

Yogesh Raj and Bhaskar Gautam. 2015. *Courage in Chaos: Early Rescue and Relief after the April Earthquake*. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari.

Courage in Chaos is an impressive study of the rescue and relief response following the April 2015 earthquake. *Courage* provides evidence of not just the impact and meaning of failure for earthquake survivors but also important details on how failure occurred. It is far from comprehensive, has several blind spots and draws on a slightly unusual methodology, as will be discussed below, but *Courage* is a much-needed first draft of serious post-earthquake analysis.

Courage is a slim monograph (89 pages) and consists of five chapters interspersed with informative photographs taken by Usha Titikshu and Bhaskar Gautam. The book details the findings of Martin Chautari's social audit, covering roughly the first month after the April 2015 earthquake. The social audit involved 76 volunteers who were embedded in three different field sites in the Kathmandu Valley. The first chapter summarizes the main findings of the book. The second and third chapters explain the social audit approach; the choice of Gongabu in Kathmandu, Lele in Lalitpur and Jenla in Bhaktapur as the pilot sites; and the rupture research framework. Chapter four contains the audit's main findings followed by a conclusion. The book ends with an excellent bibliography and reading list, which will be useful to researchers.

In summary *Courage* locates the initial failure in poor preparation and lack of data available to first responders. The book suggests that an accurate picture of needs was distorted by the intervention and collusion of politicians,

government officials and business. *Courage* argues that the government's focus on centralization, regulation and control, instead of working to facilitate and encourage relief, resulted in further failure and misery for earthquake survivors.

Courage makes a number of important points on the early relief. This is despite the authors stating that they are not interested in framing "a policy blueprint for its perplexed stakeholders" (p. 1). To take an example, *Courage* shows how the rapid visual assessment process that was used to assess damaged properties was designed as a result of collusion between government officials, political parties and the construction industry. Politicians used this process to ensure that their constituencies received aid. The way that assessments took place also enabled the construction industry to avoid accountability (p. 35). The book goes onto to describe how similar for-profit collusion took place in debris management.

Courage makes an important point about the lack of targeted relief in the early response. The book shows how the methods that were used to manage the relief process contributed to poor targeting of aid for marginalized communities. These methods included the way that the Prime Minister's Disaster Relief Fund was distributed (pp. 40–41) and the "logic of equal disbursement of funds" (p. 56), despite areas having different needs. *Courage* also highlights attempts to work around the constraints of the aid system and improve targeting locally, such as when a coupon system for allocating relief to households was introduced in Bhaktapur. This had problems but made the "relief distribution process relatively effective" (p. 54).

The authors make clear the limitations of the book: *Courage* is a preliminary report from an ongoing social audit. As *Courage* says, is not a general introduction to the April 2015 earthquake (p. 1). The book will probably confuse readers not familiar with the government response. *Courage* could also have benefitted from another round of editing.

It is difficult to criticize *Courage* for substantive omissions and assumptions. The book has set a high standard for post-earthquake research. Among other issues *Courage* is right to question the quality of the needs assessments hurriedly collected to produce the June 2015 Post Disaster Needs Assessment for the International Conference for Nepal's Reconstruction (p. 12).⁶ However, there are a number of issues that could be explored further

⁶ This is in contrast to claims by the former National Planning Commission vice chair and a former member who emphasized international recognition of the "rigor and professionalism" in which the post-disaster assessment was carried out (Pokharel and Waglé 2016).

later on or analyzed from different perspectives. Firstly, *Courage* does not directly critique many of the broader categories used to define need or the ways in which needs were answered. As *Courage* argues the categories used to assess damage, classify need and define a household in the government response did not reflect how affected communities lived.⁷ However, these findings did not generate broader critiques in *Courage* about, say, whether or not the global post-disaster norm of using damage to property to assess needs was suitable for Nepal and whether or not CGI sheeting and cash transfers were the right tools to answer complex needs questions.

Courage and the social audit use an esoteric “rupture research” framework, drawn from an edited book by Yogesh Raj (2013), as a way of analyzing rescue and relief. The rupture research approach seems useful in critiquing popular notions about the impact of a disaster on societies. However, it is unclear exactly how, if at all, rupture research helped frame the social audit’s research questions and choice of focus topics. Ultimately *Courage* seems to have ended up discussing many similar issues, albeit in more depth, as other articles on the early rescue and relief.

Courage, like other reports, focuses primarily on the government response and not on other groups involved in the rescue and relief. The book is obviously right to place blame on the government and demand a better response. *Courage* shows how the state’s “amnesia” (p. 63) in being unable to retrieve previously collected information about Nepali citizens led to chaos when government officials first visited affected sites. However *Courage’s* focus on the government means that other groups heavily involved in earthquake relief are not held to account. This includes volunteers (Nepali, foreign and diaspora Nepalis), NGOs, and international humanitarians. Admittedly not all of these groups were fully active in the first month after the quake. However many were and their role has rarely been analyzed.

The international humanitarians (UN agencies, donors and INGOs), in particular, worked closely with and, in many ways, were inseparable from the government. However scrutiny of the international response has tended to focus on a limited number of issues. This includes the World Food Programme’s distribution of damaged rice in mid-2015 in Gorkha district, the internationals perceived political complicity in bankrolling a delayed response and valid but predictable criticism of super-sized humanitarian

⁷ This point has been extended in an important op-ed on definitions of a family used in earthquake relief by Martin Chautari researcher Lokranjan Parajuli (2016).

salaries and cars. The Martin Chautari social audit is well placed to attempt a much more informed critique of the international response.

Courage's recommendations about the need for a new information architecture would have been improved by drawing on relevant critical humanitarian literature. Greater engagement with such readings would also have made the Nepal response seem less surprising and less exceptionally chaotic (though obviously no less harmful to survivors). Assessing the international humanitarians would have enabled critiques of how aid was delivered and why policies were followed, without necessarily letting the government off the hook. This approach could also have illustrated how current trends in delivering humanitarian aid (such as greater use of remote technology) arguably facilitated a poor government response.

Courage's criticism of the government does not include examining the reasons behind why the state response was so poor. The book occasionally hints at deeper political economy explanations but also veers, at times, close to a simplistic “failed state” answer. A more detailed approach would examine the government’s conception of relief and would draw on previous government responses to natural disasters in Nepal. A different approach would also recognize that some local government efforts worked, especially during the initial response. For example, The Asia Foundation (2015) found that some citizens were positive about the early role of VDC relief distribution committees.

At the same time as being highly critical of the state, *Courage*, like many other reports, appears overly optimistic about the ability of the state to do the right thing once a technical solution is in place. The recommendations that *Courage* suggests are based on improving the state’s use of data from citizens. The book does not consider whether or not citizens wish to make themselves more legible to the Nepali state. The book suggests that greater use of big data and more easily available data will help solve response problems. I would argue that what is actually needed is “thick data”: namely better use of data that is also tested ethnographically on the ground in field visits, perhaps in ways similar to the social audit. Even if these fixes were implemented then it is not certain that it would result in a better state response. Without being fatalistic, disasters cause chaos even in apparently

well-prepared nations.⁸ The ability of a state to do the right thing in such situations is a more complicated question than presented in *Courage*.

Courage is one of several studies that draw on ethnographic surveys of earthquake survivors.⁹ As with the peace process, Nepal Studies can expect an influx of experts to study earthquake-related issues. The large influence of anthropology and anthropological modes of thinking on social science research in Nepal is likely to place the future research focus on how earthquake survivors interpreted and navigated their post-quake situation. The best of these approaches will combine micro-level analysis with national level politics, as *Courage* has done. However, there is a danger that some weaker studies using this focus may de-link what Nepalis say about the earthquake from analysis of what happened at the national level, that they may collate local narratives in isolation from politics and that they may rely on assumptions about how humanitarianism and development work in Nepal that may no longer be true.

Regardless of such issues *Courage* is an impressive start to substantial post-earthquake-related research. Other analyses of the post-earthquake response have typically focused on three topics: the willful incompetence of the government response, the resilience of Nepalis abandoned by the state, and the hacking of the humanitarian system by volunteers. While these explanations are all, in different ways, true they have often been retold in simplistic ways that obscure other perspectives and downplay more detailed explanations. *Courage*, in contrast, deepens our knowledge and stands out for its informed critique of how things failed nationally based on comparative ethnographic data.

Furthermore, *Courage* is an example of the role that academic research can play in a post-disaster situation, in terms of Martin Chautari prioritizing a research project during the immediate post-quake chaos. The great urge to do something practical and humanitarian is important – especially in the immediate aftermath of a disaster – but we should also not underestimate the importance of critical academic engagement as part of “doing something” and showing solidarity with those affected by the earthquake. *Courage* illustrates

⁸ As shown, for example, in Adams (2013), an excellent ethnography of the post-hurricane Katrina recovery in New Orleans, USA.

⁹ Such as The Asia Foundation (2015). There are several anthropological surveys taking place including at least three projects funded by American National Science Foundation ‘Rapid’ grants.

clearly that doing something to help does not only mean delivering aid but also using social science.

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