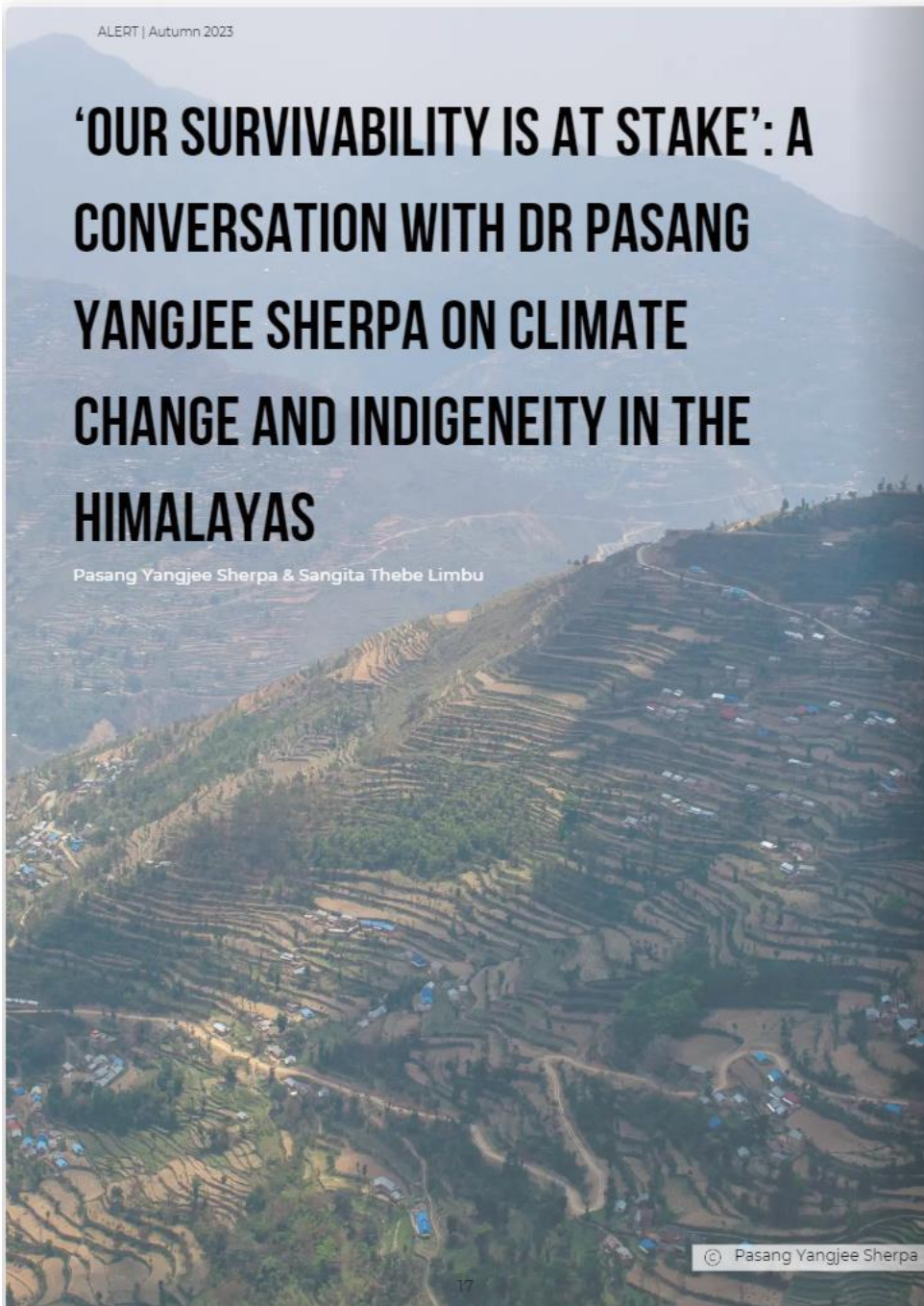


‘OUR SURVIVABILITY IS AT STAKE’: A CONVERSATION WITH DR PASANG YANGJEE SHERPA ON CLIMATE CHANGE AND INDIGENEITY IN THE HIMALAYAS

Pasang Yangjee Sherpa & Sangita Thebe Limbu



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Across the world, the impacts of climate change are becoming increasingly evident. However, not everyone is and will be equally affected, as pointed out by numerous studies on climate change, disasters, and vulnerabilities. Adding to this development, researchers in contemporary social sciences have been questioning how we could understand climate change beyond the dominant lens of Western science, and what is at stake if we continue to disregard different forms of knowledge and diverse lived experiences. In this article, I will explore these questions with Dr Pasang Yangjee Sherpa.

An anthropologist by training, Pasang is an Assistant Professor of Lifeways in Indigenous Asia at the University of British Columbia. Originally from the Mount Everest region in Nepal, Pasang has been researching the issues of climate change and Indigeneity among the Himalayan communities for over a decade.

Sangita: You studied the perceptions of climate change among Sherpa communities and institutional responses in Nepal during your doctoral research. (1) It has been almost a decade since then. Do you see any changes in how climate change is understood and addressed in the Himalayan region?

Pasang: When I started my PhD, people in my immediate circle at the university and the Sherpa community were quite sceptical about the term climate change. There is much more awareness about climate change now. Back then, the emphasis was on prediction. Now, we are accounting what is already lost, and what we are on the verge of losing. We are living the predictions of our past.

Sangita: During my fieldwork in Nepal last year, I felt that climate change was still seen as a specialist issue. How can climate science be made more accessible?

Pasang: It is important to study climate change at a local level, with a deep understanding of the place, the people, and the land. It is also important to engage at the global level with institutions like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that produce the global climate assessment reports. Those reports are taken up by policymakers and world leaders who decide the fate of our planet. But as with any forms of knowledge, Western science is also



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limited, and it does not have answers to all the questions. Therefore, the position I take is that we need to work with different forms of knowledge to understand the state of the planet and seek solutions that can make life better for everyone.

Sangita: In recent years, there has been some recognition of Indigenous knowledge in the assessment reports produced by IPCC. You were also a contributing author to the Sixth IPCC Assessment Report. (2) What do you think about this development?

Pasang: While there is growing awareness, interest, and motivation to include Indigenous knowledge, Western science is still treated as the main form of knowledge for understanding

climate change and its impacts. So far, including Indigenous knowledge has meant three things: First, it has meant including examples from Indigenous communities as case studies to support the findings of Western science. Second, there is a tokenistic inclusion whereby names of Indigenous scholars are included as contributing authors to these assessment reports, without their meaningful participation. Third, there are diverse Indigenous experiences that have not been considered.

Sangita: You have talked about the importance of pluralistic and decolonial approaches in your recently co-authored paper. (3) Could you tell us more about what such approaches might look like?

Pasang: We could think of pluralistic and decolonial approaches as academic jargon, but what it really means in practice is to listen to the people researchers like to study and save. It means recognising that there is more than one way of being, knowing, and doing things, and realising that the Euro-Western ways are not necessarily the best. I learned this lesson from my Sherpa community in Pharak-Khumbu. One of the things I noticed was that they paid close attention to the scientists and experts who came to the region from Kathmandu and other urban centres around the world, but they also heeded advice from religious leaders. Immediately after heavy rain flooding in the summer of 2011, for example, the villagers performed rituals to appease the local deities under the guidance from religious leaders. They also remained open to learning about the changes in our physical environment from the scientists.

Sangita: What is at stake if we continue to disregard inequalities and different ways of understanding socio-ecological relations, loss, and climate change?

Pasang: Our collective survivability is at stake. For example, Chief Ninawa Huni Kui from the Amazon has warned us of the mass extinction in slow motion. (4) When we disregard inequalities and different ways of understanding socio-ecological relations, loss, and climate change, we are privileging the same systems and structures that brought us to this present moment of climate and nature emergency.

Within the existing structures, the vulnerable groups keep growing, while the groups who are considered safe are contracting. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, some individuals and groups did fine, and some even profited financially, as their needs were met. Yet, who was serving those needs and at what expense? People experience different kinds of vulnerabilities, and we need to understand that.

Sangita: What makes you hopeful?

Pasang: What makes me hopeful is knowing that there were many who came before us, many who are with us and many who will come after us in working towards making a just, livable planet for all. This knowledge is based on an acknowledgement of our responsibility to care for each other, whether in the human form or not. It is about knowing our relationship to each other and honouring it.

I am hopeful because of the tireless effort of Indigenous leaders, scholars, and intellectuals who have shown us the pathways to creating the future I want to see for my children and grandchildren. My commitment to keeping our Sherpa songs and stories alive for the next generation gives me hope.

(The interview has been edited for brevity and clarity).

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