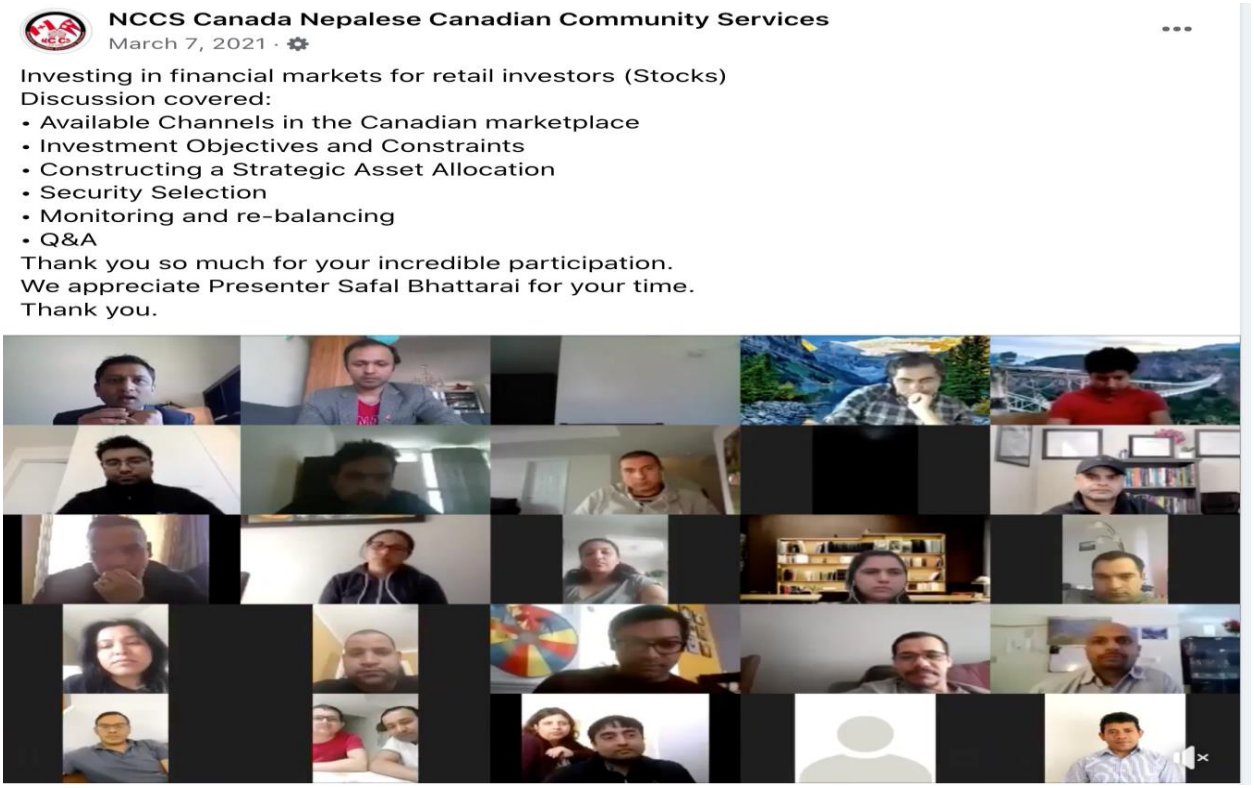
Financial literacy and entrepreneurial sessions

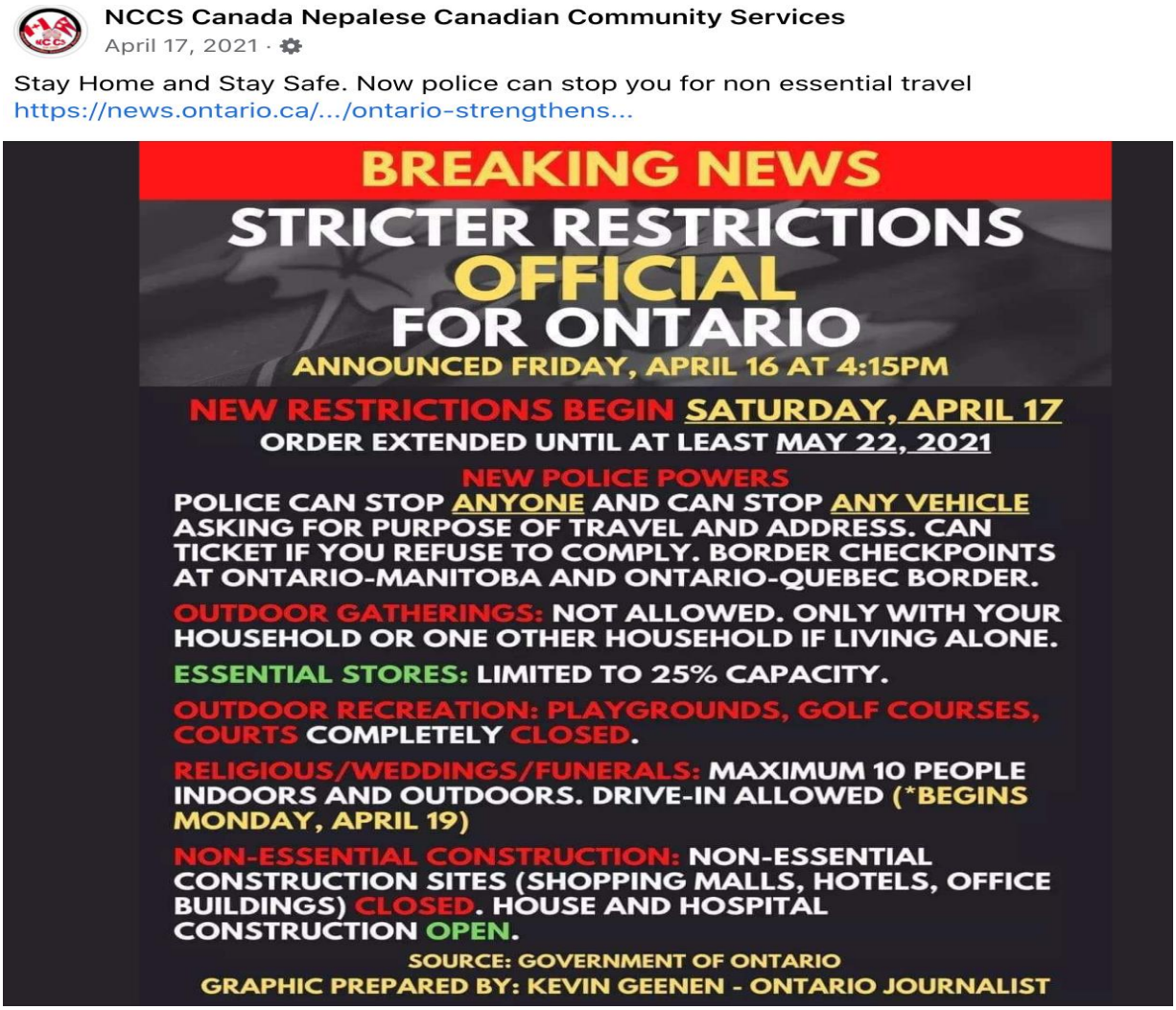
Covid saw a huge new pool of enthusiasts and millennials plugging into stock market and cryptocurrencies. It was also the time when the housing market literally peaked. It made all a good sense for the community to disperse their activities catering to all range of audience within the community. While the bulk of sessions were intended to boost morale and psychology, the community adopted a rounded approach by including financial and entrepreneurial sessions at the practical end of spectrum. What they did is also timely at the time when financial literacy is increasingly realized as the must have literacy target in

schools. Focus was placed on the value of building healthy financial habits, saving and investing in ways that would provide for family needs here and in Nepal. Such sessions matter to the community members many of whom have no idea how to trade and how to put a mortgage application together. Several audiences appreciated the community-driven efforts to educate its members on these practical life matters. One of the presenters shared with me the feedbacks he received of these sessions: several participants were thankful for the learning opportunity and, ironically, Covid-19 lockdown for the occasion (personal communication, March 11, 2021). The financial literacy need is not specific to this community. As Skagerlund et al. (2018) highlight:

> As members of today's society we have never been so riddled with difficult financial choices. During the past decades we have been faced with increasingly complex financial products, such as different mortgage forms, payday loans, student loans, complex retirement plans, credit cards and so on… Extant findings indicate that many individuals around the world are financially illiterate, at least when measuring their literacy on measures of financial literacy. This is troubling, given the surge in introductions of novel and sophisticated financial products, but also for more basic everyday situations… (p. 18)

Similarly, Lee and Mueller (2014) cite Kezar and Yang (2010) proposal that financial literacy is "a life skill, a requisite to citizenship . . . a critical intellectual competency…and an essential component of a college degree" (p. 15) and that "colleges could take the initiative by mandating a financial literacy course or even infusing financial literacy into an already established course in the business or math departments on campus" (p. 15).

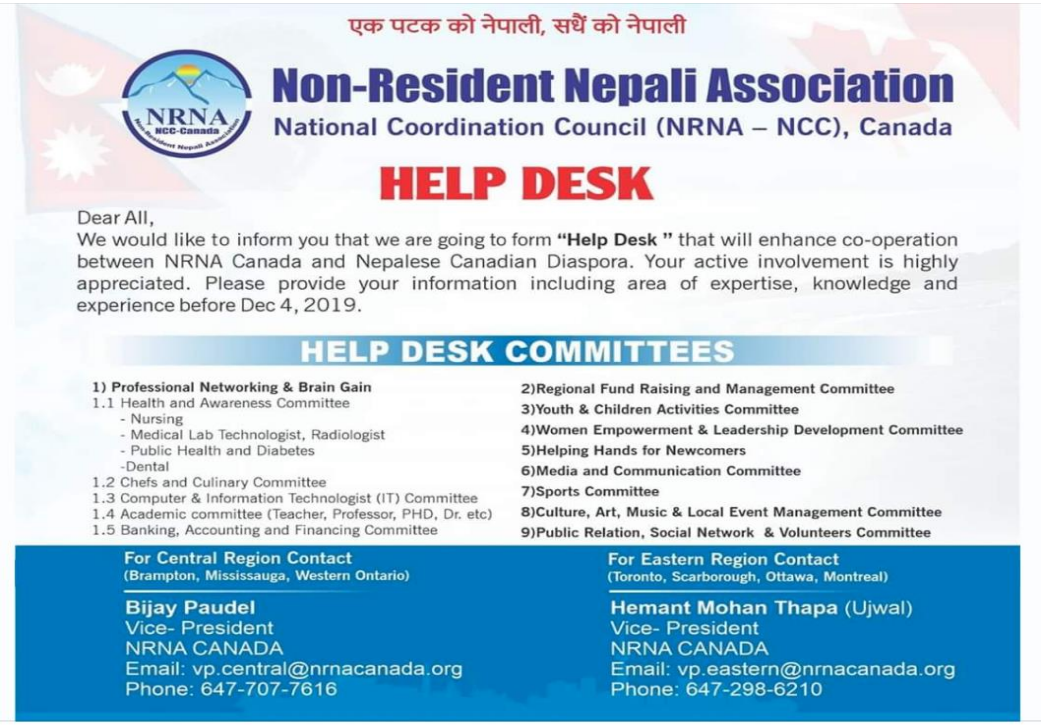




The Diasporic

"Return" to home country. Diasporas have their "collective commitment to maintenance, restoration, safety, and prosperity" of their place of origin (home country) (Cohen, 1997, p. 26). A great deal of this community's activities was centered around helping "mother country" when she most needs it. This community showed its desire to return to the old country in the most practical sense of the term, that is, not by returning physically, but by sending the support it needs: soliciting Canadian government aids, such as vaccine and other safety supplies,[10] sending remittance to their family members, raising funds to buy supplies, and so on.

[10] https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2021/06/canada-sending-medical-supplies-to-support-covid-19-response-in-pakistan-and-nepal.html



NRNA Canada
June 5, 2021 ·

Canada Stands Together for Nepal !!!
We extend our sincere gratitude to Nepalese Canadian Community Services (NCCS), Toronto, Canada for generously raising funds to purchase 1 Oxygen Concentrators ($1,000) to support the NRNA-Canada initiative "नेपालमा अक्सिजन पठाऔँ, आफन्तको ज्यान बचाऔँ " to fight COVID-19 in Nepal, which is under its merciless grip. Your support to buy Oxygen Concentrators shall help save lives of our family members, friends, brothers and sisters back home. Thank you so very much for standing together with us to ease the pain of our Mother Country, Nepal!

Empathy: Bonding or strong horizontal ties and implication for diversity.

Diasporic and immigrant communities maintain co-ethnic solidarity, affiliation, fellow-feeling, or empathy. Diaspora communities hold "a strong ethnic group consciousness …based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history and the belief in a common fate" (Cohen, 1997, p. 29). The commonality drawn around their distinctiveness from the host society gives them a shared space and opportunity for bonding along the horizontal tie. To illustrate, Nepali Associations in Canada share a common idea of "fostering positive communication, mutual respect and cooperation among Nepalese, and individuals or organizations of similar objectives and interests" (NCAO, 2001, amended 2011).

Bonding is the tie between people who are like us. According to American political scientist Robert Putnam (2006), "bonding social capital" might lead to "bridging social capital" (ties to people who are unlike us). In this observation, Putnam counters the long-held assumption, informed by the conflict theory,[11] that "bridging social capital and bonding social capital are inversely correlated in a kind of zero-sum relationship: if you have lots of bonding ties, I must have few bridging ties and vice versa" (p. 143). As Putnam writes: "High bonding might well be compatible with high bridging, and low bonding with low bridging" (pp. 43-44). The overall implication here is that while diaspora and immigrant communities are inclined to ally with those who are like themselves experientially, the horizontal ties (bonding social capital) might also positively contribute to working across differences or to bridging social capital.

One such event during the pandemic that united not only immigrants and racial minorities in the United States but also anyone who has any humanity was the savage killing of George Floyd and global protests following this event. Nepali communities across the world including in Canada staged protests, allying with BIPOC, for racial justice. They wanted to demonstrate that Asians, or what is also sometimes referred to as "ideal minorities," are not complacent when it comes to racial injustice.

The Medium-ic? The Zoomification of community engagement and exposure to virtuality.

Whether we recall Alexander Pope, English poet, satirist, and critic of the Enlightenment era, "the sound must seem an echo to the sense" and take a whole recourse to the form/content alterity or bring in Canadian philosopher and communication theorist Marshall McLuhan's (1964) "Medium is the message", medium shapes the form and content of a message.

There has been a continued divide within academia whether a turn to virtuality is going to destroy all that is human and social elements of teaching, communicating, meeting remotely (and the pro-virtual versus pro F2F apologists). Covid pandemic became just another opportunity for the lobbyists to advocate their positions since this debate can be traced back to the supporters and opponents of MOOCs (massive open

[11] "Contact theory suggests that diversity erodes the in-group distinction and enhances out-group solidarity or bridging social capital, thus lowering ethnocentrism. Conflict theory suggests that diversity enhances the in-group/out-group distinction and strengthens in-group solidarity or bonding social capital, thus increasing ethnocentrism" (Putnam, 2007, p. 144).

online courses) versus conventional classes and in fact the debate could be said to be as old as man vs machine and what we believe or do not believe consists in the humanly versus the mechanical. As far as actual students are concerned, *The New York Times* report article (April 29, 2021) "What Students Are Saying About 'Learning Loss' During the Pandemic" might be illustrative. The *NYT* used their daily Student Opinion forum to ask teenagers to share their experiences and opinions. In particular, they asked if they experienced "'learning loss,' and if so, how"? The result is instructive as can be seen in the main points drawn from student opinions, reproduced below:

> Some thought students should skip standardized tests this year.
> Others believed testing would reveal students' needs (to measure the effects of the pandemic).
> Several spoke critically of standardized curriculum.
> Many agreed the pandemic has brought attention to inequalities of all kinds.
> Some students say they have suffered learning loss.
> Others said they adjusted and learned just as much.
> Even if they themselves were not affected, many were concerned about others who were.

Student perspectives on the need to change the current system, namely "standardized tests" and "standardized curriculum" is educative in the sense that it supports the wealth of existing research suggesting that standardization reestablishes already existing inequalities, servers only administrative and bureaucratic needs of efficiency and 'objectivity' and thereby punishes different abilities and ignores different of learner needs. What is striking about these students' voices is their awareness of the current situation, striking because it does not support the widespread complains that today's youths might be disinclined to take part in political discussions as they remain indifferent to politics around them. Several voice their concern for others who might not be like themselves. More importantly, several of these students ascribe their awareness of things around them to the flexibility of time they now enjoy away from schools, colleges campuses. What is relevant to my discussion of resilience with respect to the community in question, a good number of students said that "they adjusted just as much." Nepali community in Canada clearly took advantage of the unexpected virtual turn. The flexibility of the screen offered the community leaders and participants an opportunity to solicit participants and coordinate discussion on a wide range of topics by basically community-sourcing (c.f., crowdsource) the knowledge. Such community sourcing of knowledge and critical reflective discussions on our role as a community and our role as humans in a critical time took place though virtual awareness and wellness sessions, financial literacy sessions, talks, and interactions sessions. These sessions overall were meant to aware and prepare the community for the right source of information and in a way fight misinformation. While the virtual meetings gave space to those who wished to share their professional experiences, virtuality allowed younger members (gen 1.5vers to voice their concerns that would otherwise go unnoticed. It became something of a common place, what is called *chautari* in Nepali. While these opportunities were the natural products of the virtuality, it also meant that the presenters and participants had to familiarize themselves with the affordances and constraints of doing things virtually, to get attuned with what I am calling the virtual rhetorical situation.

The flexibility of the screen offered the community leaders and participants an opportunity to solicit participants and coordinate discussion on a wide range of topics by community-sourcing (c.f., crowdsource) knowledge.

In this context, the idea of affordances and constraints is useful as a comparative lens—affordance of virtual medium vs in-person.[12] The affordances of ZOOM included the possibility of making a mistake; an opportunity to experiment with, adapt to audience and time's needs, improvise new things; the chance to utilize feedbacks and comments as part of ongoing process of learning by doing. Presenters seemed to utilize the affordances of the virtual platform while some constraints remained, particularly for those who were doing presentations for the first time and those who were coordinating or running programs for the first time. Over time, they were seen more comfortable and could pace and time and align and adapt their style and content with their audience's.

Concluding remarks and a few take aways

In this paper, I took up a community's response to Covid-19. This was the time marked by all kinds of insecurities, uncertainties, vulnerabilities, and confusions both at public and at state and policy levels. Looking into how a resilient community in diaspora handled the situation shed light on several positive messages including the value of active resilience, cooperation, and solidarity. I appropriated the classic definition of "the rhetoric situation" to spin the term to reflect an ecological and community-based approach. I argued that rhetorical situation is a composite of linguistic, rhetorical, medium-ic and the mood, energy, and force of a time. Thus redefined, I contended, the rhetorical situation is both situation-producing and situated at the same time.

From a methodological, even epistemological, standpoint, looking into the biography of a community (ethnography in a sense) meant that researchers relocate community strengths in relation to the community's salient, if also evolving, characters. In the context of this essay, "resilience" as the defining character of Nepali diaspora communities revealed that a resilience rich community approach might provide hope in desperate times. One important and obvious takeaway, then, is that communities that have undergone difficult situations are able to provide a more composed approach to handing a crisis situation. Such communities might act as an effective liaison to the state in part because communities are more efficient and can recognize specific community needs and expectations. State-level decisions take more time and more research, and political and legislative are complex processes. Communities are useful resources that need to be promoted and preserved for the good of everyone.

Looking into community-mobilized virtual and online talks, trainings, and posts to inform and engage their audience has us additional observations related to how transnationals communicate and what linguistic and persuasive strategies resources they

[12] Media affordance and constraints is a topic that this space is not a right fit for now. Suffice it to say that affordance was first used by James J Gibson in 1966, best descried in his 1979 book *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception,* where he suggests, "The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill" (citation). Later addition of this word by Donald Norman (1988) in the field of Human-Computer Interaction and Design, affordance indicates "action possibilities", or interaction possibilities, or easy discoverabilities of action possibilities.

employ. Presenters' or speakers' linguistic, rhetorical, and content choices with respect to their audience suggested that they understood audience's unique community and trans-community; translingual needs. They reflected the persona of open-minded cosmopolitans. They equally drew on their rich tradition while demonstrating their awareness of mobility and emplacement in a changing context of belonging and becoming. While drawing on the tradition's resources was helpful to authentically connect with the audience's unique cultural values, tapping into audience's evolving needs (language mixing and relocating examples) helped them establish their identity ethos. The content and scope of sessions spanning de-stressing, race awareness, and financial literacy suggested that the community aspired for achieving holistic goals, which included the need to hold onto ethnic solidarity and fight against racial hate inflicted upon racial minorities.

These findings might be useful pedagogical guides. As teachers we can inspire institutions to strive for holistic pedagogical goals, which include the aspiration for everyone's success and overall success. An ideal of everyone's success could not only fill the achievement gap but also be a step toward equality and justice. Overall success could be an ideal to strive for, and, recalling bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress*, it would mean foregrounding wholeness. Hooks (1994) writes, drawing on Thich Nhat Hanh, that a holistic pedagogy aims to achieve "wholeness" and "self-actualization" as a goal, one that values "a union of mind, body, and spirit", "'whole' human beings, striving not just for knowledge in books, but knowledge about how to live in the world" (pp. 14-15). With increased awareness of mental wellness more recently, which unfortunately should have been long paid attention, it seems fair to say that the community approach I have discussed in this essay could be a good model for us as teachers and scholars. Another related implication is for us to foreground mindful, engaged, and embodied practices. Yet another is to foreground community such as this as part of our reseracch and teaching materials.

Acknowledgement

A small nonetheless meaningful part of this essay (specifically when I discuss Buddha and the *Bhagavat Gita*) is part of the joint project Hem Paudel (PhD), my colleague here at University Iowa's Rhetoric, and I did together in a graduate course at the University of Louisville. I wish to acknowledge Hem here.

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