

The End of Everest? Reimagining Himalayan Adventure  
Travel in an Age of Unnatural Disasters

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## Introduction

Himalayan adventure travel is a burgeoning industry in some mountainous regions of Nepal, India, and the Tibet Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China. The development of a trekking and expedition mountaineering infrastructure has created economic opportunities in remote areas and allowed visitors from around the world to embark on life-changing explorations to some of the planet's most unique destinations. However, with the rapid, uneven, and largely unregulated growth of this industry have come environmental and resource challenges, the creation of new economic and social arrangements, and renewed questions of equity and safety.

Adventure travel systems involve complex interactions between historical, social, political, and economic factors (Zurick, 1992, p. 608) and despite – or perhaps because of – the prominence of Himalayan adventure travel in the popular consciousness, the structural factors that maintain and reproduce the current paradigm remain poorly understood. The industry's growing pains are highlighted by the mounting human toll of disasters in the mountains, most recently the earthquake that destroyed Everest Base Camp in April 2015. The aftermath of these and other crises of have been marked by season cancellations, accusations of malpractice and negligence by adventure travel outfitters and the Government of Nepal (GoN), and demands by high altitude workers (HAWs<sup>1</sup>) for greater control over their role in the adventure travel system. Although the proximate causes of these disasters were natural events, growing social and political unrest suggest that their ultimate causes are in fact chronic and unnatural.

My research is based on eight months of fieldwork in the Himalaya and combines

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1. In popular accounts of Himalayan mountaineering, high altitude workers are often referred to as “sherpas.” Traditionally most HAWs were, and are, ethnically Sherpa men, though this has begun to change in recent years. HAWs are those hired staff that work above Base Camp; they should not be confused with porters, who carry loads below Base Camp, or with guides, who lead expeditions and are usually nationals of First World countries. In this paper I use the terms HAW and sherpa interchangeably to refer to high altitude workers regardless of ethnicity.

analysis of theoretical, historical, and contemporary sources with personal experience as a Himalayan expedition leader. This investigation will examine the Khumbu region of Nepal, both because the region has been exceptionally well-documented in both academic and popular mediums and because the Khumbu's social and political arrangements tend to be emulated and exported throughout the Nepal, India, and Tibet Himalaya. I argue that the current Himalayan adventure travel paradigm is unsustainable, and that only a profound rebalancing of the sociopolitical relationships that drive it – those between the state, local and global civil society actors, and adventure travel practitioners and participants – will allow it to continue. My findings demonstrate that recent events both reflect longstanding structural problems and have provided an opportunity for previously underrepresented stakeholders to become increasingly assertive in their quest for a more equitable adventure travel system.

### **The History of Commercial Mountaineering in the Nepal Himalaya**

Himalayan mountaineering dates from British explorations and initial Everest attempts in the 1920s, though early expeditions tended to be few in number and largely exploratory in nature. It was not until the end of the Second World War and the opening of Nepal to foreign climbers in 1951 that the golden age of Himalayan mountaineering began (Salisbury & Hawley, 2007, p. 5). These expeditions were characterized by relatively large teams employing numerous lowland porters to ferry equipment to base camp and utilized HAWs to establish progressively higher camps before making a summit push. Because of the complex logistics and high costs involved these efforts were generally sponsored by national governments, who used their broad discretion to appoint expedition leaders and members. The 1950s and 1960s saw first ascents of all of Nepal's 8,000 meter peaks, among other accomplishments, and expedition mountaineering

continued into the late 1980s (Salisbury & Hawley, 2007, p. 5-6).

By the late 1970s growing numbers of international visitors were arriving in Nepal, an increasing proportion of them mountaineers. In the early 1980s, the German DAV Summit Club, led by Franz Kroell and Guenther Haerter, quietly organized Nepal's first commercial expeditions to Annapurna IV and Baruntse. Other outfitters soon followed: many of the major players in Himalayan mountaineering today were established during this period, including Seattle-based Alpine Ascents (1990), Mountain Madness (1991), and International Mountain Guides (1991) (Salisbury & Hawley, 2007, p. 6). Despite the growing popularity of alpine-style climbing, in which highly skilled climbers attempt difficult objectives with little or no support, commercial outfitters inherited many of the social and economic arrangements utilized by national expeditions. The dependence on a great deal of portage and high altitude labor continued, as did the practice of progressive laying of camps at high altitude. Expeditions would still be led by First-World guides and Nepalis would still serve as support staff, but now expedition members could buy their way onto teams (Ortner, 1999, p. 283). In the early 1990s \$30,000 bought climbers an all-inclusive climb; the cost today starts at around \$30,000 but can rise to as high as \$85,000 or more depending on amenities provided (Arnette, 2015b).

Commercial operations rapidly developed around the three Khumbu expedition peaks of Ama Dablam, Cho Oyu, and Everest. By the 2000s, the number of mountaineers attempting four routes on these mountains (the southwest ridge of Ama Dablam, the northwest ridge of Cho Oyu, and the South Col and North Col routes of Everest) exceeded the number of mountaineers attempting all other peaks in Nepal combined (Salisbury & Hawley, 2007, p. 11). The early phase of the commercial period ended with the 1996 Everest disaster, which claimed eight lives and was immortalized in Jon Krakauer's bestselling book *Into Thin Air* (1997) and later the

blockbuster movie “Everest” (2015). Contrary to deterring people from climbing the mountain, the disaster sparked renewed worldwide interest in Himalayan mountaineering. The subsequent decade saw astounding growth; in 2007 over 500 mountaineers summited Everest thanks in no small part to the “Krakauer Effect” (Salisbury & Hawley, 2007, p. 6). A decade ago, Himalayan mountaineering had reached its current commercialized, concentrated, iteration.

### **Mountaineering and Serious Games**

In her ethnography of Everest, Sherry Ortner (1999) introduces the idea of “serious games.” Her description helps shape my analysis and is worth quoting at length:

Games are not just bundles of intentions or fields of language or discourse. Games involve players, differently positioned, differently situated, with respect to those intentions and discourses. Games are social, indeed intensely social; people play against each other, with each other, for each other. Games thrive on difference; there can be no game without difference (Ortner, 1999, p. 150).

While iterative games are a part of everyday life, they are particularly useful for understanding adventure travel interactions. The game of Himalayan mountaineering throws together people from around Nepal and around the world, all of whom bring with them personal and sometimes conflicting motivations for climbing. In the expedition period mountaineers climbed for national pride, their philosophy shaped by notions of heroic masculinity underpinned by broader notions of imperialism and nationalism (Bayers, 2003, Isserman & Weaver 2008). In the commercial period climbers pursue individual objectives, especially the quest to achieve some “first”: “being the first ethnic “x”, the oldest or youngest “y”, or overcoming obstacle “z”” (Salisbury & Hawley, 2007, p. 6). Whereas George Malloy famously declared that that his reason for climbing Everest was “Because it is there,” the motivation for climbing has since become an identity value: “Because I’m here” (Ortner, 1999, p. 288). By contrast the motivations

of HAWs, both past and present, are grounded in desires for modernity and (ethno)nationalistic pride (Ortner, 1999, p. 22-3, Adams, 1996, p. 6-7). More pragmatically, they climb for money: despite the well-known danger, high altitude work is extremely lucrative for people with few other economic prospects (Schaffer, 2013). Whereas the per-capita income in Nepal is less than \$600, HAWs can make up to \$8,000 in a few months (Krakauer, 2014), their tiny slice of the \$340 million in revenue generated annually by Nepal's adventure travel system (Schaffer, 2013).

In the microcosmic setting of the mountains, these colliding intentions and shifting imaginaries are not innocuous. Instead, they can have drastic, even fatal consequences. These quests can seem foolish and futile to outsiders, but many climbers take them seriously enough to risk their lives and the lives of others. Indeed, mountaineering is perhaps the only sport that demands that at least some of its players must die. The pursuit of existential and material objectives profoundly shapes the formal and informal sociopolitical systems governing the Himalayan mountaineering paradigm, which has created elite opportunity at the cost of a system built on chronic inequities. We have already been introduced to some of the players that participate in these games – outfitters, guides, members, and HAWs – and we will now explore the relationships between them further.

### **The Evolution of State and Civil Society in the Khumbu**

The GoN has never played an especially active role in regulating adventure travel systems, and today its presence in the Khumbu is confined mostly to the resource management functions of Sagarmatha National Park, established in 1976 (Stevens, 2014). Unlike many other peaks in Nepal, where permit royalties are collected directly by the quasi-governmental Nepal Mountaineering Association, the \$11,000 permit fee for foreign climbers to attempt Everest is

collected directly by Nepal's Ministry of Culture, Tourism, and Civil Aviation (MCTCA) (Arnette, 2015b). The continued absence of the Nepali state is likely a reflection of the country's turbulent political history and lack of governance capacity (Shah, 2002, p. 155) paired with the relative strength of local authorities and relative remoteness from the capital Kathmandu.

To fill the Khumbu's governance void, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) play an outsized role in creating both legal and normative realities. As Fisher (1997, p. 440) describes, the rise of NGOs in the neoliberal period was enabled by shifting interdependencies among political actors. These groups have undertaken a large range of activities, often ones that had previously been ignored or left to government agencies. Although their operations invariably come at some cost to state capacity, it has been argued that NGOs are less encumbered by bureaucracy, more open to innovation, and better able to respond to grassroots needs (Fischer, 1997, p. 444). This trend has been reflected in development efforts throughout Nepal, including in the Khumbu. Unlike arrangements in most other countries, state-like regulatory powers to control climbing routes and provide training and credentialing to HAWs have fallen to a loose coalition of semi-governmental and nongovernmental organizations.

One such semi-governmental organization is the Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee (SPCC). Founded in 1991 to clean up Everest's then-notorious garbage dump, its responsibilities expanded in 1997 with the creation of the Icefall Doctors, a small team of crack climbers paid to set the route from Base Camp to Camp II through the dangerous Khumbu Icefall (Loomis, 2015). Aided by HAWs from commercial teams, the Icefall Doctors create an elaborate highway of ladders and fixed lines that make the route climbable. The exact route varies from year to year depending on conditions, and the Icefall Doctors have broad discretion to determine the exact route and make continual adjustments. The work of the SPCC is made possible through

financial support from Sagarmatha National Park, though the bulk of its budget comes from the \$600 royalty fee per Everest climber (Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee).

Himalayan mountaineering carries inherent risk. While the work of the Icefall Doctors mitigates some risk for expedition members, HAWs continue to bear the brunt of risk exposure. From 1922 to 2013, 72 sherpas died on Everest and many more have been injured or left disabled (Schaeffer, 2013). Using Mt. Everest as a case study, Firth *et al.* found that foreign climbers tended to die of illnesses and injuries (HAPE, HACE, fatigue, and exposure), while HAWs tended to be killed by objective hazards (avalanches, rockfall, and other natural occurrences). Almost twice as many HAWs (1.18 vs. 0.54) died per incident involving objective hazards than members. The greater number of deaths per incident was attributed the greater amount of time spent by HAWs transporting equipment through dangerous areas, or otherwise carrying out hazardous tasks in exposed places (Firth *et al.*, 2008, p. 1432, cited in Bellows, 2014, p. 13).

In response to these dire statistics, longtime foreign guides have sought ways to improve the technical competency of Nepali expedition staff. The most successful of these has been the Khumbu Climbing Center (KCC), which has trained nearly 1,000 Nepalis since its inception in 2003. The KCC's training curriculum combines technical rock and ice climbing with soft skills like first aid, navigation, and understanding the mountain environment. Modules on expedition management, member care and English are intended to allow Nepali mountaineers to achieve some standard of professionalism, with the goal of allowing them to advance their careers in the adventure travel industry. With this in mind, we now turn to the sherpas themselves.

## **Sherpas**

The mythos of sherpas as Himalayan supermen is as old as Himalayan mountaineering

itself. In the early expeditionary period, ethnic Sherpas were valued for their physical strength, stamina, and the apparent ease with which they navigated the mountain environment, providing valuable support porters from lowland Nepal could not match (Ortner, 1999, p. 58). Accounts from the 1920s through the 1960s enumerate the Sherpas' numerous intangible traits: good humor and temperament, generosity, and outright heroism (Ortner, 1999, p. 58-61). They were also particularly noted for their level-headedness and supposed impassivity in the face of death, which was most often attributed to the Sherpas' Buddhist religious beliefs and the supposed promise of reincarnation (Ortner, 1999, p. 134). Together, these traits made Sherpas ideal expedition partners, though they nearly always remained in a subservient role to their First World employers. Sherpas engaged in some brand promotion themselves very early by seeking to distinguish themselves first from lowland Nepalis and then from Tibetans, and eventually demanding that only ethnic Sherpas be hired (Ortner, 1999, p. 80-1). By the 1950s and 1960s the Sherpas had become so famous that this insistence was no longer necessary; the surname Sherpa had become synonymous with mountaineering work (Stevens 1993, p. 414, Ortner, 1999, p. 89).

The conception of the Sherpas as hardworking, loyal, and hardened against the realities of the mountains contrasts with reality. The seemingly fatalistic behavior of Sherpas in the face of death should best be understood with an eye to Orientalist discourse; few if any Sherpas shrug off the death of a companion because they believe their time has come or it did not matter because they would be reincarnated (Ortner, 1999, p. 135). The desire of Sherpas to continue working in the face of tragedy is likely the result of a desire to honor fallen companions or fulfill their professional (and often financially lucrative) obligations rather than for any religious reason (Ortner, 1999, p. 138-9). Troubling also for the idealized Sherpa image is a documented history of Sherpa resistance. On the very first British Everest expedition in 1921, high altitude workers

staged an “attempted mutiny” over rations (Ortner, 1999, p. 79). The 1920s and 1930s were filled with a variety of work stoppages, strikes, and other acts of resistance towards expedition leaders over such issues as food, pay, equipment, working conditions, and recognition. Through various acts of resistance, Sherpas sought to obtain more money and recognition and less domination, conditions that make high altitude work more rewarding (Ortner, 1997, p. 89). This process of give-and-take, and the list of demands, has changed little in the last century.

While HAWs are now multiethnic, these received imaginaries have proven transferrable. In times of peace sherpa hospitality and loyalty may indeed be unmatched, but in times of strife, these histories – the fact that sherpas are deeply affected by the cumulative effects of disasters, and the fact that the sherpas have a history of successful resistance to prevailing adventure travel paradigms – can be mobilized for political purposes. The last three years have been plagued by such calamities. In 2013, a brawl at Everest Base Camp between First World guides and sherpas threatened to derail climbing, and the 2014 and 2015 climbing seasons were ultimately cancelled after natural disasters and resultant loss of life. In the following sections, I analyze the unnatural roots of these disasters, and how each of these incidents illustrate the complex and shifting relationships between the stakeholders that comprise the Himalayan adventure travel regime.

## **Disasters**

The first incident, a now-infamous brawl at Everest Base Camp, occurred on April 27, 2013. Although accounts conflict, it appears that three notable foreign climbers – Ueli Steck, Simone Moro, and Jonathan Griffith – ascended above Camp II, apparently in violation of a community agreement not to climb while sherpas were installing fixed lines. Ice dislodged by the climbers subsequently injured one of the sherpas, and the rest of the sherpas at Camp II (initially

a small group that later swelled to over 100) heard what had happened and became angry. The two parties confronted each other, profane language was exchanged, and a violent confrontation broke out that eventually had to be broken up by bystanders. Steck and Moro were injured. No substantive discussion took place and there was no resolution apart from a “peace agreement” signed before a Nepal Army major. The trio beat a hasty retreat back to Kathmandu, and the climbing season continued without further incident (Adhikari, 2013; Neville, 2013).

The second incident occurred on April 18, 2014. While sherpas were hauling supplies, a massive avalanche swept through the Khumbu Icefall, killing 16 HAWs and destroying the route through the Icefall and halting climbing. After a procession of some of the bodies through the streets of Kathmandu, the GoN offered compensation of Rs. 40,000 (about \$400) for the family of each victim, which was seen as entirely inadequate and drew swift condemnation from the sherpas and other climbers. On April 22, a memorial puja for the victims was held, an unofficial climbing boycott was declared, and 13-point charter articulating demands for reform was circulated. With unrest growing MCTCA Minister Bhim Prasad Acharya came to Base Camp to April 24, though by then the climbing season was all but over (Schaffer, 2014, “Sherpa”).

The third and most serious incident occurred on April 25, 2015. A 7.8 magnitude earthquake triggered multiple avalanches and serac falls on Pumori, again destroying the route through the Khumbu Icefall and obliterating Everest Base Camp. 18 people (12 of them HAWs) were killed. Most teams immediately suspended their attempts and prepared to return to Kathmandu. Despite the immense destruction and loss of life and extensive international media coverage it was not until May 6 that the Government of Nepal conceded that operations could not be resumed and officially cancelled the climbing season after the SPCC and Icefall Doctors announced that they would not attempt to repair the route (Prasain, 2015).

## **Growing Assertiveness of Historically Underrepresented Actors**

Now that each of these three incidents has been briefly described, I seek to unpack these bare narratives with a further exploration of the forces at work in the Himalayan adventure travel regime. The events of the past three years show that an important paradigm shift is underway: sherpas, historically underrepresented figures in the Himalayan mountaineering system, are exercising unprecedented assertiveness. Crucially, I believe that this has come about because of growing professionalism among the sherpas, as well as formal organizations such as the KCC and SPCC that they dominate having reached the critical mass needed to enact political change.

While sherpa resistance is not new, the ability of sherpas to win significant concessions has historically been limited. In the expeditionary period sherpas would often negotiate terms with leaders of their specific expedition, which lead to wide variation in the terms of their employment and the dynamics within their teams (Ortner, 1999). However, the ability to enact systematic reforms was always beyond the reach of the sherpas; they did not have the power to alter their fundamental role in the adventure travel system. While they might have won the right to leave portering work to others, for the better part of the twentieth century their role was one of expedition support, not leadership. Few could ever dream of becoming guides in their own right or conceive of alpinism as a sport in itself, but both of these things have occurred in recent years. Thanks to the widely-respected efforts of the KCC – now run almost entirely by Nepali instructors – and other training programs, the level of skill and professionalism among the Nepali climbing community has continued to increase. In addition to those trained by the KCC, a dozen Nepalis now hold certifications from the International Federation of Mountain Guides Associations (IFMGA), a rigorous international standard for climbing guides also held by many First World expedition leaders (Schaffer, 2014). Growing competencies have led to a small but

growing indigenous sport climbing tradition, embodied by a young generation of newly-minted guides and elite climbers such as Pasang Lhamu Sherpa that includes an increasing number of women and non-Sherpas (Solnit, 2015, Arnette, 2015a). These people, the sons and daughters of lodge owners and experienced expedition staff members (*sirdars*), are also children of Nepal's adventure travel system. Young sherpas increasingly question the need for First World outfitters when Nepalis increasingly have the capacity to organize and run major expeditions themselves.

Emboldened by their growing technical skill and a broader, macro-level view of the adventure travel system, sherpas' interactions with foreigners have become more assertive, even confrontational. In 2013, the sherpas succeeded in forcing Steck, Moro, and Griffith from Everest after they ignored a community agreement and endangered others on the mountain.

Traditionally such slights were tolerated, but witness Tashi Sherpa describes what set the 2013 incident apart and the moral victory that came with standing up to the foreign climbers:

The resentment was always there. But incidents like this didn't occur before because Sherpas didn't take offense to trivial matters. But this time around, it was different. Earlier, most Sherpas were uneducated and they would grin and bear it. Earlier, we had suppressed our feelings...But this incident was waiting to happen, and it will happen again as long as Sherpas are humiliated...Now they have become more confident (Adhikari, 2013).

While the sherpas might have won a moral victory in 2013, it was surpassed by their political victory in 2014. The events of 2014 in particular provided an opportunity for publicity that could not be ignored by the climbing community or trivialized by the GoN. The sherpas used their boycott to criticize the GoN's policies, contending that Everest provides a lucrative revenue stream (\$3-4 million in permit fees every year) but that the HAWs that enable the system to operate receive a disproportionately small share of revenue and other benefits. (Barry, Sharma, & Najarapril, 2015). Their agitation also succeeded in bringing Minister Acharya to Base Camp, who later presented their 13-point charter to the Cabinet (Barry, Sharma, &

Najarapril, 2015). Although most of the charter's demands were ultimately not met, the GoN raised the insurance requirement for HAWs from \$10,000 to \$15,000 and agreed to honor 2014 permits in 2015, a substantial loss of revenue but an important reassurance for foreign climbers (Schaffer, 2015). Though the sherpas lacked official leadership, their collective action succeeded in getting at least some of their demands addressed and closing the mountain for the first time.

In 2015, the growing assertiveness of these individual sherpas was embodied in the collective and growing strength of formal institutions that increasingly reflect their interests and agendas. Aside from a few military personnel and government liaison officers the SPCC is the closest Base Camp has to a respected governing authority, often organizing meetings between climbing parties and mediating disputes. Through the Icefall Doctors – professionals trained by the KCC – the SPCC also has the official power to close the mountain, an authority it first exercised in 2015. Despite the destruction at Base Camp, on April 30 MCTCA Minister Tulsi Gautam initially declared that the climbing season would not be cancelled, and unrealistically declared that the route would be repaired in “the next two to three days” (*The Telegraph*). A week later, the SPCC issued an unprecedented Facebook press release, stating in part:

After thorough assessment of the damage at Base Camp and the Icefall caused by the massive earthquake and avalanche of 25th April 2015, the SPCC has concluded that the risk of setting a route in the current situation cannot be taken.

Specifically, the SPCC cited little interest from climbers in continuing, the inability to reset the route before the rapid onset of the monsoon given the lack of supplies, the departure of all medical teams from the mountain, and the pressing matters HAWs needed to tend to at home (Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee, 2015). The MCTCA issued a counter-statement asking for “clarification” regarding the “unilateral” closure, but did not dispute the move and ultimately cancelled by the climbing season the next day (Prasin, 2015). 2015 demonstrated that

sherpas have gained both the critical mass and the organizational clout to reorient the Himalayan mountaineering paradigm. Their desire for reform is embodied in collective action and control of key institutions that hold the ultimate trump card – closing the mountain altogether – and sherpas have shown that they are not afraid to use it if their concerns are not satisfactorily addressed.

This growing assertiveness of the sherpas has received a mixed reception from foreign climbers. Though sherpas have successfully articulated and refined their message, the past three years have not been without some ugly moments. Steck, Moro, and Griffith claim to have feared for their lives, describing the sherpas that opposed them as a “mob” (Neville, 2013). In 2014, rumors circulated at Base Camp that anyone (sherpa or foreigner) that sought to continue climbing after the boycott had been declared would face retaliation, though no source was ever identified and no one was threatened directly (Schaefer, 2014, “Sherpa”). While emotions run raw in difficult situations, the latent tensions between sherpas and foreigners is unquestionable.

Many guides and members are sympathetic to the difficult position of the sherpas and have at least some recognition of how their decision to climb fuels continual crises. In 2014, member Isaiah Janzen blogged that commercial teams were little more than a collection of people united by money and individualism, and noted the absurdity of them risking the lives of others – many of whom climb less voluntarily – for their benefit: “there are things at stake more important than my selfish, arrogant and egotistical summit ambitions” (Barry, Sharma, & Najrapril, 2014). Other members, such as Cleo Weidlich, have contested growing sherpa assertiveness, defending her decision to defy the closure by taking a helicopter to Camp II by declaring, “I refuse to give in to the pressures of the Everest mafia” (Schaffer, 2014).

This view, though a minority opinion, is gaining traction in climbing community. Guides and members I’ve spoken with increasingly claim that the sherpas constitute some sort of

“mafia,” a term that implies both organization and sinister motives. As early as the 1970s, foreigners contended that sherpas has somehow been “spoiled” by the adventure travel system (Ortner, 1999, p. 248), a view echoed by Steck, who noted “...the Sherpas are not stupid. They see [the Everest industry], and they want to take over the business and kick out the westerners. This is a big fight” (Neville, 2013). The growing perception of the sherpas as greedy and assertive contrasts sharply with imaginaries – and perhaps overrepresentations – of them as good-natured, subservient, and stoic, a change that some climbers have seemed unprepared for and perhaps unwilling to accept. Not unlike the “aid cowboys” and “aid mercenaries” in Pfeiffer’s Mozambique (2003, p. 729), First World mountaineers are adventure-seekers with transnational reach that have traditionally only been superficially bothered by “philosophical concerns with “development.”” Their obsession with their serious game of mountaineering not only divorces sport from the underlying social, political, and economic realities that drive the adventure travel system but precludes a serious examination of their participation, if not complicity, in an inequitable system they have historically controlled. The fact that First World mountaineers can climb at all is the product of geospatial realities, but they often fail to recognize that the sherpas cannot ignore questions of development; for them it is an evolving, all-encompassing reality and quite literally a matter of life and death.

For these reasons, the sherpas increasingly see control over adventure travel systems as essential to their development trajectory (Schaefer, 2014). In the latter half of the twentieth century, growing connectivity with the rest of the world led to an obsession with the material trappings of development – *bikas* – but little recognition that imported development was leading to a breakdown of cooperation, self-reliance, and local knowledge bases (Shrestha, 1997, p. 59-60). As we have seen previously, NGOs are the primary change agents in Nepal’s fragmented

political landscape and have filled the governance void in the *bikas* era (Fisher, 1997, p. 140), and that private parties may be uniquely suited to responding to grassroots needs (Fisher, 1997, p. 144). In this new development paradigm, projects are most successful when initiatives for change and development come from the people themselves, since there is a sense of ownership in both projects and results (Bista, 1991, p. 145). After years of struggle, the sherpas have managed to pair their aspirations for greater voice with formal mechanisms of power in the prevailing paradigm, which has allowed them to build community, increase self-reliance, and expand both traditional and new knowledge bases at the same time these capacities are being lost elsewhere. In this way, the sherpas have mobilized the instruments of the development age in pursuit of their own development destiny. From this platform of strength, they have demonstrated their ability to negotiate new terms that better represent their interests with the government and adventure travel practitioners – and win. With the demise – both literal and figurative – of the sherpa as archetypal Himalayan superman, the stage is set for a time of reckoning.

### **Conclusion: The Way Forward**

Even before the incidents and disasters of the past three years, it was clear that the Himalayan mountaineering paradigm in general, and the Everest system in particular, was unsustainable in its current form. The social, political, and economic dynamics of the mountaineering system, developed over a century of climbing, are built on fundamentally unequal relations of power and privilege. These relations are encouraged by a decentralized and fragmented adventure travel system, but it is precisely in such a landscape that alternative paradigms can take root. What the brawl in 2013, the avalanche in 2014, and the earthquake in 2015 did was reveal the structural weaknesses of the existing system and provide a capacity-

building exercise for historically underrepresented stakeholders, the sherpas and their underappreciated formal organizations. In this way, the chronic problems of a system under strain were brought to light by acute events, and its unnatural roots challenged by the people whose labor and sacrifice allow it to operate.

The way forward is far from clear. While the sherpas' increasing control of adventure travel systems may be justifiable on moral or development grounds, indigenous management alone will not solve all problems. The recent assertive trend is not universally supported; there is a growing rift in the sherpa community between young, professional, assertive sherpas and older sherpas whose employment depends on longstanding, carefully-fostered relationships with First World outfitters. Cut-rate Nepali outfitters have among the worst safety and environmental protection records (Shaffer, 2014). Similar to Citrin's critique of the medicalization of health (2010, p. 59), the move towards professionalism and training risks the what I term the technicalization of adventure travel- the idea that the serious problems facing the Himalayan adventure travel system can be solved with more ladders and fixed lines, more training, and more robust safety nets for disaster victims. If these changes do not sufficiently alter the structural calculus of power, whatever gains the sherpas have realized will remain similarly superficial.

As I write on the eve of the 2016 climbing season, it is unknown what, if any, new events will intervene to change this calculus. However, two things are certain: there will always be an interest in climbing the highest mountains on earth, and the future of Himalayan mountaineering is contingent on a fair and durable arrangement that addresses current and historical structural inequities to the satisfaction of all parties. The fraternity of Himalayan climbers, myself among them, have survived disaster before. The real tragedy will be if we continue to fail to prevent disasters that are largely of our own design.

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