HIMALAYA

Research Article

Two Kitchens and Other 'Modern' Stories: Rethinking the Family in Contemporary Nepal Through Household Conflict and Fission

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Abstract

This paper examines the ongoing phenomenon of household nuclearization in the Newar city of Bhaktapur, Nepal. Building upon 15 months of ethnographic research conducted in 2018–19 among middle-class families, I investigate the reasons for household fission and the related kinship transformations. Tracing the interconnected stories of conflict and dispersal of the members of a joint family, I argue that transitions in domestic structures not only represent the consequence of improved economic possibilities but also communicate dramatic social transformations and a redefinition of hierarchies of value and power between family members, which emerge alongside new ideas of family and self. By negotiating domestic spaces and practices, householders redefine a modern dharma to attain a middle class ideal of relatedness. By considering the domestic as the locus of the negotiations between social change and continuity, and by looking at conflict as a dialogical process of cultural revision, this study provides a new perspective on the making of moral modernities in Nepal, ultimately contributing to recent debates in the fields of kinship studies, anthropology of conflict, and moral anthropology.

Keywords

Conflict; development; family; fission; modernity

Recommended Citation

All that is creativity, innovation, and development in the life of the individual, his group and his society is due, to no small extent, to the operation of conflicts between group and group, individual and individual, emotion and emotion within one individual.

(Dahrendorf 1959: 208).

Introduction

Recent data on household composition in Nepal reveals that the average size of a family is 4.6 people (4.2 in urban areas and 4.8 in rural areas), with the majority of households composed of 2–6 people (84% in Patan, 83% in Bhaktapur, and 84% in Kathmandu) (Figure 1).[1]

21 by 1–3 people, and 23 by 7 or more, with the largest configuration being 15. From an investigation of the reasons behind each household's composition, I observed that the majority of the nuclear families had been created following voluntary separation after a quarrel of some sort. Among the remaining cases where fission did not follow conflict, nearly half the people had separated after the 2015 earthquake, when whole areas of the houses were made unliveable, while others had left the joint household to migrate to other areas of the Kathmandu Valley or abroad.

I encountered three main modalities of household fission.

The most prevalent of these is what people call the 'flat system', which involves the creation of separate households in the form

District	Number of households	Number of persons in the household								
		1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9** or more
Patan	109,797	6,502	13,912	21,954	28,193	17,550	10,482	4,372	2,514	4,318
Bhaktapur	68,636	3,636	7,498	12,425	18,084	12,000	7,018	3,152	1,762	3,061
Kathmandu	436,344	33,242	67,564	95,012	108,821	63,062	33,690	14,000	8,020	12,933

Figure 1: Households by Number of Persons in Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Patan (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2012)

This is a considerable change from the past, when Newar families lived in more numerous households (Nepali 1965: 251). While the available literature suggests that the process of nuclearization started at least 50 years ago (Barré et al. 1981: 100), recent census data shows that this is progressively increasing. The 1973 census, as cited by Levy (1990: 111), reported a majority of six-person households, and in the early 1990s Parish (1994: 299) recorded that 40% of families in Bhaktapur were nuclear (see also Acharya and Ansari (cfr. Parish 1980: 299).[2]

My own findings confirm this trend. By surveying 100 households in 2018–2019, I found that 56 were composed of 4–6 people,

of small apartments, each with their own kitchen. In some cases, these households still share an additional common kitchen on the top floor.

Another system commonly implemented to mark separation between two households is the creation of two distinct stoves within the same kitchen (Figure 2). Electric stoves make these divisions easier than the old *chulō* (ground fire) system, although some older people reported that in the past, too, *chulō* were separated after arguments. Bungalow-style concrete houses are also becoming very common, and the iron rods of the construction structure are purposely kept sticking out of the roofs to enable the subsequent expansion of the spaces. This
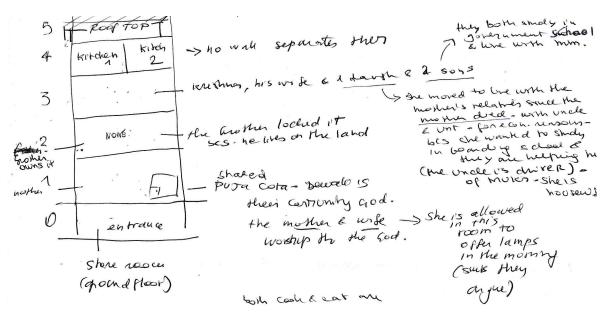
Figure 2: A Page from My Fieldnotes Showing a House with a Kitchen Divided in Half

can make fission easier in case of quarrels, but it might also be useful to add rooms for one's married children.[3] Spaces might also be rented out or converted into hotel rooms.

Lastly, fission may involve separating into completely different houses. On a practical level, partitions of domestic spaces are made more viable in contemporary times on the wave of the expanding construction market—as new rental properties, constantly being built on the outskirts of the old city perimeter, become available—and by increased economic well-being.[4]

In the 1960s and 1970s, houses in Bhaktapur were limited within the walls of the old city (Hagen 1980); however, lower-caste settlements were, as was customary, still located on the riverbanks beside the cremation sites. The expansion of the city occurred only between 1971 and 1981, when residential areas doubled in size (Doebele 1987), and modern housing and new construction materials began being advertised to the upper middle class (Bhattarai, Upadhyay and Sengupta 2016: 90) (Figure 3).

Nonetheless, changed material possibilities do not explain why fission would be preferred to finding a solution for staying together, especially when the very act of leaving challenges the established Newar ethos of domestic unity. In Nepal, a young married couple is considered a new subnucleus that will join the extended household—the ideal form for a Hindu family (Michaels 2020)—unlike in Western families, where married couples form their own household.

What does the phenomenon of household fission tell us about a changing society when we explore domestic processes from a bottom-up perspective? These negotiations need to be examined in relation to new pressures and ideals that come together to shape what I call a 'modern dharma'. Dharma is that ensemble of religious and domestic duties traditional associated with a person's caste or stage of life.

At first glance, these practices might seem to be a form of adharma insofar as they oppose traditional dharma principles such as domestic unity and a hierarchical ethos. Instead, I found that there is tension, and a conscious effort to redefine these rules – rather than rejecting them altogether – or to remake the domestic dharma on new moral premises. This endeavour is taken here as a dialogical process that is intersubjective in a Husserlian sense, involving actions through which "one actively works at making sure that the Other and the Self are perceptually, conceptually and practically coordinated around a particular task" (Duranti 2010: 17).

Based on both observations made by the people themselves and on the comparative

Figure 3: An Advertisement for a New Housing Complex Found in a Local Newspaper

sourcing of the literature on Newar society (Nepali 1965; Levy 1990; Parish 1994; Pradhan 1981), this paper explores the motives leading to fission, and then moves to investigate whether the nuclear setting is more suited to modern middle-class ideals of relatedness. Tracing the stories that interconnect and weave together the breakdown of a joint family, I argue that transitions in domestic structures not only represent the consequence of improved economic possibilities but also communicate dramatic social transformations, which include the emergence and affirmation of new ideas of family and self.

Context and Methods

The data discussed in this paper was collected during 15-months fieldwork conducted in 2018–2019 among one-hundred Newar middle-class families from the Jyapu caste background in the Newar town of Bhaktapur. The Jyapu is the caste of farmers, and it is the largest caste in Bhaktapur. Trapped for centuries in a feudal-like system, the Jyapu were emancipated through a combination of events (Hachhethu 2007) including the fall of the Rana regime in 1951, the initiatives of the Nepal Workers and Peasant Party and of the Bhaktapur Development Project, and others. Their insurrections led to the Land Reform Act in 1964. Establishing itself on new ideological and economical aspirations, and favored by the economic liberalization between 1990 and 1994, the Nepali middle class is a catalyst of social change that is experienced in terms of projection towards the future (Liechty 2003: 58). Yet, it still remains to be understood how families interpret and enact these broader transformations.

The methodology I used to collect data included participant observation and interviews. A collection of narratives and open-ended interviews provided the possibility of obtaining a multi-perspective overview of conflict and fission. In particular, I agree with Mark Liechty (2003:

xvii) that the modality of the interview is of crucial importance in collecting the voices of middle-class people in Nepal because it allows one to grasp the making of discourses of identity. While the story of this family is of course unique, it also speaks to a broad phenomenon ongoing in contemporary Nepal, and it shows the affirmation of values that can be seen in other families that I interviewed.

There is a methodological advantage in the choice of narrative collection: The rather secret nature of domestic conflict and fission meant that, with few exceptions, I could not personally witness the intimate aspects involved in such dynamics. However, a collection of viewpoints on the same story helped me to appreciate how conflict dynamics articulate old and new needs and desires. A diachronic approach to the stories meant that the people interviewed could reflect and provide details of events that occurred over several years, in this way giving me the possibility to appreciate not only the values involved in the process of fission but also how the nuclear household functions as the locus of ethos revision in the years following the separation.

Two Kitchens

On a winter morning in 2019, Krishna Hara, a middle-aged man working as a hotel cook in the old town, told me that his wife Geeta and he had divided their kitchen into two to avoid sharing food with his mother. He invited me to see the kitchen arrangements.

The Haras' house, in the neighbourhood of Khauma, just outside the city's gate, is a five-story traditional Newar house of 250 square metres. The whole building had previously been divided into small apartments due to conflicts between the elderly parents and their adult sons. Despite these separations, the kitchen had been shared up until that point.

As we walked through the bright kitchen on the top floor, I could see the two separate stove tops and two sitting mats on the floor in opposite corners of the room. The two areas were not divided by a wall or any other structural element; it was the action of cooking, eating, and washing the dishes separately that marked the fission between the two subnuclei. In the previous years, both his brothers had left the joint household to live independently with their nuclear families. A history of arguments was at the base of these divisions.

As we went out in the rooftop so that he could smoke, Krishna explained the reasons for their conflict with his elderly mother that had led to the division of the kitchen:

> When my father was still alive, we separated the building into small apartments, one for me, one for each of my brothers and one for my parents. This is because we had several conflicts due to money management, and my father did not want to sell our land.
>
> When he died, three years ago, the problems continued: We wanted to sell the land, but my mother wanted a share for herself to give to her widowed sister. My brothers and I thought about it for a while, but eventually refused. The land remained unsold, and now she is *krōdhita* (angry) at us and she is refusing to accept our food.
>
> We do not eat together anymore; she cooks rice for herself. And we wash our dishes, while she washes her own. However, if we cook any *viśēṣa* (special) food, we still share it with her, and she accepts it, but she will always eat it separately from us. And she never offers us any special food in return. In any case, we never share rice with her.
>
> You see, why should we give part of the money to her sister? She has her own children. And we need funds to be able to support ourselves and our children.

The mother was not in the house at that time, and I made a note to talk to her as well.

> "So are you going to stay separated for Dashain also?"[5] I asked. "Yes, although we give food to her, we eat separately also for Dashain, such is our anger for each other." "So why do you share special food with her?" "This is to show our love to her, which goes beyond the anger."

Krishna believed that he was right in preserving his own interests and those of his nuclear family against those of the mother's older sister, whose destiny is said to be attached to that of her own grown-up children. Nonetheless, demonstrating his continued affection for his mother through the sharing of special food was necessary for him to establish himself as moral.[6] This hesitance to enforce complete household fission might follow from his peculiar role in relation to his mother: He is the youngest son, customarily supposed to take care of her and eventually of her funerary rituals.

Biku, the elderly mother, is of a lower caste than of her late husband. They had a love marriage when they were teenagers, after her husband had divorced from his previous wife. Biku has one younger sister, Dhriti. When they both became orphans Biku took care of Dhriti, although they kept living with their uncle and aunt for a few years. Dhriti became a widow 17 years ago, and has been struggling economically since then.

Some days after my conversation with Krishna, sitting in her kitchen, Biku shared her worries about Dhriti with me: "I am worried for my sister and I would like to help her, but my sons do not agree. This made me very angry, and I am separated from them now." From Biku's perspective, she is the one who separated. "They are *svārthī* (selfish)", she said, "so I do not want their food. In the past, elders were more respected. Nowadays people only care about their nuclear family."

The idea that the past was a better time for the elderly is a theme that recurred in my discussions with senior people, who pointed out that their needs diverged from those of their adult children and their nuclear families.[7]

Bikram and Ramila

Eight years earlier, while Krishna's father was still alive, Krishna's eldest brother Bikram had left the joint family to build a new, modern house on the family-owned land and live there. I went to see Bikram and his wife Ramila. Sitting on the rooftop terrace, partially covered by the shade of an umbrella placed in the middle of a plastic table, Bikram described the nuances of the quarrel that had eventually led him and his wife to leave the household:

> When my children were younger, my brother Narayan's wife was not nice to them. For example, one time she bought candy for her own children, and only gave a small amount to my children. She left them in the kitchen and my children got some more. When she saw this, she looked with an angry face and the day after she hid them away from them!
>
> Then, as the children grew up, they started to argue among themselves for who was the smartest and who would have been better educated in the future.
>
> Things started to worsen gradually.
>
> There was no *sadbhāva* (harmony) in the family. No one had *āpasī sama-jhadāri* (mutual understanding). My wife often complained to me in private that they did not give her a moment of peace during the day when she was at home and I was at work, always yelling at her and giving her more jobs than themselves.

Bikram's anger gradually grew, and he kept making mental notes of his sisters-in-laws'

actions, up to the point when they attacked his wife:

> One day, an argument between the wives became so heated that I could hear them yelling when returning home for lunch, and objects of the house were being thrown out of the window. They were arguing for who had to work in the family's fields because the work was very hard. As I ran upstairs to see what was happening, I saw my middle brother's wife Sita hitting my wife with a wooden spoon on her shoulder.

> As I saw that, I told her to stop, to which she replied that because I am educated and my brothers are uneducated, I think to be better than them [here he shows his thumb to demonstrate that his brothers are illiterate, where the gesture means that they are unable to sign documents, for which they have to use thumbprints instead]. Sita said that my wife too felt superior to them and wanted to be served rather than be the one serving. [Ramila works in a bank and is out of the house most of the days, so she cannot help in the fields.]

> We have a different mindset; we could no longer have mutual understanding. Before that day, there had been other quarrels, both the wives of my brothers were upset that I didn't work in the fields often enough as I was too busy with my work. They also complained that I didn't share enough of my salary with them and that I only bought gifts for my children and wife. They were also angry that I bought a new motorbike for myself. But I didn't care what they said about me.

> The fact that Sita hit my wife was too much, and so we divided soon after. My parents also did not defend my wife and instead accused her of being *alchī* (lazy).

In Bikram's narrative, his education and office job in Kathmandu, and his wife's job at the bank, made his illiterate brothers—who worked as farmers, like their father—jealous and insecure, and they accused Bikram and Ramila of thinking they were better than Bikram's brothers and their wives. Eventually, different educational levels and competing desires made mutual understanding impossible.

In the past, few Jyapu families could afford to send all their children to school, because they needed their children to work in the fields. When one child had to be chosen, this was generally the youngest son because the other members of the family could work to support him. Education for girls was not favoured and if the family could afford it, the youngest son would be given a private education, which is thought to provide superior future prospects compared to the public system.

Bikram was the eldest son, but he went to school. That was unusual at the time. When he was a child, public schooling had just been made free in Nepal, following the fall of the Rana regime in 1951, and so he had the opportunity to go of his own volition. As he explained: "Our house was near a school and I could see the children passing every day with their small blackboards under their arms. I wanted to go too and so I did!"

However, he went against his parents' wishes: "They did not want me to study because they needed me to work the lands, but you need to be educated if you want to have a better future. In this way, I also hope to be able to provide my children with *rāmrō jīvana* (a better life); this is my greatest responsibility."

Ramila, like Bikram, holds the ideal of providing their children with a good education. Ramila works in a bank. Ramila's natal family—a Shrestha family in Patan which had better economic assets than Bikram's family—gave her an education. These issues created tension and bitterness.

After Bikram's sisters-in-law attacked Ramila, Bikram and Ramila went to live on the land owned by the family that they had

never sold due to the subsequent arguments with his mother. His father gave him some money to build a new house on a corner of the land. Bikram's apartment in the joint household was dismantled, and Narayan and Krishna each took one floor of the building.

When I enquired about the ongoing phenomenon of fission, many of my informants used the notion of *āpasī samajhadari* as an emic notion for empathy, without which harmony is no longer possible. Bikram, too, used the term. When I asked Bikram to explain what he meant, he said it was *samjhautā* (an agreement):

> People have mutual understanding when they choose to stay, talk, and share. It's like an agreement, like coming to a resolution between two parties or people by agreeing upon some points based upon some discussion. When there is not understanding there is conflict. In that case, people separate because there is no understanding between them.

Mutual understanding can help to solve a conflict; however, when this cannot be achieved, a breakup is often the only option. This can take various forms, according to both economic possibilities and the perceived gravity of the disagreement. Several people commented that in the past mutual understanding was usually *jabarjasti ko bujhai* (enforced forcibly): One person had to submit to the will of a superior in the domestic hierarchy in the name of harmony and group well-being.

Within Hindu joint families "a considerable number of people may share distaste for a given standard, yet comply with it" (Orenstein and Micklin 1966: 315). Thus, whereas conflict challenges the "cultural structures of empathy and solidarity" (Parish 1994: 182), an ideal of harmony and mutual understanding facilitates the convergence of different ideas. These days, as I will explore in a moment, the notion of mutual understanding often equates with an intersubjective dimension marked by ideals of equality. In the past, the

submission of one or more members would have been the norm for maintaining the household's unit and hierarchical harmony, which in turn provided social and economic security.

In Bikram's story, the interest of his nuclear family prevails over the ideal of harmony for the joint household. Nevertheless, in forceful understandings, material possibilities play a crucial role even today:

> More often in the past, but still today, due to material constraints people could not separate and had to accept the mutual understanding even if forceful. Forceful understandings occur when people do not have any other options. That's why they stay together. If they had any option, they would choose to not stay together.
>
> You need to be economically secure to move to live independently, otherwise you risk becoming miserable. Maybe you have some savings and you think that you can be independent, but if you don't have a stable income and a secure prospect for the future, you will fall into poverty and life will get very stressful. In that case, you will need the help of your relatives, and that's why it is good to have peaceful relations with them. But if you have conflict with them and then you need help, then you are left alone.

After making this reflection, Bikram stopped talking, looking away at the green hill known locally as the 'Sleeping Buddha'. The strong noon sun was on his face. Sipping my tea, I smiled at his wife, Ramila, and asked for her opinion on separation after conflicts. Ramila commented:

> In the past, all relatives lived together. When I was a child, there was a family with 100 people in my *tole* (neighbourhood). There were 29 people in my house, but gradually everyone started to leave. They could not get along. They divided everything they had, up to the last chicken.

When I grew up and moved to my husband's house, things were the same, and we eventually separated too. When there are many people put together, everyone has their own opinion, and conflicts emerge. The difference from the past is that nowadays people separate, but the reasons for arguing are the same, they have been the same for centuries.

I asked her why more people separate now than earlier. She smiled and answered as if she had never been surer about something: "Because nowadays, if things are not good, women leave!". Yet, later in conversation, she revealed that while conflict was the decisive factor for separating, they would have gone nuclear anyway: "We do not care what society thinks. We are modern and our views are different from society. We still take care of our elder parents, but we want to be independent."

While Bikram considered the economic aspect a strong factor in decision-making surrounding fission, Ramila identified women's moral agency and a will for independence as a leading cause. Their voices, taken together, reveal how changing socio-cultural values and ideals of individual well-being are intertwined with economic drivers in leading to fission.

Narayan

Later in conversation, Bikram revealed another quarrel—which occurred after his wife and he had left the building—with Narayan, his middle-brother, that deteriorated their relationship to the point that they would never share any food again,[8] not even on festive occasions:

> I was supposed to put the first lamp on my father's head,[9] and to inherit my father's property, even if I was living in a separate house. But when my father died three years ago, Narayan, who had taken the most care of our father over the last years of his life, told me to let him do all

the rituals, and he would receive the properties in return.

> But, you see, the eldest child is by tradition expected to perform the rituals of the father, and the youngest son of those the mother, while the middle son has no responsibilities. What he did made me very angry and I refused to do what he said. I performed the rituals as tradition required. Since then, there are very harsh feelings between us.

Customarily, brothers should wait until the death of a father to separate. However, nowadays, a father is expected to distribute the property equally among his children while he is still alive. According to Biku, this was her late husband's intention, but he died without leaving a written will.

After their argument, Bikram accused Narayan of trying not only to disregard a funerary rule and going against tradition but also selfishly and calculatedly attempting to obtain their father's remaining wealth. Because a traditional funerary rule was being disregarded, mutual understanding was not possible, and the father's wealth became another object of contention:

> As the eldest brother, I thought that it was right to administer the remaining wealth, and Narayan already had another house by the time of our father's death, which he bought with some money that he got from Krishna for leaving his apartment to him. All I was doing was administering the land on which I had built a small house with my father's support when he was still alive.

> The rest of the land I have been administering in the last years by renting it for agriculture, and with this money I am funding my children's education. We also had a small house in Patan which I gave to my sister.

Not long after their father's death, Narayan gave up farming, because he no longer wanted to work on the land on which Bikram had moved to live, and he left the household and moved to a modern-style building just outside the city (Figure 4), where he started a bed-and-breakfast for tourists out of some of the rooms.

When I saw him on a cloudy spring day, he was repairing his motorbike in the shed in front of the house. He invited me to sit inside, where he quickly made scrambled eggs for his guests before we could sit and chat. Narayan then revealed that a pre-existing quarrel with his father was another reason that had led him to leave:

> Since marrying some years before, my parents constantly requested that I provide them with more money than the amount that I was able to contribute. I was not able to provide enough money to them because I had to give half to my wife and we needed it for our child's education.

They also did not respect my wife from the start. One day, they said that they didn't want to feed her. They told her "You have so many relatives so you shouldn't ask for our food."

One time when she became ill, they did not help her or care for her, while I had been taking care of my father up to that point. That is when I decided to leave.

However, we needed the time to organize the move, gather our savings, and find a new house. My father died while we were in the process of doing so.

In Narayan's narrative, as in Bikram's, his family's treatment of his wife forced him to leave. However, economic matters still played a central role in the proceedings of these conflicts.

Figure 4: A New House at the Periphery of the City (Author 2018)

Problematizing fission

Several interconnected themes and main points of contention run through the stories analyzed including diverging economic interests between brothers and the competition for care and status between family members. These findings resonate with the literature on the phenomenon of dispersal in Nepal and India.

Ideal families

Several studies stress that money matters constitute a central element in the conflicts between nuclei living in joint households (see, for example, Quigley 1985; Goldstein, Schuler, and Ross 1983: 721; Nepali 1965: 252; Pradhan 1981: 54; Kaldate 1962; Ross 1961; Kapadia 1959; Shah 1988; Srinivas [1952] 1987; Caldwell, Reddy, and Caldwell 1984).

Others point out that women's dissatisfaction in the joint household, particularly in Newar society, is a leading factor of tension in the family, especially in combination with economic matters (Pradhan 1981: 50; Nepali 1965: 260; Levy 1990: 116).[10] People call it a *phunga ki* ('pillow insect' in Newari): "The wife talking in bed at night, and [they say] that if a man listens to his bride's opinion, everything will be over" (Levy 1990: 116).

The stories explored in this paper are an example of how tertiarization and division of incomes following the abandonment of agriculture, which was once a family activity, generate conflict over the management of financial resources, especially in the context of augmented pressures of modern times, such as financing children's education.[11]

Nevertheless, while these changes occur in the context of new economic possibilities, the question of how to make these resources flow within the domestic sphere involves a reflection on new ideas of relatedness and on the notion of family itself. The motivations behind the arguments show new limits to acceptability in the domestic sphere and reveal the affirmation of new sensibilities towards traditionally established roles and hierarchies. These transitions are intertwined with the emergence of concomitant drivers towards desirable modern settings shaped by new ideas of family.

Scholars of moral anthropology suggest that in phases of socio-cultural change, transformations in the hierarchy of traditional values, or the introduction of new values, cause conflict (Robbins 2012: 120; Zigon 2007). Nonetheless, hierarchies of values are problematized, and complex explanatory frameworks are developed in people's commentaries over their experiences of fission. These speak to new ideas of empathy and relatedness and to the desire to provide one's family with a better life.

People define their nuclear family as that group among kin that is *du nughla jise* (closer to one's heart). My interviewees often referred to their nuclear family as *mero pariwar* (my family), interchangeably with *mero ghar* (my house). Also, the nuclear family was commonly described as the unit that provides *bharosa*, the highest level of trust, because relationships are based on reciprocal affection rather than on the compulsion of relatedness.

"You also have affection for people in the joint family", said Geeta (the wife of Krishna Hara, who had divided the kitchen), "but it is different from *sahai* (free flow from the heart) or the spontaneous feelings that you have for the people in your nuclear family." Many women also feel a spontaneous affection towards their *thachen* (Newari for natal family). Men, on the other hand, are more often affectionate towards their parents, which collides with the attitude of subordination they are expected to demonstrate. For example, Krishna said: "You have to love your elder parents, even when there is no understanding."

Here, it is important to note that some in-laws do have empathy for their children and their wives. Commenting on his wife's relationship with her mother-in-law and with her daughter-in-law, a middle-aged man said that the difference between the two lies in their degree of 'modernity':

My wife is respectful to my mother and they have a good relationship, but surely they are not *pāsa pāsa* (literally, friend-friend), or friends. My wife greets my mother every day, touching her feet. And she does the same with other elders when she sees them. Differently, my daughter-in-law is a friend to my wife, because my wife is *bikāsi* (modern), and she does not expect respect from her and she leaves her free to act however she feels comfortable.

Several respondents told me that in a nuclear family, relations between members can be *pāsa pāsa*—freer, and more trusting and spontaneous. This empathy allows for enhanced moral creativity. Overall, people commented that when family members are not friends, they cannot express themselves freely. At the same time, while both men and women expressed their desire to live in a nuclear household as a way of fulfilling one's true self and inner desires in opposition to the strict control of the joint family, the affirmation of new ideas of family through fission has a distinct gendered aspect.

Gendered Kinship

The Newars consider 'society' an autonomous entity, "an almost impalpable and objective presence" (Parish 1994: 119) that should always be respected. Those who separate from the joint family are considered selfish and, ultimately, subversive of the social order, according to many of my informants. "Material possibilities and changed values do not make leaving the joint household any easier; it is very hard to leave the joint family because *samāia* (society) will judge you (*prashna garcha*)", a 30-year-old man noted, revealing a problematization of fission common among men. Thus, strong motivations are needed to separate. This was also observed by Krishna Hara himself:

> Many people would rather live in a nuclear family but it is not easy to make such a big step. Even when

there are conflicts, people always fear the judgment of society. I do not like this part of society, being too judgmental, but elders take society seriously and will judge badly. Society is a strange thing; people prefer to respect society than following their own desires.

While this form of what I shall call here 'public morality'—as a revisitation of the notion of 'public and private faces' by Mines (1994)—is still decidedly strong in Newar society, this is strictly linked to 'private', embodied, emotional moralities that directly connect individuals within a family. When going against cultural norms, therefore, people often experience suffering and guilt. For men, any discussion of their preference for a nuclear family is embedded in the narrative of a separation enforced by circumstances, revealing the working of these concurrent pressures. Bikram considered it necessary to separate from his parents, but he still felt *aparādha* (guilt) and *lāja* (shame):

> When you go nuclear, people will judge you as a selfish person. Also as immoral, as a son who has not been able to maintain the harmony in the family, to keep the balance between everyone.
>
> In my case, it was hard to be together, and so it is better for us to be free from that burden. At the same time, I felt both *lajjita* (embarrassed) and *dōṣī* (guilty) soon after I left them, but we had no choice.
>
> You need to perform several rituals and also *shraddha* for your parents, and living in another house makes this problematic, but also these days a *purohit* (priest) will perform the *shraddha* in a house different from that of the deceased, so things are starting to change in this sense.

Traditionally, a moral householder must maintain domestic harmony and preserve the social order and hierarchy dynamics

by performing rituals. Evidently, men's narratives problematize the concept and practice of separation. But new, 'modern' responsibilities—funding education, spending time with spouses and children, and ideally caring about their emotional well-being—come to shape a 'modern dharma' and challenge their desire to meet traditional expectations. The transition in duties, responsibilities, and expectations is enabled, in large part, by changing spousal dynamics.

In the past, women's dissatisfaction was a "strain" (Beals and Siegel 1966), one of those "areas of life in which culturally induced expectations tend to be frustrated more frequently" (Beals and Siegel 1966: 68). Young men found it difficult to "revolt against the decision of the elders" (Nepali 1965: 283) and, therefore, seldom voiced their own desires or supported their wife's needs. If modern responsibilities challenged traditional expectations, the issue would often be resolved by divorce, but now more conflicts end in nuclearization than in forced understandings or divorce. This may be because the number of love marriages has increased. Thus, love marriages act as 'stresses' (Beals and Siegel 1966) that cause ruptures.

The tension between traditional and modern expectations follows changing ideas of family and a reconsideration of the very role of each household member in meeting expectations. The change in women's ideas of family derives from the development of a stronger sense of their own rights and from the affirmation of their desire for intimacy (which are influenced by access to media and education).

A man plays a crucial role in helping his wife to have a better life; in demanding respect for their wives, men affirm their own selves based on their moral and emotional values. In Indian domestic settings, "a young wife focuses on cultivating an exclusive one-on-one relationship with her husband, so that he might intervene to improve her life" (Derné 2000: 342–343). Further, my findings suggest that among middle-class people in Nepal,

reciprocal care might push one to challenge pre-existing social rules. And the process of creating new social rules involves redefining the very notion of mutual understanding from the equivalent of an enforced, unequal agreement to a dynamic of reciprocal care, which often leads the joint household to fall apart.

"Traditional devices" (Beals and Siegel 1966: 68) – such as the discourse of mutual understanding in the name of harmony— can solve problems if people are willing to compromise. But because times of dramatic sociocultural change redefine the very ideas of self and belonging—through conflict, value negotiation, and the questioning of old and new social ideas—people are not willing to compromise, and so the traditional devices are unlikely to work.

Modern Houses for Modern Families

So far, I have discussed how the processes of conflict and fission are key to affirming modern ideas of family. Most accounts of kinship in Nepal treat the notion of family as a 'system of substances' (Dumont 1980)—equal to kinship networks, household settings, and material forms of exchange and duties (see Gray [1995] 2008: 14–23). However, to ask what a family is to ask an ontological question that goes beyond structural substance. Ongoing conflict and fission reveal an ongoing redefinition of the ontology of the family itself. At the same time, household spaces themselves need to be understood not as mere accessories in these processes of moral negotiation but as significant elements of an intersubjective conversation between members.

As Toffin (2016: 164) postulated "A house is not merely a shelter, an architectural edifice. It also corresponds, in the mind of its dwellers, to a set of ideas, and it is associated with a whole series of powerful images". In Newar households, the symbolisms underpinning the divisions of space "are not mere intellectual constructions. They have a very real bearing of everyday social life" (Quigley 1985: 16). In fact, as

Lefebvre ([1997] 1991: 121) suggested, "The house is as much cosmic as it is human. From cellar to attic, from foundation to roof, it has a density at once dreamy and rational, earthly and celestial".

Following ideas of purity, the traditional Newar house is divided vertically into stories (generally four). The house is conceptualized as a sacred space, a place of worship, and a threshold of death (Gutschow and Michaels 2005). Here, the dead are worshipped periodically and supported in the afterlife to gradually return to earth in a new body, to which the living contribute *pinda* (offerings of flour and water shaped into little balls). The *pinda* is thought to provide the dead with new bodily consistence during the *shraddha*.

In the traditional house, social norms were enforced by socializing the young and perpetrating religion-based inequality between members, and the social hierarchy—which is based on each person's age- and gender-appropriate role—was reproduced. Food was served, and adults shared their business affairs, in the kitchen (Quigley 1985: 17). The kitchen was the purest space; it was generally located on the top floor to protect it from the impurities of the street and the influence of the evil eye, both of which are believed to make food indigestible. Bedrooms were not romantic spaces and were generally shared between several couples and their children.

Many of these spatial features are maintained in nuclear households, either when moving to modern houses or when renovating old houses to modern requirements and standards. The kitchen spaces are still built on the top floor, beside a *pūjā kōṭhā* (worship room), and the *pūjā kōṭhā* is often shared between nuclear households.

At the same time, the religious practices associated with the household that made the house the threshold of life and death are adjusted to accommodate modern lifestyles. For example, whereas earlier the *shraddha* rituals had to be performed in the house where the dead once lived, now the rituals may be performed in any house. In this

way, *shraddha* can be performed even by sons who live in other countries, although people still try to gather together annually. New strategies are also adopted to secure attendance to the funerary *siguthi* association. For instance, if a joint family breaks down, the half membership option lets nuclear families maintain membership (see Tiné 2021b). But new ideals and practices of relatedness are also carried out. Bedrooms now host only one couple and, sometimes, their young children if they do not have their own. In modern houses the division might be vertical—each nuclear household has a room on each floor—or horizontal.

Following the Western imaginary conveyed by the media that has shaped desires, and compared to the traditional Newar house, the reorganized modern house lets nuclear families both achieve middle-class status and affirm modern practices of relatedness. Bedrooms are now spaces of intimacy for a couple, but also for young children, who are now considerably older at marriage. Private bedrooms are personal spaces, and many middle-class homes have a television screen in every room of the house. The kitchen is now the place for intimacy, where one can "share their problems", as people say, and it is a responsibility of good house-holders (men and women) to make sure that individual issues are discussed at dinner. Whereas earlier households would share a toilet, now, toilets installed on the lower floors can be shared with guests, and those that can afford to install new private ones beside each bedroom on the upper floors do so. A new element is that of rooftop terraces, where "members of the household can give free rein to their imagination and spend time lost in their thoughts" (Toffin 2016: 162–164). Thus, the layout of the new spaces provides household members greater privacy and facilitates greater intimacy between them and, because there is less control and judgment and more intimacy, enable moral creativity; at least ideally, therefore, a nuclear household is a space of intimate interaction and emotional support.

Reflecting on the structural changes that have occurred after they separated from their joint family, Ramila observed that their nuclear family was experiencing independence, freedom, and an improvement in well-being and lifestyle:

> After we began living as a nuclear family, our life has improved for the better and we have been able to do the things that we wanted to do.

> In the kitchen, we eat together with our children, we discuss our problems, what happened during our day. We don't want others to listen, we don't want to be observed. We also don't want to be judged on what we buy or cook. I also don't want to be criticized if they don't like my food, if I use enough oil or salt.

> Without being judged, we can speak our minds more freely. We always wanted to be independent, and when we had enough savings we finally did it.

> There were many quarrels because we have a modern mindset. We conflicted often with the elders, we talked about building a new house, and my husband considered going to work abroad.

> We enrolled our son into a college in Australia.

> All these topics had created great conflict with the in-laws and [after moving out of the joint family household] we could finally do what we wanted without being judged.

Being free to experiment with one's own self is considered a value of modern times, and the new domestic dynamics make it easier for people to do so. Young people, particularly those living in a joint family, desire to form their own nuclear families one day, as evident in the comment of a young man I interviewed who lived in a joint family:

> I dream of living as a nuclear family one day, to be free to make my own choices, without being judged and watched, being able to make mistakes, learn new things, and enjoy life. Young people have a modern mindset, they dream big and it is not easy to fulfill your ambitions when relatives judge you all the time.

One could argue that these settings allow for better mutual understanding, or greater openness of one's personal thoughts, and also more opacity of minds, that is it augments the privacy of the individual members of a household (on this notion see Feinberg (2011) and Robbins and Rumsey (2008)). The case studies examined here show not only how the physical and symbolic dimensions of domestic life are strictly intertwined but also that these dimensions can be manipulated to affirm new ideas and practices of relatedness. By enabling a new balance between privacy and intimacy, modern houses become epistemological structures of relatedness and offer concurrent ways to achieve intersubjectivity. Thus, in the coordinated civic "ballet" of Bhaktapur (Levy 1990: 16), the ideal household is no longer the space where social order is perpetrated; rather, it is a space for negotiating changes and continuities.

Discussion and Conclusion: Domestic Negotiations as Dimensions of Development

For several and often interconnected reasons, the size of households in Bhaktapur has become smaller than in the past when large families were the norm. My research findings suggest that one major reason for the joint family dispersal is conflict. Among the reasons for conflict, the problematization of household hierarchy and a revision of domestic structures are not only a consequence of economic possibilities, but also of the affirmation of new values that remodulate the limits of acceptability. Throughout these processes, the nuclear household emerges as the locus

where new lives are both imagined and practiced, and in which men and women collaborate dialogically to shape a modern dharma. I suggest that the latter can be seen as a bottom-up dimension of development which is conceptualised in terms of family well-being. As noted by Pigg (1996: 496), development in Nepal is filled with local meanings, which shape social relations. In the case-studies analysed, relatedness appears to be articulated as a shared existential condition that is projected towards the future. This "aspiration towards the future" (Appadurai 1996) challenges the fatalistic approach by which one's substantial life improvement could only be obtained in the afterlife (see Bista 1991: 84). It follows that a revision of domestic relatedness is needed within this new existential dimension.

I believe with John Gray ([1995] 2008: 23) that the household is involved in an ontological relationship with dharma. This is because the sacred duties of the householder define "the essence of the household and the fundamental mode of being in the everyday world. (Gray [1995] 2008: 14-23)."[12] Furthermore, domestic asymmetry perpetrated through dharma reflects and maintain the cosmic order. In modern times, the nexus between individual action and the contents of domestic dharma becomes complicated by factors that hinder the order and correspondence of micro and macro order.

Through household conflict and fission, people revise their position in the social hierarchy, rethinking ideas of family in which preference is given to children or spouses over parents and in-laws, with the goal of collaborating to family well-being. Thus, the stories analysed suggest that these processes are closely linked to changing notions of mutual understanding as a modality of intersubjectivity, which involves empathy and equality between family members. In other words, there seems to be a link between the effort towards life betterment and the preferred intersubjective style between members. But why are some members preferred to others? That is,

why is the nuclear family inextricable from intimate understandings of development? In the Nepali middle-class case, the sacrifice of one's time and effort in the pursuit of "better lives" is often conceptualised as a shared experience in which affection is the necessary bounding element for kinship (see also Zharkevich 2019: 889). Informants' voices discussed in this paper suggest that this is related to ideas of the self as an agent deserving and providing affection to their peers rather than fulfilling a compulsory project of relatedness. These stories reveal intimate dimensions of development, that is the ways in which larger societal processes unfold in the privacy of domestic spaces.

While these findings lay the groundwork for understanding recurrent themes in the articulation of emic discourses of relatedness in Bhaktapur, a stronger desire for empathy does not mean that this endeavour is easy to achieve in nuclear family settings. Furthermore, processes of moral creativity do not necessarily involve the affirmation of new ideas of family, but can also be featured by the resistance to family life itself, whether joint or nuclear, demonstrating a common need to rethink one's individuality before other kins. The strategies implemented to fulfil one's individual desires in opposition to social judgment were explored at length in the Indian context by Mines (1981), who suggested that people might wait until old age, when social judgments lessen, to fulfil their private ambitions. In recent scholarship of Nepal, Sharma (2013, 2018) has discussed how outmigration works as a rite of passage in the affirmation of one's own independence and identity for young men away from the control of the joint family.

Further research is needed to understand how concurring individual needs and domestic realities are balanced, and even opposed, within the setting of the nuclear family. Similarly, while it is evident that the middle-class Jyapu in Nepal is experiencing nuclearization, no comparative data is available that suggests that it is occurring only, or mainly, among the middle class. Future studies could assess the occurrence, or lack

thereof, of similar aspects among groups of other socio-economic status and ethnic backgrounds. Ultimately, by considering the domestic as the site of the articulations between social change and continuity, and by looking at conflict as a dialogical process of cultural revision, this study offers the possibility of new investigations into the fast-changing local moral worlds of people running the marathon of 'progress'.

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Endnotes

1. These percentages are calculated based on data extracted from the Central Bureau of Statistics (2012).

2. Pauline Kolenda developed a schematization of definitions of household types in her 1968 study of Indian family structures. According to this scheme, families are distinguished as 'nuclear' (composed of husband, wife, and children), 'subnuclear' (a nuclear family plus one member of a previous nuclei, such as a widowed elder parent), and joint (two or more nuclei together). The latter can be lineal (parents and married children) or collateral (brothers and their wives and children). I use Kolenda's schematization in this paper to define household types based on locality.

3. In this way, a householder can fulfill their *grihastha dharma*, or his duty to build a house for his sons and provide them an easier life. A householder is expected to fulfill this duty after his father's death, so *grihastha dharma* is not in opposition with the ideal of a joint unit. In any case, this ideal might rarely have been actualized, because the living spaces within the city walls were relatively static – due to both security reasons and the stigma towards areas outside the city, considered impure and relegated to lower-caste families. These ideas have changed; now, living outside the city is considered a sign of high status.

4. Renting was not commonly practiced in Bhaktapur at the time of Niels Gutschow's survey in 1982 (Gutschow 2021, personal communication).

5. Dashain is a Hindu celebration of the victory of good over evil and it is an occasion for the whole family to gather and share food. Unless estranged, as in this case, people also share food during rituals and festive occasions such as Tihar.

6. On the social and symbolic role of food in Newar society, see Löwdin (1998).

7. For a comprehensive discussion on the condition of the elderly in Bhaktapur, see Michaels (2020) and Speck and Müller-Böker (2020).

8. They do not share gifts either, or give each other blessings, during rituals. I observed this in several other families.

9. Customarily, the son who 'offers the first lamp' to the deceased parent is entitled to their wealth.

10. For a more recent account on the contestation of household roles in Bhaktapur, see Tiné (2021a).

11. The financial aspects of divisions between brothers can be seen on several levels. First of all, when brothers have different jobs, they generally separate income and expenses, although this becomes difficult when sharing a household. In some cases, they might put some of their income in a shared fund (according to one's possibilities and the number of members that they are putting in for). Usually, elder brothers manage their late father's properties while younger brothers take their mother's goods. However, this has become progressively contested, and fathers themselves have started to divide their properties among their children.

12. While Gray's study was focused on the Baum-Chhetri, the same can be said for the Newars.

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