

## Research Article

# The Difficult Art of Parenting: Social Change and Parent-Child Avoidance in a Painted Account from Nepal

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### Abstract

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Conducting fieldwork among middle-class families in Bhaktapur, Nepal in 2018-2019, I found that local parents are concerned with teaching their children the notion of ‘moral measure’. At the same time, a strategy of avoidance, rather than open negotiation, is preferred to maintain harmony and preserve kinship networks. Focusing on the case study of Dor Bahadur and his children Sita and Vishnu around a contested birthday celebration, in these visual works in gouache, acrylics, and oil colors, I explore and analyze the role that parent-child interactions play in the making of moral selves among middle-class people in Nepal. Through layers of colors, I convey the sense of the conflictual processes that the protagonists of this story experience, and the concomitant ‘opacity of minds’ established between their existential perspectives.

### Keywords

art, morality, Nepal, parenting

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## Introduction

On a winter day at sunrise, a man in his 40s named Dor Bahadur Bhakta was jogging in white clothes<sup>1</sup> around the Siddha Pokhari pond, on the outskirts of Bhaktapur's old town. After his run, when the early morning fog had been replaced by the sun, Dor Bahadur generally would go back home to get ready for work. On that day, he was off duty, and he invited me to his house for breakfast. While he was boiling some water in his kitchen, his teenage daughter passed by to grab a snack before going to school. Just before leaving, she casually said:

Bye dad. Vishnu and I won't be at home for dinner this evening. We will go to the cinema with our friends, and we were also thinking of having a cake later on. You know, it's Vishnu's birthday tomorrow...

'What?', Dor Bahadur snapped out of surprise, 'you know that we are in a mourning period! You cannot throw parties in our house!'. The daughter rolled her eyes with impatience and replied: 'Yes, I know, but we'll go to *paju's* [maternal uncle] house. I have also bought a present for Vishnu, with my savings, it is our birthday tradition and...'. 'Enough!', he said angrily, 'I don't want to know anything about this present, bye now!'. The girl left the house, Dor Bahadur composed himself and served us tea, commenting:

You see, I am a modern father, and I treat my children as friends. I believe that since they are about 16, children start to be able to think with their minds and make good and wise points. So we need to listen to them, have mutual understanding, and consider each other's point of view as *pāsā-pāsā*.

When using the term *pāsā-pāsā*, Dor Bahadur performed a gesture that I had seen before when talking to local people in Bhaktapur. He first moved his hand right and then slightly left with the palm facing down, each of the two movements accompanying one of the two repeated words, '*pāsā*' and '*pāsā*'. Repeating a word two times is

a common way in Newari to express the resemblance of two things. In the case of this expression, through the repetition of both words and gestures, local people stress the equality of the relationship between parents and children. '...But...', Dor Bahadur continued gravely, 'even if we are like friends, there are things that are unacceptable, such as this'.

The case of Dor Bahadur and his children sums up a recurrent theme that I encountered when researching parent-child relationships in Bhaktapur in 2018-2019 (Tiné 2020, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2025a, 2025b), that is to say, an ongoing reflection on the boundaries of acceptability within the sphere of domestic moralities and on the relational dimensions of the making of moral selves. With its recent civil war, a devastating earthquake, the increase in outmigration, and the spread of education and media following a century-long dictatorship, Nepal is the ground of accelerated social change, which can be vividly seen at the household level. I found that local parents recurrently used the notion of being 'advanced' (used in its English form by people of different ages) in opposition to the local term *lajjā* (shame). 'Advanceness' is conceptualised emically as the urge to express and realise one's own desires as an attribute of a 'modern' individual. Through the ideal of 'moral measure', parents attempt to guide their children in the delicate navigation between different goals, duties and desires and projects of the self. Akin to Liechty's (2008) findings among a middle class in Kathmandu, this sense of measure was conceptualized by my informants as a moral and relational principle. Despite these efforts, interviews with parents and young adults also revealed that a strategy of avoidance, rather than open negotiation, is preferred to maintain harmony and preserve kinship networks.

Focusing on the case study of Dor Bahadur and his children Sita and Vishnu around a contested birthday celebration, in these visual works in gouache, acrylics, and oil colors, I explore and analyze the role that parent-child interactions play in the making

of moral selves among middle-class people in Nepal. Using the style of abstract expressionism that I have been developing during the last decade (Tiné 2021a, 2021b, 2022c, 2024a) and drawing on my ethnographic findings on social change and relationships in Nepali society (Tiné 2021c, 2024b, 2025a), through layers of colors, I convey the sense of the conflictual processes that the protagonists of this story experience, and the concomitant ‘opacity of minds’ established between their existential perspectives. The notion of ‘opacity of minds’, developed

by Robbins & Rumsey 2008 (also Feinberg 2011), indicates that effort people employ with various levels of intensity, to mask their real thoughts and feelings. Visually, opacity here is expressed through the technique of layering, which includes different mediums with transparent bases and opaque strokes. In the following ‘Gallery of images’, I visualize the case study of Dor Bahadur and his children, gradually abstracting into a broader reflection on parent-child relationships in contemporary Nepal.





DOR BAHADUR THINKING

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Dor Bahadur could not accept the idea that his son Vishnu would celebrate his birthday in their house because they were in a mourning period following the death of his mother a few days before. Local people say that attending a ceremony during a mourning period is considered improper (*ucit chaina*), let alone organizing a party and sharing gifts. This event caused Dor Bahadur to keep thinking about his position in relation to his children.

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Figure 1: *Dor Bahadur Thinking*. Gouache on paper.  
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For Dor Bahadur's children, celebrating the birthday mattered a great deal, enough to act against the convention. For how mundane, perhaps frivolous it might seem, celebrating his birthday was for Vishnu much more than a cake and some gifts. 'Traditions are not always right' he commented, 'my birthday was the occasion to finally have fun and relax with my friends; after so much study and stress during the year, we could finally meet up and enjoy ourselves.' Vishnu's reflection reveals a self-reflective scrutiny of what was right and wrong.

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Figure 2: *Vishnu*. Gouache on paper.  
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WASHU

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OR BAHADUR'S DAUGHTER SITA

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There are precise reasons why celebrations are not allowed in a mourning period. Festive occasions are considered dangerous because they can attract the spirit of the dead back to the house when they should be leaving for the after-world. While celebrating the birthday in the uncle's house in a sense overcame these issues, it was still a new behavior that created uneasiness in the father, who therefore preferred

not to know anything about it. In so doing, he allowed them to follow their own preferred line of action, and to experience an alternative moral world from that of his own. This story is an example of how a dichotomy of perspectives is dealt with through strategies of avoidance and opacity become the preferred solutions when individual conflicting desires or needs strongly undermine the potential for an open agreement.

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Figure 3: *Sita*. Gouache on paper.  
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Parents widely believe themselves to be guides for their children in the process of seeking a moral balance between new values and pre-existing social and religious beliefs and practices. They call themselves ‘friends’ to their children, thus enabling them to ‘open their heart’ and embrace ‘advanceness’ rather than ‘hesitate’ to express themselves due to a feeling of shame. At the same time, parents are also firm in defining what they expect their children to do. This involved the achievement of socio-economic improvements for the whole

household and the respect of social and religious norms. The title of this image derives from a quote from one of my informants who referred to parenting as a ‘difficult art’, a notion that tells of the delicate balance that parents and children have to find between old and new pressures and moralities while they pursue family wellbeing. This work visualizes more directly this ongoing ‘conversation’ (using a term by Schutz 1970 that connoted the ways in which people interact to establish a common moral ground) between parents and children.

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Figure 4: *The Art of Parenting*. Gouache on paper.  
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THE DIFFICULT ART OF PARENTING

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VANCENESS AND SHAME

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Having open conversations when there are different perspectives on how the ‘moral self’ should behave are experienced as painful and shameful, and therefore are generally avoided by both parents and children. Instead, both establish an ‘opacity of mind’ so that thoughts remain obscured, particularly when it is believed that empathy for their perspective (and as such any mediation) would not be possible (see Robbins & Rumsey 2008; also Feinberg 2011). Children then address the situation as a negotiation of their desire for ‘advanceness’, which is more socially acceptable and therefore mitigates shame.

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Figure 5: *Advanceness and Shame*. Gouache on paper.  
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Among Newar people, Steven Parish suggested that empathy is a process of ‘identification with cultured others’ (1994, p. 305). That is, empathy is carefully embraced, and content is filtered and adjusted, based on what information one is willing to share and receive. This becomes particularly critical when parents and children have different existential perspectives and also diverging ideas on how ‘mutual understanding’ should be established.

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Figure 6: *Generational Gaps*. Gouache on paper.  
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GENERATIONAL GAPS

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ALTERNATIVE MORAL WORLDS

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Concomitantly, younger people only open up with those that they feel closer to and in the contexts that are considered appropriate and safe (see Image 7). As a consequence, a moral state of ‘advanceness’ brings about the manifestation of a new dimension of the emotion of *lajjā* that differs from what was observed by Levy (1990) and Parish (1994) 30 to 50 years ago in Bhaktapur. Experienced as a ‘shamelike affect’ (Parish 1994, p. 208) shaping the boundaries of empathy between parents and children, *lajjā* becomes here a motive for seeking

alternative venues of soci-ality and moral creativity rather than completely suffocating individual desires. Alternative dimensions of expression carried out through dating, socializing in public spaces and virtual engagements demonstrate the affirmation of a different shade of the moral emotion of *lajjā*, which, rather than suffocating ‘unauthorized feelings’, restores them in alternative contexts. This is possible due to the working of the feeling of ‘advance-ness’, which enables a new dimension of expression outside the domestic sphere.

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Figure 7: *Alternative Moral Worlds*. Gouache on paper.  
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While Images 6 and 7 zoom onto experiences of opacity and the establishment of alternative moral worlds and support networks, the work 'Dimensions of Mutual Understanding' invites reflection on the centrality of kinship networks in enabling at once the development of self-concepts and the negotiation of broader ethos systems.

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Figure 8: *Dimensions of Mutual Understanding*. Gouache on paper.  
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DIMENSIONS OF MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

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## Conclusion

By visualizing the relational dialogue through which parents and children in Nepal navigate and contribute to social change, the drawings in this essay provide a window into domestic transformations in a climate of socio-economic uncertainty. Starting from the case study of Dor Bahadur and his children, I discussed my broader findings that in the local context strategies of avoidance and opacity rather than open confrontation are adopted as techniques to navigate interpersonal conflicts. These findings pave the way to further lines of investigation, for example, on what consequences these dynamics have in the formation of moral personhood and in the overall well-being of the social actors in question. More broadly, this work highlights the centrality of kinship networks in the development of individual selfhoods as well as in the negotiation of broader ethos systems virtually among all societies across the world.

## Endnote

1. During a mourning period, all the direct men of a family have to wear white clothes.

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