

Collective Documentation of Lives during Covid19 in Kathmandu

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Introduction

Collective Documents are an archive of a community's knowledge, wisdom, skills, hopes and dreams for a future and a world. Collective Documentation, a practice informed by the Narrative Practices takes the form of poems, books, collection of pictures, interviews, lists, illustrations, drawings, letters, etc. "Narrative practice is a term that is replacing 'narrative therapy'. Many practitioners work in public sector settings such as early child care and education, social services, community mental health where "therapy" does not adequately describe their roles. Applications of narrative practices in community circumstances also demonstrate the limitations of speaking about "therapy." (Narrative Practices Adelaide, 2015)

Michael White (2003) and David Denborough (2008) have introduced us to many examples of collective narrative documents. Denborough 2008, has described collective narrative documentation as involving the process of collaboration in constructing ways to archive and "...describe the skills and knowledge that people are engaging with to deal with hard times" (p 28).

Collective Documentation can also record a moment in time, the responses of communities to a moment and stand as an alternative to the dominant narratives generated by the mainstream ways of documentation. Myerhoff (2007) calls them acts of 'cultural creativity'. They can represent the past, the current moment in time and possibilities and imaginations for the future. The hope from sharing these documents is for the audience to stand as witness to these preferred ways of being and living of communities. Sharing increases the visibility of these often marginalised experiences and brings with it the possibility of nurturing diverse narratives of people and communities.

In the case of this article, they are an archive of the responses of a few people with diverse life experiences, living in Kathmandu, Nepal during the COVID 19 pandemic. Here we have chosen the form of a document of responses to some key questions determined by the authors. We have woven together a tapestry of diverse responses that each stand out in their uniqueness and together resonate in their shared values and principles.

We interviewed:

Safal Lama, 21 years old.

Tripty, 25 years old is a photographer on her way to becoming a professional house sitter. She loves cooking, gardening and petting other pets.

Rihana, activist and ex-drug user working at the intersection of transgender rights and addiction, currently co-managing a women's drug rehab centre north side of Kathmandu.

Pranika, poet and activist living with her son P and his father Prajwal. To read her writings go to Setopati.

Uma, is a photographer, a visual storyteller who has been working as a photojournalist for almost a decade. To see her work related to the pandemic go to her instagram page: [uma.bista](https://www.instagram.com/uma.bista)

What has been the experience of living during COVID19?

Safal: I am an outgoing person so it was really difficult for me. Covid made me stuck in one place, it made me suffer from stress. I was lonely, bored and tired. I used to feel sleepy all the time. In the beginning I felt like there is nothing in the future. I got alopecia which also got me worried. In the beginning not only for me – but my friends were also suffering from financial difficulties, without any support from their parents. Now we are adapting to the situation.

Tripty: In the beginning after the lockdown was imposed, I was really scared. My family is in Jhapa and they called me and asked me to come home. I thought I am just going to stay here, it would be safer, I might get infected going home. We had started COVID response campaign at work. We would put information around COVID. We were working 8-10 hours which kept me busy and not thinking about this situation. I was living alone. I would only talk to friends and family on the phone. Having something to do was good for me.

I have been house sitting for some people. I also started working on relief distribution and documenting the work. I have moved from house to house. It has been constant change – personal space as well as the situation outside. This has been confusing sometimes, but I am trying to work it out.

Rihana: Before the first lockdown in March I had started working at the women's drug rehab centre north side of Kathmandu. The centre was started by female drug users. We currently have 6 residents and 3 caretakers and I am one of them. I am a transgender woman and an ex drug user and now I find an overlap in my work, something I want to do, so that was good. Personally, at the beginning it was a bit monotonous. And the noise and news all around was too much. I stopped listening to the news at one point and focused on providing day to day structure for residents.

Pranika: I like the side of Kathmandu I live in because it is quieter, fresher. I live in a big space which feels like a lot to work on daily. I think an apartment would have been better for us. I live with Prajwal and our son P and we co-parent together. There is not much difference because in a sense that prior to lockdown also I

wouldn't go out much anyways and lockdown has also been the same mobility wise. Before lockdown I would get invited to so many discussions, including speaking engagements but couldn't go to all these places but now it's all virtual so now I can actually participate in more. Sometimes from 11 am to 6 pm there are marathon webinars. This situation has made it possible, due to internet access. People who have that access can listen to me all over Nepal about violence during conflict, caste issues, citizenship, women's rights issues, the books I am reading or have read, and I have reached a new audience I think. This has happened all because of this lockdown. However, how will it translate into my future work? That is still in a limbo. Don't know whether people are serious about following it, whether this online engagement will continue and be sustainable or not. So these days I am again refraining from speaking. How effective is it? Could it be just a show?



Uma: Once I came to Kathmandu, I didn't think it would be so bad. I went to work and on the lift I saw notices about social distancing and mask wearing. The notices were everywhere. People were in panic and I felt the panic too while going to the office everyday. Then it was decided we wouldn't have to go to work regularly but I would have to work during lockdown. Our team of 4 decided to work alternate days to be safe. One of my co-workers would work everyday to help out. The joy I felt was seeing the city feel clean as I went out to work as an essential worker. I was afraid but seeing the changing face of the city I felt ananda, calm.

Along with office work, I also took pictures for myself and showcased it which became a way to engage myself, console myself of the fear. Earlier, I used to watch a lot of news, but I decreased the frequency, which helped to reduce my panic. At home everyone was normal, acting like nothing will happen, but I would be in panic and was told not to think too much.

Who has made it possible for you to get on with your day to day life?

Safal: At first I didn't talk to anybody, I was so worried. After I got alopecia – I started talking with someone at the organisation where I intern. I shared with her – about my feelings, my insecurities about beauty and the hair fall. Then I started talking to some friends that I trust. Talking to them I realized, others are also suffering in similar ways like me. They helped me by talking to me everyday.

Tripty: Friends and people around me have been trying to help me. I know I will be ok because of this. Even when I have to leave the house I am in currently, I know I won't be on the street because of these friends. Even though the first two months I was living alone, over phone calls I could talk to people if I needed to. One thing surprising during COVID was how you made the effort to talk to people over video calls. I also realized that it was the same for so many of my friends – having reunion calls with high school friends – people were making the effort to wake up in different time zones to talk to each other. We didn't do that before Corona. After I started doing relief distribution work – I would see people thrice a week, being in the same space with other people, eating the same food, I missed that. One of the people doing relief work was my neighbour. During the lockdown phase, we bonded, we cooked for each other, went for runs and cycling together. This neighbour in particular, helped me. One of my friends sent me flowers when I told her I was not feeling so well.

Rihana: My sisters who have been doing this work on addiction for a long time, have been a huge support for me. And now being able to work here, helping women struggling with addiction has given me a sense of purpose. It has brought us together. Also the NA groups I am part of and the international NA groups for LGBTIQ folks have been a huge source of ongoing support. Nature, surprisingly plays a big role in helping me get through my day to day, and I never thought I would ever say such a thing! Seeing the vegetable garden grow, the nature around here is such a wonderful experience.

Pranika: Time wise even before the lockdown we had a schedule and I would be able to take my time and do my work. We cook. I don't like to order food anyways.

Before I would eat out a lot now its eating at home. My grand-aunt was living with us for a while. Prajwal and she, both of them liked cooking so that was sorted for me. And the choice of food that I cook or prepare is what P chooses! I got some fleeting thoughts of picking up a hobby. And now gardening which I have begun to learn has become a hobby all of a sudden. And it's been nice though I do so little.

Uma: My fellowship class for photography, narrative diploma class, women photography community working on the pandemic on instagram, are some areas where I have been able to contribute. Collaborating and getting to know photographers and international networks have helped me a lot. I live with my family. Since 19 I have been away doing this work and I was unaware of what happens at home. I haven't been aware of the changing of seasons, wheat fields followed by paddy fields. The timetable followed that day at home. New noise and distractions and having to play with the children at home and they would call me to interact with them, play with them. My home is a bit far away from the centre of town so we have the advantage of having a more open environment and it feels good to spend time with family. There is a forest a walk away. My mom cooks and we eat together and it's a new experience. Dai chiura khane din asaar ma, the day to eat curd and beaten rice is in June and it had been 8 years or more since I had sat together during the day leisurely observing small moments with family.



What have you made possible for others around you in their day to day life that with you being there, their lives have felt safer etc?

Safal: I was talking to disabled queer persons – they were distressed that their parents will find out they are queer. Their parents are queerphobic and being disabled, being a queer person and not being accepted in their family was very hard for them. Some of my friends are HIV + , they were worried that their parents will find out. Since I know their parents too, I would talk to them and deliver their medication to their houses. We got to understand each other's worlds. We made groups to talk and share about experiences, memes, funny moments of queer people during this COVID situation. I have talked to many unknown people in this lockdown. We can share positive energy even without knowing people.

Tripty: For my neighbour, I did for him what he did for me as friends, as family. We were there for each other for food, for exercise. I went for relief distribution for a few days to take photos and interview people. After I interviewed people who were receiving relief, it hit me how bad the situation was. I was safe, I was in a bubble. I realized how people were really struggling after the lockdown situation, the reality struck me. I was very sad for weeks after that. I felt so helpless, the relief we were distributing helped people but their problems were so much more than that.

Rihana: For the residents here I provide a structure in their day to day life. I provide dance classes and yoga. I have always been vocal about my own struggles with addiction. Last year I was having a really difficult time in my life and even while facing difficulties, I did not stop going to meetings. I stayed connected with the ex-drug users' community and stayed sober. I think that was possible for me because they are such a big part of my life.

Pranika: For Prajwal to have a break during the day, I schedule everything in the morning. When I have calls in the afternoon, I can turn off the video and be with P as well and that works out. Doing online engagements has made it possible for me to be with P. In the past I would travel for work without P and it didn't work at all. I have been [pointed out]? as making a fuss for having a child and I have to

explain that P is not like other children. If I were to take P to a public event and he would get upset and cry, people would look at me like I wanted attention.

Uma: In the home front I tell my family members to be cautious, I provide information. I help with doing the grocery. I interact with family members and I am around during the day which wasn't possible before.

Something you learnt about yourself that surprised you?

Safal: Firstly, I always feel that I am a useless person. I have never thought I will do this in the future. I usually think of the past. But in this COVID situation, I thought I could be a sex therapist, which helped me a lot. I was researching about sex therapists and sex cultures, especially queer sex cultures. I find it easy to talk to my parents, family, brothers and sisters about sex cultures. I also find that I can easily connect with people, people listen to me. I do not feel negative about the alopecia I am suffering from. I feel beauty never stops, everything is beautiful. In Nepalese society being disabled, having alopecia, being queer person is a problem. I read, I explored myself, I accepted myself – so I can help other people accept themselves. I am confident nowadays about myself. I feel unique. I talk openly about any subject on different platforms. I talk about sex openly – I shared articles about sex on Facebook. I asked sex therapists in Nepal if they knew about sex cultures, and they said they didn't. This makes me think I need to be a sex therapist in Nepal. Now I have a goal, I need to do this.

Tripty: I am the kind of person who makes plans, I get upset if it doesn't happen. But now, I am trying not to do that in larger plans, involving my living space. I still get upset when plans change with friends, etc. but with this living situation I am surprising myself.

Rihana: I have always been a complete unbeliever, naastik, when it comes to things like yoga and meditation. But due to the lock down, I met this new Rihana who has started meditating and doing yoga. There is faith and self love that I realized about myself. There is special growth and I am amazed at myself! I am coming face to face with this real me at this moment! Where I am these days, there is a forest and a hill nearby and a river beside it. And I go on walks. Dance

has been a big passion of mine and one of the ways I spend time is creating dance classes for people with different needs--that's been the profit of Covid19 lockdown time for me!

Pranika: I would think I would be way more anxious right now but I am not. I don't know if this is acceptance or denial! I am not taking a lot of work even though I should pay my loans but I am so relaxed. I have been financially independent since I was 19 and I would only get comfort from a certain amount of savings in the bank. Right now I am using my savings. Thinking about this I do look for work and apply but it doesn't seem so urgent to be working to earn I am not feeling the heat! And this is definitely not ME you know. I have LOANS. Looking at my son, I do feel desperate. Maybe there is calmness because of what is going on. Now it's all the world that is helpless, so could it be why I am calmer as opposed to other times, Everyone is arrested in time, bound by time right now. Before the world was on the move and I would feel so helpless. And it would trigger me. Earlier, there would be consolation that it's not just you, but it felt like an excuse to try to pacify me but now it's actually that. Talking about what's surprising-- I am surprised how I can live with this anger and resentment I have against the government. Writing abstract poems (Koyu, 2020), warning our present regime that let there not be an uprising because then you won't have a place to hide.... I wrote that and many people read it and I felt happy about it.

Uma: Wouldn't call it surprising. But I get the sense that I know myself better. I realized I sleep when I am upset or angry! Related to job, at work I wasn't satisfied for a long time and i would tell myself to quit but would then keep going. But now I have a sense of clarity, I didn't gain much and there is no space to showcase what I know. Jyan vanda thoolo jaagir hoina, job is never more precious than life. Spent a lot of time in my 20s investing in the organization so I feel sad. So now I realize that there is no use to give myself wholeheartedly. I can look for other work. I used to think I have to do the hard work but if there is no space then, no open communication . . . so it isn't worth it. This issue was already here but came to the forefront now. As a photographer I am surprised by how even without a camera through a regular screen I can capture moments through screen shots, there are portraits that I have taken like that. Exhibitions aren't possible in spaces. Now to

meet or network with a veteran I don't need to go somewhere, it can happen online, that possibility has increased.

What has this moment got you thinking about what you would like to be different in the world?

What would you like to keep and what would you like to change in the world?

Safal: Caste, cultural discrimination, race discrimination has been increasing in the world in these COVID times. We should never judge people by their circumstances. This is a situation where we should be together. We need to support each other, we need each other without caste, discrimination, without any conflict. We can help each other. We can explore what we want to be, with access to the internet in our homes. We can make parents understand our experiences, since we have time during this lockdown - showing them interesting videos, materials, tools. Everything happens if we are together and we help each other without any judgement, without any discrimination. Identity doesn't matter - what I feel, how I identify, if we help each other with pure heart, pure soul and sharing positive energy. People are bullying each other but there are also people helping each other without any fear, being strong themselves. You never know who is helping us - like we don't know who is distributing relief but we are taking it and therefore accepting help from people we don't know.

Tripty: Difficult times like Corona affects different people differently. I would like that to change. It is so unfair. People should have access to basic things. I interviewed someone who said that you are giving relief and that's great, but we don't have gas to cook the ration you are giving. Everyone should have access to free healthcare and basic things to live a simple life and not have to struggle so much just to eat and live.

Lot of people came together to do so many things - relief distributions. People were doing things for others for free. I wish this would continue and not just be a thing when something bad is happening like Corona. At photo circle where I work, we were doing reading sessions for the photographers' community. People came not only for reading but to talk to each other and do something meaningful

and stay productive and connect to people they like. People trying to be there for each other in different ways, being thoughtful.

Rihana: Nature risayera malai nai time deu vaneko jastai chha, nature is angry and is saying give me all your time! Nature is so important. It has been a very new realization for me and I would like to keep nature and make it more safe. Also this system we are forced to live within, I have always been against this system, it has ruined everything. It is not the fault of the individual and my desire is to change the system. I know at present so many transgender individuals must be struggling with substance abuse. I am an ex-drug user and a transgender woman and there is no representation at all. And doing this work in the beginning I felt proud and now that pride has shifted into focusing on the motive of the work. And with my involvement I feel there seems to be more possibility of opening up and using my own experience.

Pranika: Doing online participation, it is economic, environment friendly, and it's less time consuming (saves your travel time which can get hectic and tiresome in Kathmandu's traffic). Let's hope this continues. Earlier, I would feel I couldn't do anything online. But the other day a dear friend said I am very present in online discussions and she said you can do it! I give importance to physically being present but that has sifted. Also, I wish we were more of risk takers. I wish we were bound by different things. If I didn't have P, I would be out in the street for sure The State wants the citizens to do things on their own, PCR do it on your own, 26 lakh for ventilator, pay it yourself. Social injustice that is rampant and its propagated by the state that is apathetic, corrupt. They don't do it directly but the refusal of setting up health measures, and denying dignity even in these badly put up shelter is killing dalits, aiding in trafficking women or individuals. All this proves that they don't care whether we live or die. So why are we silent? Social media activism is the safe resort at this time and it feels like it has minimal impact. It's as good as not using it and staying at home and accepting the situation for survival. We have been reduced to this. I wish I could work on that, changing the mindset of people. We don't have to be passive recipients. To what extent can I write if no one is influenced by it to act? In the US, people coming out against lockdown, that could be silly but they are expressing their individual needs. Here in Nepal, social, communal needs are more important than an individual need, we say, so how

come we don't come out to protest together because it is crippling all of us? There are people who are doing it of course but we need to have a ripple effect. Taking P would make it look like I am attention seeking. If he could walk then it wouldn't be a problem. Unless they have a child like him, they will not understand. And this is not only in times like this. This situation for families of people with disabilities has always been the same in Nepal - the absence of a comfortable and healthy atmosphere (both mental as well as physical), that allows you to take your child like P has been absent. The onus is on us to the extent that it is burdensome and discouraging.

Uma: Being at home and eating home food, my health has become better so I would want to keep that. We need to get rid of Corona! We can't go back to normal now and it's affecting everything. Personally for me, the assignments that I get might need me to travel. So since I do need to work to make a living, I can't refuse and insist that I will work from home only. This is a crisis and people need to work together. Also as photojournalists, our work needs to be appreciated by the institutions we work for.



Common threads in this diverse tapestry

Care for ourselves and others

Care for others and how it is intricately linked to caring for ourselves is something many of our interviewees spoke about. Making new connections and talking to people we would not have done in 'normal' life circumstances is also visible in many of the above narratives. Helping unknown people and accepting help from unknown people resonates through many of the experiences shared. This is further highlighted in how nature comes up in the conversation and the feeling that it has nurtured and the responsibility to nurture it in return.

Exploring new territories of identity

Whether it is learning to adapt to changing circumstances and embracing it or exploring new interests and discovering ways in which we would like to take our lives forward, this time has allowed, amidst the chaos and distress, to anchor ourselves in newer ways of being.

Connecting more deeply with various facets of one's own identities, being surprised and amused at those discoveries has also been spoken about and resonates throughout all the conversations.

People speak about learning to live the sadness that this moment brings, due to the gaping disparities of the society around us or the helplessness and inability to do everything we would like and the constraints of our lives and societies.

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