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Editorial

Jeevan R. Sharma and Michael T. Heneise

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As the sun sets on HIMALAYA's 50th year of publishing, first as the Nepal Studies Association Newsletter (1972-1980) and then the Himalayan Research Bulletin (1981-2003), we again celebrate the journal's legacy, while also looking forward to a bright tomorrow. While publishing the highest quality scholarship on the peoples, histories, sciences, cultures, religions, politics, languages, and geographies of the Himalayan region remains a top priority, we believe HIMALAYA's growth as a peer-reviewed interdisciplinary and open access journal must also be oriented towards serving as an academic platform for critical discussion and debate of key developments in Himalayan studies. This is only possible with a sincere, decided inclusion and wholehearted engagement with in-region scholars representing the full depth and breadth of in-region scholarship, from Nepal, India, and Bhutan, to China,

Pakistan, and Afghanistan. We have taken significant steps in this direction by engaging more intentionally with contributors, but also in reaching out to editors, copyeditors, reviewers, and indeed typesetters, artists, and photographers, working independently, and within universities, and research centres across India, Nepal, and Bhutan especially. And indeed, many of the volumes and issues over the past decade have increasingly been shaped by these critical in-region energies, ideas, and talents. But we have a long way yet to travel in achieving the full vision of critical inclusivity for the journal, and we look forward to hearing from and being guided by readers, editorial board members, contributors, and reviewers alike.

In this issue we feature a special section edited by former HIMALAYA editor Arjun Guneratne featuring three articles on Tharu Identity. And we follow

these with four omnibus articles touching on themes of caste, Tibetan pilgrimage, kinship, and identity. We have a perspective piece by long-term contributor Geoff Childs, a wonderful photo essay by Paola Tiné, and a rich selection of seven book reviews. Finally, we are also very excited to include a conference report summarizing the recent 'Himalaya Futures' Himalaya Studies Conference, organized by the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies (ANHS), and held at the University of Toronto from October 13-16.

Like most scholarly publishing, the pandemic impacted timely publication of issues of HIMALAYA. This was unavoidable as it not just impacted submissions but more critically peer reviews, production and fulfilment of the journal. As we emerge out of the pandemic, we are catching up with the delayed publication of the issues, and we aim to bring the next issue of HIMALAYA (Issue

42.1) within the next two months that will honour and recognise the sustained and generous support offered by Macalester College for hosting the journal and support in the production process.

A number of scholars working in the Himalayan region met both virtually and in-person at the Himalayan Studies Conference in Toronto which was a great success and attracted just over 200

participants in 47 sessions. During the conference, the journal hosted a roundtable chaired by our managing editor Stefan Lueder 'HIMALAYA: The Future Role of the ANHS Journal as a Medium for Knowledge Production' where past and present editors (Mona Bhan, David Citrin, Sienna Craig, Mark Turin, Ishani Dasgupta, Michael Heneise and Jeevan Sharma) took part in the discussion on the challenges in sustaining the publication of HIMALAYA.

As always, thank you for reading HIMALAYA, and for your continued support of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies.

Jeevan R. Sharma and
Michael T. Heneise

Editors, HIMALAYA

Special Section Guest Editorial

Guest Editorial for Special Section on Tharu

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The social science literature on the Tharu people of the Nepal Tarai (produced mainly by anthropologists) was once quite limited, especially when compared to the extensive documentation of the society and culture of the Nepal hills. In the last twenty years or so, however, there has been significant growth in our knowledge of Tharu communities in both Nepal and India. In the latter case, for instance, a preliminary examination of dissertations produced in Indian universities since 2000, as documented in the open access website Shodhganga, indicates at least twenty-nine theses in the vernacular and fifteen in English that deal directly with topics relevant to the study of Tharu society and culture. Many other relevant studies likely also exist in that database, although “Tharu” does not appear in their titles. Much of this work, however, including the excellent work done in Nepal by a new generation of scholars, has been

conducted in Chitwan and Champaran and points west; Tharu society and culture in the eastern Tarai is not much better known today than it was twenty years ago.

The collection of three papers that form part of this issue of HIMALAYA are a contribution to this expanding knowledge. If there is a theme that links them, it is that of social change in the context of modernity. My own paper, on the classification of the Tharu as a “tribal” group in the colonial literature, points to the variation in attributes deployed by western social science as it sorted Indic peoples into castes and tribes, which in turn distinguish Tharu communities in the Tarai on a west to east continuum. That is, Tharu communities in the west have more of the features of what colonial anthropology thought of as tribal, while in the east, Tharu communities are integrated into mixed caste communities and share in the attributes of caste.

I discuss this with special reference to the Tharu of Chitwan, whose society and cultural practices have been transformed by the malaria eradication project of the 1950s. Unlike in the past, however, where the integration of “tribal” people into “caste-based” societies was seen by anthropologists such as Marriott as bringing them into the caste order as new castes, I argue that by being integrated into the multi-ethnic polity of a modern state in the wake of the transformation of Chitwan, the Tharu are better described as an ethnic group rather than as a caste or a tribe.

Where malaria eradication initiated a dramatic transformation in the way Chitwan Tharu lived and worked, the beginning of labor migration abroad led to further transformation, particularly in the dynamics of family life. Andrea Grimaldi’s paper takes up this topic, by discussing how the remittance economy

that has emerged in Chitwan in the last few decades has altered gender roles, particularly that of young wives, who are often the recipients of remittances sent home by their husbands. Although this gives them a measure of autonomy, it also contributes to domestic conflict and tension within the family. Women also play a significant role in labor migration (although they do not form part of the labor pool) because their membership in microcredit organizations generates the financial resources that allow men to seek employment abroad. Grimaldi does not find much evidence, however, that women are able to maintain their autonomy and expanded role in society over the long term; the return of their husbands from work abroad also appears to be a return to more traditional gender roles.

The last article in this collection, by Maycock and Chaudhary, examines the changing role of the Tharu *guruwa* (or *gurau*, as they are known in Chitwan) in the context of the spread of Western medicine in Nepal, especially the ubiquity of pharmacies and health posts. Their particular focus is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which provided opportunities for the *guruwa* to redefine their traditional role. In the context of lockdowns and social distancing, people increasingly turned to the *guruwa* for help, and *guruwa* increasingly responded in creative ways, for instance by conducting long-distance consultations over the phone, and by using their supernatural powers to protect the village from this new and unanticipated affliction. The modern technology of the phone, ironically, has helped *guruwa* reclaim

their traditional status as healers in Tharu society in the context of a pandemic that modern public health systems struggled to deal with. The question remains, however, whether these changes can survive the disappearance of the conditions that allowed for them.

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Tharu as tribal, Tharu as caste: Reflections on Colonial Categories along the Indo-Nepal border

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Abstract

The Tharu are a culturally diverse ethnic group that inhabit the Tarai of Nepal, whose culture shifts from being more ‘tribe’-like to being more ‘caste’-like on a west to east continuum. I focus on one district in the Nepal Tarai, Chitwan, to show that this continuum, which indexes certain cultural attributes, can be explained by ecological, geographical, and historical facts that have differentially shaped the relation between different areas of the Tarai to the states that encompassed them. Although Chitwan lies on the border between Nepal and India, the major socio-cultural influences that have shaped it in modern times have come mainly from the Hindu societies of the hills. Before the 1950s’ malaria eradication program, the Chitwan valley was inhabited mainly by Tharu, who had kinfolk across the border in West Champaran, India. Despite these cultural connections, however, and the political fact of an open border in the legal sense, the Indo-Nepal border at Chitwan has constrained cross-border exchanges and flows for ecological reasons. Historically, the Tharu of both Chitwan and Champaran were buffered by those ecological conditions from the caste societies of both the hills and the plains. Although the Chitwan Tharu might once have fit the concept of a tribe, the cultural transformation brought about by close contact with hill Nepali society since the malaria eradication program has transformed them not into a ‘caste’, as might have happened in earlier historical periods, but into an ethnic group in the context of a modern state.

Keywords

Tharu; Chitwan; tribe; caste; cultural change

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Introduction

The ethnic group known as the Tharu that inhabits the Tarai region along Nepal's southern border are a culturally diverse people who seem to conform in different places and at different times to two sociological types that are still current in South Asian studies—that of 'tribe' and 'caste'. Although the term 'tribe' has a different value in South Asian studies than it does elsewhere, as Sumit Guha has argued (2015), its meaning in the ethnology of the Indian subcontinent has required the existence of castes: a tribe is what castes are not but which they might once have been. A caste, on the other hand, does not require the existence of tribes, only the existence of other castes, without which the concept loses meaning. These two concepts have no deep roots in South Asian cultures; both are of foreign provenance, used by outsiders to describe the complexity of South Asian societies. Terms like *janajati* or *adivasi* (in Nepal) that correlate with tribe are of relatively recent origin as well. They are grounded more in political activism (such as the assertion of indigeneity, a form of identity that has become significant in modern times) than in ethnological concerns about social taxonomies. How then does the case of the Tharu help us understand the relation of caste to tribe in colonial and twentieth-century anthropology and the value of those concepts to the anthropology of Nepal?

I argue in this paper that 'tribe' and 'caste' index clusters of attributes that are always in dynamic relation. They index, for observers, the kinds of relations social groups labeled with these terms have with their natural and socio-political environments. These two terms constitute the poles of a dynamic continuum of ethnicity formation, which is defined in relation to state power - not just any state but those organized to uphold a particular sort of ethnic organization, which is summed up by the term caste society. This is different from the existence of prejudice and discrimination based on caste status, which exist independently of the state and can transcend

the boundaries of the polity in which they were formed. For an ethnic group to be a caste, it must fall within the ambit of such a state, and be in regulated interaction with other ethnic groups subjected in similar ways to state power - which is why to be a caste requires the presence of other castes. 'Tribalness' is a colonial concept that indexes relative distance (or relative buffering) from the power of states devoted to upholding caste systems. As Krauskopff has shown, Tharu societies in western Nepal achieved that distance through their mobility, which they used to resist overly intrusive attempts at state control over their labor (Krauskopff 2018). Where the state - as in modern South Asian democracies - no longer upholds the caste order, it is no longer useful to talk of castes or even of tribes - what one has are ethnic groups in plural societies jockeying for position and power, based on criteria different from those of the caste order.

The concept of an ethnic group has broader scope than either caste or tribe; it refers to a social group with a belief in its cultural distinctiveness from other such groups in its orbit (even when that distinctiveness may be largely illusory, as I have argued elsewhere; Guneratne 2002). Significantly for my argument, the concept of ethnicity does not require a particular kind of society or socio-political features to be useful in analysis. It may be deployed to describe social groups ranging from foragers, to nomadic pastoralists, to farming people and to the populations of modern states, in every sort of social formation, from kin-based groups to what Anderson (1991) described as 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1991). Castes are ethnic groups; what makes them castes is that they exist in a hierarchical system characterized by certain kinds of beliefs about the relative worth of the groups that constitutes the system, practices that relate to those beliefs, and importantly for my argument, a state that sees such a system as the necessary basis for social, political and economic activity. Castes require states; tribes (as the term has been used in South Asia) do not. Where the modern states of South Asia no longer uphold the caste

order or see it as legitimate, caste begins to decompose into ethnic groups competing in a different kind of political field, even though vestiges of the old order remain. Indeed, this may explain the enormity of the violence visited upon Dalits in both Nepal and India; they are attempts to maintain the old order even as the new offers it no legitimacy.

Tharu as Tribal, Tharu as Caste

The interplay between ecological conditions and the dynamics of political and economic control along the Tarai frontier - and its attendant social systems - shaped the relations that the Tharu, considered indigenous to the region, had with their neighbors. It was this dynamic that produced different communities of Tharu as people of one or the other of these two cultural types. Different Tharu groups shift from being more 'tribe'-like to more 'caste'-like on a west to east continuum along the Tarai. This dynamic owes much to the way different political powers - primarily the East India Company Raj, the Gorkhali state, and the modern Nepali State - engaged with and shaped the Tarai borderland and its ecology in pursuit of their own interests. The Tharu today consider themselves a single ethnic group even though the various communities that identify with that ethnic label share none of the conventional symbols of ethnic identity identified by scholars; they lack a common language, shared ritual practices or common myths of origin. Different communities of Tharu, separated from each other by language and culture, have cultural attributes that are to varying degrees 'tribal' or 'caste-like.' The attributes these terms index are the dynamic product of shifting ecological, economic, and political conditions. As Angma Dey Jhala's work on the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) suggests, however, these attribute bundles - in her work, as they relate to 'tribes' - are themselves fluid and inconsistent. Tribes were heavily shaped by their encounters with Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus; ethnic and cultural identities in the CHT, Jhala argues, were fluid and their boundaries porous,

realities unrecognized by colonial ethnography (Jhala 2019).

The term Tharu encompasses a range of ethnic groups that inhabit the Tarai, mostly in Nepal. They speak different Indo-European languages derived from or with strong affinities to, the languages spoken by their neighbours - Awadhi, Bhojpuri and Maithili - with distinct differences among them in material culture, ritual practices and the other attributes of ethnicity. As I have noted elsewhere (Guneratne 2002), in modern times (i.e., post-Rana Nepal), Tharu communities in Nepal, under the aegis of various ethnic associations, most especially an organization known as the Tharu Kalyankarini Sabha (Tharu Welfare Association), have constituted themselves as a single ethnic group (*jat* in Nepali), and, at the level of the elite at least, have dissolved the cultural boundaries that once constituted them as separate cultural entities, most notably in promoting marriage relations across once inviolable boundaries (Guneratne 1998: 763-764; Ødegaard, 1997).

The distinction between caste and tribe is useful insofar as it indexes the factors that shaped relations between different Tharu communities and the pre-modern states (including the British Raj) that encompassed them. It is important to note, however, that these terms have no precise analogues in South Asian languages, although the terms *adivasi* and *janajati*, both of relatively recent provenance, are used self-referentially today by people whom the British regarded as tribal, while the English word caste has passed into the South Asian lexicon. Thus, Tharu activists might use both *janajati* (or *adivasi*) as well as *caste*, as in 'hamro caste' [our caste] to describe themselves. Nepal has in fact been a 'caste' society for as long as the British have known it, even though colonial officials saw it as quintessentially a 'tribal' society (Holmberg 1988). That a Nepali speaker might also use the term *janajati* or *adivasi* to talk about the Tharu, but also use the English term 'caste', suggests a different way of thinking about the relation among these terms than a colonial ethnographer

might deploy. Nepal's old legal code, which organized Nepal's many ethnic groups into a caste system in 1854 and survived for a hundred years, recognized none of these distinctions; in the *Muluki Ain*, the operative term is *jat*, which may be translated as species or kind and which was applied as a descriptive label to all the kinds of people who inhabited the kingdom, all of whom were assigned a place in a single all-encompassing social order (Höfer 2004; Sharma 1977). *Jat*, of course, is a term that continues to be used, by Tharu and others.

The notion of caste, as used in both colonial and contemporary scholarship, refers to social groups based on kinship that are integrated into complex social and political orders in terms of a hierarchy of statuses imbued with differing values, held together and upheld by political and economic power. A caste system requires a centralized political system and a ruler whose responsibility it is to maintain the order of that system. The *Muluki Ain* of 1854 exemplifies how the state might order such a system, frame it ideologically, and work to uphold it. When colonial ethnographers and twentieth century anthropologists encountered Indian societies, they found societies trying to perdure in the absence of such states, which had largely been dismantled by colonial power, keeping the system going instead through an enduring ideology that buttressed the position of the privileged and was upheld by the power of the dominant landowning castes (Quigley 1993). However, in the context of modern democratic politics, castes transform into ethnic groups in plural societies, contesting for status and power (Gupta 2005). This process is well underway in Nepal, and groups such as Bahuns and Chhetris should be seen as ethnic groups dominating multi-ethnic plural societies rather than as high castes in a caste system.

Tribes, in contrast, were ethnic groups characterized in the colonial literature by their relative autonomy from and marginality to caste society, in terms both of their practices, beliefs, the extent of their integration into the wider social and political systems

characteristic of castes, and their location in space. In the colonial imagination, tribes occupied the geographical margins of forest and mountain, not the cultivated plains, which were the domain of castes. The Tarai, forested, malarial, and to outsiders at least, ominous, was quintessentially one of those tribal places. The people who lived there tended to be mobile, to practice swidden cultivation as opposed to settled agriculture and to live in mono-ethnic communities, in contrast to the mixed caste villages and *jajmani* (patron-client) relations (see Quigley 1993) that characterized caste societies. Tribal peoples in South Asia were conceptualized as those isolated from state-based caste society and its control, but also as the raw material for the caste order. According to Beteille, "in India tribes have always been in transition [to caste], at least since the beginning of recorded history" (1986: 298). Or as Marriott puts it, "The present highly differentiated and extensive caste system may be regarded . . . as a living monument to a primary adjustment among tribal peoples emerging into a civilization of greater organized range and scope" (1955:188). How this transition happens is explored later in this paper.

The Tharu in the Colonial Literature

To the British, the Tharu were tribal, most notably because they occupied an interstitial territory. The Tarai itself has been conceptualized by outsiders as a peripheral region, a no-man's land on the edge of civilized life. The westernmost part of the Tarai, from the district of Naini Tal in India to the four western-most Tarai districts of Nepal - what used to be known as the *Naya Muluk* - have historically been the most forested and remote (from Kathmandu) of the Tarai districts. Although Tharu are associated with the Tarai as a whole, it is the western Tarai that the Tharu call Tharuhat. The various Tharu communities that lived there and in adjacent Indian districts share cultural features that recall the attributes of tribes. Much of the colonial literature on the Tharu - of Williams (1869), Rowney (1882), Nesfield (1885), Risley (1892) and Crooke

(1896) were about the Tharu of the western Tarai. For these colonial ethnographers, the Tharu were quintessentially tribal. Notably, they lived in mono-ethnic villages in forested areas, were mobile and not tied to the land and did not include Brahmin priests in their rituals. Nesfield wrote they were “an aboriginal, casteless and un-Brahmanized tribe whose customs have been only slightly modified by contact with those of the Aryan invader” (Nesfield 1896: 3). Risley, again generalizing broadly across the various Tharu communities, comments on their nomadism and writes, “they live their own life on the outskirts of Hindu civilization, and no place has as yet been allotted in the Hindu social system” (1892: 319).

Risley has little to say that is original about the Tharu (Risley 1892: 312-321). His observations about Tharu east of the Gandak deals with the Chitwaniya, and I will return to them below. What is noteworthy is that Tharu do not figure much in colonial accounts of Bihar and Bengal, except in discussions of Champaran; the British would not have come into extended contact with Tharu communities because their settlements east of Champaran were all in Nepali territory, in areas into which British travellers were not ordinarily allowed to go during colonial times.

The eastern Tarai was always economically more vital for the Himalayan states, and its society was shaped over the centuries by immigration from the border districts of India, which provided a source of labour for the region’s development. It is likely that Tharu in the eastern districts of the Tarai were also more tribe-like than caste-like earlier in their history; Sugden (2013:526) citing Hamilton (1818), claims that the indigenous people east of the Koshi “carried out a form of slash and burn agriculture and hoe cultivation” and speculates on the existence then of a more egalitarian economy. Famines in late-eighteenth century India, such as the Bengal famine of 1769-1770, as well as the demand for labour to develop the Tarai by the hill states that controlled the region, contributed to the emergence of a plural, multi-ethnic society in the Tarai

east of Chitwan, as well as in some areas of the central Tarai. The descendants of those immigrants call themselves Madhesi and the region they inhabit Madhes. What is significant is that although Tharus in the western Tarai reject both the term Madhesi as a descriptor of themselves and the term Madhes as a label for the Tarai, insofar as there are Tharu supporters of the Madhesi movement—and there are some—they are most likely to come from the eastern Tarai and to view themselves as Madhesi. This political difference is probably associated with the cultural differences indexed by the tribe-caste continuum that I have referred to above.

The Tarai Environment

I turn now to the natural environment of the Tarai as a factor shaping relations among human communities. The Tarai was shrouded in pre-modern times by dense forest cover and inhabited not only by wild animals but for the Tharu and their neighbours, by malevolent spirits. Nesfield writes of Tharu villages in the western Tarai, “During the night the crops and the cattle are kept constantly under watch to prevent the inroads of wild animals; while the forest, which forms the hunting ground in the day time, bounds the horizon on all sides” (1885: 5). He also characterized Tharu in the west (probably the Rana Tharu) as being averse to both manual labour and working for Hindu landlords (he is referring to those who live on the edge of the forest rather than deeper in), and subsisting on the hunting of game and on swidden cultivation, including of rice (1885:4-5).

The natural dangers that affected all who would settle in this challenging environment are also captured in a land grant issued to a Tharu *gurau* (shaman) in Chitwan in 1807 that admonishes him to “Cultivate and make the land populous and protect the people from the threats of elephants, tigers, evil spirits, disease and epidemics” (Krauskopff and Meyer, 2000: 160). The Tarai was a place to be feared for all of these reasons, but especially for its virulent malaria. The Tharu were

considered by the British to be the only people who could survive malaria and work the land, and the British were prepared to make concessions to accommodate them, for they were regarded as highly mobile and apt to migrate to Nepal were their situation to become too oppressive (Guneratne 2002: 56; Krauskopff 2018). This mobility, which challenges the state's control over its population, is itself an attribute of 'tribalness.'

Malaria, however, was not equally virulent everywhere in the Tarai. Recent work by the environmental historian Tom Robertson has shown that the incidence of malaria varied by region and by the species of mosquito vector. It was at its most virulent in the forest belt that stretched along the Churia, encompassing dun valleys such as Chitwan, but its incidence was low in the broad and agricultural plains of the eastern Outer Tarai, the districts that stretch from Bara to Morang (Robertson 2016). The degree of deforestation taking place can affect which species of *Anopheles*, the mosquito vector of malaria, becomes established in a given region; these species vary in the degree of transmission and morbidity of their parasites. *Plasmodium vivax*, for instance, is the commonest malarial parasite found in Nepal, and its effects are, relatively speaking mild; *P. falciparum* is far more deadly in its effects, and was historically present in certain areas of the Tarai, including Inner Tarai valleys such as Chitwan. According to one authority, "tropical forests and hilly areas with streams" are especially favorable for the "proliferation of mosquito vectors when humans are present" (Schapira 2002:105). This is a fair description of conditions in Chitwan and Dang. The eastern part of the Outer Tarai, on the other hand, which shares a border with the Indian state of Bihar, had been largely cleared of forest by the nineteenth century and the incidence of malaria was low. It had also been a magnet, since at least the eighteenth century, for migration from the border districts of India, of people fleeing famine, whose activity helped to engineer that ecological transformation. Where the presence both of forests and malaria constrains relations between

Tharu and caste society in either the hills or the plains (because, for instance, malaria discourages the settlement of other ethnic groups in Tharu villages), one will expect to find the Tharu more tribe-like in their attributes. In the eastern Tarai on the other hand, ecological conditions allowed the Tharu to be more readily integrated (sometimes as a dominant caste) into the caste societies that developed there as a result of Indian migration.

Society and polity in the Tarai

The other kind of environment is the socio-political environment of Tharu society and Tharu relations with the state and with the people who lived to the north and south of them. Although the existence of a political border dividing the territories of Gorkha from the East India Company's territories and later that of the Raj, did not impede movement, western Tharu (the more 'tribe'-like populations) did not live in multi-caste villages, had limited contact with caste populations, and were apt to pack up and move if harassed. Although Tharu everywhere, including those categorized as tribal, were subject to state control, as Krauskopff (2018) has argued, their mobility was itself an act of resistance to attempts by states to over-reach, and the extent of forest land as well as a border that could be crossed to exchange one state for another facilitated such resistance. The more developed eastern Tarai probably presented fewer opportunities for such strategies. Both the forests and malaria constituted an ecological barrier to migration and settlement by both plains and hill people; by the end of the nineteenth century there was less of both in the east.

The eastern Tarai was subject to forces that did not impinge on the west. One of these was the great famine of Bengal of 1770, engineered by the East India Company's misrule, which is said to have cost ten million lives or a third of the population (Drèze 1995: 72, 76). Champaran (Bettiah), which lies south of Chitwan, may have lost nearly half its inhabitants to the 1770 famine, and many who survived abandoned

the district (Hamilton 1820). This and other famines, and the density of population in India's border districts, were a major impetus for migration into the Tarai, providing the labour that the hill states needed for its agricultural development (Ojha 1983: 24). The eastern Tarai and some areas of the central Tarai thus developed in a different way from the relatively more isolated regions of the far west, and their settlement patterns evolved differently.

Over the centuries, a multi-ethnic (or 'multi-caste') society developed in the eastern Tarai, the region from Bara to Jhapa. The dynamics of this process is documented in the *lal mohar* ('red seal' land grants) collected by the Tharu historian Tej Narayan Panjiar and published with commentary by Krauskopff and Meyer (2000). Before the rise of the hill states and the development of their policies towards the Tarai, the Tharu of that area may have resembled Tharu in the west both in their practices and their distance from Brahminical norms, but as a consequence of their closer integration into the multi-ethnic and plural society that formed in the eastern Tarai, they began to sanskritize - notably, to summon Brahmin priests to conduct their life-cycle rituals and to preside over 'great tradition' rituals which are distant from the experience of many western Tharu. The late Ramanand Prasad Singh recalled for me his childhood in Saptari in the early twentieth century; he seems to describe a caste system based on *jajmani* relationships:

We had a Brahmin teacher or the village schoolmaster . . . there were some oil men [Teli caste] who had settled on our land and we permitted them to stay there, we used to get our oil seeds pressed by them, and the whole village used to pay a certain amount to the oil people pressers, that was the system. So they used to press oil for a whole village and every household used to pay them something in kind, paddy and all those things, so they were getting from the whole village. Similar was the case with the barber, and then

these menial castes like Chamars and Doms, they used to take away the dead animals . . . We were almost an agricultural caste, community, we had no other obligation than agriculture. [in English].

In the western Tarai and especially in the districts of Kailali, Kanchanpur, Bardiya and Dang, Tharu had a preponderance if not an outright majority of the population as late as 1971; they lost ground not as a result of migration from India but migration from the hills following the malaria eradication program. In the east, on the other hand, the relative decline in the proportion of Tharu in the population came much earlier, as Indian labour was recruited, often by Tharu chiefs themselves, to develop the region (Krauskopff and Meyer 2000). This labour represented many different caste groups of the plains, and they reconstituted their social systems in the new contexts of the Tarai. It is probable that the same processes of cultural transformation took place in the east that I describe for Chitwan below; first the elite and then the other social strata would likely have been incorporated into the network of relationships being constituted in this new context. Because of the strong connections that local Tharu elites (at least in Chitwan) had to the state and to local Brahmin-Chhetri elites, they were probably influenced by Brahmanical norms to a greater degree than other Tharu, a phenomenon I noticed in western Dang in the late 1980s and early 1990s; that, and the presence of multiple castes in eastern Tarai villages would have been a factor reshaping Tharu practices to accord with what the observer expects to see among castes. I turn now to examining how this process of elite emulation might have taken place more generally by examining the case of the Tharu of Chitwan.

The Cultural Transformation of Chitwan

The cultural processes that in all likelihood led to eastern Tharu becoming 'caste-like' have also taken place in Chitwan,

but much more recently. Well into the twentieth century, despite a significant amount of Hinduization (or in Bista's terms, Nepalization, which amounts to much the same thing) that had taken place since the demise of the Rana regime, the Chitwan Tharu retained many features of 'tribal' society. An example is the worship of local as opposed to pan-Indic deities, and the reliance on indigenous religious specialists, but the turn to Brahmin priests to conduct mortuary rituals had already been established at the time of the Malaria Eradication Project of the 1950s (Guneratne 2021).

Seventy years ago, one might have placed the Tharu of Chitwan in the more tribe-like end of the continuum I have discussed above. Since the Malaria Eradication project of the 1950s, however, their society has been increasingly shaped by hill culture. They have taken on many of the attributes of caste, notably through the expansion of the role that Brahmin priests play in their ritual lives. The Chitwan Tharu today resemble a mid-level agricultural caste, the kind of socially and educationally disadvantaged castes that in India are called Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Their close relations in West Champaran, however, were classified in 1941 as a Scheduled Tribe, a status their elites contested and campaigned to have changed, which happened in 1951 when they were re-classified as a Backward Class. Realizing that this offered them fewer benefits than their prior status, the Tharu of Champaran (or at least their elites) set in motion another campaign to revert to their original status, which they only achieved in 2003.¹ The catalyst for this movement between different categories was clearly the policies of this state, but even in the Chitwan Tharu case, the policies of the state, although less overtly, influence the process of cultural transformation.

Although Chitwan lies on the Indo-Nepal border, the major socio-cultural influences that have shaped it in modern times have come mainly from the Hindu societies of the hills rather than from India. Prior to the 1950s, the Chitwan valley was inhabited mainly by the Tharu. Despite their

connections of culture and shared ethnicity to the Tharu areas of Champaran, and the political fact of a border that has been 'open' since before the founding of the modern states of India and Nepal, geographical and historical factors have constrained cultural flows across the frontier. In colonial times, the forest that covered the valley of Chitwan extended as far south as Bagaha in West Champaran, a distance of up to thirty miles from the border. The barrier that this forest posed to north-south travel was compounded by the malarial nature of the region. The Tharu lived in agricultural enclaves in the forest on both sides of the frontier, and were linked by ties of kinship, but people of other ethnic groups from the Indo-Gangetic plain avoided the region for the most part, from fear of malaria. Labour for cultivation depended largely on the Tharu. Bernardo Michael notes that while land slipped in and out of different categories of use (forest, fallow, fallow grassland, cultivated etc) depending on the availability of labour, "Considerable tracts of land on the Champaran-tarriani frontier remained uncultivated" during the period of the East India Company's rule (2007: 322). Prior even to the malaria eradication project, Chitwan Tharus had greater exposure to ideas and practices carried down from the hills during the winter (when malaria was absent) than came north from India during the entire year. Penetration by outsiders into the Tharu areas of Champaran was limited in the nineteenth century and is difficult even today (see Kumar 2009). The limited east-west links prior to the 1950s also constrained communication into the valley. Thus, the Chitwan Tharu were a once tribe-like people who, after the cultural transformations brought about by the Malaria Eradication Project in Nepal in the 1950s, could be readily 'Hinduized' along Nepali lines and take on more of the attributes of caste. But, as I will show below, what those attributes mean have changed.

Outsiders avoided year-round settlement in the valley from fear of malaria, allowing the Tharu to maintain a relative autonomy well into the twentieth century. Brahmins and Brahminical rituals played little role

in their lives and their settlements were for the most part mono-ethnic. The only significant role of the Brahmin priest prior to malaria eradication was to preside over funerary rituals, and then only in the cold season, when the danger from malaria was at its lowest. It is possible that some local elites sponsored rituals such as the Satya Narayan *puja* in the winter, when Brahmins could be found to perform it - an expression of piety, certainly, but also an expression of adherence to the state and its norms. In the late eighties and early nineties, during the period of my first fieldwork in Chitwan, old Tharus who remembered the time before the malaria eradication project would speak of travel to Bhikna Thori, a railhead² on the Indian border (even today an area of heavy forest cover), which was their principal bazaar, but they had little to say about the wider world outside Chitwan. The anthropologist McKim Marriott (1955: 175) sees the distribution of pilgrimage sites as a way to gauge the extent of the links the Indian village community as it existed in his day had with a wider world (he is writing in the 1950s). The major pilgrimage sites of the Chitwan Tharu lie mostly within the valley and in the adjacent Churia hills. In short, the Tharu had relatively weak links to the world outside the valley, and little to do with powerful outsiders except on those transient occasions when the most powerful of them (the Rana elite) came to Chitwan to hunt. On those occasions, their labour was corv  ed to make those hunts possible.

Despite its political and economic importance today, Chitwan was a Tarai backwater at a time, as late as 1950, when the districts of the eastern Tarai were well settled and a mainstay of government revenue. Conditions in Chitwan, a strategically important border district, differed for a number of reasons. Following the Anglo-Nepal war of 1814-16, the Gorkha state de-populated Chitwan, which up to that time appears to have been well settled, by moving a large part of the population out of the district into villages in the surrounding hills, and allowing much of the valley to revert to jungle (Oldfield 1880: 49; 140). This measure was aimed at deterring a

possible British invasion through this route, which provided the quickest access to Kathmandu from India.

Chitwan was known for malaria during the nineteenth century, and avoided by hill people; the endemic malaria caused Chitwan to be known as ‘Kalapani’ or the Valley of Death (Elder et al. 1976: 11-12a). Unlike the Outer Tarai, Chitwan never became a destination for Indian immigrants, although there was movement of Tharus back and forth across the border with Champaran. With the exception of government officials and police (who were present in the valley only during the winter months), the population was mostly Tharu, along with a number of other, smaller indigenous groups.³

Apart from malaria, plains people were deterred from moving into the valley by its dense forest cover, lack of roads, and the existence of similar conditions in a broad buffer along the frontier in the Tarai areas of Bihar’s district of West Champaran. Unlike the valleys of the Inner Tarai, the Outer Tarai of Nepal is an extension of the North Indian plain, and consequently lacks geographical barriers to movement across the border. Chitwan, on the other hand is difficult of access because of its location; unlike the Outer Tarai, it is separated from the plains (and from West Champaran) by the thickly forested slopes of the Churia, which rise to 3000 feet in this part of their range. The hills are bisected only by the pass that leads from Madi in southern Chitwan to Bhikna Thori. The adjoining areas of Champaran were malarial and sparsely populated until modern times, and the population was mostly Tharu (Blyth 1892). As a consequence, there was no significant pressure (such as famine) on the population across the border from Chitwan that would encourage them to seek land in Nepal, and those that might have been moved to do so would have found it easier to travel east and cross the border at Birgunj.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Chitwan appears to have been unimportant economically to the Rana state, particularly by comparison with the

Eastern Tarai. The *Nepal Trade Directory* of 1959 lists its important products as oil seeds and big game. Mustard seeds were traded by Tharu at Hetauda and Bhikna Thori to raise the cash they needed to pay the land tax and to buy cloth, kerosene and salt. There were no permanent bazaars located in Chitwan itself, although itinerant traders used to come down into the valley from the hills during the winter. Religious fairs (*mela*) held regularly throughout the year at various shrines also provided an opportunity for trade. Unlike the eastern Tarai, Chitwan during this period did not produce a surplus of rice. As far as the state was concerned, Chitwan served primarily as a prime hunting preserve located relatively close to Kathmandu for the Rana aristocracy. Although the initial security requirements that kept Chitwan undeveloped diminished in significance as relations improved between Nepal and British India, its value as a hunting preserve probably played some part in keeping it forested until the Ranas were overthrown in 1951.

Malaria Eradication, Development, and Cultural Change

Beginning in the third quarter of the twentieth century, Chitwan was transformed from a wilderness of forest and grassland to one of the most heavily settled parts of the country outside the Kathmandu valley. In 1955, most of the district was under dense forests, with only 2500 *bigha* (about 1700 hectares) under cultivation. By the 1980s, this figure had increased to 40,000 *bigha* (27,200 hectares) (Bhandari 1985: 13), and Chitwan had lost about 70 percent of its forest cover. What remains is mostly within the national park. The majority of its inhabitants today are recent migrants from the hills; apart from members of the dominant Brahmin-Chhetri ethnic groups, many of Nepal's hill Dalits and *janajati* groups are also represented, with the Tamang forming a significant minority.

A successful malaria eradication program was begun in Chitwan in 1954, and by 1960, the threat of malaria had been rendered insignificant. The Malaria Eradication

Organization was set up in 1958, and entrusted the task of eradicating malaria throughout the country. These developments, coupled with the construction of an all-weather road linking Chitwan to Kathmandu and Pokhara, opened up a flood of immigration that brought hill people into the valley. In 1961, the Central Inner Tarai, including the modern districts of Chitwan and Nawal Parasi, was second only to the Eastern Tarai in the number of immigrants it received - 27,560 vs. 72,030 (Ram Bahadur KC 1986: 10). By 1971, the population of Chitwan was about 183,644, of whom 24,718 (about 13.5%) were Tharu (Chand et al 1975: 6). The Tharu population of Chitwan was about 63,000 in 2011, barely 12% of the district-wide population of 579,984 (Government of Nepal 2011: 40). This influx proved too great to be controlled or managed in planned government settlements, and most immigrants encroached illegally on state land, a process which has been described as spontaneous settlement (Shrestha (1990) provides an extensive discussion of immigration into the valley).

The state's development policy changed the social makeup of the valley, turning the Tharu into a minority and transforming the social composition of their once mono-ethnic villages. More importantly, it set in motion a process of intentional cultural change, a process initially pursued by local Tharu elites to make their own practices conform to the culturally prestigious practices associated with state power and a socially dominant immigrant population that was now intruding directly and continuously into their own lives. Individual families, originally of the *jimidari* class,⁴ sought to align themselves culturally with their more powerful new neighbors, but this acquisition of cultural capital also distinguished them in both symbolic and material ways from their other, Tharu neighbors. Over time, these practices percolated down into other strata in Tharu society, as others strove to emulate, in a process of status seeking, what was becoming normative - the practices of the high castes now in their midst. The example of how Tharu marriage practices changed

after the Malaria Eradication Project enabled immigration into Chitwan shows how this happened.

Kanyadan in Tharu Society

The British colonial ethnographer H.H. Risley suggests that the Chitwan Tharu used to pay bridewealth; he writes “The traditional amount of the bride-price is supposed to be Rs. 9, but this is liable to vary according to the circumstances of the family” (1892: 314). By the time of my fieldwork, however, brideprice had entirely given way to dowry. The few sentences that Risley devotes to describing the actual ceremony accords well with my own observations of what I call the traditional Tharu practice of marriage: the groom and a small group of his kin known as the *bariyat* go to the home of the bride and return the next day with the bride and without ceremony; a feast is eaten at the bride’s house and a ritual is performed at the groom’s house on their return to incorporate the bride into his lineage, and there the matter ends.

After Brahmins and Chhetris settled in the valley in increasing numbers, *kanyadan* and dowry came to replace the traditional form of marriage and bridewealth as the dominant practice within Tharu society. *Kanyadan* requires both economic and cultural capital, and in a context where *kanyadan* has become widespread, economic capital helps to maintain social distinctions. Thus, *kanyadan* was initially adopted by elite Tharu families in eastern Chitwan by the 1970s; a few elderly men I interviewed in 1989-90 claimed that their families were the first to introduce the practice. Although the traditional practice of the *bariyat* was retained, once the *bariyat* arrived at the bride’s house, the *kanyadan* ceremony was performed there. This also became the place for the public and elaborate presentation of the dowry, and the public giving of wedding gifts to the bridal couple, practices which did not exist before. In eastern Chitwan, inter-ethnic social intercourse is primarily a matter for the elites, usually their male members, while the rest of society largely remain within

their own social groups. While the *kanyadan* ceremony aligned the Tharu elite with the prestige of ‘high caste’ culture (understood by everyone as the normative culture of Nepal, not because it was high caste but because it was Hindu), it also distinguished them from their social inferiors in Tharu society. But as *kanyadan* percolated through society - not because the elites promoted it but because their social inferiors saw it as a mark of personal or familial status to be emulated - the *kanyadan* ceremony itself and the practices of feasting came to be elaborated on as a way to maintain social distinction. Conspicuous consumption, especially where the dowry was concerned, marked status, and the traditional Tharu marriage practice referred to earlier came to be regarded as a sign of poverty.

There is social pressure to make the *kanyadan* ceremony as elaborate as possible (it has, as people tell me, to be *ramailo*, i.e., pleasurable), with a lavish dowry that include furniture, household goods and clothing, as well as cash, for the bride. These are costs not associated with the traditional ceremony, and are borne by the bride’s family, which must also pay for the services of a Brahmin priest. While the Tharu elite emulate Brahmin-Chhetri customs to align themselves culturally with politically influential newcomers whose culture happens also to be that promoted by the state, their social inferiors seek to emulate their own elites to seek status for themselves. The marriage ceremony lends itself to this sort of status claim because of its very public nature, but it also imposes a tremendous burden on those with few resources. It is, of course, beyond the reach of the poorest, such as those with little to no land. Besides that, however, it is a ritual in which a Brahmin priest plays a public and visible role, complementing the role he plays in the performance of the funeral rites.

As this practice of social emulation spreads through society, the demand for services of Brahmin priests expands as well. There was one Brahmin *purohit* for the Tharu households in the village where I did fieldwork, and he made a good living. This is not

however sanskritization in Srinivas's terms, in which a subordinate caste collectively emulates the customs of the dominant caste (Srinivas 1966); this cultural transformation is the outcome of people (and households) pursuing their individual desires for status rather than acting in accordance with the edicts of a caste association seeking to collectively raise the status of the group. In other words, it focuses on the individual rather than the group; it is about class more than it is about caste.

Besides the imperatives of status seeking, social pressure is also exerted on Tharus by hill people to conform to high caste norms. One Tharu woman commented,

There's a lot of contact with *pahadiyas* [hill people] now, and they come to the weddings, and they ask why we haven't given anything to the *dulahi* [the bride] and they laugh. And they say you must give these various things—necklaces etc.—to the *dulahi*. And because of this our customs are disappearing, because of the *pahadiya* society.

Marriage according to the traditional rituals, was, and continues to be, a low-key affair, in which there are few opportunities for a public display of wealth and status; it has come to be associated with poverty. The *kanyadan* ceremony has been valorized not only because it is normatively both Hindu and Nepali, but also because it is modern; it was, in the 1990s, still a relatively new practice for Tharu people, and one closely associated with that segment of the population - the 'high castes' - who are seen by them as the most advanced and modern of their neighbors. The elaborate *kanyadan* ceremony is now the focus of the whole marriage process, taking place after the *bariyat* arrives in the bride's village. The traditional Tharu practices that bookend it - such as the particular form of the *bariyat* and the rituals performed on return to the groom's village - now serve as markers of a distinctive Tharu identity that must define itself against other identities present in the village.

The interpolation of the Brahmanical marriage ritual into traditional practice and the major role played by Brahman priests is of relatively recent origin. The widespread employment of Brahman priests became possible only after hill people settled permanently in Chitwan. It required the year-round presence of a caste society, with its more prestigious practices and the social pressures it could exert, as well as the ready availability of its ritual specialists, for Tharu practices to change in the direction of 'caste-like' forms. And it required also the transformation of their environment - the eradication of malaria. Once Brahman priests became available year-round, a variety of factors encouraged increasing numbers of Tharus to incorporate the *kanyadan* ceremony into their traditional marriage practices. This influence is expressed in the words of one Tharu, who invokes the Hinduness of Tharus as the explanation for the shift.

In the old days, Tharus didn't even meet Bahuns [Brahmans]. They lived in the hills and didn't come here for fear of malaria. Where then could one go to find a Bahun for a wedding? So the Chaudharis got married according to their own customs [*apno hisab-kitab lé*]... There were no *pujas* of any kind at all. The Brahmans would not come to perform weddings because they said they would get malaria. . . Now there are Bahuns in every village. Seeing that they are there, why should we not do it according to sanskritic ways? We should do it according to our *dharma*. . . . Now most people will not marry without a Brahman. Only one or two marriages are conducted now according to the old way.

Conclusion

Ecological conditions in the Tarai served to limit migration into it for much of the region's modern history. Conditions in the east had changed over the centuries as labor became more readily available to

supplement that of the Tarai's indigenous people, thanks to push factors such as famine that encouraged immigration into the Tarai, but this had much less, if any, impact on the westernmost Tarai districts and in Inner Tarai valleys such as Chitwan. As the eastern Tarai became deforested and well-settled by an ethnically heterogeneous population, Tharus in the east grew to be more like their neighbors from the plains and over time took on more of the attributes of caste; in Chitwan, however, those neighbors did not arrive until the malaria eradication project of the 1950s, and Tharus retained more of the attributes of what colonial ethnographers referred to as 'tribes'. The explanation for the cultural differences indexed by the two concepts of caste and tribe among the different social units of what today is considered to be a single ethnic group, lies with the changing and inter-linked ecological and social conditions of the Tarai borderland.

It is well known but usually forgotten that neither tribe nor caste are indigenous concepts to South Asian societies. In Nepal, the social forms that these concepts strove to distinguish were simply treated under the concept of *jat*, a term that encompasses all the meanings of the English terms and more besides, and a term that can also readily be rendered in English as ethnic group. To render it as caste on the other hand brings with it the baggage that accrues to the concept, and raises the problem of the *matwali* groups, which are also *jat* but which, to the British, were tribes. In the context of the *Muluki Ain*, the use of caste for *jat* in English translation is appropriate, as the MA is a codification of a caste system by the state, which sought to regulate inter-group relations. In the modern context, neither of those terms (tribe and caste) has much value, for the social groups they purport to describe must all operate in the shared political space of the modern nation-state. From being concepts initially introduced to describe social forms that existed in the eye of the (Western) observer, they became, instead, ways in which the social groups so described could compete for status, resources and power in the

context of a particular political order, as the Tharu of Champaran did with their switch from Scheduled Tribe to Backward Class and back again. A generalized drift towards caste identified by twentieth century anthropology ('Sanskritization,' or the formulations of Marriott and of Beteille, cited earlier) has taken a turn towards ethnicity with the rise of republican forms of government in South Asia, and the politicization of caste by such institutions as the colonial census.

The concept of Sanskritization was developed by M.N.Srinivas and others to account for the way that mobility occurred in the caste system. Individuals could not achieve caste mobility; only the community as a whole could, usually under the prompting of their elites, and by adopting the attributes of locally dominant castes to claim a higher status (i.e., more social honour) than the one accorded them. That is not what is happening in contemporary Tharu society in Chitwan. Here, as in the case of the changes in marriage practice, it is the pursuit of individual or family status. Attributes that once signalled caste status now are attributes of modernity and national belonging. Older attributes of social honour now no longer count for much; alcohol consumption, for example, which once marked a clear boundary between the pure and the impure in the old legal code, are now consumed by elite Brahmans (local businessmen, government officials and the like) who socialize with their Tharu counterparts in Chitwan. Social honor is indexed by new markers of status that are not grounded in the caste order. Notably, they are the acquisition of education, and entry into the professions. The Brahmans' superordinate position is based on their 'cornering the market', so to speak, of these attributes; they have become a model of the modernity that Tharu seek to emulate (Guneratne, 1999).

Caste is not a useful concept to describe the Tharu of Chitwan today. Nor are they a tribe, emerging, in Marriott's phrase, "into a civilization of greater organized range and scope" (1955:188). These concepts have

no purchase in Chitwan, which is today a plural society of many ethnic groups, some with more privileges than others, but all formally equal in the eyes of the state. The Tharu are an ethnic group in a modern polity drawing on the cultural symbols - once associated with ritual status - that have now become markers of modernity, religious affiliation, and national belonging, to maneuver from a position of disadvantage or fewer privileges in a field of political action where power is unevenly distributed.

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Endnotes

1. *Times of India*, "Tharus given the status of Scheduled Tribe." May 25, 2003. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/Tharus-given-the-status-of-Scheduled-Tribe/articleshow/47408792.cms>. (Accessed July 13, 2022).
2. The railway was extended to Bhikna Thori after a rail link was established between Bettiah and Muzaffarpur in 1888 (Kumar 2009: 13).
3. Daniel Wright, the British Residency surgeon at Kathmandu, noted that Hetauda, a town in the foothills overlooking the Chitwan valley, was "a considerable village in the cold season, but the place is almost deserted in the hot season and during the rains [from April to November], on account of the aoul or malarious fever, which is deadly to all but the aborigines of the teraie" (Wright 1872: 1).
4. Local elites; originally revenue collectors and local magistrates, who served as village heads for ritual purposes as well.

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Special Section Research Article

Tharu women at the crossroads of labor migration in Chitwan, Nepal

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Abstract

In an ethnically mixed village in the Chitwan district of Nepal, large numbers of young Tharu men are migrating for labor to the Arab Gulf countries and Malaysia. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, this essay examines the impact labor migration has on the lives of women who stay behind. I focus on two ways that local women participate in this process: first, by financing migration through microcredit loans and second, by managing the remittances they receive from abroad. I argue that, while women now play a significant role in helping finance migration, they are still subject to societal oversight when it comes to managing the remittance money, which creates new sources of conflict within families, and reinforces women's desires to become more independent. Microcredit loans and remittances, as a social agreement and the material outcome of migration, are altering traditional gender roles, although it is still too early to determine their lasting effect.

Keywords

gender; Tharu; migration; microcredit; remittances

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Introduction: Pipariya's remittance landscape

Every morning, after preparing the morning meal for her in-laws and children, Susmita helps her two sons get ready for school. She walks with them to the village's main intersection and waits for the private school bus to pick them up. Then, Susmita heads to a small cement building that has two big windows as doors. She greets her next-door neighbor, a Bahun woman who runs a small stationary shop. She lifts the metal curtains that cover the building's large windows, wipes the dust off the candy jars and shampoo envelopes, and heads to the back towards her sewing machine.

Susmita's shop is small, an all-in-one tailoring and stationary store. She sits behind the sewing machine and continues working on the *kurti* she began sewing the previous evening. Every once in a while, she pauses her work to sell candy, pencils, or erasers to the children passing by on their way to the local government school. She takes some time off during the day to talk to her neighbor, or to teach a young girl how to use the pedal-powered sewing machine. Susmita's shop and the fees for her children's private school are relatively recent comforts in her life. Three years ago, her husband migrated to Saudi Arabia, where he has a job as a construction worker. With the money he sends home every two months, Susmita has been able to build the store and put her children through what she considers to be a better education system.

This ethnography describes the impact of international labor migration in transforming traditional gender roles among Tharus in the growing, ethnically mixed village of Pipariya in Chitwan, Nepal. I argue that international labor migration is an all-encompassing social phenomenon that impacts not only the migrant but the household as a whole, transforming the economic resources that women have traditionally accessed and managed. Through microcredit loans, women play a significant role in helping finance their husbands' migration, becoming more involved in the decision-making process

that enables men to migrate. However, how women, and particularly young women, spend the remittance money their husbands send from abroad is still subject to tight control and societal oversight. As such, remittances have now become an added source of tension between women and their in-laws. Though it is still early to assess its long-lasting effect on gender dynamics among Chitwan Tharus, international labor migration has already had the capacity to redefine the financial resources women manage both within public and private spheres of the village.

The data on which this ethnography is based was collected during two different periods of fieldwork. I first spent four months in Nepal during the fall of 2014. I then returned to Nepal in December 2015, a year after my initial fieldwork and seven months after the devastating earthquakes of April and May 2015. During both periods I spent most of my time in Pipariya, a small village in the Chitwan District, in the southern Tarai region of Nepal. I decided to conduct my research in this village given the large number of men from the area who migrate abroad in search of work. I also chose this village because of its diversity. The village's population is comprised of Tharus, one of Nepal's indigenous groups, and Bahuns, high-caste people originally from the hill areas. I was interested in learning about international migration practices amongst Nepal's indigenous groups, and how they could differ from migratory practices amongst high-caste hill communities. Through this journey, I gained interesting insights about the role that Tharu women play in their husbands' migration.

I lived with a Tharu family in the village of Pipariya for a total of seven weeks. I interviewed Tharu migrant workers, women whose husbands and sons had migrated, young men who were preparing to leave the country, as well as non-migrant Tharus and Bahuns. I spoke with people working for microcredit entities and also with Bahun and Tharu women who had accessed higher education. My aim was to get as

much of a nuanced perspective as I could in a short period of time. In total, between my two fieldwork experiences I conducted more than 50 interviews and 30 household surveys, and spent many hours listening to people's stories about migration while sitting around the fire in the cold winter nights. I am forever thankful to the community of Pipariya for welcoming me into their lives and allowing me to share their stories with the world.

I will begin by providing historic context on Chitwan in general, and the Tharu of Pipariya in particular. I will focus on past internal migration trends that changed the community. I will then provide context on the Nepali government's policies regarding international labor migration and remittances, as well as the Tharu peoples' motivations to participate in migration, before analyzing specifically the role of women in supporting male out-migration. I will then discuss how Tharu women help men in their household finance migration through local women's microcredit loans. I will also discuss the challenges Tharu women face, and the benefits they obtain from managing the remittances their husbands send home. I will conclude by providing insights on the impact international labor migration can have in transforming the traditional expectations of Tharu women in this community.

Chitwan: A century of Hill People and Tharu movement

Pipariya is an ethnically mixed village in Chitwan, one of Nepal's Inner Tarai valleys bordering India. An important region economically, socially, and politically, Chitwan has experienced a large demographic transformation over the last few decades. Traditionally, communities such as the Bote, Musahar, and Tharus inhabited the valley. These groups were marginalized within Nepal and had distant contact with the national government in Kathmandu. They remained relatively isolated during the nineteenth century, as malaria kept people from the Nepali hills from populating the area. In the 1950s,

however, Nepal's government changed the way it approached the Tarai territories. Given the technical difficulties of developing a modern agricultural system in the hills, the Inner Tarai valleys became targets for agrarian 'development'. The clearing of these valleys was expected to alleviate population pressure in the hills by offering new productive farmland (Müller-Böker 1999). The construction of a motorway and the implementation of the malaria eradication program brought economic and social changes to the area. It attracted migrants from other parts of Nepal, including different hill ethnic groups such as Newars, Gurungs, Tamangs, high-caste hill groups like Bahuns and Chhetris, and untouchable caste people or 'dalits'.

When this research was conducted, Pipariya was administratively still part of an homonymous village development committee (VDC) where Tharu people constituted a majority of the population. According to the 2011 population census, the last census where this political and administrative division of Nepal was used, 48% of households identified as Tharus. Bahuns represented 28% of the population. The remaining 24% of the VDC's population was made up of other groups of hill-migrants as well as Dalits (CBS 2011). While Pipariya is predominantly Tharu, the presence of Bahuns is strongly visible. These two groups generally live in different parts of the village and interact with each other in limited situations, although interaction is stronger between the Tharu male elites and Bahun males. Children and teenagers sometimes attend the same schools, but groups of friends are seldom ethnically mixed. Tharu women interact with Bahun women through the local microfinance groups, but women also prefer to stay within their own linguistic communities, where they feel more comfortable.

Tharu people define themselves as *ādivāsi*—indigenous inhabitants of the land. The main economic activity of the Chitwan Tharu has traditionally been agriculture and cattle herding. With large amounts of land available for a small population,

Tharus in the past never encountered the same problem of land scarcity that burdened hill people. Before the Nepali state—with help of US international development practitioners—implemented a land registration system, Tharus used to live semi-nomadic lifestyles and practiced shifting cultivation (McLean 1999). Immigration, resettlement, and the land reform policies of the 1960s changed land availability drastically.¹ The environmental transformation brought about by land reform upended traditional Tharu life in the area: as land became privately owned, Tharus were forced to shift to intensive farming, abandon their large herds, and forgo the grasses, reeds, and wood that made their houses and fashioned their daily lives (Robertson, 2018: 928).

After the influx of hill migrants, Tharus were also confronted with the loss of their social position to these newcomers, as they became a minority in their own land (Robertson, 2018:925). These newcomers considered Tharus to be backward farmers and people of the jungle—*jangli* in Nepali—in relation to the educated, more business oriented Bahuns. Despite the fact that the hierarchical differences between these two groups are rooted in the caste system, few Tharus regard Bahuns as spiritually superior to themselves (Müller-Böker 1999). As the anthropologist Arjun Guneratne states “[Tharus] supposed backwardness is believed by most Tharus, and in particular the young, to stem not from inferiority in the ritual sphere, but in the economic [...] not because they are of low ritual status in relation to Brahmins but because they are uneducated” (1999: 165). The desire of the Tharu community to improve their social status, therefore, is expressed as a need to better educate the community, and to move away from traditional farming into more business-oriented activities.

Education, however, has done little to improve the perceived status of Tharus in this community, and international labor migration has come to fill the vacuum. Migration is seen by many Tharus as an opportunity to improve their family's

economy. As Birendra, a 23-year old man from Pipariya who was waiting to get his work visa to go to Malaysia explained to me: “We have no jobs here, but we also have no education. We are poor, we don't go to good schools, and we don't have good jobs. If I work abroad, I can make better money than in Nepal, and it will be better for my family.” Motivated by the desire to improve the socio-economic status of their families, and as such their groups' standing within Pipariya's society, more and more young Tharus are venturing abroad in search of employment.

Economic advancement through migration has become so ingrained in Pipariya's imaginary, that almost every Tharu household has at least one member abroad. In 2015, when this research was conducted, a total of 71 houses (or 40% of all the houses in the village) had a migrant member. Eighty percent of the migrant-sending households in Pipariya belonged to the Tharu community. Of the 57 Tharu households who had members abroad, 48 were working in the Gulf countries or Malaysia. Only 9 Tharus who left Pipariya did so in order to study, and sometimes also work, in Australia, the United States, or Europe. Tharus, therefore, are mainly participating in what has become a commonplace practice in South Asia, migrating to Malaysia and the Arab Gulf states for temporary labor.

Nepali out-migration: Searching abroad the development that cannot be found at home

Internal migration from the hills into Chitwan and Pipariya and the lack of well-paying jobs available in the area, combined with the opportunities created by foreign markets to work abroad, has interested many young Tharu men to migrate abroad. While this is a relatively recent trend among Chitwan Tharus, international labor migration is by no means a new phenomenon in Nepal. Migration and remittances have a long history in Nepal. Since the nineteenth century, large numbers of Nepali men have moved abroad to work for the British and later the Indian Army as

Gurkha soldiers. For many decades, people have also descended from the hills of Nepal into India to work seasonally as manual labor, field workers—including in the tea plantations of Darjeeling—, security guards, domestics and low-level public servants.

Since the 1990s, however, a different kind of migration started to boom. After the armed conflict, with democratization and the liberalization of the economy, the Nepali government has taken active steps to be a part of the movement of workers into the expanding economies of East and South East Asia, as well as the Arab Gulf region (Graner and Gurung 2003). There are many internal factors that motivated the Nepali government's decision. The development and foreign aid fever of the twentieth century created dependency without truly addressing any of Nepal's institutional flaws (Dixit 1997). The national economy did not expand outside of the agriculture sector, which itself remained largely underdeveloped. Even today, 70 percent of Nepal's population subsists on agriculture. This economic reality, aggravated by insufficient jobs outside of the agrarian sector to employ the rapidly growing young population and a failing educational system, motivated the Nepali state to facilitate access to international labor markets and rely on remittances as a pivotal tool for community and national development.

In 1985 the Nepali government promulgated the first Foreign Employment Act, which was later amended in 2007 to reflect new dynamics of labor migration. This act enabled the establishment of labor recruiting agencies throughout the Kathmandu valley and other parts of Nepal. These agencies work with employer companies from Gulf countries and Malaysia connecting Nepali workers with jobs abroad, following the regulations of a system known in the Arab Gulf as 'kafala system.' Through this system, migrant workers need to have an in-country employer sponsor their visa and legal status. In several cases, this also implies that the employer keeps the worker's passport while the worker is under the contract.

This kind of migration is relatively short-term and circular, as most men are hired on two to three-year contracts. At the end of the contract, the workers are sometimes given the option to continue working for the company or return to their home countries. Unfortunately, the process is plagued with corruption and fraud, and there are innumerable stories of Nepali migrants who have been deceived and exploited, leaving them without passports, at the mercy of greedy corporations, and unprotected by international labor legislations.

Scholars have argued against the risks of relying on migration and international remittances as the main source of economic development for a country. In his critique of the remittances-to-development agenda—an agenda in which the Nepali state gladly partakes—sociologist Matt Bakker notes that migration and development policy have proved fertile terrain for actors across multiple scales of political authority to respond to recurring preoccupations with global poverty, inequality, and injustice with 'market-based solutions' that would extend rather than reverse neoliberal globalization (2015: 20). As such, the Nepali state is eager to participate in this international exchange of labor and money, in an effort to improve its position within the capitalist world-system. However, in a context of unequal power relationships, where corporations have little incentives to protect the well-being of temporary workers and nation states cannot aptly defend the rights of their workers abroad, Nepali migrants are often left at the mercy of their own ingenuity.

Back in Nepal, the overall perception is that migration is an opportunity for both the family and the nation. Given the lack of local well-paying jobs, the remittances that adult migrants are able to send turn a person who would otherwise be un- or under-employed into an income generator. Migration does provide a temporary solution to employment issues but cannot ensure solutions to other structural problems of the state. In a largely agrarian country, where agriculture is insufficient to support the rapidly increasing population

given the small amount of arable land available, migration and remittances are perceived by young men throughout Nepal—as well as their families—as the only reliable economic alternative. The Tharus of Pipariya, aware of the social and economic limitations they face in today’s Chitwan landscape, are also eager to participate in this international trend as an opportunity to provide upward social mobility for their families and their community.

Migrants’ wives: In reality and in the literature

It is a warm winter afternoon, and Reeta and I are sitting together by the water well. I have just finished doing laundry, and Reeta is washing her son’s clothes. Reeta, a charming Tharu woman, is about 27 years old and married into this household six years ago. Her husband has been working in Dubai since before they got married. He is only able to return to Nepal every two years, when he gets a two-month long vacation. In the six years they have been married, Reeta and her husband have lived together for a total of six months. I have been meaning to learn more about how she copes with her husband being abroad. After a few questions about his next visit to Nepal, and how long he would stay, I ask her about how she generally prepares for her husband’s departure.

She quietly responds: “Well, when a person is leaving for a trip, the family prepares a *pooja* where they fill two vases with water and place them on the floor by the door. Then the man who is leaving goes out from that door, and his father and mother give him *tika*. Then other relatives prepare garlands and hang them from his neck, and people cry and then the man leaves.” I noted the impersonal way she told the story, without mentioning her husband, talking in general terms about all the men who leave. Then she added, “But I never do it.” I asked her: “You never cry, or you never prepare the *pooja* for your husband?” “Of course I cry, a little bit!” she says “but I never give my husband *tika*.” “Why not?” I wondered. At this point Reeta gives me a glance that

indicates I should know better than to ask that question, a look she often gives me when I have been inquiring too much. She answers, nonetheless: “How many times has he come and gone, even before I came to this house? He doesn’t like it, so we just don’t do it.”

Talking to Reeta, I understood how commonplace it has become for Pipariya’s young men to migrate, to the point that no rituals or special celebration is needed if the migrant has already left several times. People in Pipariya have become accustomed to seeing their men leave. However, while migration is becoming increasingly popular and desirable amongst young men, leaving home in search of work is not expected of Tharu women. In Pipariya, there are very few women who have left the community for reasons other than marriage, and none of them are migrant workers. Female out-migration is not unheard of in Nepal, and it is in fact rather common among certain ethnic groups, such as the Tamang (Massey et al. 2010). Tharus, however, seem to be against the idea of women migrating for work. In conversation with me, a group of middle-aged Tharu men firmly stated that they strongly oppose the idea of women leaving the village to go work abroad like the men do. However, this does not mean that women remain in the shadows of migration. In fact, they are involved in both the financial choices that enable a young man to migrate, and the decision-making process of allocating the money men remit from abroad.

Migration has a visible impact on the village gender demographics: while it is easy to see women of all ages, you will mostly encounter young boys or older men in Pipariya. Male out-migration has had another impact on Pipariya’s social life: it is mainly women who are now at the front of the household. Several authors believe that male out-migration can lead to changes in the gender division of labor, which, in turn, leads to greater mobility, autonomy, and overall empowerment of women by providing new roles, skills, opportunities, and decision-making power over the use of

resources (Connell 1984; Bever 2002; Chant and Craske 2003; Quisumbing 2003). After the male figure leaves the household, new spaces open up for women to reconfigure their roles and responsibilities. Sadiqi and Ennaji (2004), and Hondagneu-Sotelo (1992) suggest that male migration helps increase women's autonomy and self-esteem by expanding their role and responsibilities in the household beyond the traditional ones. Gender roles and responsibilities are culturally situated, and ethnographic studies allow us to perceive the particular changes each community experiences.

The impact of migration on women within Nepal is dependent on the position of women in society (Adhikari and Hobley 2015), but more importantly, the position of women within the household. Nepal is a patriarchal, patrilineal society, where women are expected to stay at home and take care of children while men move about to fulfill their role as breadwinners (Bohra and Massey 2009:640). Chitwan Tharus, like many other groups in Nepal, also practice patrilocality, where newly married couples reside within or nearby the husband's parents' house. This often means that after their husbands migrate, women find themselves relatively isolated inside their in-laws' household. It takes several years for a new daughter-in-law to be able to enjoy certain privileges—such as a reduced workload—and it is generally after the birth of their first son that women begin to be more accepted by senior women in their husband's household (Bennett 1983). The situation of women changes once the household splits, the husband moving away from his parents' compound and building his own house.

Regardless of whether the household is still joint or it has split, Tharu women continue to be mostly immersed in the realm of the household, and define their social roles within the closed, private space of the family. In her analysis of female land ownership in South Asia, Bina Agarwal conceptualizes family dynamics as a “complex matrix of relationships in which there is ongoing (often implicit) negotiation,

subject to constraints set by gender, age, kinship, and tradition” (Agarwal 1994:54). As such, she considers women to be constantly “bargaining” their positionality within the household. Women's access to resources, and ownership of these resources, delimits the amount of autonomy they will have in the private sphere—the family—and also the public sphere—the village.

This bargaining over power that women do within their household has also been studied amongst different Tharu communities. Ulrike Müller-Böker (1999) points out that Chitwan Tharu men and women interact with one another more freely than the orthodox Hindu groups. In his study of Tharu women in the Western Nepal valley of Dang, Drone Rajaure states that Tharu women “are not mere shadows of their husbands, as they are in Hindu society. A husband tries to keep his wife happy and satisfied, otherwise she might take another husband or run away to her parents” (Rajaure 1981:179). The status of Tharu women across the Tarai is likely to vary—we can observe more conservative attitudes in the east, where Tharu society is more influenced by Hindu upper caste norms. However, there was likely more congruence between the Tharus of Dang and Chitwan in the past, and relatively more freedom for women. Rajaure's work can be a rough and ready indication of what life was like for Tharu women in Chitwan as well, before all of the changes introduced by malaria eradication.²

Despite these accounts, there is no actual privileged status of Tharu women over men. In traditional Chitwan Tharu culture, a wife may eat the remains of her husband's meal but not vice versa; both can eat together in the same room but not from the same plate, and the greeting following a long separation is performed in Hindu style, with the wife washing the feet of her husband and then drinking the water (Müller-Böker 1999:65). While these practices are fading away, the contradictions present in these interactions—occupying a secondary position while at the same time needing to be

satisfied—bring light to both the power and limitations that Tharu women experience within their households today.

International labor migration in the 21st Century further complicates the social and familial boundaries that women navigate, both in Chitwan and across Nepal. In her analysis of social transformation in Nepal, Yadav (2017) analyzes women participation in public spaces after the country's decade long civil war making the argument that due to the rupture of restrictive gender norms, the conflict helped transform gender social relations, although these achievements are often overlooked during peacetime. We can argue that international labor migration is adding to the rapid pace in which women's roles are transforming throughout Nepal after the conflict, providing a space for women to take ownership of more private and public resources, which in turn impacts the participation of women in society at large. International labor migration and the financial tools associated with it—remittances and microcredits—require the participation of not only the men who migrate, but also of the women who are left behind, asking women to contribute towards economic household decisions in ways that differ from the past.

Because migration is such a crucial activity for many Nepali households, we would expect the experiences of migrants' wives to be better depicted in Nepal and in migration studies. Women like Susmita and Reeta, who endure the responsibilities of the household alone while navigating multiple constraints and expectations of being a woman in Nepal, deserve to be recognized as key actors in the management of household finances in cases where their husbands have migrated. However, as Shrestha and Conway (2001) express it, migrants' wives exist in shadow—in the shadow of their husbands, in the shadow of the mountains, and in the shadow of the academic discourse on migration.

***Mahilā samuha* microfinances: Women's contribution to migration**

As I walk around Pipariya in the dry winter months, Tharu women are everywhere but in the shadows of this village. They are visible and active at all times of the day. Early in the morning, as they feed the cattle, sweep the courtyard, and prepare the morning meal. During the day, as they wash clothes, talk to each other, make stools, weave carpets, or attend a meeting for the local women's group. In the evening, as they prepare dinner for their families, or sweep the courtyard once again before the sun sets; and late at night as they talk by the fire, joined by the other members of the household.

International labor migration, however, has provided relevance to the spaces that Tharu women occupy in the public sphere of Pipariya's society. The emergence of women's microcredit groups, for example, has had a great impact on women's access to financial capital, since they are now able to easily access loans from other community members. As I dug deeper into the mechanisms through which Tharu men finance their international migration, it became clear that more and more Tharu women are using their capacity to obtain loans to contribute towards their husbands' migratory expenses. During my fieldwork I interviewed seventeen men who had recently returned from working in Arab Gulf countries or Malaysia. Twelve of them had partially financed their migration through these women's microcredit loans.

In Nepal, women's microcredit groups are known as *mahilā samuha* or 'women's group'. Purnima is a woman in her forties who has been part of the *mahilā samuha* since she arrived in the village after marriage. She lives near the center of the Tharu village, and is an active member of three different *mahilā samuha*. Despite being part of them for so many years, Purnima is unable to tell me exactly how long these groups have been around, but estimates they were created around twenty years ago.

Purnima explains that the *mahilā samuha* meets the first day of every month, and that day all the women are supposed to give 50 rupees to the microcredit fund. That day, those women who have taken loans also pay their monthly interest, and families who need to take new loans approach the *samuha* with the request. Regardless of what the money is used for, or for whose benefit within the household, according to the organization's rules it must always be the woman who is part of the *samuha*, the one to request the money and become responsible for the loan. Purnima also explains that there is more than one group in the village; there are around three or four, but not every household is represented in each group.

Purnima believes that being part of these groups has taught Tharu women many things. She said: “we are not educated, many of us older ones did not go to school, so we did not understand money, we only spoke our language, Tharu *bhāsā*. But now we understand money, we know the price of things, we can go to the bazaar and not be afraid or ashamed.” What Purnima describes as empowerment is also reinforced by a perceived trustworthiness from the men in the village. Men whose wives or mothers have taken loans from the *mahilā samuha* admit that there were also ‘men’s groups’ that worked just like the women’s groups. However, men did not pay the money back on time, so their groups shut down while the women’s thrived. One young man used the English word ‘transparent’ to describe the *mahilā samuha*. These microcredit groups have not only had the capacity to expand women’s financial capital, they have also had an impact on their social capital, probably because women are perceived in Pipariya’s society as reliable managers of household assets.

Unfortunately, a positive social perception does not necessarily imply that women have power to decide what should be done with the loans they have agreed to take. In his analysis of women’s microcredit entities in rural Bangladesh, Aminur Rahman quotes Benería and Roldán’s assertion

that microfinance may increase women’s income but this increased income does not imply changing women’s position in the household in terms of power and authority (Rahman 1999: 16, citing Benería and Roldán 1987). The strongest criticism of microfinance, supported by Rahman, is that rural women are vulnerable to the patriarchal ideology expressed most obviously in prevailing social norms and intra-household gender relations (Rahman 1999: 149). More recent criticisms of women microfinance state that we need to be careful about the unintended consequences of these interventions. Rather than transforming unequal social relations, political and socio-economic structures, these interventions aim at providing women individual access to assets and resources without challenging the social, economic and political patriarchal system to which they are subjected (Buisson et al, 2022). In the particular case of Pipariya, women are not using these loans for their own individual benefit; they are taking them to benefit another member of the household, or to contribute towards an enterprise that is believed to benefit the household as a whole. Women in Pipariya agree to their families’ request to take out a loan to send their sons or husbands abroad; however, it is extremely difficult to assess whether they are doing so out of their own initiative, or they are obeying what is socially expected of them as women and as wives in a patriarchal system.

Looking beyond this structural limitation, however, it is important to remember that Purnima believes that participating in the *mahilā samuha* has given Tharu women confidence to engage in different economic activities outside of the household. Following Agarwal’s argument (1994) that resource management is a source of empowerment for rural women, it is also plausible that participation in microcredit entities has expanded the autonomy of women both within the private and the public sphere. Through accessing microcredit loans, women now have a stronger participation in the men’s migratory process. This would be a powerful claim supporting the argument that migration

is not simply the decision of the migrant, but rather an activity in which the entire household participates and as such has the capacity to transform individuals beyond the migrant.

The fact that a woman assumes the burden of a loan in order to contribute to her son's or husband's migration establishes a commitment between the two. The men I interviewed who had partially financed their travels with microcredits, said that the reason why they stayed abroad initially was to be able to send money that would allow their families to pay the *mahilā samuha* loan. Sandeep, a 37-year-old migrant who worked in Dubai for only eight days, was part of a group of Nepali migrants who protested against unfair working conditions and managed to return to Nepal before the contract's end date. Upon returning, Sandeep was immediately set up by the manpower agency with a job in Malaysia. He confessed that the main reason he returned abroad so quickly was because his wife had taken out a loan from the local *mahilā samuha*, and they needed to repay it. Microcredit entities have expanded the role of stay-behind women in a male-dominated migration process. Women contribute to migration by assuming the responsibility of these loans, while men commit to remit money home in order to pay it back.

Remittance management: a possible empowerment tool

The intention to migrate and send money back home, however, has a bigger goal than that of covering the costs of the loan. As explained before, remittances are the vehicle through which the Tharu community is attempting to achieve upward social mobility. Constructing houses, educating children, and acquiring certain consumer goods such as computers, TVs, or even motorcycles are some examples of how families decide to invest the remittance money. Because remittances are an important asset for the family's financial development, the person entitled to receiving that money becomes subsequently important within the household.

Women have the capacity to manage the remittance money; the space, however, is not always provided. The internal organization of the family will influence the autonomy of women, how much access they have to the remittance money, and how much decision-making power they have within the household. The ideal Hindu joint family is characterized as an extended household, comprising two or more generations of a patrilocal family, with the oldest active male as the household head (Agergaard 1999). The household head's wife, sons, daughters-in-law, unmarried daughters and grandchildren form this joint family. Although households are based on some kind of family and kinship relationship, households are subject to continuous changes (Agergaard 1999). Disputes arise, and sometimes the sons decide to split up the joint household, dividing the land and building individual houses for their nuclear families.

Tharus pride themselves in not splitting households as often as Bahuns do, and of having more harmonious family relationships. In Pipariya, however, there is only one household left of considerable size, with a total of fifteen members, including the father, and his four sons with their respective wives and children all living in the same compound. When I interviewed the household head, he expressed pride in having such a large joint family, with no desire to split. On two different occasions, however, when I spoke to the village's young men in their early thirties, they recognized that lately, Tharu families are splitting faster than before. One of them believes that labor migration plays a role; from his perspective, once the husband starts making money abroad, the wife will try to convince him to split from the household so that she can directly benefit from the remittances without having to go through the in-laws. Joint and split households expect different family members to become recipients of remittances, and there are different kinds of tensions that arise from each situation.

In their study on the impact of remittances on gender relations, Adhikari and Hobley (2015) observed that in joint households, where other male members of the household or the migrant's mother are the ones entitled to remittances, wives of migrant husbands become economically dependent on their relatives who receive the remittances, losing control over the resources. In cases where households had recently split from the joint household, there are tensions when the wife receives all the remittance and makes decisions about its use for the sole benefit of her nuclear household, with communities pressuring the wife for money and help because of a belief that their husbands are sending them sufficient remittances (Adhikari and Hobley 2015). Overall, women may find that their relationships with male relatives and with other women in their networks worsen because of tensions after their husbands migrate (Adhikari and Hobley 2015), tensions that are largely based on the entitlement to remittances.

In my interviews with migrant workers' wives, I asked about some of the challenges they faced after their husbands migrated. Women who still live in joint households focused on how difficult it was for them to have a voice of their own in the house, and how they were asked to do the hardest work. One in particular mentioned: "It is very hard when your husband is not around to talk to your father-in-law for you. Then it is like no one hears you." It is true that tensions would still exist if the husbands' stayed home, but the women I interviewed all seemed to believe that the presence of the husband mitigates some of the tension.

Remittances impact women differently in joint or split households because there is jealousy from those who are also members of the household but do not receive remittances. The tensions between young women and their in-laws have been thoroughly documented by Lynn Bennett in her ethnographic fieldwork in the hills of Nepal (1983). Bennett states that "probably the most common reason for a woman to encourage her husband to separate from

the joint family is the demanding presence of the *sasu* or mother-in-law" (1983). The stress of this relationship is sometimes also observed among the Tharus of Pipariya, and becomes particularly evident in cases where the migrant decides to send the money to his wife, despite his household not being split. Parents believe that they should be naturally entitled to remittance money. In a conversation I had with a group of Tharu men in their fifties, I learnt that they consider it useless to send the money to the wife, because she would spend it on herself and not share it with her parents-in-law. One man even said that generally, when the son sends the money to his wife, she would spend it on buying new clothes and running away with a new boyfriend, while the son is working hard abroad. When I asked a group of migrant workers' wives about this allegation, they complained about being unfairly accused by these men. From their perspective, they rightfully use the money to improve their children's education, to cover household, agricultural, and medical expenses, or cover the costs if their in-laws get sick. Who is right or wrong is not the question here; what matters is that remittances have contributed towards the already tense relationship between a migrant's wife and her parents-in-law.

Women who live in split houses and whose husbands are the household heads, have challenges that focus more on the difficulties of taking care of the fields and raising their children on their own. However, they overall agree that it is good for them not to have the pressure from other relatives inside the house. Sudha, for example, is a 33-year-old woman who has a son aged 17 and a daughter aged 13. Her husband left for Malaysia 10 years ago. He returns every two years, stays for a month and then goes back to work in Malaysia. A year before leaving for Malaysia, Sudha's husband acquired a small flour mill. After he left, Sudha has been in charge of running the mill. She is one of the very few women in the area in charge of businesses of any kind. One important thing about Sudha is that, though her husband is a Tharu man, she is a Bahun. Bahun women are relatively more

empowered than Tharu women, and are much more present than Tharu women in the public sphere. There are more Bahun women who work as teachers, even as accountants at local microcredit entities, roles that are beyond the reach of many Tharu women.

Sudha's words, however, reflect the feelings of all migrants' wives, regardless of caste or ethnicity. She told me how it was difficult at the beginning to be a woman in charge of the business, especially when it came to hiring men for work and telling them what to do. However, 10 years later, Sudha is the de facto owner of the mill. Three men work for her, and esteem her very highly. I could appreciate the interactions between Sudha and her workers while I was visiting the mill, interactions that were cemented in respect. Sudha explained to me: "I have my own work and I think that is good, all the other women who are alone should do like I do, the work in the fields is not a good kind of work, they should get their own things, their own work, and raise their kids well, do things well for their own family." Sudha feels independent and able to make decisions by herself, without having the interference of the extended family. She is considered a strong person in the community, and she is aware of this.

While remittances on their own have become important in changing women's roles, the amount of money migrants are able to remit from abroad is also relevant. When remittances are low, the workload of women increases. Women need to work more in the field and sometimes engage in wage labor in order to feed their families while at the same time pay the money-lenders for the loan taken before migrating (Kaspar 2005). When remittances are high, women's workload diminishes, and in certain cases they are even able to move out of agriculture into other kinds of work. In some cases, opting out of agriculture is perceived as a privilege; in others it is more of a necessity because of the low revenue obtained from the land. Sudha's is an example of families opting out of agriculture. In the case of this particular family,

once the household split, the land owned by the parents was divided among the three sons. Post-partition, the plots were really small, and that is why Sudha's husband decided to sell the land and acquire the mill. When asked about what she does with the remittance money that her husband sends, Sudha talked about using part of it to run the mill, especially when there is a technical problem. However, she focused on being able to send her children to prestigious English-language private schools, because the mill already provides income necessary for daily subsistence. She has also been able to expand the mill through the remittance money.

Sudha's story leads to the other important aspect impacted by migration: the decision-making power that women have in their communities. Studies on stay-behind women in other parts of Nepal have found that after male out-migration, women are relatively more active in decision making, especially in agricultural decisions such as what crops to grow, when to hire workers, when to go for wage labor themselves, when to rent in land and when to rent it out, and when to purchase livestock or engage in small sales (Maharjan et al. 2012). Women still consult their absent husbands about it, but they are the ones deciding how to spend the money. However, this empowerment is not yet permanent.

It is often assumed that the migration will be temporary and the husband will resume his role upon return (Kaspar 2005). Regardless of the absence of their husbands, women are still unable to make decisions regarding certain specific aspects of domestic life. The limited role of women in nonfarm investment can be attributed to traditional gender discrimination, where women are raised to follow decisions, not to make them (Maharjan et al. 2012). It is clear that women become de facto household heads although their husbands remain the formal household heads (Kaspar 2005). Overall, Maharjan (2012) concludes that stay-behind women tend to retreat to more passive roles when their husbands return from abroad. These conclusions match

the reality of Pipariya as well, where most Tharu women enjoy a limited freedom while managing the remittance money. However, once their husbands return from abroad, or if they receive pressure from their in-laws, women retreat to the shadows of traditional gender expectations.

Conclusion

As I get ready to leave Pipariya, I head over to Reeta's house to say goodbye. We have come to enjoy each other's company, and I owe to our conversations much of the conclusions I arrived at doing research in Nepal. We exchange gifts; I give her chocolate for her son, she gives me glass bracelets. "When you return next time, you will hopefully meet my husband," she says. Hope is always present in Reeta's eyes. Hope is also present in the eyes of all the women I have met in Pipariya. Hope that this is a sacrifice they are making to improve their lives, to ensure a better future for their children. Sadness is also present in these women's eyes. Sadness because they feel lonely, sadness because they do not want their husbands gone, and also sadness because despite their independence, there are many eyes that still control and criticize what they do, how they choose to spend the remittance money, and how they choose to spend their time. Women in Pipariya are fully aware that they navigate a complex space, torn between remaining obedient to their in-laws, or benefiting from their husbands' newly acquired wealth in a more selfish way.

Studies conducted in Nepal recognize the importance of migration as a way to improve household livelihood. This happens in the context of increased population pressure on resources, decline in resource base, and the need to consume modern amenities to express modernity through the generation of additional cash income (Macfarlane 1976; Adhikari 1996; Bishop 1998; Adhikari and Hobley 2015). It seems likely that migration will continue happening, and more and more Nepali households will become engaged in this kind of economic activity. As such, the key development issue

is to reduce the social and economic costs of migration and increase its returns for the migrants and those remaining at home (Thieme and Wyss 2005:89). There is, therefore, an urgent need to consider the changes in gender roles in the context of male out-migration in the economic development policies and strategies of Nepal (Maharjan et al. 2012).

As they reallocate remittances and household resources to enable their families to express modernity, women also find a space to manage finances, contributing to migration. Women, the main stay-behind actors in Pipariya, navigate traditional gender roles and cultural constraints as they expand their decision-making power. Unfortunately, there is still not enough evidence that women can maintain these newly acquired empowered roles. New forms of gender relations are struggling to emerge in rural and urban Nepal; more time must pass before we can discern to what extent the Tharu women of Pipariya have been able to redefine their autonomy, occupying the space that they well deserve in the community.

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Endnotes

1. For more on 1960s Nepal's land reform and its impact on Chitwan Tharus refer to Guneratne 1996 and 2002, and Robertson 2018.
2. Dr. Arjun Guneratne, in personal email communication regarding this topic. August 8, 2022.

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Special Section Research Article

Traditional healers in an age of the pharmacy and Covid-19: The case of Tharu Guruwa in Nepal

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Abstract

The *guruwa* have been a central part of Dangaura Tharu communities for many years, with various edicts referring to the role as far back as 1807. Within the existing literature, their role was conventionally defined as faith healers/shamans/Tharu cultural leaders. However, with the increasing influence of ‘western’ medicine as embodied by the exponential growth of pharmacies across Nepal, the role of the *guruwa* in Dangaura Tharu communities has evolved. In this article, we draw on several data sources including PhD fieldwork and subsequent research in a *kamaiya basti* in Kailali District, Nepal. Additionally, several interviews were conducted with *guruwa* in several Districts in 2020, to understand the ways that the *guruwa* are responding to Covid-19. It emerges that the Covid-19 pandemic constitutes a challenge as well as an opportunity to place the stature of the *guruwa* in Dangaura Tharu communities. Through analyzing the changes to the role of the *guruwa*, we consider the ways in which interactions with modernity are experienced and given meaning within Dangaura Tharu communities. We also explore the ways in which local modernities are shaped by specific histories and [Tharu] cultural practices. Finally, we consider what the future might look like for the *guruwa* in Dangaura Tharu communities, and how this critical role in the lives of many Dangaura Tharu communities might further adapt and evolve in the future. Ultimately, we illustrate that the role of the *guruwa* is at once both ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’.

Keywords

covid-19; Dangaura Tharu; Tharu community; guruwa; western and Tharu medicine

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Introduction

The *guruwa* have been part of Dangaura Tharu communities¹ for as long as anyone can remember, with various edicts referring to the role as far back as 1807 (Krauskopff and Meyer 2000:160). Whether they should be considered shamans, traditional healers or priests is not clear, as at different times they undertake parts of each of these roles. It is important to note that alongside the *guruwa*, there are other healers in Dangaura Tharu communities, including *baidawa* (ayurvedic or western medical doctor) and *surenya* (midwife) (Subedi 2019). However, in this article, we specifically consider evolutions in the role of the *guruwa* in Dangaura Tharu communities in Nepal as a consequence of modernity and the increasing influence of western medicine. This article considers tensions between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ health systems explored by Harper (2014) in Palpa district. Our analysis complicates simplistic binary oppositions relying on notions of the ‘tradition’ and ‘modern’ (Baudrillard 1987), to consider various interactions with modernity. This is explored through exploring the ways in which the ‘traditional’ role and place of the *guruwa* in Dangaura Tharu communities continues to evolve and find new ways to be transcend the ‘traditional’ and be at the same time ‘modern’. Interactions with modernity are shaped locally, and have been analyzed in a range of contexts such as Thailand (Klima 2009; Morris 2000), as well as in the context of Nepal (Pigg 1996; Pettigrew 2004, January; Carney and Rappleye 2011; Maycock 2012).

Our paper incorporates analysis of PhD fieldwork (of one of the authors, MM) and subsequent data collected between 2009-2017 in a *kamaiya basti* in Kailali district, far-west Nepal. This is complemented by interviews conducted with *guruwa* in 2020, facilitating an analysis of the ways in which the *guruwa* are responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, considered to be the biggest public health challenge of our time. Through analyzing the changing nature of the role of the *guruwa* we analyze what these changes illuminate about the ways

that Dangaura Tharu communities seek health advice and medicine and how this might provide insights into the impacts of ‘modernity’ among Dangaura Tharu. Our findings indicate that the *guruwa* remain a critical reference point in Dangaura Tharu communities, with the *guruwa* role evolving alongside wider changes in Dangaura society. This is evident in the creative responses to the Covid-19 pandemic that we explore in this paper.

Methods

Methodologically, our paper is based on ethnographic research undertaken in Kailali district in far-west Nepal in 2009 and shorter visits in 2011, 2014, and 2017 (Maycock 2011, 2012, 2014a, 2017, 2017a, b, 2014b, 2019). This eight-year timeframe has facilitated the reflection and refinement of initial insights into the changes in particular in a Dangaura Tharu *kamaiya* community in Kampur², Kailali district. Fieldwork was focused on generating the material for analysis through ethnographic methods, principally interviews and participant observation. These methods were focused on experiences of and testimony about the *kamaiya* system, the transition to freedom, and post-freedom experiences. During this fieldwork regular contact was made with a number of *guruwa* in this village and more widely in Kailali district, with one particular *guruwa* - the Kampur *guruwa* - the focus of multiple interviews and observations.

Complementing the above research, seven interviews were undertaken with *guruwa* in May 2020 in order to further reflect on changes to their role. All interviews were undertaken in Dangaura Tharu remotely using telephone, given that a lockdown was being implemented by the Nepali government at the time, making face to face research impossible. This posed particular methodological issues, given that many *guruwa* do not have mobile phones and reject such markers of modernity (Sharma 2014). More widely, our adapted methodology reflects issues faced in ethnographic research more widely where face to face methods and participant observation are

not considered safe or ethical (Fine and Abramson 2020; Schmid 2020).

Shamanism and the Literature on the Tharu *Guruwa*

Shamans have been a consistent focus within ethnographic research in indigenous communities in Nepal for many years (Höfer 1994; Müller-Ebeling et al. 2002; Nicoletti 2008; Peters 1981; Riboli 2000; Sagant 1996). Specifically concerning the Dangaura Tharu, Krauskopff and Meyer (2000: 160) indicate that there are various edicts referring to the role of the *guruwa* as far back as 1807. Conventionally, the *guruwa* were consulted about health matters, but occasionally they also advised about spiritual issues or concerns relating to Tharu culture. They also had roles and responsibilities in the Tharu traditional irrigation system. According to Guneratne, writing about the *guruwa* in Chitwan Tharu society:

The *gurau*³ is essentially a healer. When Tharus wish to draw an analogy between the *gurau* and a contemporary institution, they invariably compare him to a medical doctor. (Guneratne 1999: 12)

Guneratne states that the work of the *guruwa* goes beyond spiritual matters to include administering cures for diseases using various medicines:

The *gurau*'s work as a healer is not confined to intercession with gods and spirits to discover the cause of illness; the *gurau* also seeks to cure disease through the medicinal use of roots and herbs and other skills. (Ibid.: 13)

Subedi found that Nepalis often use herbal remedies and traditional healers before turning to modern or 'western' medicine:

[Modern medicine and health care] are only sought as a last resort, usually for the serious and persistent problems. (Subedi 2003: 155)

This indicates that traditional and modern forms of medicine are both used flexibly and interchangeably, indicating a medical plurality (Kleinman 1980; Pigg 1992, 1996; Subedi 2019). Although Subedi does not explore the reason, cost is an important influence here. Seeing a *guruwa* does not always incur a cost, whereas using modern medicine does. However, we are not sure that Subedi's claim regarding the primacy of faith healing across Nepal is applicable among the Tharu today, as certain changes are happening here in these communities that we explore below in relation to the position of the *guruwa* in Dangaura Tharu communities. Guneratne contradicts Subedi's position by indicating that many of the Tharu with whom he undertook research often turned first to western medicine, which is taking on greater significance in Dangaura Tharu communities (Guneratne 1999: 12). According to Guneratne, the two forms of medicine complement each other:

Women are likely to have more faith in the *gurau* than are men, particularly younger men with some education. Both men and women however will have recourse to both doctor and *gurau* to treat illness. (Guneratne 1999: 13)

Here, we see that increasing levels of education has an influence on ways in which the role of the *guruwa* is changing. Guneratne indicates that these gender differences apply within his field site in Chitwan specifically and that these differences are due to women being less exposed to outside influences as they are more rooted in the village, where the *guruwa* plays an important role. Men travel and migrate more and are more likely to be formally educated than women. However, this does not seem to be why the *guruwa* is exclusively a male role. One learns to become a *guruwa* by training with an existing *guruwa* for several years. The training is offered without charge and the *guruwa* cannot turn down anyone who asks for it. Women never approach the *guruwa* for training, as a female *guruwa* was inconceivable in Dangaura Tharu

communities. Younger generations of Tharu men show limited interest in becoming a *guruwa*. Consequently, the importance of the *guruwa* is being slowly eroded, particularly in relation to health; however, they seem to be becoming more involved in consultations about Tharu culture. This significant evolution of the *guruwa*'s role is analyzed in more detail below. The decline about *guruwa* being a source of guidance for health matters represents the decline of a certain vision of the Tharu body, as well as the associated ways of healing it:

Belief in the efficacy of the *gurau* is in decline among Tharu generally (but less so among women than among men). Nor are young men interested in taking up the calling. (Guneratne 1999: 14)

Alongside the shifts in religious practice outlined above there is also a decline in the importance of the *guruwa*, in particular concerning the rituals they are traditionally expected to perform on occasions such as marriages and deaths. Guneratne states that where life cycle rituals are concerned, Tharus will call on the *Bahun*; where illness and 'shamanistic' work is concerned, they summon the *guruwa*:

The balance of ritual power has shifted in the direction of the *Bahun* and the cultural tradition he represents, as Tharu society has become more Nepalized (and thus hinduised). The *gurau* on the other hand, like the tiger, has become a threatened species in Chitwan. (Ibid.: 20)

Bahun priests area available in the Terai all year, due to the eradication of malaria, and the associated clearing of forests. These changes in ritual power had a profound impact not just on Tharu hunting and gathering practices but also on cosmological considerations.

Maycock has further analyzed the role of the *guruwa*, complementing Guneratne's analysis, but using the concept of masculinity to analyze their role in post-Maoist

People's War Nepal (Maycock 2012, 2014a, 2019). This research considers issues of embodiment and the performances of masculinity of the *guruwa* within the context considered in this paper of changing modernities in Tharu Kamaiya communities. This is the only research to explicitly consider the importance of performances of masculinity on the role of *guruwa*. In a substantial text, Sarbahari (2012) outlines in some detail the role of the *guruwa* within a wider framework of analyzing Tharu spiritual knowledge. This book is the conclusion of a study on Tharu Guruwa System (2011 - 2012) in Deukhuri, Nepal. Sarbahari states that the Tharu people perform their rituals through *guruwa*, which is different than Hindu Brahmin communities, with the *guruwa* also having an important role in the management of traditional Tharu irrigation systems. However, in recent years the Tharu are increasingly utilizing Hindu Brahmins for their ritual ceremonies, increasingly marginalizing the *guruwa* system in Dangaura Tharu communities. This study outlines Sarbahari's views of the working process of the *guruwa* healing system in Deukhuri valley. Before western medicine was imported into Nepal, no alternates to the *guruwa* were found in Dangaura Tharu communities. Therefore, before the introduction of western medicine, *guruwa* had significant respect and prestige within Tharu society. Sarbahari indicates that the economic status of the *guruwa* is poor, and there are few Tharu young people deciding to become a *guruwa*. This is indicative of the wider decline in the influence of the *guruwa* in Dangaura Tharu communities. Within the theoretical framing of medical pluralism, Subedi (2019) builds on the notion that the *guruwa* and the folk medicine that they administer is in decline and is situated at the bottom of State hierarchies of medicine. Cumulatively, the existing literature relating to the role of the *guruwa* within Dangaura Tharu communities outlined in this section suggest interactions with modernity at multiple levels. There is a recurring theme cutting across the literature that relates to a decline in the influence of the *guruwa* and of Tharu specific traditional approaches to

health and healing. It is within this context that this article is situated, a context within which the Covid-19 pandemic emerges as constituting a further subversion of the role of the *guruwa*. This resonates with research about the *guruwa* by Krauskopff and Meyer (2000) that explored the political importance of the *guruwa* in Rana and pre-Rana times in Nepal. This was a consequence of the *guruwa* having the knowledge to control both wild animals and evil spirits, they were key to opening up the Terai. Therefore, the changes in the role of the *guruwa* is part of a longer historical trajectory for Tharu shamans that has been an erosion in status, as both science and modern bureaucratic forms of governance have combined to erode their standing.

Modernity in Dangaura Tharu communities

In this section, we first define what we mean by modernity and interactions with modernity and consider how other researchers in Nepal have developed this concept, as this is critical for shaping the analysis of the data that follows. This section will illustrate how the approach that is taken to modernity in this article illuminates aspects of the evolution in the role of the *guruwa* that we subsequently explore, where this role becomes at the same time both ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’. The importance of modernity for this article relates to a specific understanding of the influences and changes in Dangaura Tharu communities in Nepal.⁴ This is a constant evolving and shifting process, throughout this article we consider a range of interactions between modernity and the role of the *guruwa* that illustrate change and continuity in both. More widely, this facilitates an exploration of the ways in which interactions with modernity are a critical part of the changes in the role of the *guruwa* in Dangaura Tharu communities that are the focus of this article. In order to provide a starting place for considering various aspects of modernity, we first consider Giddens’ perspective:

Modernity is a double-edged phenomenon. The development of modern

social institutions has created vastly greater opportunities for human beings to enjoy a secure and rewarding existence than in any type of pre-modern system. But modernity also has a sombre side that has become very important in the present century, such as the frequently degrading nature of modern industrial work . . . (Giddens 1991: 7)

In some senses the understanding of modernity above, and the transition Giddens mentions from pre-modern systems, would correspond with multiple changes in Dangaura Tharu communities that to varying degrees come together and are shaped by the evolution of the role of the *guruwa*. However, there are no straightforward interactions and modernity and the ways in which they illustrate that the role of the *guruwa* has and is evolving. In relation to bonded labor specifically, while the *kamaiya* system was abolished in 2000, what this means for transitions to modernity is in question.

While significant changes are evident in the lives of many Tharu following such as end of the *kamaiya* system and the Maoist People’s War, we argue in this article that these events do not in fact represent a clear juncture or ‘break’⁵ between pre-modernity and modernity as the interactions between Dangaura Tharu communities and modernity are more complicated and nuanced than this might account for. Similarly, while the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic are currently unclear, that this might in fact strengthen the role of ‘traditional’ healers such as the *guruwa* particularly in a context within which ‘modern’ or western medicine is seen to be ineffective, and modernity and the connectivity that come with it the cause of the pandemic. This reflects a questioning of any assumed links between pre-modernity and modernity and specific events such as the Maoist People’s War.

Before considering the interactions between modernity and the role of the *guruwa*, we now outline what modernity means more broadly in Nepal. In this section we focus

on the local contours of modernity that are influenced by mainstream development process and discourse. This illustrates the influence of aspects of development on certain aspects of Dangaura Tharu communities in relation to health, which we discuss below. We focus here on Pigg's research on various aspects of modernity, although many other researchers have investigated aspects of modernity in Nepal, including Adams (1998), Ahearn (2001; 2004), Fisher (1990), Guneratne (1999, 2002), Harper (2014), Liechty (2003, 2010) and Ortner (1999). We are focusing on Pigg (1992, 1996, 2001) for a number of reasons, but principally because her work focuses on the development process in a framework of changing attitudes to shamanism (something we consider in more detail below in relation to the *guruwa* who perform a type of shamanic role within Dangaura Tharu communities). Pigg's research indicates that there are particular associations made in Nepal between development and modernity, which help to shape how modernity is understood in Nepal. For Pigg, modernity:

...is quite literally a worldview: a way of imagining both space and people through temporal idioms of progress and backwardness. (Pigg 1996: 161)

For Pigg (1992, 1996), development in Nepal is synonymous with modernity and the development process carries modernity with it (cf. Carney and Rappleye 2011). Pigg reflects this position in a nuanced way that opens up a space for consideration of how modernity is shaped locally:

... development establishes an ideological encounter in which universalist notions of progress and modernity meet locally grounded social visions. (Pigg 1992: 492)

She continues:

Embedded in the Nepali usage of *bikas* (development) is what we call an ideology of modernization: the representation of society through an implicit scale of social progress. (Ibid.: 499)

The relevance of Pigg's perspective on modernity is not that modernity is simply being absorbed into Nepali society, but that modernity is being transformed as it unfolds locally. Critically, for this paper, Pigg indicates that within Nepal Shamans are caught up in the meanings of modernity (Pigg 1996). We take this perspective in this paper through exploring not just the local contours of modernity in Dangaura Tharu communities, but also Pigg's analysis of how these local modernities become critical for the way that Tharus (and others) interact. Modernity/development is given meaning and reformed locally in specific settings to create 'alternative, interactive modernities' (Appadurai 1996, 65). By analyzing the evolution of the *guruwa* role, this article offers a unique insight into Tharu modernities, themes also explored by Harper in research in Palpa district (2014). In this article we are advocating for a deeper and longer analysis, considering the gradual evolution of change in Dangaura Tharu communities, that the concept of modernity we have outlined in this section helps to analyze. The broader social change and role of the *guruwa* in Dangaura Tharu communities provides a unique perspective on these wider debates.

The Kampur Guruwa

One of the authors [MM] spent some time with the *guruwa* in Kampur *basti*⁶ and observed him practicing, mainly in 2009. His practice mainly consisted of minor rituals to alleviate minor aches and pains such as backache and headache among others. The rituals were designed to make the *budh* (ghost or witch) leave the patient and thus alleviate the pain, and refer to a Tharu-specific cosmology (cf. Guneratne 1999; McDonough 1984). The *guruwa* are always male and always elderly because, as an elderly man in Kampur *basti* told me "All the *guruwa* are men, as men are good at this. Look at the pharmacist, too." This points to a significant continuity of gender-specific roles of authority and influence, across diverse forms of medicine. The quote above also points to an influential

manifestation of modernity within Kampur, a the nearby pharmacy and the drugs and advice available there, resonating with other studies that have analyzed the impacts of cross-border medical travel in Nepal about modernity (Dahal 2022). To return to Pigg (1992), the influence and prominence of the pharmacy and western medicine in Kampur, is a manifestation of progress and modernity. If the *guruwa* didn't adapt and change in response, they would become increasingly peripheral within Dangaura Tharu communities.

The majority of the *bastis* and Tharu villages that MM visited in Kailali had at least one *guruwa*, who might provide services for a number of villages. In many instances, these were elderly men who were accorded a certain level of respect in each village due to their knowledge of spiritual and health matters. The wider Tharu community often referred to *guruwa* as being highly knowledgeable about Tharu customs. This was respected in each *basti*, particularly given the revival of pride in Tharu customs resulting from the Tharuhat movement in Nepal in the post Peoples War era (Maycock 2011). However, the *guruwa* were rarely involved in politics as such matters are seen as largely incompatible with their focus on health and spiritual concerns.

MM met the *guruwa* in Kampur on many occasions in 2009 (and once in 2014). He may have been the oldest man in Kampur (although no one knew for sure). As one of the more prominent people in the *basti*, it was important for MM to meet and spend time with him to secure a sort of approval to undertake research in the *basti*. In Kampur he seemed to be uniformly respected, and when he walked around the *basti*, people acknowledged him unlike anyone else and watched what he was doing with interest. They seemed to accept his behavior, which was sometimes eccentric and different, as he was a man who knew things that the other villagers did not, in particular a certain interpretation of Tharu culture and history. In a way the *guruwa's* role constitutes a specific form of cultural literacy

(Bourdieu 1977) that is intertwined with older gendered forms of Tharu identity. He dressed much like anyone else of his age in the *basti* and lived with his family, although he seemed detached from them in a way. He told MM that he was very focused on Tharu spiritual matters and that his family were less important to him. Perhaps because of how young and old villagers viewed and talked about him with reverence, there was something different about this man.

The multiple performances that coalesce to form the position of the *guruwa* correspond to a specific attribute of masculinity and spirituality. *Guruwa* in general represent a specific form of masculinity and masculine power in the *bastis* and were particularly targeted by Maoist cadre during the People's War (PW).⁷ The Kampur *guruwa* told me that this was a particularly difficult time for him, as Maoist cadres had beaten him up more than once, and it had been difficult for him to practice his rituals openly during the PW. This illustrates the importance and prominence of the *guruwa* at that time: they represented a certain type of spiritual challenge to the form of Maoism that the PLA advocated. Maoists are anti-religious, and spiritual leaders such as the *guruwa* represented a 'valid' target during the PW. To a degree the focus on the *guruwa* by the PLA illustrates the extent to which the PLA didn't view the *guruwa* as simply having a role of the past, but that this is a role that has relevance in the current as well as the future.

The Kampur *guruwa* drank and smoked much like the other men in the *basti*, although like other men his age, he never went to local drinking dens. There were certain aspects of his behavior that corresponded with more mainstream performances of masculinity in the *basti*, although he on different on spiritual and health matters. When MM asked him why he had decided to become a *guruwa*, he said that he had always been interested in spiritual matters, and particularly in his (and wider) pan-Tharu heritage. The timing of his becoming a *guruwa* is interesting: he had decided to take the training when

he was no longer able to work as much as he had previously. His body and physical capital seemed to have been profoundly affected by his many years of bonded labor in the *kamaiya* system. One could see, in his frail body, the hardship of extremely long hours of demanding work and a poor diet over many years. He told MM that being a *guruwa* enabled him to transcend the negative and lasting physical results of being a bonded laborer. His focus on spiritual matters helped him to replace the negative implications of his damaged body with the more positive and less physically demanding role of a *guruwa*. This is an variation on Leder's (1990) view that the body is taken for granted, or disappears, until aging and/or ill health bring it more strongly into focus. This *guruwa* responded to the changed appearance of his body through ageing and ill health by focusing on spirituality, in an effort to make his body disappear once more. It was unclear whether he was successful in this, but he certainly wanted to give the impression that he was full of vigor and energy in public situations, most of which he shaped through his role as a *guruwa*. According to him, this energy was a direct result of his becoming a *guruwa* and embracing his Tharu heritage.

Over the course of a number of conversations, MM came to see how this *guruwa* located himself and was situated amongst various locally formed hierarchies and forms of cultural capital. His position initially indicated that the *guruwa* represents a counter discourse to Hindu forms of spirituality, that have a significant influence with Dangaura Tharu communities (Maslak 2003; Rajaure 1982; Skar 1995), alongside Buddhism and Tharu spiritualities (Rajaure 1982). However, after further examination this appeared not to be the case. This is a consequence of the instances in which the *guruwa's* performance of spirituality referred to Hindu spirituality (for example, in the ways he positioned himself as a spiritual reference point in the *basti*) but these performances didn't subvert the hegemonic status of Hindu spirituality that was evident throughout the *basti* through posters and statues of Hindu deities

in all houses. Here MM is concerned with the local level of hegemonic spirituality, a level at which Hinduism is hegemonic and therefore the reference point for some (but not all) performances of spirituality by the *guruwa*. Despite this, there are some significant disconnections that relate not only to differences in the performance of certain religious practices but also to other performances and practices (such as drinking and smoking), that appear to have little to do with certain types of Hindu spirituality.

When MM discussed with the Kampur *guruwa* the inroads that Hindu religious practices have made into the Dangaura Tharu communities, as Guneratne mentions above with reference to Chitwan, he seemed ambivalent about this. The Kampur *guruwa* also seemed ambivalent about 'western' forms of medicine as represented by the local pharmacy (or *medical*) and district hospital in Dhangadhi⁸. This was something that had largely displaced a key historical aspect of the *guruwa* role, that of healer and is an influential manifestation of modernity across Nepal (Dahal 2022). It was evident that in most instances the people of Kampur *basti* did not go to the *guruwa* in relation to health issues, but far more frequently visited the pharmacy in the adjacent village (this was observed throughout my fieldwork). If there was a more serious health issue that needed attention, villagers went to the local health center or the district hospital in Dhangadhi. The Kampur *guruwa* reacted to these changes in the use of health services and advice by re-orientating their role as cultural reference points and arbiters of Dangaura Tharu cultural practice. This we argue is the critical area where we can observe the impacts of modernity (in this instance reflected in pharmacies and use of western medicine more widely) on the role of the *guruwa*, providing an insight into the wider interactions with modernity in Dangaura Tharu communities. Such changes have been explored in other contexts in Nepal, in particular in reference to Ayurvedic medicine (Cameron 2010, 2008), but they have not been considered in Dangaura Tharu communities until now. Ultimately, it would have been

inconceivable in previous generations that rural Dangaura Tharu communities such as those in Kampur would have sought health information and healing from any other source than the *guruwa*. In particular younger generations in places such as Kampur are not using the *guruwa* in these ways; if they consult him, it is to clarify cultural issues.

Having considered the *guruwa* in Kampur *basti* and the ways in which this role has evolved in response to an increasing influence of Hinduism in Dangaura Tharu communities as well as western forms of medicine as interactions with of modernity locally, we now move on to analyze more contemporary evolutions in the role of the *guruwa* in 2020.

The Role of the Guruwa in 2020

Complementing the above section, a number of interviews were undertaken with seven *guruwa* located in multiple districts in 2020. On average, the *guruwa* interviewed had 30 years experience, focusing on religious roles with partial or secondary healing roles within their communities. The *guruwa* discussed a number of particular areas of expertise, including infertility, menstruation problems, fever, headaches, toothaches, epilepsy, snake and scorpion bites and general health problems. All seven *guruwa* were asked to outline their current role. Responses were diverse, reflecting differences in the role and stature of the *guruwa*. Responses included a focus on community and notions of bad or evil spirits:

My role is focused on controlling or defending my village from evil spirits that had been causing harm.

A *guruwa*'s role is focused on the prevention all kinds of bad and evil in Dangaura Tharu communities.

The majority of responses related to the *guruwa*'s role in relation to *puja*⁹ within Dangaura Tharu communities:

I worship as the head *guruwa* at community *puja*.

I am a normal *guruwa* therefore I do not have big responsibilities for community *puja*.

My responsibility is to worship *charai puja, asadhi puja, hareri puja, nikasi puja, lawangi puja* in the community and also worship individual *puja* too, if any households request this.

There was very little discussion of health-related matters, or anything to do with what Guneratne identified as the central role of the *guruwa* as a 'healer' or the *guruwa* being analogous to the role of a medical doctor (Guneratne 1999: 12). These comments then consolidate the notion that the *guruwa*'s role has evolved substantially in recent years and is currently far removed from how it was conventionally viewed. This we argue is a consequence of the interactions with modernity (in this instance embodied by pharmacies and western medicine) in Dangaura Tharu communities. All of the *guruwa* interviewed were asked about how their role had changed over the years. The availability of western forms of medicine was a consistent theme in these responses, indicating that Dangaura Tharu communities now rely on pharmacies, hospitals and other manifestations of western medicine:

Now we have medicals [pharmacies] in every village. People go to medical clinics. Therefore, people do not come [for] initial treatment. When they tried western medicine, then they come as a last chance. Therefore, we are not busy in the traditional healing system.

Right now we have good health post access in the villages. So that we are suggesting people visit doctors first. If there is no relief from medical treatment then we suggest people come to us. Before, we had difficulties in accessing the health post; then, we did not have options and the patient came

directly with us. We are not unhappy [about] changing our roles.

The *guruwa* quoted below (and several others) advised people approaching him with health issues to go to the hospital first, as he was concerned about the risk of not advising this:

Now I do not take any risks. I advise people to go to hospital first. Remotely I worship deities to help patients recover. My cultural responsibilities have not changed.

Resonating with previous research that has analysed the *guruwa* system as occupying the bottom of hierarchies within a medical pluralist framework (Subedi 2003; Subedi 2019), the *guruwa* below stated that he advised people to use western medicine before they turned to the *guruwa* system:

Occasionally patients are cured at weddings. Therefore, I would advise Tharu people not to depend on the *guruwa* system. Also, I want to say, do not neglect the *guruwa* system if the western medicine fails to cure you; come at once to us. Our spiritual powers will heal you.

This seems a very pragmatic response to the influence of modernity within Dangaura Tharu communities, where the influence of pharmacies continues to increase. Pigg (1992) indicates that in the Western imagination, Shamans can be viewed as obstacles to science, here we see evidence of something quite different, through the *guruwa* above advocating that some Tharu should use western medicine. Many of the *guruwa* reflected on the ways in which people needed help in relation to health matters, stating that on a number of occasions hospitals were not able to treat the person. Therefore, *guruwa* were visited last if other forms of medicine were unsuccessful:

Nowadays, patients come to visit us after having been in hospital. When they are treated for a long time in the hospital but don't improve or improve only slowly, then they come to try

us at last. Ultimately, the *guruwa* are not a health care priority within Dangaura Tharu communities.

It is important to note that some *guruwa* were resistant to the idea that the *guruwa* system was changing, or under threat in anyway:

Now nothing is challenging the *guruwa* system.

This section has shown that some *guruwa* accept and adapt to the changes that are happening in Dangaura Tharu communities regarding their declining role in health matters, while others are resistant to these changes. The role of the *guruwa* has always been shaped by these interactions, illustrating that the *guruwa* role can at once be 'modern' and 'traditional'. This role in many ways has successfully evolved therefore ensuring that the *guruwa* remain relevant and influential within Dangaura Tharu communities. More widely this further complicates Pigg's critique that Shaman's are often used to present 'premodern' and have been "handy symbols in the construction of "modernity" (1992, 161). The evolution of the *guruwa* role [to use Pigg's terminology, the Shamans within our study] role, our paper suggests that the associations between the *guruwa* and 'tradition' are tenuous at best and overlook the complexity of the changes and evolution in the *guruwa* role we analyze in this paper.

The Covid-19 Pandemic and a Resurgence in the Role of Guruwa

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in a comprehensively observed lock-down across Nepal, and is widely being discussed as the most significant public health challenge globally, including in Nepal (Asim et al. 2020; Marahatta, Paudel, and Aryal 2020; Sapkota et al. 2020). This creates particular challenges for qualitative research such as this, given that face to face research was not possible at the recent time of data collection and many *guruwa* did not own mobile phones. The *guruwa* have responded to the Covid-19 pandemic in interesting and

creative ways, particularly as the health services that people have started to use in recent years are now closed. For example, one *guruwa* stated:

Due to lock-down people do not like to go to hospitals and they are coming to my house. I am doing tantric treatment maintaining distance. Some treatment I am doing remotely and sometimes I go to their home for treatment. But we maintain distance.

Here we see the *guruwa* undertaking his work but also observing social distancing, and the *guruwa* finding new relevance in a context where other [western] health information and support is not available. In this sense the Covid-19 pandemic might be an opportunity for traditional healers such as the *guruwa* to re-frame their role and re-imagine it within a time of lock-down.

Over a number phone interviews with one particular *guruwa* we explored the implications of the *guruwa* working within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and observing social distancing. This *guruwa* practiced in Dang district¹⁰ and had been a *guruwa* for 40 years. During the initial interview, he stated that he had spiritually protected his community from Covid-19. He claimed to have cured three Dangaura Tharu and one Magar patient within the previous week, while stating he had respected social distancing throughout.

The claims of social distancing were slightly complicated through discussing aspects of the ritual ‘*aachhat*’¹¹ he had administered. Two of the female patients had menstruation problems, both visiting him at his home. He performed a ritual, ‘*aachhat*’. In this process the *guruwa* at the very beginning prays to the deities and give a random quantity of uncooked rice to his patient. The patients touch their forehead and other body parts with the rice and return the rice to the *guruwa*. Then the *guruwa* observes the touched rice (to see their client’s *aachhat*) and diagnoses the problem in their client in their own way (using their spiritual powers), using mantras and the formula. After diagnosing the problem, they give the

same touched rice, *aachhat*, to their patient. The clients are supposed to swallow two to three rice grains and the leftover they either keep under their pillow or somewhere close to them, depending on how serious their case is, until they recover. But if the patient’s case is serious and they do not recover by this basic ritual, the next step is to chant mantras. To maintain the two meters distance required during the lock-down, the *guruwa* gave them the *aachhat* to eat without touching either patient, although the rice was touched by both the patient and the *guruwa*.

The same *guruwa* discussed instances of having phone consultations with patients as opposed to their coming to his home. This *guruwa* discussed treating a patient from Rolpa via the phone. The patient in this instance was a baby with a fever, and the mother called the *guruwa* for spiritual treatment as western medicine was not working and not very accessible during the lock-down. The *guruwa* diagnosed the baby’s problem through the initial *aachhat* process and identified poor eyesight as the problem. He subsequently cured the baby’s poor eyesight through his spiritual powers remotely over the phone. The *guruwa* also discussed curing other patients remotely, chanting mantras and spells over the phone. This reduced the necessity of patients coming to his home, although some in the local vicinity still did this. To specifically protect himself from Covid-19, this *guruwa* stated:

First, I bath early morning and kept cow milk, incense sticks, beetle nut, cardamom and cloves and went to the *maruwa*.¹² Then I cleaned the *maruwa* and worshipped all the deities of the *maruwa*. At the same time, I pray to the deities to protect me from coronavirus, by offering a *puja*.

He was sure that there were no cases on Covid-19 in his catchment area, as a consequence of these precautions and worship at the *maruwa*. It is evident in interviews with other *guruwa* that there was an increase in

demand for the *guruwa*'s services within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic:

In this critical situation of COVID-19 I have been working with patients. They are coming to my home, prevention is not my responsibility. I am responsible in ward no. 1 and I have protected the whole ward with my supernatural power to protect it from Corona virus.

Other *guruwa* commented on different aspects of their response to Covid-19, through using their powers to protect their villages from the pandemic:

I have worshiped at the *maruwa* last month to protect from the COVID-19 pandemic. I have tied both villages from my supernatural power. Until today God is protecting our villages. Also healing patients if they come to me.

Again, the *guruwa* above suggests a reinvigoration of the aspect of their role that relates to health, something not considered in the previous section or literature on the *guruwa* for a number of years now. Most of the *guruwa* interviewed in 2020 discussed Covid-19. There was a recurring theme that they were casting spells to protect their villages from the pandemic, and that they were busier during the pandemic due to other sources of health advice not being available. This material on the impacts of Covid-19 on the role of the *guruwa* suggests a potential resurgence of their traditional role of protector of the community and a continued importance for this role within Dangaura Tharu communities in 2020. To an extent this resonates with historical accounts from 1807 analysed by Krauskopff and Meyer in which a particular *guruwa* (Tetu Gurau) was to:

....protect the people from the threats of elephants, tigers, evil spirits, disease and epidemics. (Krauskopff and Meyer 2000: 134)

Conclusions: What is the Future of the *Guruwa*?

Data collected and analyzed in this paper relating to the Covid-19 pandemic suggest that the role of the *guruwa* in Dangaura Tharu communities is undergoing change, and reflecting in previous literature relating to the *guruwa*, this has perhaps always been the case. *Guruwa* role within Dangaura Tharu communities have always and will continue to be influenced by locally specific interactions of modernity, such as increasing levels of education, migration and access to technology such as mobile phones. Those *guruwa* who use a mobile phone are able to adapt their practice and treat their patients remotely in the lock-down in ways that western health professionals might not be able to, and which secures for the *guruwa* a partial restoration of their former role as healer. Further research is required to more fully analyze the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on the ways in which Dangaura Tharu communities seek help and advice in relation to health and what this might mean for the role of the *guruwa* in the longer term. That increasing numbers of Dangaura Tharu in multiple districts may be turning to the *guruwa* within the context of the lock-down in Nepal, suggests a continued relevance of this role in Dangaura Tharu communities and a further evolution of this role. When asked what the *guruwa* role might look like in the future, some *guruwa* were quite fatalistic, and felt that this role will disappear:

The *guruwa*'s role is decreasing day to day. In the future it will be completely finished. The *guruwa* system is in crisis because religious change is high in our community.

Conversely, other *guruwa* were more positive and looked towards the new generations as potentially supporting the continuation of their role. One remarked that it was critical that *guruwa* find ways to engage with the younger generation to enable their practice to continue to resonate in rapidly changing communities.

“We *guruwa*,” he said, “must transform and translate our knowledge for the new generation.”

This might also be complemented by the *guruwa* themselves, by expanding their skill base and insights into a range of disciplines (incorporating health, Dangaura Tharu culture etc...). As a *guruwa* remarked to us, “Increasing our disciples and transforming *guruwa* skill and knowledge is critical.” He added that these new skills related to new health challenges such as Covid-19, and to changes within Dangaura Tharu communities such as increased migration and movement (Maycock 2017b). Returning to question of the interactions between modernity and the role of the *guruwa* within Dangaura Tharu communities, what does the Covid-19 pandemic represent? In relation to modernity, Covid-19 is the most recent manifestation of what Michael Peters (2022; Peters, McLaren, and Jandrić 2022) has called viral modernity. According to Peters, this viral modernity is ‘a concept that is based upon the nature of viruses, the ancient and critical role they play in evolution and culture, and the basic application to understanding the role of information and forms of bio-information in the social world’. Our paper illustrates the ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic, as the latest manifestation of viral modernity has further influenced and led to the evolution the role of the *guruwa* within Dangaura Tharu communities. The pandemic, and in particular the lockdown associated with it, has resulted in a new relevance for the *guruwa* and a reinvigation of their role. Further questions then emerge about the longevity of this new relevance: has this sustained after the lock-down has eased and pharmacies and hospitals reopened?

Even so, and resonating with previous studies, our discussion indicates a continued decline in the influence of the *guruwa*, and a change in their role away from an orientation around health matters due to interactions with modernity, embodied by the pharmacy and the Covid-19 pandemic as a manifestation of viral modernity. This article extends previous studies on the

guruwa to consider what this still critical role means in Dangaura Tharu communities in the context of 2020 and the Covid-19 pandemic. Ultimately, while the role of the *guruwa* has been shaped by interactions with modernity and in particular the influence of western medicine. The response of the *guruwa* to the Covid-19 pandemic illustrates the flexibility and enduring relevance they have in Dangaura Tharu communities in Nepal. Ultimately, the role of the *guruwa* is at once modern and traditional, it will be fascinating to observe the ways in which modernity influences the role of the *guruwa* in future.

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Endnotes

1. In this article we specifically focus on Dangaura Tharu communities, but it important to note that the Tharu are a diverse indigenous group in Nepal with many diverse peoples (Guneratne, 1999).
2. Kampur is pseudonym for the name of this village to protect the identities of the villagers living with it.
3. This is the Chitwan Tharu word in the original.
4. Chhetri 2005; Guneratne 2002, 1999b, Guneratne 1999a, 1996; Hu 1957; Krauskopff 2002, 1995, 1989; Krauskopff and Meyer 2000; Maiti 2004; Maslak 2003; Maycock 2011; McDonough 2000, 1997, 1984; Meyer 2003; Meyer, Meyer, and Rai 1998; Müller-Böker 1999; Ødegaard 1997; Rajaure 1982; Shrestha et al. 2000; Skar 1999; Srivastava 1958; Verma 2009, 2010.
5. The criticism of the idea of 'break' used here reflects Appadurai's (1996, 2-3) analysis of this.
6. *basti* is a Nepali word meaning settlement, denoting a place smaller and more precarious than a village.
7. One of the authors (MM) met a number of *guruwa* in other villages and *basti* who had had similar difficult experiences during the PW, MM was also told of instances where *guruwa* were killed by PLA cadre during the PW. Problems for the *guruwa* during the PW were also discussed in the later fieldwork conducted for this study.
8. Dhangadhi is the district headquarters of Kailali district.
9. *puja* refers to a type of prayer or religious ritual
10. Data on the incidence of Covid-19 in Nepal generally, and in districts such as Dang where *guruwa* practice is limited and of poor quality. However, according to an online news story dated 9 July, 2020 (www.onlinekhabar.com), in Dang district 599 people had tested positive for Covid-19. 378 people have been discharged from hospital while 219 people are still being treated in

hospital. There is no data on the numbers of people who have been in quarantine and isolation, nor is the data disaggregated by gender and caste.

11. Guruwas perform a ritual called '*aach-hat*' which is a first step or basic part of the healing process they administer.

12. *maruwa* is a kind of temple. Every Tharu village has a *maruwa*

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Research Article

Tibetan Pilgrimage Guides to Bhaktapur: An Image of Dīpaṃkara Buddha Manifesting as Speaking Tārā

In memoriam Hubert Decleer (1940–2021)

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Abstract

This paper explores the phenomenon of a single devotional image identified with multiple deities by drawing from both premodern and modern Tibetan guidebook literature and ethnographic work. It engages the Tibetan-Newar Buddhist interface in the Kathmandu Valley with a focus on the Mūl Dīpaṃkara Buddha of Bhaktapur (alias Speaking Tārā, Sgrol ma gsung byon). The essay provides the first chronology of relevant literature and traces what has historically been of interest to Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims in Bhaktapur. The contemporary Dīpaṃkara/Speaking Tārā identification appears to supervene an older conflation occurring until the 18th century, when Tibetan pilgrims identified the Hindu Tantric goddess Taleju, the tutelary deity of the Malla kings who resides in Bhaktapur's Royal Palace, as Speaking Tārā. The paper offers a preliminary investigation of this development and reflects on spatialized shifts in Tibetan pilgrimage practices.

Keywords

Buddhism; Kathmandu Valley; Newar; shrine image; deity

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Introduction

It is not unusual for a single devotional image to be identified with multiple deities in South Asia. Related discussions often orbit around an attempt to capture a structural relationship between Buddhist and Brahmanical traditions (Buddhism and Hinduism).¹ In addition to this kind of inter-religious encounter, there are also intra-religious examples of stakeholders from different faiths converging on particular sites. The Kathmandu Valley is one of these sites. It encompasses a geographical area where Tibetan and Newar Buddhists have been interacting over centuries.²

Tibetan names given to Newar Buddhist deity images are usually a direct translation of a deity's Sanskrit or local name.³ So why do Tibetan Buddhists commonly identify the chief Dīpaṃkara Buddha of Bhaktapur as Speaking Tārā (Sgrol ma gsung byon) and not as Mar me mdzad, which is the Tibetan translation of Dīpaṃkara?⁴ That Dīpaṃkara is not referred to by his Tibetan name but is instead considered to be Tārā (Sgrol ma), with whom he shares neither gender⁵ nor any other obvious attributes, is unexpected and prompts one to seek the reason behind this peculiar identification. This is particularly relevant given that the chief Dīpaṃkara is the key, if not the only, pilgrimage site for Tibetan Buddhists in Bhaktapur today. In the Newar community, the same deity image is known as Mūl Dīpaṃkara and is revered as the oldest and most important of five Dīpaṃkara Buddhas dispersed throughout the city (Gutschow 2016: 372, Locke 1985: 444).

The contemporary Dīpaṃkara/Speaking Tārā identification is also of interest because it seems to supervene an older conflation occurring until the 18th century when Tibetan pilgrims identified the Hindu Tantric goddess Taleju - the tutelary deity of the Malla kings - who resides in Bhaktapur's Royal Palace, as Speaking Tārā. Why did the Speaking Tārā become associated with the chief Dīpaṃkara Buddha of Bhaktapur, whose shrine is difficult to find and has to be sought out with the help of guides? Why not with one of the other four Dīpaṃkaras,

for instance, one located very close to the Royal Palace (and therefore the most logical and easiest for pilgrims to reach)?

This paper cannot solve these conundrums, but it lays out available evidence to help clarify the situation. Furthermore, it offers a preliminary exploration of the Dīpaṃkara/Speaking Tārā phenomenon by combining Tibetan sources with ethnography. I draw from my own fieldwork in Bhaktapur (2016 and 2018) and information from Tibetan guidebook literature made available to me by Hubert Decler, to whom I dedicate this article. Hubert was a wonderful mentor who passed away on August 25, 2021, as this essay went into peer review.⁶ The guidebook passages below were kindly selected, provided, and, unless stated otherwise, also translated by him; I merely assembled and chronologically ordered these references and added notes.

Contextualizing the Local: Dīpaṃkara, Divine Identities, and Spatialized Practices

Dīpaṃkara is a Buddha said to have lived on earth eons ago. His name appears in the *Buddhavaṃsa* as the first of 24 Buddhas who preceded Śākyamuni Buddha. There is a legend that describes how Dīpaṃkara assured ("predicted") the Śākyamuni Buddha's future enlightenment in one of the latter's previous lives.⁷ The most important scripture related to Dīpaṃkara in Nepal is the *Kapiśāvadāna*, which revolves around giving alms (Gellner 1992: 184).⁸ He is commonly identified as the principal Buddha connected to the virtue of *dāna* (Skt. generosity) in Newar Buddhism.⁹ In Tibetan Buddhism, he is known as the "Buddha of the Past," conceptually grouped with Śākyamuni, "the Buddha of the Present" and Maitreya, "the Buddha of the Future" (Frédéric 2003: 129).¹⁰

In Nepal, Dīpaṃkara alone figures at the center of an important Buddhist worship practice that has developed and flourished since the Malla period (Michaels 2013: 317). An abundance of Dīpaṃkara images in the Kathmandu Valley attests to his popularity, as do the festivals devoted

to him, such as Samyak or Pañcadān (e.g., Bāsukalā Rañjītkār 2007, Brown 2014, Gellner 1992). He plays a crucial role in the city of Bhaktapur, where “just as Padmapāṇi Lokeśvara can be regarded as the patron of Lalitpur (and, to a lesser extent, of Kathmandu) so Dīpaṅkara [sic] might be considered the patron of Bhaktapur” (Sharkey 2001: 238). The city is famous for its five iconic, larger-than-life-sized Dīpaṅkara images, which are revered as living deities existing in a hierarchical order by virtue of seniority (Wollein 2019: 134).

Only the chief among these five, known as the Mūl Dīpaṅkara,¹¹ is considered the Speaking Tārā by Tibetan Buddhists. Therefore, this situation demonstrates a localized instance of a dual Buddhist identification of a single image.¹² As already mentioned, such plural identification is nothing new or unusual. In “On why it is good to have many names:

the many identities of a Nepalese god,” Tuladhar-Douglas (2005) engages the case of the Buddhist/Hindu deity Buṃgadyaḥ (Karuṇāmaya)/Rāto Matsyendranāth and even states that the “profound error is to assume that any particular shrine image can only have one identity.” He further argues that the capacity of an image to “sustain several distinct identifications at the same time (...) is crucial for the patronage and public life of that shrine image” (2005: 56 f.). Taking these insights as a starting point, my paper explores the topic from a different angle. It looks at the possible development of a dual identification through a (shifting) spatialization produced by Tibetan pilgrimage practices. This essay attempts to historicize the emplacement of the Speaking Tārā through pilgrimage practice and literature. It contours how multiple identities are produced through emplacement rather than asking why they are produced or, indeed, what is produced.¹³



Figure 1: The Mūl Dīpaṅkara outside his shrine during the Pañcadān procession of 2016 (Author 2016).

Early Tibetan Pilgrimage Diaries: Blessings of the Speaking Tārā

Tibetan Buddhists have their own associations with Bhaktapur, known as Kho khom in Tibetan.¹⁴ In addition to the orally transmitted knowledge about the holy places of the Kathmandu Valley, there is a rich corpus of Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage guides (*gnas yig*). One of the most detailed pre-modern Tibetan accounts of the Kathmandu Valley known today was written by the Eighth Situ Rinpoche, known as Situ Panchen Rinpoche (Si tu paṅ chen chos kyi 'byung gnas, 1699/1700–74), who visited the Valley at the end of the 18th century. He came to Nepal twice and stayed in Bhaktapur in 1748 CE at the then newly-completed Kuthu Bahī (Decleer 2000), one of the Newar Buddhist monasteries in Bhaktapur. He met the king in the Royal Palace and was granted a view of the actual image of Taleju, an exceedingly important goddess surrounded by a strictly secretive cult who plays a crucial role in Bhaktapur.¹⁵ Situ Panchen Rinpoche saw Taleju¹⁶ as identical to the famous Tārā, who had once spoken to a former king about Milarepa¹⁷ and who is the most important element in Tibetan guidebook literature when it comes to Bhaktapur.¹⁸

Two stories about the origin of the Tārā of Bhaktapur are found in a pilgrimage diary of the Sixth Zhwa dmar pa (1584–1630), Gar dbang chos kyi dbang phyug, entitled *Mālā Garland with Jewels Embellished* (*Bal yul du bgrod pa'i lam yig nor bu spel ma'i 'phreng ba zhes bya ba bzugs sho*),¹⁹ who describes her as “a golden image endowed with great blessings.” The legends detailing her origin differ. In one version, a previous king of Bhaktapur who wished to travel to India was being delayed by one of his ministers, and in order to be able to depart, he had this Tārā image made. However, there is a second, more popular, explanation, which appears in the same text:

According to the other version, a terrible epidemic once broke out in Nepal while Lord Mila [Milarepa] had been staying at a residence in Nyishang.²⁰ After the king had come to know about his fame as one having

attained realization, he wished to invite Lord Mila. Then this Tārā [image] spoke a prophecy: ‘Even if you invite Lord Mila, he will not come. Offer your prayers to him with an offering of arura and one kashika muslin cloth.’ The king of that period was one who had attained the [power of the] magic stares and glances, and by means of such a stare, he offered [and transferred] some arura and a roll of such cloth. From his side, the Majestic Lord, by his own magic sight, accepted these - thus, it is locally known (Gar dbang chos kyi dbang phyug n.d.: folios 27b-28a).

According to this legend, there are several references to the Speaking Tārā of Bhaktapur in Tibetan literature, and the story is relatively popular. It might be assumed that the Tārā image appearing in literature is consistently identical to Taleju, as explained to Situ Panchen Rinpoche, but since the Taleju image is beyond access and her color has been variously described by different sources, this cannot be known with certainty.

A guide written later by Situ Panchen's companion and student, the Fourth Khams sprul bstan 'dzin chos kyi nyi ma (1734–1779)²¹ mentions only the Royal Palace as a site to be visited in Bhaktapur.²² But Brag dkar rta so sprul sku chos kyi dbang phyug's (1775–1837) subsequent guide, *The Infallible Mirror that Speaks the Truth—A history of Nepal's sacred places and sacred images* (*Bal yul gyi gnas dang rten gyi lo rgyus nges par brjod pa 'khrul spong nor bu'i me long*),²³ states:

Bhaktapur's Tārā who manifests as speech: It is the sacred image with great blessings endowed, that in a prophecy exhorted a previous king of this country to present the great Majestic Lord Mila with kashika cloth and with the vijaya arura. Although at one time it was possible to visit it, later on, the image was either destroyed or taken elsewhere - Tibetans are not sure, except for the

fact that, at present, there is no way to visit it, so they say (Brag dkar rta so sprul sku chos kyi dbang phyug n.d.: folio 27b).

The Speaking Tārā appears to have been the highlight of Bhaktapur for Tibetan visitors, and it seems that Situ Rinpoche was the last to report having seen her, assuming that she is identical to Taleju.²⁴

Modern Tibetan Pilgrimage Guides: Various Speaking Tārās and five Dīpaṃkaras

Although the premodern reports suggest that it was impossible to see the image of the Speaking Tārā, she continues to appear in modern guidebooks, demonstrating a fondness for informing the pilgrim about her greatness, power, whereabouts, and color. The reason for highlighting her importance seems to be that the related story refers to two connected masterpieces of Tibetan literature, the *Rje btsun mi la'i rnam thar* (the *Life Story of Milarepa*) and the *Mi la'i mgur 'bum* (100,000 Songs of Milarepa). An instructive entry about her features appears in the guidebook written by Rinchen Darlo, the former president of the Tibet Fund, who was the Dalai Lama's former representative in Nepal and North America. His well-known piece on Buddhist holy places, *Music of Amazing Tales - A descriptive guide to the sacred places [of the Kathmandu Valley]* (*Gnas bshad ngo mtshar gtam gyi rol mo*), outlines the pilgrimage foci in Bhaktapur as follows:

Kho khom sgrol ma gsung byon, The Speaking Tara of Bhaktapur: In the oral tradition of the local people, it is well known that there are various 'Speaking Taras,' but a detailed history of each of them does not exist; so, I will not write one here. Tibetans claim that the most sacred one is the highly respected, original Speaking Tara that now resides in the Taleju temple of the royal palace of Bhaktapur. The goddess' icon there is green.

However, at the great festival of Daśāi, i.e., the Newar New Year, on the day known as Navami, at a spot where there is the great [golden] gate in ancient style at the front of the Bhaktapur palace, there is a tradition of having the Tara icon reside there - which is the only time one may view it²⁵ (Gnya' nang bur sras pa rin chen dar lo 1984: 118).

Again, it is asserted here that the Speaking Tārā resides in the Taleju temple - implying that she is Taleju - and it is established that she is the original one, next to other Speaking Tārās, who are shrouded in mystery. Rinchen Darlo further mentions the five Dīpaṃkara Buddhas of Bhaktapur:

Kho khom sangs rgyas mar me mdzad,²⁶ the Dīpaṃkara Buddha of Bhaktapur: it is known that, within the city of Bhaktapur, there are five brother images of Dīpaṃkara Buddha. The one which Tibetans traditionally visit as the most famous among them is the foremost of the five. The temple where this sacred image resides is the one called Adi-Buddha Vihara, locally known as Kwathandau. As for this set of sacred Brother images, (1) the first one is the above-mentioned, (2) the second one is in Goli-nath tole, inside the temple called Mangaladvipa Maha-vihara (Jhaurnbhai), (3) the third one at Tadhunchen Bahal, alias Chaturvarna Maha-vihara, (4) the fourth in the quarter of Kothu Bahil, and (5) the fifth at Tatu Bahil, also known as Sayakirti Maha-vihara (Gnya' nang bur sras pa rin chen dar lo 1984: 117).

Darlo clearly points out the primary importance of the first Dīpaṃkara for Tibetan Buddhists and also presents him in the framework of a group. The order is slightly incorrect,²⁷ but Darlo acknowledges a hierarchy since he knows that the Mūl Dīpaṃkara of the Kwathandau area is the principal one.

Since the five Dīpaṃkara Buddhas are not mentioned in the older guides, it is unclear when they started to appear in guidebook literature. The bibliography of Dowman's 2007 booklet, *A Buddhist Guide to the Power Places of the Kathmandu Valley*, lists a variety of Tibetan sources that have been combined into his handy guidebook. One section features entries about Bhaktapur and begins with the Dīpaṃkaras of Bhaktapur but subsequently also mentions Bhaktapur's Speaking Tārā, Sgrol ma gsung byon (Nep. *bolne tārā*), the Śākyamuni Buddha housed in Jhaur Bahī and the Lokeśvara found at Itachhen. The main passage of concern is about the Dīpaṃkaras:

kho-khom sangs-rgyas mar-med-mdzad: Bhadga'um Dipamkara: in Bhaktapur, you will see many images of Dipamkara and the Five Buddha aspects (*rigs-lnga*) etc. (Dowman 2007: 70).

This is a literal translation of a passage found in one of Dowman's sources, namely Turrell Wylie's *A Tibetan Religious Geography of Nepal* (1970). The matching Tibetan passage is in its Appendix A,²⁸ which in turn is a transliteration of a guidebook named *Bal yul gnas yig* - earlier thought to be from the 18th century. This particular work again dates from the 1950s and was authored by a Newar monk with the Tibetan name Ngawang Dorje, a tantric practitioner who had lived in Lhasa and later settled in the area of Kimḍol, where he then became known as the "Blue Lama" of Kimḍol.²⁹ However, as there are no further leads, it is unclear where the information about the five Dīpaṃkara Buddhas provided in this guide comes from. At present, it seems to be the "oldest" source mentioning several Dīpaṃkaras.

An Outlier? Speaking Tārā(s) and one Dīpaṃkara in the *Guide to Mustang*

A further source refers to only one Dīpaṃkara in Bhaktapur. The relevant piece of text appears in a *Guide to Mustang*, which consists of an anthology of writings about

monasteries and temples in that region of Nepal, compiled by the late Mkhān po bkris bstan 'dzin.³⁰ Despite its title, it turns out to be not only a guide to Mustang but also a guide to Bhaktapur:

At the king's palace in Bhaktapur | the main sacred icon is the Speaking Tārā. | At the time when Milarepa miraculously | assumed the role of the king's main Guru, | the king beheld her face. She revealed herself by speaking many a time [since]. | So, this amazing Tārā [image] resides there. ||

Furthermore, also in Bhaktapur, | this Newar [monk] Maha-karunika | who was the root Guru of Rwa Lotsawa [from Tibet] — | his [personal] sacred item was [his namesake,] the Great Compassionate one who abides here | as [an image of Buddha] Dīpaṃkara [who manifests as] Speaking Tārā || (mkhan po bkris bstan 'dzin 2004: 53, verses 56-69).

Interestingly, two instances of a Speaking Tārā are recognized here. It is the only source that does so, as all the older guides introduce only one image as a Speaking Tārā.³¹ While the Speaking Tārā housed in the palace is already known and requires no further discussion at this point, the acknowledgment of Speaking Tārā manifesting in the form of Dīpaṃkara seems to be a genuine novelty.

This passage is significant because it recognizes Dīpaṃkara and attributes a further identifying dimension to him, as well as establishing the image as a personal sacred item (*thugs dam*) of the monk Mahākaruṇika.³² The quote does not explicitly mention that the image concerned is the Mūl Dīpaṃkara, but there are strong reasons to believe that it is. The many Tibetan pilgrims I met during my research at the site commonly view him as Speaking Tārā and consider his shrine to be the key sacred place in Bhaktapur.

Living Practice: Tibetan Buddhist Pilgrims in Bhaktapur Today

It is unclear when Tibetan pilgrims started to view the Mūl Dīpaṅkara as Speaking Tārā. Whether or not the *Guide to Mustang* - or rather the recycled passage found in there - had any authoritative influence on the community viewing Dīpaṅkara as Speaking Tārā or instead only echoed changes of pilgrimage customs is uncertain.

Tibetan visitors, who arrived in groups of up to twenty people, asked the attending priest about the name of the image, and the answer given was that it was “Bolne Tārā” (Nepali for Speaking Tārā) or even “Drol ma sung jön” (Sgrol ma gsung byon). Questions of identity were a non-issue; the priest readily accommodated Tibetan conceptions rather than imposing his own Newar Buddhist views on the pilgrims.³³



Figure 2: A Tibetan Buddhist monk offering butter lamps in front of the Speaking Tārā. The officiating priest is seen inside the shrine on the floor. He is one of the very few people who are allowed to enter this space (Author 2016).

I observed that Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims were, for the most part, not aware that this image is Dīpaṅkara Buddha from the Newar Buddhist point of view and, even if they were aware, continued to refer to it as Tārā or Sgrol ma and not Mar me mdzad. The officiating Newar Buddhist priests appeared to have no intention of informing the Tibetan pilgrims about the image’s Dīpaṅkara-identity. On the contrary, I was present on several occasions where

This seems to indicate that the information contained in the passage of the *Guide to Mustang* is probably not a part of popular knowledge. Nevertheless, since there are, except for the pilgrims’ embodied activities, no other sources that establish a relationship between the physicality of this Dīpaṅkara Buddha image and Speaking Tārā, the *Guide to Mustang* currently offers the only known (written) explanation for this identification.



Figure 3. Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims exiting the shrine of the Speaking Tārā (Author 2016).

I met and spoke to numerous pilgrims who self-identified as Tibetan nearly every day at the shrine throughout the summer of 2016. While on some days, only one or two pilgrims would come, on other days, groups of twenty or more arrived. They usually came for pilgrimage (*gnas mjal* or *gnas skor*), with this shrine being the only stop in Bhaktapur on their route. These groups often arrived with Nepalese guides, and pilgrims told me on several occasions that they would be unable to find the shrine by themselves. There were representatives of both lay and monastic Tibetan Buddhists, and they all tended to spend five to thirty minutes on site before proceeding to their next destination and leaving Bhaktapur behind. There were pilgrims belonging to the Tibetan diaspora (in Nepal, Canada, and the United States) and Tibetans coming from eastern Tibet (Kham). Their mode of worship consisted of standard traditional customs: prostrations (*phyag 'tshal*), offering ceremonial scarves (*kha btags*) and

butter lamps (*mar me*), and circumambulations (*skor ra*).

Regarding the image's capacity to speak, some pilgrims said they believe it can communicate with devotees in an inaudible way (i.e., speak with a divine, non-human voice), while others seemed to merely guess that the image had once spoken in the past. A few pilgrims who came with larger groups were similarly unaware of the deity's plural identities or related narratives before being instructed on-site.

Conclusion

The Tibetan view of Bhaktapur as a pilgrimage destination is well-established; however, it entails historical developments that cannot be fully appreciated due to a lack of research on this thinly studied topic. The original reason for a pilgrimage to Bhaktapur seems to have been a Speaking Tārā image that was probably viewed as identical to Taleju. What is known with

certainty from the written sources is that this image ceased to be accessible at some point during the 18th century. What we know for sure is that Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims today visit the Mūl Dīpaṃkara shrine, where they identify the present Dīpaṃkara image as Speaking Tārā. What we do not know, and where further research needs to be conducted, is why the original image became inaccessible. Could it be because there were increasing numbers of pilgrims? Or was the Speaking Tārā always inaccessible except for certain occasions? Was the inaccessibility related to wider socio-political developments in 18th-century Nepal?

In terms of the Tibetan pilgrimage to Bhaktapur, it appears as if the veneration of the Speaking Tārā underwent a spatial shift. Instead of visiting the Durbar Square Palace, where the Taleju image still resides, Tibetan pilgrims now worship her at the Mūl Dīpaṃkara shrine. This invites further questions. Were pilgrims purposely redirected at some point in the past? Did they proactively establish new modes of worship after Taleju became inaccessible? Did they perhaps once lose their way and accidentally establish a habitual confusion of Dīpaṃkara with Tārā? I have heard different stories about this from contemporary pilgrims. Likewise, views diverge on whether the Speaking Tārā in the form of Taleju is the same as the Speaking Tārā in the form of Dīpaṃkara; some say it is the same deity appearing in different forms; others believe they are two (among countless manifestations).

Regarding the site shift, the idea that it might have been an accident cannot be ruled out entirely. However, this possibility seems unlikely given the relative inaccessibility of the Mūl Dīpaṃkara shrine, half-hidden among myriad Bhaktapur temples.³⁴ With the hiddenness as a spatial quality of the shrine, its location far from the palace also needs to be considered. If we imagine for a moment the purposeful redirection of pilgrims, why were they redirected to this hard-to-find-shrine, about twenty minutes from the palace, given that

the Dīpaṃkara Buddha of Caturbrahma Mahāvihāra³⁵ would have been only a one-minute walking distance away from the Royal Palace?

Concerning the other Newar Buddhist deities residing in Bhaktapur, as listed by Dowman, it is evident from the previously discussed guidebooks and by observing current pilgrimage practices that they are only of secondary interest to Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims. The Speaking Tārā/Dīpaṃkara, in particular, appears in modern written sources within a set of five Dīpaṃkaras; however, it is unclear when they all started to be included in Tibetan guidebooks. While they are referred to as Mar me mdzad and presented as a group in contemporary guides, only one of them, the Mūl Dīpaṃkara, is identified as Speaking Tārā. The mention of the five Mar me mdzad in modern guides might reflect a growing familiarity of some Tibetans with their Newar surroundings.³⁶

Although the *Guide to Mustang* is a completely isolated source - the information appearing in this guide has not yet been found to be reproduced or derived from other works - it is revealing insofar as it seems to articulate the conceptual merging of old and new practices of pilgrimage within the genre of guidebook literature. It is unclear whether the guide is a product of current practices or details the practices that predate them. On the one hand, it could be bridging a knowledge gap in the sense that it might be indicative of a heretofore unknown source that accurately describes the situation of the Speaking Tārā/Dīpaṃkara. On the other hand, it could be a rather new entextualization that attests to how Tibetan pilgrimage practice has evolved as an oral tradition. The *Guide to Mustang* certainly points to a serious textual gap and a gap in the interrelation of text and practice. The Speaking Tārā/Dīpaṃkara phenomenon invites more ethnographic and textual work.

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Endnotes

1. An in-depth discussion of this is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is important to note the initial problem of Hinduism and Buddhism being etic terms with a history of their own, not to mention the problem of suggesting structures that supposedly capture their relationship. Different approaches have been proposed, for instance: inclusivism (Hacker 1983), borrowing (Sanderson 1995), identification

(Lienhard 1978), symbiosis (Ruegg 2008), multifocal polyphony (Owens 2000), or polynomasia (Tuladhar-Douglas 2005). The problematic term syncretism comes to mind as well; see Gellner 2001: 319 ff. or Sinclair 2015: 431 for critiques.

2. Tibet has been connected to India through trade routes that passed through the Kathmandu Valley (Tuladhar-Douglas 2006:9) and made Nepal an important point of cultural articulation. Richardson maintains that, as documented by the earliest available evidence of ancient Tibetan edicts, Nepal is cited as the immediate source of religious practice in Tibet (1998:89ff). For the history of interactions between Newars and Tibetans, see Lewis (1996, 1989), Lewis and Jampal (1988), and Lo Bue (e.g., 1997, 2002).

3. For example, Seto Tārā, the White Tārā image of Itumbāhāḥ in Kathmandu (Sgrol dkar), Pharping's Vajrayoginī (Rdo rje rnal 'byor ma) or the Śākyamuni Buddha in Patan's Hiraṇyavarṇa Mahāvihāra (Ye rang sha kya thub pa).

4. The Sanskrit name *Dīpaṃkara* literally means "light-maker." *Mar me mdzad* denotes the same in Tibetan. The name *Dīpaṃkara* appears variously spelled in published literature concerned with Newar Buddhism, for example, *Dīpaṅkara* (Michaels 2013) or *Dipaṃkara* (Bajrācārya et al. 2004). I spelled the name as *Dīpaṃkara* in this article based on tāhe recommendation of Christoph Emmrich.

5. In a recent correspondence, Gray Tuttle raised the interesting question of whether "they" pronouns (or perhaps "s/he") would better reflect the non-binary aspect of this image having both genders. Since this would almost add a third identity (based on an etic viewpoint) to the deity and necessitate theoretical discussions requiring more space than is available, I decided on the following for this paper: I use female pronouns when discussing the image as the Speaking Tārā and male pronouns when speaking about the image as *Dīpaṃkara*. I use "they" when discussing them simultaneously (i.e., Speaking Tārā/*Dīpaṃkara*). I made my choices of identity/gender based

on the material under discussion and how the deity was respectively conceived. If the deity appeared in guidebook literature or conversations as Tārā, the deity would be female, whereas if the deity appeared as Dīpaṅkara, the deity would be male. Since the deity is owned by Newar Buddhists, who conceive of it as male, the male identity appears privileged both in terms of chronology and by virtue of ownership. Future studies that engage with this subject more deeply and do not privilege chronology and ownership status would be a great addition to this preliminary study.

6. I am beyond grateful for Hubert Decler's generous help and for engaging with me and my research interests over several years. We have been in conversation about the topic of this article since I began working on my MA thesis (an ethnographic study of the Mūl Dīpaṅkara shrine in Bhaktapur) in 2016. As per his wish, his name does not appear as co-author since he insisted that his contribution was only minor.

7. For more information, see Ghosh (1987). For a comparison of some of the legends, see Matsumura (2012).

8. Another local story popular in Patan, Nepal, revolves around Dīpaṅkara accepting a few grains of rice from an old lady instead of receiving the king's gift first (for more see Gellner 1992:185).

9. Slusser states that he is also seen as a protector of merchants (1982: 292 f.) and travelers (1982: 359).

10. Collectively referred to as Buddhas of the Three Times, Dus gsum sangs rgyas, this triad is the primary form in which Dīpaṅkara Buddha appears in Tibetan Buddhism. The Buddhas of the Three Times are rarely depicted but appear, without their individual names being stated, in some prayers, e.g., the "Prayer to Guru Rinpoche for Removing Obstacles and Fulfilling Wishes" (see Chapter 5 in Doctor, 2005).

11. *mūla* is a Sanskrit term denoting root, origin, or base and is pronounced without an inherent *a* at the end in both Newar and Nepali (i.e., as *mūl*) where the term also connotes the primary and main meanings.

12. To my current knowledge, there are no other instances in the Valley of Kathmandu where the Tārā and Dīpaṅkara identities are connected.

13. There is insufficient space for a theoretical discussion. In brief, my approach is framed by viewing space/place/locality as process-oriented, with locality always understood as linked to time (in the sense of chronology) and to the wider world (e.g., Low 2017, Massey 2005). I consider the local frame of the Dīpaṅkara/Speaking Tārā as conditions for the phenomenon rather than looking at the dual identity of the image independently of its spatio-temporal context.

14. *Khu khom* and *Khu khrom* are alternative spellings (Roberts 2007: 147). The term(s) seem to derive from the Newar term *Khvapa* (see Wolle 2019: 110).

15. Regarding the spatio-religious context - Bhaktapur is framed by eight mother goddesses (*aṣṭamātrkā*) who protect the city's boundary and their respective quarters of residence. They are placed around Tripurasundarī, a ninth goddess, who constitutes the religious center of the town (Levy 1992). Her political complement is the goddess Taleju, also known as Taleju Bhavānī, whose temple is found inside the Royal Palace. Taleju is said to control the whole of Bhaktapur and, unlike other deities, never leaves her temple (Vergati 1995:159). Thus, she can only be seen by designated people under particular circumstances. While Tripurasundarī embodies the center of the *maṅḍala*, annual rituals demonstrate that Taleju is the sovereign deity of the town; hence, political power has primacy over the religious center (Vergati 1995: 27).

16. Taleju is said to have been brought in the 14th century by King Harisimha Deva when he fled India. She remained the lineage deity of the Malla kings, and Bhaktapur is considered the original site of Taleju in the Kathmandu Valley, as other Taleju temples were built in Kathmandu and Patan only in the 16th and 17th centuries. Prior to 1768, Taleju had been the tutelary divinity of all the three Valley towns and their separate kings; however, the Shah dynasty subsequently adopted Taleju as the tutelary

deity after the Gorkha conquest and the destruction of the Malla kingdoms (Vergati 1995: 85 ff). Taleju also continued to be the lineage deity of the Kathmandu court (Tuladhar-Douglas 2006: 10) and remains highly significant. Levy states that during the festival of Mohani, Taleju “possesses a maiden to become manifest in the form of Kumari” (1990: 241). Several living goddesses referred to as Kumārī (Skt. young girl, virgin) exist in the Newar cities. The girls must come from a Buddhist family, Vajrācārya or Śākya, and are selected for their role based upon certain criteria.

17. Situ Panchen mentions in his autobiography and diaries that he visited this Speaking Tārā image in the palace, where he was told that she is identical to the goddess Taleju Bhavānī. (Personal communication with Hubert Decler in August 2016.) According to Punya Parajuli, this Speaking Tārā is the Hindu Goddess Tārā, the first of the 10 *mahāvīdyās*, who in North-East India and the Himalayan foothill kingdoms was commonly the personal deity of Hindu rulers (email communication 2021). The list of the 10 *mahāvīdyās* is to be found, with a brief explanation about each, in Daniélou (1964).

18. According to Hubert Decler, this is why she became referred to as Speaking Tārā (personal conversation 2016).

19. For a critical study, edition, and translation, see Lamminger (2013).

20. Milarepa is known to have stayed in Nepal, where he gained a great reputation during his lifetime. The story about Milarepa that involves Tārā can be found in Chapter 27 of Tsangnyön Heruka’s *100,000 Songs of Milarepa*. For specific information about Milarepa’s retreats in Nepal, see Quintman (2014).

21. The title of the guide is *Nectar for Snow-Crusted Ears* [i.e., for the Ears of the Snowlanders]: *A guide to the sacred places of Nepal Valley’s ‘Great Land’ Upa-chandoha* (*Yul chen po nye ba tshandho ha bal po’i gnas kyi dkar chag gangs can rna ba’i bdud rtsi* composed by Bstan ’dzin chos kyi nyi ma). A first draft of the guide can be found in

his autobiography, the *Rang tshul lhug par smras pa ma bcos gnyug ma’ rang grol* (*My Life and Primordial Spontaneous Liberation, Freely Told, as it Happened*). See bibliography.

22. Although in a rare manuscript version of his autobiography, he notes, in 1755, that “it is said that previously, in the Bhaktapur king’s palace, there was a Speaking Tārā, and I felt some regret that there is no way to visit it” (Email correspondence with Andrew Quintman, September 2016).

23. The text has recently been published in English translation, with clear color photographs of the manuscript in Ehrhard (2020).

24. He, in fact, mentions meeting the king at the temple of “Tārāju” (Decler 2000: 40), which might be a hybrid form conflating Tārā and Taleju if it is not simply an honorific way of addressing Tārā.

25. Anne Vergati has pointed out that there is no precise plan of the courtyards where Taleju resides and that the entrance to the temple is extremely restricted even to Hindu Newars (1995: 93). According to local *karmācārya* interlocutors, Taleju is said to be moved twice a year from one room in the courtyard to another. At this time, people are allowed to see her and witness the movement, but since Taleju still is quite far away and heavily decorated, she can barely be seen underneath all her adornments. In general, it is said that only high Hindu Newar caste members of Bhaktapur (*rājopādhyāyas*, *karmācāryas* and *jośīs*) are allowed to come near her.

26. Kho khom sangs rgyas mar me mdzad literally means Bhaktapur Buddha Dīpaṃkara.

27. The traditional order is: (1) Prasannaśīla Mahāvihāra (encompassing the Mūl Dīpaṃkara shrine), (2) Caturbrahma Mahāvihāra, (3) Jhaur Bahī (Maṅgaldharma Dvīpa Mahāvihāra), (4) Thathu Bahī (Jayakīrti Vihāra, also called Śukravārṇa Vihāra), and (5) Kuthu Bahī (Bauddha Saṃkṛta Vihāra) (Bajrācārya et al. 2004). This order corresponds to the order annually reaffirmed by the Buddhas during the Pañcadān procession. For a map that shows the location of these

vihāras see Wollein (2019).

28. The Dīpaṃkara section is: *kho khom sangs rgyas mar me mdzad bhad gha 'um di pam ka ra sangs rgyas mar me mdzad rigs lnga sogs mjal rgyu mang po yod* (Wylie 1970: Appendix A, page 40).

29. Ngawang Dorje's *Bal yul gnas yig* has in the past been erroneously assigned to the 18th century, while it is only from the 1950s (Decler 2006: 81 ff.; Ehrhard 2007: 105 f.).

30. Hubert Decler, who recently passed away, purchased a hard copy of this guide in Lo, which he used for this translation. I could not find any information about this book online. The guide to the sacred places of Mustang dates from around 2004 and was compiled by Mkhan po bkris bstan 'dzin who comes from the monastery Mkhar rdzong lcags ri gtsug lag khang in Glo bo smon thang gi yul ljongs. It partly consists of an anthology of the existing guides to Lo Manthang but also relies on local oral traditions. It is uncertain who the original authors of several passages found in the guide were. The full title of this guidebook is *A Lamp in the Dark, as a Reminder: a descriptive guide of various monastic complexes, by means of which the previous realized sages of both (the land of the) ārya superiors (i.e., India) and Tibet, as an act of love, through thousand lights of enlightened mind activity, diffused the institutions of learning* ('Phags bod mkhas grub gong mas bstan dgon khyab spel thugs kyi phrin las 'od stong 'phros pa'i bka' drin rjes bzahag dgon sde khag gi dkar chag dran bskul mun sgron composed by Mkhan po bkris bstan 'dzin).

31. Darlo, who states that there are several Tārās, is no exception. Not only is his guide rather new, but since no specific information about these several Tārās is included and the five Dīpaṃkaras are presented separately - without any relation to the Tārās - there seems to be no connection to the information found in the *Guide to Mustang*.

32. Mahākaruṇika was a Newar master who lived in the 11th century and who is identified with the lineage of Naropa. The name sometimes appears also as Mahākaruṇa (Thugs rje chen po) (Roerich 1996: 375 ff.).

Since he is thought to have been related to Patan, a connection to Bhaktapur seems surprising. At present, his name was entirely unknown to the community at the Mūl Dīpaṃkara shrine of Bhaktapur.

33. Tuladhar-Douglas describes this kind of accommodation as a “managed business” that points to a “process of non-confrontation and of implicit collaboration, orchestrated by the corporate body responsible for the management of the shrine image” (2005: 60).

34. The shrine is a part of the Prasannaśīl Mahāvihāra, which, like all Newar Buddhist monasteries, is not a freestanding, publicly visible building. Unlike Hindu temples, which are located at points of maximum exposure where they display their rich art, Newar Buddhist monasteries (*vihāras*) are always set back from the road. They cannot be easily seen from the outside, and it is necessary to pass through a door to get inside the monastery compound, which is built around a courtyard (Gellner 2001: 137). In the dense urban environment of Bhaktapur, one needs either to cross several private courtyards to get to Prasannaśīla Mahāvihāra and the Mūl Dīpaṃkara shrine or access the shrine via a narrow alley (New. *galli*). This arrangement not only guarantees privacy but offers no vista of the shrine at all.

35. Its name is sometimes spelled as Caturvarṇa Mahāvihāra; the place is also referred to as Tadhicheṃ Bāhāḥ, the only architecturally intact *vihāra* of Bhaktapur (Locke 1985: 447). It can be safely assumed that the Dīpaṃkara of Caturvarṇa Mahāvihāra had been present there long before Situ Panchen Rinpoche visited the Valley - given that an early reference to a gathering of seven Dīpaṃkaras in the 14th century testifies to the historical importance of Bhaktapur's Dīpaṃkaras (Manandhar 1974: 101). For more on the history of the five Dīpaṃkaras of Bhaktapur, see Bāsukalā Rañjītkār (2007).

36. After the Tibetan uprising in 1959 and the escape of the 14th Dalai Lama to India, the first wave of about 100,000 Tibetans fled Tibet. The majority settled in India, Nepal,

and Bhutan (Balakian 2008). One of the largest groups of Tibetans today can be found in the Kathmandu Valley.

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Research Article

Using Vignettes to Explore Caste Attitudes in Central Nepal

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the attitudes of young persons in Nepal toward caste using completed short stories, or ‘vignettes’, that imagine situations involving intercaste couples. A total of around 230 stories were gathered from 2018 to 2019. The study, conducted among Class 11 and 12 students in around a dozen schools in central Nepal, covered a mixture of rural and urban locations. The results were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative analysis used simple statistical techniques (p values) to test whether there were statistically significant differences in story outcomes based on author and story characteristics. The analysis suggests, tentatively, that young people do not see caste as a barrier to relationships. The qualitative analysis of tropes and themes illuminated new framings of caste that are now prominent, including narratives that may reflect social change that occurred in the civil war period, and in the rise of identities focused on ‘merit’ and ‘achievement’ in the sphere of work rather than on ascriptive identities like caste and ethnicity.

Keywords

Caste; social inclusion; identity; marriage; social transformation

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Introduction

There is a paucity of empirical research on social attitudes toward caste and, in particular, on intercaste relationships at the grassroots in Nepal. There have, of course, been important recent monographs and collections of papers on the dalit situation (Bennett 2006; Bishokarma 2019; Guneratne 2010; Luintel 2018). These monographs compare the dalit's access to state and market resources with higher-caste groups and trace the histories of dalit movements, legal challenges to caste discrimination, and interactions with political parties and with Nepal's new federal political structures. In addition, dalit activist literature (Aahuti 2010; Kisan 2005) has focused on the history of dalit social movements and the relation of Nepal's dalit struggle to the thought of Ambedkar and to the communist ideology of the Maoist insurgency of the 1990s. The data these studies have used is of a macro nature, drawn from national census data and some data on economic and educational participation – with the exception of Adhikari and Gellner's (2019) recent study on the impact of labor migration on caste attitudes, which uses detailed survey data from several locations. Otherwise, at the local level, these studies have tended to use anecdotal case studies, small-scale focus group studies, or traditional social surveys to get at social attitudes to caste.

By contrast, the literature on the dalit experience in India is rich in all kinds of data. For example, browsing the tables in Thorat and Newman (2010: vii–xi) provides just one example from a relatively recent monograph of a panoply of data drawn from multiple sources: India-wide government surveys of business ownership broken down by caste; consumer expenditure data by caste; Indian Institute of Development Studies household surveys on discrimination patterns (531 villages in 5 states); and nationwide occupational surveys broken down by caste and countless well-funded academic surveys on all dimensions of caste attitudes and caste exclusion with high N samples. Given that the dalit in Nepal has not experienced the specific forms

of political empowerment—via dalit-led political parties and government affirmative action—that they have in India, the gap in the scholarly literature on caste in India and Nepal is significant, although Nepal could be a crucial 'laboratory' for the comparative study of caste, as has been pointed out recently (Gellner et al. 2020: 92).

In 2020 the pressing issue of caste discrimination in Nepal was highlighted by incidents of caste-based violence in the western region.¹ It is therefore of some urgency to know more about attitudes to caste in Nepal and try to fill the gap in grassroots-level information. The current paper, which uses vignettes (respondent-completed short stories) to try and get at caste attitudes among young Nepalese, is a small step in this direction, although as I highlight in the implications section the real advantage of this study is that it provides a template for future studies which will cover a wider geographical area, including those parts of western Nepal where caste violence has recently been most prominent.

The Use of Vignettes in Social Science Studies of Attitudes

As defined by Sadi and Basit (2016: 183), vignettes “are short descriptions of a person or a social situation on which the respondents build their judgment or response”. The advantages of using vignettes in social science studies of attitudes are many. They allow participants to take a depersonalized (third-person) view of sensitive topics that might reveal social norms more frankly than asking for attitudes in a survey where social desirability bias may impact results (Sampson and Johannessen 2020: 10; Schoenberg and Ravdal 2000: 66). They provide a way to combine relatively large N sample sizes with contextualized and ethnographically rich data (Sadi and Basit 2016). They allow the potential for strategically varying key information in the vignettes to ‘test’ for attitudinal differences or, in effect, to ‘control’ for various independent variables—such as age, gender, race, or caste—for both the imaginary characters of the vignette and for the authors of the

completed vignettes (Carifio 1989; Finch 1987).

Perhaps surprisingly, vignettes remain underutilized in general social science studies of attitudes and beliefs and are more commonly used in public health, mental health, and educational research where sensitive topics such as institutional abuse, racism, and disparate behavior in service delivery are being examined. I could find no previous published studies that applied the vignette methodology to caste attitudes, with the important exception of an unpublished study presented by Steven Folmar at the South Asian Studies Conference (Folmar 2014).²

There are methodological drawbacks to the use of vignettes which this current study is not free from: while vignettes may reveal general social norms, they are less well adapted to revealing the likely behavior of individuals (Finch 1987), although Barter and Renold (2000: 311) show a correlation between attitudes revealed in vignettes and real-world behaviors. In other words, while a study such as this can tell us about the generic narrative discourses ('tropes'), norms, and generally accepted social attitudes to caste at a particular time and place, it should not be interpreted as telling us how young Nepalese people actually behave in social interactions related to caste. In Corkey's terms (1992: 256), the "simulation" of social reality represented in a vignette can make normative social codes or habitus "visible" even if it cannot tell us whether a particular individual will behave in harmony with that code. In the case of caste in Nepal this gap between what the vignette authors 'say' and what they might 'do' may be particularly problematic, because the study may only be making visible the 'official' codes associated with a modernizing polity overtly hostile to caste discrimination—as seen in school textbooks, social and mainstream media, television shows, and party-political propaganda. Even if this is the case, I believe vignettes can reveal points of tension within that official narrative where traditional caste attitudes or habitus collide with official anti-caste views,

or at the very least it can tell us how 'effectively' that official anti-caste narrative has implanted itself in the minds of the young authors of the vignettes so that elements of that narrative reassemble themselves unbidden in a writing exercise.

The other key drawback of vignettes arises from the sheer difficulty of constructing a plausible social scenario that attracts the interest of participants while not veering into melodrama and in which the key informational elements are understood by a high percentage of respondents. As Barter and Renold argue (2000: 319), a vignette scenario must be "real and conceivable" but also interesting enough to evoke an affective response. In the next section I discuss the formulation of the vignette(s) used in this study in the light of this tension.

Designing the Vignette

Barter and Renold (2000) argue that a vignette should be simple and comprehensible and be given sufficient context for elaboration, avoid 'eccentric' scenarios, and provide a 'third-person' viewpoint so as to reduce social desirability biases. I broadly followed this useful framework in designing the vignette I used in this study. Together with two research assistants from the dalit community, I wrote a very short introduction to a story to be completed by respondents. We tested this vignette on young people known to the assistants to check for informational problems, especially in recognition of caste names in the stories and in understanding the basic scenario. The scenario chosen was as follows.

X (male) and Y (female) are in love. They met in their first year of college (Bachelor of Arts). They decide to elope. On the day that they are eloping to Pokhara, (Y's) father sees them getting on a bus at the New Bus Park in Kathmandu. **What happens next?**

This scenario was chosen to elicit the interest of the young people who were

responding and to resonate with potential real-life experiences they or their friends may have had. The wording was deliberately simple and the introduction short, to avoid adding levels of complexity. The danger was that the scenario would be too melodramatic, thus eliciting responses that emphasize the soapoperatic or ‘Bollywood’ elements of the story. Some responses did indeed fit that description. However, it was decided that less dramatic scenarios, such as stories involving intercaste friendship or workplace situations, might be less likely to engage respondents emotionally. In addition, if the essence of the endurance of caste is persistent endogamy, then a vignette which addresses a threat to endogamy is more likely to elicit caste-based affect. This choice has the drawback of not capturing the more subtle forms of everyday discrimination associated with commensality prohibitions—sharing food, entering the homes of people of other castes, etc.—which need to be studied using other methods, such as surveys and direct observation.

The basic story was varied by the caste group of the characters to create *de facto* ‘controls’ to test for potential differences in response based on the caste of the imaginary characters (Table 1).

In Nepal, last names reflect caste identity: Devkota and Neupane are recognizable as upper-caste (usually Brahmin) names, while BK (Bishokarma) is widely recognizable as a dalit or lower-caste name. One of Nepal’s *janajati* (hill-based ethnic minorities), the Tamang community is not perceived as untouchable by the upper castes, but they occupy a lower-middle stratum in caste-status hierarchies (Rai 2011). This Tamang version was included to try to measure whether there was a difference in rigidity between the fundamental boundary of caste Hindu and ‘untouchable’ and the boundary between caste Hindu and *janajati*. Two versions include a Brahmin-dalit match (with genders varied) because this was the situation of most analytical interest. Version 1, with an upper-caste daughter rather than a son, was used more often than Version 2 (with the genders reversed) based on the assumption that caste ‘honor’ would be more perturbed by a match between an upper-caste female and a lower-caste male. There was no statistical difference between responses based on the gender of the upper-caste child.

Version 4 counts as the ‘control’ in this study, since it features a Brahmin-Brahmin match, while versions 1–3 feature inter-caste relationships, whether involving a

Table 1: Different Versions of the Vignette

<p>Version 1</p> <p>Bishal BK and Sajita Devkota are in love. They met in the first year of college, studying BA. They decide to elope together. On the day that they are eloping to Pokhara, Sajita’s father sees them getting on a bus at the New Bus Park in Kathmandu. What happens next?</p>
<p>Version 2</p> <p>Suraj Devkota and Sajita BK are in love. [same story, Suraj’s father sees them]</p>
<p>Version 3</p> <p>Suraj Tamang and Sajita Devkota are in love. [same story, Sajita’s father sees them]</p>
<p>Version 4</p> <p>Sajita Devkota and Suraj Neupane are in love. [same story, Sajita’s father sees them]</p>

Brahmin-Bishokarma match or a Brahmin-Tamang match. In other words, the control can be used to measure whether outcomes of the story—positive or negative—are due merely to the elopement scenario or to the castes of the characters in the story. I was able to gather 184 completed vignettes from spring 2017 to summer 2018. I obtained 71 stories from 4 rural schools in Sindhupalchok District and 113 from 5 urban schools in Kathmandu. Students did the exercise during free or lunch periods under the supervision of their usual teachers and they were instructed that the exercise was about ‘love marriage’. The aim of this prompt was to decenter caste as the object of the exercise and therefore hopefully avoid socially desirable responses that did not reflect actual worldviews. I was not present for the exercise, with the intention of making the exercise feel more a part of normal school routine, and also reducing the possible biases introduced by the presence of a western researcher. Teachers were provided copies of the varied texts and instructed to distribute them randomly to students. Unless they asked, the teachers were not themselves told that caste was the focus of the study, again to avoid priming students. The 184 vignettes had the names of their student-authors, because we had requested names to test for differences in response based on the caste of the respondents, but the downside of this was that social desirability bias may have been accentuated.

In order to create another ‘control’, I added a further 32 vignettes from a rural school in Sindhupalchok District in 2019. These vignettes were anonymous. The anonymous vignettes were analyzed to see whether anonymity made a systematic difference to responses. Based on initial trial runs it was assumed that most students would ‘recognize’ the caste names used in the vignette introduction, and in more than 50% of versions 1–3, caste was *explicitly* mentioned by the authors. In many more than 50% the emotive force and terminology of the story—for example, referencing ‘tradition’ versus love—suggested caste had been recognized and was affecting the

composition. But I did not check caste awareness with students first, precisely because I did not want to prime students to see the exercise as explicitly about caste. In a few cases (N = 11) there was clear mis-recognition of caste – for example two students thought a Devkota-Neupane pairing was of upper and lower caste, so those stories were re-categorized. Apart from these cases, rather than make subjective judgments about whether the vignette authors had recognized the caste differences involved, it seemed more methodologically sound to analyze all the vignettes, whether or not the authors explicitly mentioned or alluded to caste in their responses.³

Class 11 and 12 students (usually ages 16–19) were chosen because it was felt that older respondents such as undergraduate or graduate students would more easily recognize the ‘purpose’ of the exercise and be more likely to write generic answers in accordance with social desirability bias. In addition, university students would skew toward a middle-class demographic. On the other hand, younger children would be less likely to recognize caste identities or to have had much exposure to discussions about caste norms in their family or community. Also, for Class 11 and 12 students, engaging with somewhat controversial topics in class is not new, whereas for younger students it would have been ethically contentious to introduce such topics outside of a broader pedagogical context.

Analyzing Completed Vignettes: Quantitative Analysis

Stories were written in Nepali, except for students at an elite private school in Kathmandu, who wrote in English, their usual writing idiom. I listened to an assistant reading the stories slowly in Nepali, and personally translated them, asking for assistance with vocabulary and nuance as needed, especially in relation to possible literary allusions in the stories. I then analyzed the stories, trying to categorize them according to the basic story outcomes they illustrated.

In a first cut at categorizing the vignettes, four typical narrative outcomes emerged.

1. Unhappy outcome (death of one or other character by murder or suicide, forced separation, the girl forced to marry into the same caste, or feelings of disillusion after marriage)
2. Run away outcome (the couple elope successfully but are never reconciled to their families or communities in the long term)
3. Happy outcome (parents agree to a marriage in the near future or instantly, sometimes with some simple conditions attached, such as getting consent from both sets of parents)
4. Wait outcome (the young couple agree to wait until they have finished their studies and/or have entered professional employment)

I also grouped outcomes 1 and 2 under the heading ‘negative outcome’ and outcomes 3 and 4 as ‘positive outcome’ in order to simplify tabulation.

These outcomes were then matched to the caste of the characters in all the versions of the story to see if patterns emerged. Specifically, the outcomes could be tested against the following null hypothesis: *unhappy or negative outcomes should be no more likely in mixed-caste pairings than in same-caste pairings*. Of course, this statistical test does not prove or disprove the existence of caste-based attitudinal bias since it may also reflect a realistic assessment by the authors of the problems likely to be faced by mixed-caste couples in their communities. Only a closer qualitative analysis, as conducted below, can get at the attitudinal elements revealed by the vignettes. However, the test probably captures something of the objective social norms present in the writers’ communities and families: if authors foresaw a negative outcome, then it may reflect underlying prejudice toward lower-caste persons, whether that is endorsed by the authors or not. What cannot be ascertained is whether that underlying prejudice was held personally by the authors.

Table 2: Vignette Outcomes as Percentage of Stories in each category

Story categories	Rural Schools (N = 71)	Urban Schools (N = 113)	Total (N = 184)
Unhappy ending for Dalit – upper-caste couples (versions 1 and 2)	27	35	32
Unhappy ending for Tamang – upper-caste couples (version 3)	0	43	29
Unhappy ending for all mixed-caste couples (versions 1,2,3)	21	38	38
Unhappy ending for upper-caste couples (version 4)	26	18	21
Negative outcome (unhappy plus run away) for dalit-upper caste couples	49	54	52
Negative outcome for all mixed-caste couples	42	53	48
Negative outcome for Brahmin-Brahmin couples	53	30	38
Positive outcome (happy plus wait) for all mixed-caste couples	58	48	52
Positive outcome for Brahmin-Brahmin couples	47	70	62

Table 2 presents selected results based on pairing outcomes with the versions of the story. Note that the numbers in the boxes of the table are the percentage of stories that fall into that category, not raw numbers of stories. For purposes of simplicity, I have only included the ‘happy’ and ‘unhappy’ outcomes for separate analysis. The ‘wait’ and ‘run away’ outcomes are included in the broader ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ results.

In each total category (but not in rural schools alone) the Brahmin-Brahmin vignettes showed fewer negative outcomes than the mixed-caste and Brahmin-lower-caste couples. However, tests for statistical significance suggest no meaningful difference.

In order to test for statistical significance, I ran p value tests. The p value is the probability of obtaining test results at least as extreme as the results actually observed, under the assumption that the null hypothesis is correct. In this study the null hypothesis was that there is no difference in story outcomes based on the caste of the characters in the different versions of the vignette. When I ran a few p tests for significance using the raw data—with the null hypothesis that positive and negative outcomes should be equally distributed by caste—none of the pairings achieved statistical significance. For the comparisons with the Brahmin-Brahmin control group, typically the p value was 0.2–0.3, meaning the difference in outcomes could have emerged by chance 20%–30% of the time if they were generated randomly. Some of this may be an artifact of a small or an atypical sampling of

rural schools, where the Brahmin-Brahmin pairings seem ‘unusually’ unhappy and the Tamang-Brahmin pairings ‘unusually’ happy. Indeed, using only urban figures the p values look a bit closer to significant—for example, total negative outcomes for the Brahmin-Brahmin grouping compared with the mixed-caste grouping had a p value of 0.11 for urban stories alone, meaning that for those urban responses there was only about a 10% chance that the results would have been as skewed as they were toward same-caste positive outcomes. This rather surprising result—urban samples showed more negativity to mixed-caste couples—may resonate with the qualitative analysis below, which shows how certain tropes connected to Maoism and rural activism may be more prominent in some rural areas than in urban ones.⁴

The lack of a statistically significant finding, with the proviso that in urban schools there may be a slight bias observable, is of course meaningful, because it suggests that caste is *not* the overwhelming factor when young people imagine whether relationships will go well or not. In addition, no statistically meaningful difference existed between rural and urban schools—despite the ‘common-sense’ intuition that caste attitudes should be more ‘progressive’ in urban areas.

When outcomes were broken down *by the caste of the story author*—about 85% of last names could be assigned to caste groups without ambiguity—the results were as follows (Table 3).

Table 3: Outcomes by Caste of Author As Raw Numbers (N = 167)

Caste of Author	Negative Outcomes in story (Unhappy and run away)	Positive Outcomes in story (Happy and wait)
Upper (Brahmin-Chettri-Newar)	For mixed caste: 40	For mixed caste: 49
	For Brahmin-Brahmin: 16	For Brahmin-Brahmin: 17
Other (Janajati-Madhesi-dalit)	For mixed caste: 16	For Mixed Caste: 21
	For Brahmin-Brahmin: 1	For Brahmin-Brahmin: 7

Here the percentage data is clear enough without the need to run p value tests. This table suggests that higher-caste authors did not perceive the relationships differently based on the caste of the characters, or at least did not write as if they did!

Adding a Control Group for Author Anonymity

I presented an early version of this paper at the Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya in 2019. There, several audience members suggested that a further control should be run to explore whether the anonymity of vignettes affected responses, because it is possible that under the cover of anonymity respondents may be more likely to express their ‘true’ attitudes to intercaste relationships. Therefore, in 2019, I ran a control with another 32 vignettes from a rural school in Sindhupalchok District. The results are presented below (Table 4).

analysis provides a thicker understanding of norms related to caste and contextualizes how caste was seen by the authors in relation to such contexts as authority, tradition, development, and national identity.

It was surprisingly straightforward to isolate certain tropes which appeared in vignettes across settings, although some were more common in rural than in urban schools.

Below I discuss discourses in two groups—broadly ‘anti-caste’ discourses, which I label ‘achievement’, ‘modernity’, ‘textbook’, ‘persuasion’, and ‘repentance’ – followed by discourses that emphasize the persistence of caste difference: ‘violence’, ‘patriarchal wisdom’, and ‘outright caste-ism’. The examples chosen are the ones where caste was explicitly invoked—unlike in the quantitative analysis, where all vignettes were analyzed whether they explicitly invoked caste or not. Obviously, some of these discourses may be seen also in the

Table 4: Data from Anonymously Written Vignettes as Percentages (raw number total = 32)

	Positive Outcome (Happy / Wait)	Negative Outcome (Unhappy / Run Away)
Same-caste couples	75	25
Mixed-caste couples	59	41

Given the small sample, all from one school, and an especially small control group of same-caste characters, it is hard to draw definitive conclusions, but it is notable that the percentage of positive outcomes for mixed-caste couples (59%) was actually higher than in the total sample of vignettes with named authors (52%, as noted in Table 2).

‘control’ group of the Brahmin-Brahmin couple—in particular the cliched ‘achievement’ discourse, which advises ‘waiting’ for marriage until achievement status is reached—but in this section I am leaving aside the control group because only the authors’ explicit meditations on caste are being considered.

Qualitative Analysis of the Vignettes

Quantitative analysis can reveal only so much about caste attitudes in the vignettes. Arguably of greater analytic value is qualitative exploration of the various discourses contained in the vignettes. Discourse

The ‘Achievement’ Discourse

This discourse was included in the tables above as ‘wait’, meaning that the couple should wait until they have better education and jobs before marrying. The ‘wait’ discourse could be described as a subset of a broader ‘achievement’ discourse, recurring

in the vignettes, which emphasized achieving an educated, middle-class status rather than ‘traditional’ value orientations. Below is a nicely illustrative example of such a story in the Brahmin girl-dalit boy version (summarized).

The father got angry when he heard the word ‘BK’; he made his daughter block the boy on social media. The father is a ‘rich, prestigious businessman and [is] caste-ist’. Five years later the BK boy becomes a millionaire running a cement company.⁵ The boy meets the father on business. The father apologizes to the boy and the couple marry with his permission.

This story was unusually direct in its humorous opposition of a bourgeois, achievement-oriented attitude to a caste narrative. A more typical example, summarized below, is thematically similar (Brahmin girl, Tamang boy).

The father caught his daughter forcefully, and scolded her: “You are only 19. This is not the age to marry, this is a time to study, and besides, his caste is not similar to ours. If you marry him society will insult us and will lower out prestige.” But she insisted, “I want to marry or I will die.” But the father did not change his mind. However, after a while, the father tired of her complaints and called [the boy] to the house. He talked to both and said: “First study well and after getting educated we will think about it.” They were happy and focused on their education. After completing studies, the boy got a good job and the father gave his daughter to him.

This story illustrates the father’s transformation from focusing on a traditional ascriptive status to an achievement-based status. Many vignettes of this kind started with the father concerned about *ijaat* (honor or prestige) under perceived threat, and then being won over to an alternate set of values focused on education and employment status, so that *ijaat* could be conserved

in a new form—that of educational capital and the employability of children.

The Modernity and ‘Textbook’ Discourses

In these vignettes, the authors explicitly contrast ‘caste values’ to ‘modern’ values in a binary opposition. For example (female Dalit, male Brahmin):

Because the kids were educated they tried to explain the situation to the father: “We are of the same class – we can sustain ourselves. Because of caste there is no development in Nepal. In the world there is no discrimination among foreigners.” The father heard them and realized that they were correct, and that we shouldn’t think of caste and should work toward development, and he allowed them to marry.

This discourse repeatedly sets terms such as *adhunik* (modern) and *bikas* (development) against caste-oriented attitudes, somewhat naively setting a ‘developed’ world, devoid of such prejudice, against the ‘traditional’ world of the Nepali village. At times, vignettes in this category could be termed ‘textbook’ denunciations of caste, often containing language such as follows (from a male dalit, female Brahmin vignette):

[The girl’s father’s words] “I don’t care about high and low – all humans are the same – if you love a dalit it is not a mistake. The mistake is to hide your love.”

Others speak in a direct authorial voice to make the couples’ plight an exemplary plea for modern values (male Brahmin, female Dalit):

Because of caste this young couple died at a young age [of double suicide]. We should have been developing our state instead of disenfranchizing [*adhiakar bhachhit*] our people.

These ‘textbook’ appeals to non-caste values drew either on a political vocabulary of rights and development and modernity or on quotations from great poets which are well known from textbooks, in particular, Laxmi Prasad Devkota’s lines to the extent that *manish thulo dil le hunccha, jaat le hudaina* (people are great by their heart not by caste).

The Persuasion and Repentance Discourses

A more dramatic discourse, that overlaps in content with ‘achievement’ and ‘modernity’ but which takes those blunt oppositions of values in a more dialogic direction, is ‘persuasion’. In this type of narrative, the child, usually the daughter, or even police officers or friends of the family intervene in the argument and actively change the mind of the father about caste difference. For example, this vignette (male Dalit, female Brahmin):

The father asks what is she doing on the bus with an unknown boy: “He’s a lower-caste boy – we’ll have to cut you off from our family.” His daughter replies: “It’s the 21st century! Nowadays people don’t talk about caste. Love doesn’t know caste. Our love is deep – we can be an example to society. Laxmi Prasad Devkota said: ‘Great by heart not caste.’” The father regrets his anger and supports their relationship. Then, he argues with and convinces villagers who had been gossiping that “Blood is red – the caste system still exists” and allows the marriage after they have completed Master’s level education.

In these persuasion narratives, the content of anti-caste discourses is persuasively applied to change the mind of the father figure. In the above extract the father then becomes an agent of change himself, chastising and persuading neighbors.

A number of stories (N = 10) followed a pattern in which the police intervened on the part of anti-caste ideas. These, perhaps

surprisingly, outnumbered the few stories (N = 4) where the police were recruited by a caste-ist father to arrest the couple in Pokhara or beat up the lower-caste male. Below is an example, involving the police (male dalit, female Brahmin couple):

The father takes the couple to the police station *jabardasti* (forcibly). He asks if they are in love. He tells the boy: “You have no similarities in culture, custom, religion, or caste.” But the police take the father aside and tell him he’s wrong in his attitude of discrimination. The couple marry and become an example of inter-caste marriage for the community. [Authorial comment]: “We should accept this kind of marriage and promote it.”

Another version of persuasion involves a successful marriage as itself a form of persuasion (male Brahmin, female dalit):

The father brought the couple home and was embarrassed because his neighbors saw the couple and held his family in a negative light. But the couple would not be discouraged. They eloped anyway and married. Eventually the parents saw the success of their marriage and became happy with it. Even the neighbors were won over by this example of *ramro jankari* (good information/awareness).

It was notable that ‘persuasion’ narratives were particularly common in rural schools (by a ratio of 2:1 compared to urban schools). Not just this, but particular rural schools provided a disproportionate number of examples of this kind of narrative. Speculatively speaking, this may be a legacy of political mobilization in some rural villages in Sindhupalchok (for example in the vicinity of Thulo Sriwari) where the vignettes were written. Some of the chosen locations were strongholds of the Maoist movement and the ‘persuasion’ trope echoes elements of communist

rhetoric in relation to caste. But this connection is hard to prove.

The ‘repentance’ narrative could be said to be a subset, or variant, of persuasion. In these vignettes, a tragic death of one or both of the couple causes a change of heart in the father:

The father took them to the police, but they escaped. The villagers heard about the intercaste relationship and gossiped about it and father was upset at their talk. Finally, the police located the couple and when the father met them, he slapped his daughter, but the police intervened and stopped him. Soon after his daughter killed herself, followed shortly afterward by her lover. The father came to regret his actions and saw that caste shouldn’t stand in the way of love. He organized programs of awareness about caste in his village.

As suggested above, this dialectic of tragedy and ‘awareness’ may be engrained in rural areas as a legacy of the civil war, and it was noticeable that this narrative was much less common in stories written by urban authors.

Caste-ist Narratives: Violence, patriarchal wisdom, and explicit caste-ism

These narratives could, preliminarily, be said to ‘affirm’ caste difference—either implicitly, by depicting a story that ends in violence or explicitly, by authorial comment that criticizes intercaste marriage.

Violent events imagined were (in order of frequency): grabbing the daughter/couple off the bus; suicide by one or both young people, and occasionally parents; locking away of the daughter against her will; murder of the boy by the father or by *gunda* (violent ruffians) paid by the father; or physical harm to the boy as a threat for him to stay away. Table 5 reports the frequency overall for violence in the stories.

Table 5: Incidence of Violence in the Stories (Total = 43 / 184*)

	Rural	Urban
Versions 1–3 (intercaste)	9	23
Version 4 (upper-caste couple)	5	6

Urban respondents were more likely to imagine violence than rural ones. Again, this is not quite statistically significant – excluding the upper-caste couple stories the p value is 0.14 – but closer to significance than most of the statistical comparisons undertaken above. However, there was no difference as a ratio between violence toward same-caste couples and intercaste couples. This lack of difference suggests that we cannot infer that violence in the stories reflects, in each case, an implicit ‘judgment’ about caste, since same-caste couples often met the same violent fate. The difference between urban and rural schools remains analytically interesting, but it may reflect an urban ‘dramatizing’ of social conflict that rural students were less prone to, and which has nothing directly to do with caste relations.

Of the 230 completed stories, including the anonymously authored stories, only three or four stories could be classified as explicitly endorsing anti-caste tropes or endorsing a ‘traditional’ defense of same-caste marriage. That qualification is important. An example of a narrative endorsing a caste stereotype is the following (male dalit, female Brahmin):

The father asks his daughter “Who is that boy?” She lies: “We’re just going to celebrate a friend’s birthday.” But she doesn’t return. The dalit boy was a liar – a womanizer. A friend on the bus warns her about him but the girl doesn’t listen. She then sees him with his ex-girlfriend. She regrets her elopement. She repents to dad. He forgives her.

Oddly, this story was one of the very few written by a (male) dalit student, so it may have had an ironic intent. The absence of other stories like this may be a positive sign that stereotypical views of intercaste marriage are waning among young Nepalis.

Another group of stories (N = 4 or 5, depending on how categorized) takes a more ‘traditionalist’ stance, in which the wisdom of the father is acknowledged, eventually, by the caste-transgressing couple. For example (female Brahmin, male Dalit):

The father stopped the bus and took the couple aside. He asked his daughter whether she had considered caste. Did the boy not feel ashamed to have gone off with a Brahmin girl? ... This is against culture, religion and tradition. A couple must be of the same caste. A dalit cannot care for an upper-caste partner. His daughter had to realize that family honor was at stake and a dark future faced her. It would be a waste of education if she ran off with him. The couple’s eyes were opened [by this talk] and they decided to focus on their studies.

This is one of the rare examples where the invocation of traditional values is not complicated by a tragic outcome from the couple, leading to repentance or regret, or is not moderated by an authorial comment criticizing the father’s stance.

Overall, however, and taking into account that violent outcomes cannot be directly connected to caste-ist motivations, it was striking how few directly caste-prejudiced narratives emerged from the study: the anonymous stories contained no higher proportion of ‘caste-ist’ narratives than the authored stories.

Implications and Potential for Follow-up Vignette Studies in Nepal

Substantively, the vignettes analyzed in this study revealed the following key trends:

- Young people, especially in rural areas, are highly conscientized about caste discrimination and have absorbed tropes of ‘awareness’, perhaps as a result of media campaigns and perhaps as a result of political campaigns which are a legacy of the civil war period (Bownas (2015) and Zhakevich (2019) discuss the possibly long lasting legacies of civil war–era awareness campaigns).
- Overt caste discriminatory attitudes are fairly rare in this age group, if one sets aside concerns about social desirability bias (which was addressed to some degree by adding a sample of anonymous vignettes).
- The ‘drama’ of modern versus traditional values is still a dominant narrative among young people in Nepal, and an optimistic narrative is common in which state authorities, including the police, are on the side of civil rights and agents of beneficial social transformation.
- The ‘modern’ narrative of caste equality is also a ‘bourgeois’ narrative of the work ethic of achievement-oriented identity and of its triumph over ascriptive identity. Education, professional employment, national development, and modernity cluster together in the vignettes in contrast to a ‘traditional’ realm of village gossips.
- Contrary to expectations, quantitative analysis suggested that caste attitudes, at least in relation to marriage, are more liberal in rural than in urban settings. The causes of this are unclear, but may include—speculatively—civil war–era conscientization and communist political influence more generally in the countryside, or the greater prevalence of upper ‘bubbles’ in urban areas, meaning that urban youth are less likely

to know lower-caste persons than in rural areas.

It should be noted that the geographical limitation of this study is both a drawback and an analytical opportunity. By confining samples to the central region of Nepal, and providing a relatively large number of samples drawn from many sites in that region, the study provides a somewhat plausible benchmark for attitudes to caste at a specific time and place as well as a comparative study of urban and rural areas. This benchmark can be used in future vignette studies to measure regional differences in caste attitudes across Nepal. Post Covid, it will be particularly rewarding to conduct the same exercise in the Terai (plains) region and the far western region of Nepal, where one would expect local caste politics to manifest in the narratives and in the statistical analysis of story outcomes.

The benchmark also provides a measure that can be used to look at changes over time. If a similar study were conducted at 10-year intervals, it would be interesting to observe changes in narratives. For example, it could be that the level of ‘drama’ associated with caste declines over this period, or it could be that the ‘tradition versus modernity’ narrative dissipates or is seen as less urgent by authors. Or, indeed, there could be evidence in future studies of the ‘ethnicization’ of caste identities in new kinds of narrative not seen in the current sample. Because the methodology is simple and transparent, hopefully researchers other than the author will be able to apply it in other regions, perhaps as a supplement to more traditional social scientific surveys on attitudes. Vignettes can also be scanned and shared across the research community and be available for other, perhaps more linguistically rich, forms of analysis.

More broadly, for social research in Nepal, the vignette method could easily be adapted to study over aspects of social inclusion and transformation. For example, the method could be used to study gender inclusion. Indeed, there are gendered aspects even of the vignettes used in this study—not least the fact that in no instance was the mother

the agent of persuasion in the stories, although daughters sometimes were. Given Nepal’s extreme diversity, many other social characteristics can be studied using the vignette method including regional origin, rural versus urban identity, religious identity, ethnic origin, language spoken, and occupational status. The method creates an archive of responses that are easily sharable with other researchers and are not prone to the principal-agent problems that arise when surveys are subcontracted to paid survey agents. Given the lack of funding for social research in Nepal, the method is also cost and time-effective.

Richard Bownas (PhD, Cornell University, 2012), researches issues related to caste, religion and development in Nepal. He has published several articles in relation to the Maoist movement in Nepal, post disaster recovery, caste discrimination and more recently is working on the sociology of Christian conversion in Nepal.

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Endnotes

1. The murder of six dalit men in May 2020: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jun/13/nepal-to-investigate-dalit-killings-following-arranged-marriage-dispute> (Accessed December 16, 2022)
2. It was from listening to this presentation and in subsequent conversations with Dr Folmar that the idea for the current study emerged.
3. In many cases it was very hard to judge whether caste was being explicitly invoked. For example, when authors referred to breaking ‘traditions’ they may have been alluding to the caste of the characters in the vignettes or to the general issue of ‘love

marriage'. At times, the 'excessive' response of the parents in the vignettes was probably due to the intercaste scenario, but it is impossible to prove this. These cases were the minority, however, as in most instances caste was consciously invoked. Another reason to analyze all vignettes as a group rather than only those that explicitly invoked caste is that the experiment is designed in part to allow for unconscious biases that may have influenced authors' perceptions of the outcome of the story.

4. Another possible hypothesis is that social distance between castes may actually be higher in urban areas than in villages, although testing that is beyond the scope of this study.

5. The author must have been playing on 'BK Cement', which is not actually a dalit-run company.

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Research Article

Fluid formulations: A study of varied interpretations of Madhesi identity

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Abstract

This paper is an examination of the ways in which the residents and political actors of the *Tarāi-Madhes* (lowlands) in Nepal construct and contest Madhesi identity. It juxtaposes interpretations of Madhesi along geographic, linguistic, ethnic, and religious lines, with the experiential aspect of “being a Madhesi.” The paper demonstrates how Madhesi evolved into a politically charged, emotion-laden identity category, and argues that the experience of being othered is central to the construction and reification of Madhesi identity.

Keywords

Madhesi; Nepal; identity; othering

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Introduction

The idea of Nepal is inextricably linked to the imagination of its mountains. Yet, it is the lowlands of the country, colloquially called *Tarāi*, *Madhesa*, or *Tarāi-Madhesa*, and its people, that are central to understanding Nepali politics in recent years. The mélange of topography, languages, and people that populate the flatlands lie at the heart of ongoing contestations about who or what constitutes the country and how its diversity shapes the awareness of being a Nepali.

The lowlands of Nepal occupy around 23 percent of the country, consist of one-thirds of the total agricultural land, and over 80 percent of all of Nepal's industries are located in ten Tarai districts alone (Rimal et al. 2018). Demographically, it is home to approximately 51 percent of Nepal's population, of which 63 percent of the people are of plains origin, 36 percent of hill origin, while the remaining are classified as others in the 2011 census (Goodhand et al. 2018). The people of plains origin include the plains caste groups, *Tarāi Janajāti* (plains indigenous groups), and Muslims, who constitute 19.86, 9.75, and 4.4 percent of Nepal's population respectively (Dahal 2014).

The lowlands have, however, been treated more as a "colonial possession serving the economic and other interests" of the Kathmandu-based rulers from the hills "than as a constituent unit of the newly-founded Kingdom" (Regmi 1984: 13) ever since the formation of the modern state of Nepal in the 18th century. Despite Nepal's status as a multinational democracy,¹ Nepali national identity promoted by the state since the 1950s draws upon the cultural tenets of the high caste Hindus of the hills. It is particularly exclusionary to the people of the plains as it "privileges [hill] traditions and norms" (B. Sijapati 2013: 151). Furthermore, due to geographical proximity with India and cultural and linguistic similarity with north Indian caste groups, the Nepali state and people from the hills have always cast suspicion on the "Nepaliness" of plains people (Gauge 1975; Gautam 2008).²

Such othering has resulted in three massive protests in the lowlands termed the *Madhes āndolan* (movement) in 2007, 2008, and 2015/16 in the aftermath of a decade-long armed conflict (1996–2006), and amidst heated political debates on ethnic rights and state restructuring in Nepal (2007–2015).

Madhes, a locational term signifying the plains of Nepal, and Madhesi,³ a term used to refer to "the plainspeople of Indian cultural and linguistic background" (Gellner 2019, 269) both became highly contested terms in the aftermath of the 2007 Madhes uprising (Karki and Wenner 2020). Madhesi, as an identity category, warrants examination as it is "an ethnic category still very much in the making" (Gellner 2014) with a "fluid denotation" (Gellner 2019: 269). Scholarly works that examine the construction of Madhesi identity, specifically the reasons behind why and how "Madhesis were made Madhesis," remain lacking, as has been noted by Gautam (2008: 117). Myriad interpretations of the term Madhesi thus persist in scholarly works,⁴ and the word remains contested in practice and officially undefined.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines Madhesi identity by highlighting what it means to be a person from the lowlands of Nepal. It is guided by the research question: What kind of experiences shape plainspeople's understanding, construction of, and identification with an identity category? The paper is also an endeavor to consolidate the varied interpretations of the term Madhesi and examine the reasons for these variations. I make two arguments in this paper. First, the experience of being discriminated as the Other by the Nepali state and hill people is foundational to understanding the Madhesi identity category. Second, understanding Madhesi as an emotion-laden, politically charged experiential identity category can aid scholarly analysis by overcoming definitional issues tied to which groups of people belong to it or not. This paper does not intend to provide a definition of Madhesi identity, but seeks to highlight how articulations of "Madhesi" involve significant gatekeeping, boundary

maintenance, and problematizing of human mobility.

The remainder of this paper is organized into six sections. The upcoming section outlines the concepts used in this paper, followed by a discussion of the methodology. Section three provides a brief history of discrimination and dissent in the plains. Section four is a detailed discussion of Madhesi identity along geographical, linguistic, caste, ethnic, religious, and experiential lines. Special emphasis is placed on my respondents' experience of being treated as the Other. Sections five and six discuss the findings of this paper, contextualize them, and conclude the paper.

Conceptual framework

I use the concept of identity to inform my analysis. This paper takes a social constructivist stance on identity, which implies that while an individual has a role in constructing one's identity, the ability to construct and choose an identity is constrained by the wider social and cultural context. Referring to Jenkins (2008: 18), I understand identity as:

...our understanding of who we are and who other people are, and, reciprocally, other people's understanding of themselves and of others (which includes us). It is a very practical matter, synthesizing relationships of similarity and difference. The outcome of agreement and disagreement, and at least in principle always negotiable, identification is not fixed.

This definition shows that otherness is an unavoidable aspect of identity. Through othering, a "dominant in-group ('Us,' the Self) constructs one or many dominated outgroups ('Them,' the Other) by stigmatizing difference - real or imagined - presented as a negation of identity and thus a motive for potential discrimination" (Staszak 2020: 25). At the level of nation-states, the identification of the Other facilitates the formation, articulation, and

maintenance of national identity (Petersoo 2007).

Identity, nevertheless, is a fluid, malleable, and negotiable construct (Jenkins 2008). A constructivist understanding of identity, however, also makes it a contested category of analysis. Owing to the complexities and vagueness of the term, several authors (Rattansi and Phoenix 2005; Malešević 2003) argue that identity as an analytical category should be abandoned altogether. Identity "...is too ambitious, too torn between the meanings of 'hard' and 'soft,' the essential meanings and constructivist qualifiers, to be used in sociology" state (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 2). However, defending the significance of identity as a conceptual toolbox, Jenkins (2008) emphasizes that though constructed, identity is not entirely imaginary, as it is experienced in everyday life. He further argues that the experiential aspect of identity is partly related to categorization by others, which has real consequences. Identity can influence allocation: "what, and how much, you get" (R. Jenkins 2008: 198). Consequently, identity can be a useful tool of resistance for oppressed groups (L. D. Jenkins 2003).

The simplification of an individual's identity, which is an amalgam of age, gender, class, caste, ethnicity, region, religion, and nation, among other factors, into one category is problematic and can have disastrous consequences (see Scott 1998). Cognizant of the dangers of oversimplification, I use the concept of identity for analysis because my respondents used the term "*Pahicān*" (identity).⁵ The Madhes movements, which form the backdrop of my research, were also framed by my interviewees as "*Pahicān ko ladāi*" (fight or struggle for identity or recognition of identity).

Besides arguing for the usefulness of identity as an analytical category, and by focusing on the Madhesi category, this paper also makes an empirical contribution to identity studies in Nepal. Currently, identity research in Nepal is largely about castes and ethnicities that reside in the mid-hills and mountains such as Tamang (Tamang 2009; Campbell 1997; Holmberg 1989),

Newar (Gellner 1986; Doherty 1979), Thakali (W. F. Fisher 2001), Rai (Allen 1997; Russell 1997; Gaenzle 1997), Gurung (Macfarlane 1997; McHugh 1989), Magar (de Sales 2000; Molnar 1982), and Thagmi (Shneiderman 2015), among others. Among the people who live in the lowlands, academic literature on Tharu, a group that claims autochthony to the Tarai-Madhes, is most extensive (Müller-Böker 1993, 1997; Krauskopff 1995, 2018; Guneratne 1998, 2002, 2010) followed by writings on Muslims (M. A. Sijapati 2017, 2013, 2011; Dastider 2013, 2007, 1995; S. Sharma 1994; Gaborieau 1985, 1978, 1972). Other plain caste ethnicities and caste groups are under-researched with few works on the Maithils (Acharya 1981; Burkert 1997), Santhal (Buggeland 1999), Yadav (Dahal 2012), and Dhimal (Rai 2013). This paper seeks to address this empirical research gap.

Methodology

The empirical part of this paper is based on data collected through 55 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in various parts of the central and eastern lowlands of Nepal: Kathmandu, Lahan, Rajbiraj, Dhalkebar, Birgunj, and Golbazar in 2017, 2018, and 2019.⁶ Some among my interviewees were embedded in Madhesi politics, such as politicians, political analysts, and Madhesi rights' activists, while the rest were university lecturers, migrant returnees, hospital staff, nonprofit staff, and journalists. I used the purposeful sampling method to select my interviewees because "the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting *information-rich cases* for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term *purposeful sampling*" (Patton 1990: 169, emphasis in original). I also used the snowball or chain sampling method to locate participants, and random sampling to get diverse views on the issue. Interviews were conducted in the Nepali vernacular and simultaneously transcribed and translated into the English language on f4 transkript

and MAXQDA software. Data analysis for this paper was inspired by grounded theory and qualitative document analysis, and information was coded and analyzed in MAXQDA.

One of the questions I asked my respondents was to define the term Madhesi and relate their experience of being a person from the plains either currently living there, or in Kathmandu. This paper uses the data gathered from my respondents' answers to this question and instances when Madhesi identity was mentioned in relation to the topics under discussion. In the interviews, I observed that whether or not someone was categorized a Madhesi was a sensitive topic which evoked despair, anger, frustration, and pride in my interviewees. Before I present the findings, I acknowledge my standpoint as an urban hill Chhetri woman. My ascribed *Pahāḍe*⁷ (a person from the hills) identity was obvious to my respondents due to my surname. Some respondents, thus, felt the need to clarify that they are speaking about the hill-centric state and not hill people while discussing how the Nepali state has treated the peoples of the plains.

History of discrimination and dissent in the plains

Scholarship on the Nepali lowlands and its people, according to Gautam (2008), agrees upon two things. First, the "Madhesi" have been discriminated against and forsaken by the Nepali state. Second, the loyalty of the "Madhesi" toward the Nepali state, as well as their "Nepaliness," is doubted and questioned. Consequently, Gautam (2008) argues, "Madhesi" in contemporary Nepal are treated as second-class citizens and their presence in Nepali state mechanisms is negligible. This has resulted in the rise of regional and ethnic political parties, and established Madhes as a distinct political power in Nepali politics (ibid). Understanding the reasons behind scholarly consensus on the discrimination faced by the lowlands and its people warrants a brief discussion about the history of the modern state of Nepal with a focus on the economic

exploitation, cultural domination, and political subjugation of the region.

In 1744, a king of the hill principality of Gorkha in Western Nepal, Prithvi Narayan Shah, launched a military campaign to expand his kingdom, laying the foundations of modern-day Nepal (Stiller 1993). The Gorkhali state acquired the plains after the conquest of hill kingdoms that claimed them, and it took nearly a hundred years for the Nepal-Tarai to acquire its current form (Michael 2010). The fertile lands of the plains were prized possessions for Gorkhali rulers due to the revenue they generated in addition to providing an income for landowning elites (Ojha 1983). Social and cultural interactions between the hills and the plains remained limited throughout the 18th and 19th centuries as rulers restricted mobility of people across the regions by prioritizing the interests of the political elites, as well as military considerations (Regmi 1984). Additionally, Tarai residents were barred from politics, civil administration, and the army, resulting in their status as second-class citizens (Gaige 1975).

Culturally, the Nepali state has historically privileged hill people and endorsed their cultural tenets. The *Mulukī Ain* (Law of the Land) 1854, for instance, placed the entire population of the country in a caste hierarchy institutionalizing inequality among the people (Hachhethu 2003). The law places upper castes from the plains below the hill upper castes in hierarchy, while many Tarai middle castes and indigenous groups are not mentioned which, according to Bennett, Dahal, and Govindasamy (2008) reflects the marginal position occupied by the citizens of the plains during that period. Likewise, the 1962 Constitution of Nepal defined and institutionalized the basic tenets of Nepali national identity as the monarchy, Hinduism, and the Nepali language (Onta 1996). The *Pancāyata* regime (1960–1990), an autocratic system of rule by the monarchy, promoted a Nepali identity based on “*Eka bhāṣā eka bheṣa eka deśa*” (One language, one dress, one country), drawing on the cultural tenets of the high caste hill rulers. This implied assimilation to

the cultural norms of the high caste Hindus from the hills, and of the people living in the hills and mountains more broadly, and was thus particularly exclusionary for the people of the plains.

The struggle for rights and recognition of the distinct identity of the people of the lowlands began in the 1950s, after the overthrow of the Rana autocracy, due to the maltreatment of the region and its peoples as colonial subjects during the Shah and Rana rule (Gautam 2008; Regmi 1984; Gaige 1975). The *Nepāla Tarāi Kāṃgresa Pārṭī* (Nepal Tarai Congress Party) was formed in 1951, whose main aims were an autonomous state in the Tarai, recognition of Hindi as a national language, and ensuring adequate employment of the plains people in civil service (Joshi and Rose 1966: 138). While the party eventually disintegrated, its objectives continued to be listed as demands in all the subsequent protests in the region, including the Madhes Movements of 2007 and 2008 (B. Sijapati 2013). Likewise, in 1956, Raghunath Thakur “Madhesi” launched the *Madhesī Mukti Āndolana* (Madhesi Emancipation Movement) and later *Madhesī Janakrāntikārī Dala* (Madhesi People’s Revolutionary Party), demanding an end to the oppression of Madhesis and advocating for their rights. Self-identifying as a Madhesi, in his 1958 Hindi booklet *Paratantra Madhesa aura uskī Saṃskṛti* (A dependent Madhes and its culture), Thakur mentions “how the term ‘Madhesi/ya’ that was imposed by the state during the Rana regime then became a term for self-identification to counter the state” (Gautam 2012: 177). Thakur’s analysis of the Madhesi struggle as the search for emancipation from alienation and colonization by the hill-centric Nepali state has gained wide traction in Nepali politics since the 1990s.

After the end of the *Pancāyata* regime in 1990, the new political climate aided diverse ethnic and cultural groups in Nepal to assert their difference and rights (Hangen and Lawoti 2013). In 1983, *Nepal Sadbhāvanā Pariṣada* (Nepal Goodwill Council) was launched as a cultural association to work for the political and cultural rights of the

Madhesi. It was registered as a political party in 1990 as the *Nepāla Sadbhāvanā Pārṭī* (Nepal Goodwill Party). The Maoist War (1996–2006) further revealed deep-rooted chasms in Nepali society along caste, class, gender, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and geographic lines (Adhikari 2014). While the Maoist war was fought mostly in the hills, in 2000, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) or CPN (Maoist) formed the *Madhesī Rāṣṭriya Mukti Morcā* (Madhesi National Liberation Front) to fight for the rights of the plains people.⁸ In doing so, the CPN (Maoist) became the first national level party to systematically raise the concerns of the lowlands (Gautam 2008).

The end of the Maoist war culminated with a non-violent overthrow of the 240-year-old monarchical rule in Nepal. However, it was the Madhes Movement in 2007 and 2008 that institutionalized federalism in Nepal. Building upon the range of issues raised by politicians and activists from the plains since the 1950s - such as demands of the Nepal Tarai Congress Party - the main demands of the 2007 Madhes Movement were: state recognition of Madhesi identity; institutionalizing federal democracy in Nepal; the creation of an autonomous Madhes province; delineation of electoral provinces based on population; and proportional representation of all ethnic groups in state organs. Initial protests were triggered after the arrest of the leaders of the *Madhesī Janādhikāra Phoram* (Madhesi People’s Rights Forum), then a loose network of politicians and activists from the plains, who burned the copies of the Interim Constitution on January 16, 2007 claiming that the statute did not ensure federalism and delineate electoral constituencies on the basis of population (B. Sijapati 2013). In February 2008, the government signed an agreement with a coalition of plains-centric parties committing to carve an Autonomous Madhes Province and adopt federalism in Nepal. Yet, when the Second Constituent Assembly was preparing to promulgate a constitution in 2015, the people of the plains protested again. The protests revolved around four major issues: the delineation of province boundaries,

delineation of electoral constituencies based on population, inclusive proportional representation of all ethnic groups in state organs, and change in citizenship provisions (International Crisis Group 2016).

The discussion on Madhesi identity, which became a highly contested word in Nepali politics in the aftermath of the 2007 protests, takes place against this backdrop of dissent in the plains. As Hachhethu (2007: 2) notes, “Madhesi identity has historically been asserted by political activism” and received due recognition by the Nepali state as a consequence of the Madhes movements. In the subsequent section, I elaborate upon the diverse ways in which Madhesi identity has been interpreted, constructed, and delimited based on primary and secondary data. I discuss how geographical, linguistic, caste, and ethnic criteria are used to define Madhesi identity, and the contestations tied to those criteria juxtaposing them with the lived experiences of the people of the plains. I further elaborate upon the experiential aspect of being a Madhesi, tying it to the experience of othering, arguing that such discrimination has helped the heterogenous population of the plains collectively identify as and reify Madhesi identity.

Categorization of Madhesi identity

The interpretation of the term Madhesi varies among Nepal scholars, Nepali politicians, political analysts, activists, and people of the plains because of the diversity of the place, and the fluctuating relationship of various groups in the plains with the term Madhesi characterized by its acceptance and rejection at different junctures in Nepali politics. As late as July 2020, the Women and Social Committee of Nepal’s parliament issued a directive to the Madhesi Commission,⁹ a government-formed body for the welfare of the Madhesi community, to define the term “Madhesi.” Even so, the term is used widely in practice by the state. A reservation policy introduced in 2007 allocates 23 percent of the total reserved seats in civil service for Madhesis (Sunam and Shrestha 2019). Prospective civil service

applicants under the Madhesi category need a recommendation from the local government and based on the document, the Chief District Officer authenticates that a person is Madhesi. Political parties also have quotas reserved for Madhesis for proportional representation elections.

The 2011 census of Nepal lists 48 caste-origin groups in the Tarai, and over 99 percent of these groups identify as Hindus, comprising 19.86 percent of the total population of Nepal (Dahal 2014). Though the census does not use the term “Madhesi,” these 48 plains caste-origin groups are often referred to as Madhesi in writings about the ethnic diversity of Nepal (see Kharel, Thapa, and Sijapati 2016). In addition to these caste groups, the *Tarāi Janajāti* (plains indigenous group), Muslims, Pahādi (people of hill origin or hill migrants),¹⁰ and recent migrants from India such as the Marwadis, Bengalis, and Sikhs also populate the plains. Dahal (1992) argues that an ethnic divide in the Tarai-Madhes exists between hill migrants and plains people, between plains Hindu caste groups and plains indigenous people, and between the plains Hindu high- and low-caste groups.

Against this backdrop, who qualifies as a Madhesi, and what criteria are highlighted in the definitions of the term by scholars and the people of the lowlands? Based on my fieldwork and secondary data analysis, I discuss how an individual is defined as a Madhesi on meeting certain geographical and non-geographical criteria such as language, ethnicity, religion, and experience, in the next section. I further elaborate on the experiential dimension of Madhesi identity connecting it to discourses on the internal colonialization of the Nepali lowlands and the experience of being othered.

Geographic criteria

*Garv se kahu hum Madhesi chhi,
bhagauda nai dhartiputra chhi* [Say it with pride that you are Madhesi, not a foreign fugitive but a son of the soil]

(A CPN [Maoist] slogan widely painted on public walls across Kathmandu during the 2007 Madhes Movement)

The geographical interpretation of Madhesi has two dimensions as evidenced by the slogan above: the association of Madhesi with the toponym Madhes, and the place of origin or history of migration. As Madhesi is etymologically associated with Madhes,¹¹ Madhesi confers an ownership of the place Madhes (Interview 13, 2017; Dahal 2008). It is also emphasized in the definitions of Madhesi as “non-hill origin people” living in the Tarai-Madhes (Shah 2006; Karn, Limbu, and Jha 2018). Nayak (2011) is an exception in terms of using Madhesi as an umbrella term to describe everyone living in the lowlands: Janajatis, “Pahadi Madhesis” (migrants from hills and mountains who came to the lowlands during the 1960s and 70s on account of state-promoted migration and for better livelihood), and “Indian Madhesis” (migrants from the Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh before the 1950s). However, most of my interviewees rejected the attribution of Madhesi to hill migrants, apart from politicians, who opined that people who live in the Madhes are Madhesi.

This leads us to the second aspect of the geographical dimension of Madhesi identity: the ways in which the mobility of the residents of the lowlands is tied to their exclusion from the Madhesi category. Interviewees of hill origin, born and raised in the plains, expressed unease with the usage of Madhesi for recent migrants from India, particularly businesspeople, while labelling people who had migrated from the hills many generations ago as Pahādi. This unease was articulated by residents of Birgunj and Lahan as an “identity crisis” because they are called Madhesi while travelling to Kathmandu but Pahādi in Birgunj and Lahan.¹² People of hill origin, both caste groups and the *Janajāti*, whose ancestors migrated to the plains, perceive their categorization as a person of hill origin as an imposition that undermines their relationship with the lowlands. “The 2007 Madhes Andolan made a *Madhesko Pahāde* (Pahāde

from Madhes) but as a person born, raised, educated in the Madhes...whose family has lived in the plains for over 200 years I do not identify with the term,” a journalist explained (Interview 10, 2017).

For hill people of the plains who lay a claim to Madhesi identity, a Madhesi activist (Interview 15, 2017) made a forceful counterpoint:

Let us say you grew up in the Madhes and now ask why am I also not a Madhesi? I was born and raised in Kathmandu, but am I a Pahade? My community is different. If you grew up in Janakpur as a Karki, Thapa, Ghimire [hill castes] then you are a Pahade of Janakpur just as I will be a Madhesi of Kathmandu. Why should I claim that my son born here [in Kathmandu] is a Pahade? There is a clear division.

This quote shifts the focus away from the place as the source of the distinctiveness of Madhesi identity to community. The interviewee claimed the Madhesi community refers to plains people who are similar to each another in the ways in which they practice Hinduism and caste stratification despite linguistic diversity. Nonetheless, contestations on Madhesi identity remain rooted in the spatial link between Madhesi and Madhes, and therefore questions persist about the exclusion of hill migrants and inclusion of recent migrants, particularly businesspeople from India under the “Madhesi” category.

Migration from India is a thorny issue in the discussion of Madhesi identity.¹³ Academic studies on immigration from India to the Tarai-Madhes are exceptionally few (see Kansakar 2003, 1984; Dahal 1983, 1978), and this topic has been ignored by scholars researching on the region, as has also been noted by J.R. Sharma and S. Sharma (2011). Though some scholars (Parmanand 1986; Sinha 2009; Subba 2018) have defined Madhesi as “Nepalis of Indian Origin,” associating the origin of the Madhesi with India, others perceive it as offensive and an example of how hill people suspect the

loyalties of the plains people to the Nepali nation (see Karn, Limbu, and Jha 2018).¹⁴

It is important to note that associating “Madhesi” with India is challenged by “Madhesi” scholars and activists also because the genealogy of various hill caste groups can also be traced to India, but their identity is not defined along those lines, and neither is their belongingness to the Nepali nation questioned on that account. Madhesi is neither a diaspora nor the translation for Indian translated in Nepali asserts Yadav (2010).¹⁵ Madhesi claims to autochthony, which is connected to a wider discourse on indigeneity often tied to spatial fixity and priority in time as the source of rights, is nonetheless contested in the plains by Tarai indigenous groups, most prominently by Tharu (Guneratne 2010). All these issues demonstrate how the definition of Madhesi along geographical lines is highly disputed.

Ethnic, caste, and religious criteria

The definition of Madhesi along caste and ethnicity is arguably less contentious than the geographic interpretation of the term. Gautam (2008) argues that Hindu caste groups, Muslims, and recent migrants from India call themselves Madhesi. There is indeed broad consensus among scholars that plains Hindu caste groups are Madhesi, but no agreement on which other groups residing in the plains qualify as Madhesi (see Dahal 1992, 2014; Hachhethu 2007; Kharel, Thapa, and Sijapati 2016). Goodhand et al (2018), for instance, explain Madhesi as “non-Pahadi people living in the Tarai of Indian Hindu origin.” Some Muslims, nonetheless, associate with the term Madhesi (Interview 20, 2017; Dastider 2013). Others perceive the issues of Nepali Muslims to be exacerbated on account of their religion, and thus seek recognition as Muslims instead (Parveen 2012). A Muslim activist noted associating with the term Madhesi followed by disillusionment with it due to the practical implications of being listed as Madhesi:

Earlier we embraced the category Madhesi....But later we dissociated

with the term because within the Madhesi category they [Madhesi politicians] gave seats to Jha, Yadav [plains Hindu caste-groups] but not to Muslims.... So, we demanded that Muslims be mentioned as a separate category in the constitution. (Interview 38, 2018)

Likewise, the indigenous people of the plains also have a fraught relationship with the term Madhesi. Tharus, who constitute 85.4 percent of the total population of plain indigenous groups (Dahal 2014), protested their placement under Madhesi, demanding that the government categorize them as a distinct group in 2007 (Guneratne 2010). Some scholars (Bose and Niroula 2015: 128) have therefore argued that “the construct of Madhesi identity is assimilationist and hegemonic” while others such as Pandey (2017: 315) have interpreted Tharu protests as being against the “Madhesization of the Tarai.” However, at different political junctures since 2007, Tharu leaders have either embraced or rejected the term (Interview 55, 2019; Sarbahari and Chaudhary 2017). Dhimal, another plains indigenous group, also reject the term Madhesi to define themselves (Rai 2014).

Linguistic criteria

In one of the earliest comprehensive academic works on the Nepali lowlands, Gaige (1975, 216) defines “plains people” as “those who speak plains languages¹⁶ as their mother tongues or first languages, whether they were born or live in the plains or the hills.” While Gaige does not use the term Madhesi, most activists among my respondents used Gaige’s definition of plains people as their interpretation of the term Madhesi. Hachhethu (2007) and Dahal (2014), however, limit Madhesi identity to plains Hindu castes who speak Maithili, Bhojpuri, Bajjika, and Awadhi. Politicians, interviewed for this article, fluctuated between using Madhesi to refer to everyone living in the Madhes, or only to those who spoke the plains languages as their mother tongues. This can be interpreted

as a strategy to placate all segments of the population living in the plains: those who identify as Madhesis as well as the non-Madhesis.

Against this backdrop of acceptance, rejection, and contestation surrounding the term “Madhesi,” the meanings attached to it are ever evolving and malleable. Contestations regarding who is or should be considered a Madhesi have therefore paved the way for defining this term based on an experiential basis. The ethnic, religious, linguistic, and geographic interpretations of Madhesi identity are criteria predominantly used by scholars, politicians, and activists, and to a lesser extent by the common people of the plains themselves. However, the experiential dimension of Madhesi identity focuses entirely on individual experiences of “feeling” like a Madhesi. The experiential criteria also highlight Madhesi as an external label which fueled resistance, redefinition, and ownership of the term.

Experiential criteria

Madhesi is a constructed identity. It does not have an anthropological basis because it is not an ethnicity... Madhesis were not born Madhesi. It was a name given to us by the state and the people living in the hills. (Interview 28, 2017)

Madhesi, as the quote suggests, is a word historically used by outsiders - the Nepali state and hill dwellers - to refer to people of the plains (see Thakur 1995). While Madhesi implies people who live in the Madhes, “*Madhise*” (the derogatory form of Madhesi), used in speech by people from the hills, denotes outsiders or immigrants from North India (Yhome 2006). Madhesi identity is therefore not just ascribed but also experienced.

The focus on the experience of being termed and discriminated against as Madhesi also arguably overcomes the linguistic, geographical, cultural, caste, and religious divides amongst the people in the plains. Dastider (2000), for instance, claims that

despite religious differences, Muslims also identify with plain caste groups as Madhesi against hill domination. Madhesi is thus not an ethnicity but rather an “identity of resistance,” writes Lal (2013: 12). The association of plains indigenous groups’ leaders with the term Madhesi while bargaining with the Nepali state for political gains can also be explained as part of such resistance (see *The Kathmandu Post* 2015). Therefore, Nepali writer, Dalit activist, and politician Aahuti claims, “people who have been derogated as *Madhise* are Madhesis” (Aahuti as cited in Basnet 2018). In the upcoming section I further elaborate on the experiential aspect of Madhesi identity highlighting what my respondents framed as a case of othering and internal colonization.

The angst of the other

The othering of people who identify as Madhesi is rooted in the formulation of Nepali identity which is predicated on being different from India as the “other” (Bhandari 2016). As difference from India and Indians is a defining feature of Nepaliness, it has social and political repercussions for the people of the plains, whose “religious traditions, languages and the caste system, their food, style of clothes, forms of entertainment and even personal mannerisms are cultural characteristics they share with people who live across the border in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar” (Gaige 1975, 12). The Madhesi have to repeatedly combat the suspicion of being Indians and constantly prove their loyalty to the state (see A. Lal 2020, 2017; Karna 2015; Yadav 2010).

Narrations of the experience of othering by my respondents involved interactions with Pahādi bureaucrats and Pahādis living in the Madhes, or while traveling outside the Madhes, particularly to Kathmandu, or traveling outside of the country. In describing those encounters, phrases my respondents used were “It was when I realized I was a Madhesi,” “I became a Madhesi (*Ma Madhesī bhae~*)”, “I was made a Madhesi (*Ma Madhesī banāie~*).”¹⁷ Given the emotional nature of the issue,

I noted a distinctive change of tone in my respondents as they became unsettled while recounting such instances of misrecognition.

Seated outside a teashop in Rajbiraj, the headquarter of Saptari district in central Tarai close to the Indian border, a recent graduate (Interview 16, 2017) described the moment he “became a Madhesi” as:

Before I went to India for my high school, I did not know who a Madhesi or a Pahade was. In the institution I attended, there were around 140 Nepalis out of which around 27 were from Siraha, Saptari, and Dhanusha districts [Tarai districts]. It was there that I realized that we are not citizens of Nepal. Indians along with students from other countries would tell us, “You don’t look like a Nepali.” And the Nepali students from the hills would also tell our Indian classmates, “They are definitely not Nepali, their forefathers immigrated to Nepal from India . . .” My family has lived here for seven generations and if one generation lived for 50 years on an average then seven generations would be 350 years. It makes us “Bhoomiputra” (Sons of the soil).

This incident was linked to the beginning of his Madhesi rights activism. At other times, the mention of such misrecognition seeped into the conversation while discussing border tensions, as in the case of a politician I interviewed in Lahan, the district headquarters of Siraha district in central Nepal. Discussing an incident near the Nepal-India border in Tilathi, Siraha (see Jha 2016), the politician emphasized how Nepali politicians and bureaucrats refrain from condemning border encroachment while Madhesis protest and protect the borders. He then added, “And then they tell us we are not Nepalis!” in exasperation. A politician in Rajbiraj (Interview 19, 2017) further explained that the Madhesis participated in the Madhes Āndolan directly or indirectly because of the admonishment and maltreatment they have faced for being a Madhesi

by Pahādi and the Pahādi-dominated bureaucracy. The Madhes movements, therefore, were not just about amending the constitution but a fight for respect and recognition (Interview 1, 2017; Lal 2017; Shah 2019).

Apart from the encounters with the state and Pahādi in general, phrases and words such as “When I was in Kathmandu,” “the people of Kathmandu,” or just “Kathmandu” were frequently used by my respondents while discussing their personal experience of discrimination. Kathmandu, in these accounts, referred to all people living in the place in the most expansive definition of the term, while in its limited form it indicated the Newars of Kathmandu, such as in this account by a woman (Interview 42, 2018) in Golbazar, Siraha.

I am a Madhesi married to a *Pahāde Bahun*, and we have a house in Kathmandu . . . When I am with my sisters-in-law, they say “Madhise’s shop,” a “Madhise does this or that” like other Kathmandu residents who say “Madhise” and “Bhaiya.” It really hurts me. Even though I keep trying to correct them and use the term they use and say, “I am a Madhise too.” it seems too deeply engrained in their minds to change . . . Once I was at the pharmacy to buy medicine in Kathmandu. The boy at the counter called someone on the phone who perhaps asked, “Who is there?” and the reply was “An Indian has come.” I asked him “How come I am an Indian? I can speak better Nepali than you. You are a Newar; you cannot even speak Nepali properly. I have a Nepali citizenship too.” I do not know if I was right or wrong in saying so, but that experience ignited a feeling of revolt within me.

Specifying discrimination faced during interactions with the people of Kathmandu and to interactions with Newars, a group that claims indigeneity to Kathmandu, reveals the fault lines in the relationship between hill indigenous groups in Nepal

and the Madhesi. While the fight of both the Madhesi and indigenous peoples in Nepal is similar on account of marginalization of their languages and the dominance of hill upper castes, the “angst of *janajāti* is different” (Interview 29, 2017). The loyalty of the *janajāti* to the Nepali nation and their nationality, unlike that of the Madhesi, does not face scrutiny (Interview 29, 2017 and Interview 40, 2018).

According to C.K. Lal (2013), the notion of internal colonialism¹⁸ is key to understanding the unequal relationship between the Pahādi-Madhesi accentuated by the othering of Madhesi in Nepal. “Internal colony” is also a term widely used in practice by Madhes-centric political parties and politicians to describe the way the Nepali state treats Madhesis, as well as by my respondents. Referring to the ruling party leaders during the Madhes Movement (2015–16), a journalist pointed out how they never travelled to the hinterlands of the plains to placate the protesters “as if it [Madhes] were a colony” (Interview 12, 2017). A human rights worker (Interview 8, Kathmandu) further elaborated on state repression during the Madhes movement (2015–16):

I examined six dead bodies. Some had their heads blown off. No law in Nepal allows that, at most people are shot dead. There was no trace of sympathy. . . . The bureaucracy along with other organs of the state perceived the movement as a war against them. So, there was excessive suppression. The dead bodies looked as though they participated in a fight with enemies of another country, not participants of a political movement.

This observation is also highlighted in a Human Rights Watch Report on the 2015–16 Madhes movement and police crackdown on protesters titled “Like we are not Nepalis” (see Human Rights Watch 2015) lending further credibility to the perception of Madhes as an internal colony of the Nepali state. Political analysts and activists, therefore, argued that Madhesi strongly

demanded federalism through the Madhes movements as it would give Madhesi an opportunity to rule themselves and address the problem of internal colonization. As an activist (Interview 15, 2017) elaborated:

Madhes is the space in which Madhesis can talk of their rights, dignity, integrity. It is where Madhesi want to be empowered. Once it is empowered there then it can negotiate with the Nepali state. Therefore, the Madhes has always demanded federalism. There was always this understanding among Madhesi that the Nepali mainstream will never give us equal representation, inclusion. So, we will demand our own place and make it better.

Not everyone, however, shared this view. A leader (Interview 5, 2017) of a separatist movement in the plains argued that demands of Madhes movements and Madhes-centric political parties such as amendments to the constitution or an increased intake in the army was akin to trimming the leaves of a tree. “It will not make any difference when the roots lie just where they are. That is why we seek a separate Madhes. We have identified the root cause of the problem to be colonization and we must be free from it,” he added.¹⁹

The experiential dimension of Madhesi identity thus draws upon everyday experiences of othering and frames the structural discrimination of the lowlands and its people as a case of internal colonization. Madhesi as an experiential identity also underscores its emotive aspect. Despite scholarly and everyday contestations about Madhesi identity, it is a lived reality for plainspeople who face discrimination for being Madhesi. Such discrimination consequently brought the heterogeneous population of the plains together to join the struggle for rights and recognition of Madhesi identity for political bargaining with the Nepali state. Whether plainspeople have always identified as Madhesi or “become” Madhesi after experiencing maltreatment by the hill high caste

dominated bureaucracy, security forces, or Pahādis in Kathmandu and elsewhere, the experience of discrimination became a rallying point for the Madhes movements. Instances of private injuries aided the struggle against public injustice (Honneth 1995) as participants of the Madhes movements in eastern and central Tarai protested the othering of Madhesi. The movements not only helped redefine, own, and assert Madhesi identity, but also reified it.

Misrecognition, migration, and colonization

Instances of misrecognition and othering of people who reside along the borderlands by mainland people or inhabitants of the national capital, and evidence of internal colonialism have been documented elsewhere in South Asia too (Osuri 2017; Rahman 2002; Sabaratnam 1986; Das 1978; McDuie-Ra 2013; Middleton 2013; Wenner 2013). The case of the Madhesi in Nepal is thus not an aberration. The articulation of discrimination faced by Madhesis as an instance of internal colonization by the hill-centric Nepali state resonates with Middleton’s (2020) research in Darjeeling in North-east India among the Gorkhas. Additionally, McDuie-Ra’s (2017) analysis of the Northeast Indian category is also relevant to this paper.

In a study about Northeast Indians in the Indian capital of New Delhi, McDuie-Ra (2013) contends that the collective experience of discrimination and misrecognition by mainland Indians has contributed to the emergence of a shared identity as Northeast Indians which is otherwise absent in Northeast India due to the diversity of the place. The experiential aspect of Madhesi identity is similar. Madhesi identity is similar to the Northeast Indian category also on account of how the latter has become a basis of solidarity in times of crisis, though the Northeast category was initially used by outsiders (McDuie-Ra 2017). Different linguistic, religious, and caste groups in the Tarai-Madhes have also coalesced around Madhesi identity at critical political junctures despite Madhesi

being an imposition by outsiders. Madhesi identity, similar to the Northeast category “has an existence, one that it is felt, articulated and called upon, albeit with fuzzy and even contentious boundaries” (McDuie-Ra 2017: 31).

Some scholars (Sinha 2009; Subba 2018) have drawn parallels between the misrecognition of Gorkhas in Northeast India as Nepalis by mainland Indians and Madhesi in Nepal as Indians by the hill people. The struggle for recognition of Madhesi identity, however, is markedly different from the Gorkhas with regards to the way the former seeks respect and acceptance of cultural, linguistic, caste, and kinship ties with Indians who live across the border. Neither the existence of India nor the similarity of plains people with Indian immigrants is framed as part of the problem of misrecognition of Madhesi in Nepal by activists and politicians who identify as “Madhesi” unlike the Gorkhas’ case (see Subba 2018).²⁰ Madhesi identity politics demands “recognition on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition has previously been denied. . . . The demand is not for respect ‘in spite of’ one’s differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself as different” (Kruks 2001: 85).

The discourse on Madhesi and Gorkha identity is, nonetheless, similar with regards to the issue of transnational migration between Nepal and India, which is either denied, ignored, or disputed in both instances. Madhesi claims to being “sons of the soil” is contested and defied by Tārai-Janajāti, who claim autochthony to the place. Similarly, the Pahādi of Madhes reject this phrase to describe themselves, perceiving it to be a denial of their belonging to the place. People of hill origin in the plains further contest the categorization of recent migrants from India as Madhesi while they remain excluded.

By highlighting migration as a contentious aspect of Madhesi identity, I am not denying the civilizational past of the region, nor claiming that the Tarai-Madhes was devoid of human settlement prior to the formation of the Nepali state. I am underscoring,

however, that defining Madhesi identity in terms of place of origin and migration from India remains a complex and polarizing issue. On the one hand, the cultural, linguistic, caste, and kinship ties with people across the border in north India are ostensibly owned and celebrated in the discussion of Madhesi identity post 2007. On the other hand, transnational migration from India to Nepal in the discussion of Madhesi identity is overlooked in scholarly works and avoided in practice. The need to emphasize Madhesi as belonging to the Tarai-Madhes - both by underscoring the etymological association of the Madhesi with Madhes and laying claim to autochthony - could be due to the systematic othering of Madhesi as quasi-foreigners or foreigners by the Nepali state. The construction of Madhesi identity is thus a political choice to an extent limited by state power as one of the “main organizing principles behind ethnic identifications” (Scott 2008: 177). It is also characteristic of the broader discourse on ethnic identity in Nepal where laying claim to “sons of the soil” status has become the norm. Efforts at boundary maintenance and gatekeeping in the articulations of Madhesi identity are indicative of the persistence of essentialist articulations of identities in practice despite broader consensus in academia about the constructed nature of identities. Even so, identity as an analytical category is useful in understanding struggles for recognition in a multi-ethnic context such as that of Nepal. As Alcoff and Mohanty (2006) succinctly argue, the theoretical issue with regard to identities is not whether they are constructed or not but their political relevance and the difference those constructions make.

With reference to internal colonization, the Madhesi case resembles Middleton’s (2020) analysis of Gorkhas in Darjeeling who have been economically exploited, culturally othered, and politically marginalized. The point where the Madhesi case differs is the success of the Madhes movements in forcing the Nepali state to admit its role in the marginalization of the plains-people and make political concessions.

The establishment of a federal province consisting only of Tarai districts, named Madhes Pradesh, has further consolidated the gains of the movement, territorially underscoring how Madhes and Madhesi indisputably belong to the Nepali polity.

Conclusion

This paper had two aims. First, to consolidate the varied interpretations of the term Madhesi and articulate the reasons for it. Second, to understand the experiences that shape the understanding of, construction, and identification with Madhesi identity. With regard to the first aim, the paper highlights the geographic, linguistic, ethnic, religious, and experiential dimensions of Madhesi identity drawing upon primary and secondary data. I demonstrate how the definition of “Madhesi” along geographic lines, focusing on place of origin and migration history, is arguably the most contested. Descriptions of Madhesi identity thus remain in a state of flux as plains indigenous people, Muslims, and hill migrants continue to debate their relationship with the Tarai-Madhes and the term Madhesi.

The second aim of my paper is linked to the first. I argue that understanding Madhesi as an emotion-laden, politically charged, experiential term can aid scholarly analysis. The experiential dimension of Madhesi identity is tied to the othering of the Madhesi as foreigners in Nepal, and articulated as a case of internal colonization. Madhesi as an experiential term, a manifestation of the collective experience of othering, also elucidates why the heterogeneous population of the plains participated in the Madhesi struggle for recognition of identity at different critical junctures in history despite contesting the Madhesi label. As an emotional political category, people who identify with the category and defy it in various stages of political bargaining with the state can vary, underscoring the fluid, negotiable nature of Madhesi identity. However, as this paper largely draws upon fieldwork in central and eastern Tarai, future research in Western Tarai could

further illuminate the relationship of plains indigenous groups with Madhesi identity.

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Endnotes

1. A “nation-state that defines itself as democratic and contains a significant degree of internal diversity” (Gagnon, Guibernau, and Rocher 2003).
2. People living along the northern borderlands of Nepal who share cultural, linguistic, and religious ties to Tibet have historically had their Nepaliness questioned too. However, the categorization of those groups as hill indigenous post 1990 and the fact that Nepali national identity is constructed against India as the ‘Other’ (see Bhandari 2016) makes the discrimination faced by plains people different and more acute.
3. All interpretations of Madhesi are contested thereby the subject of analysis in this paper.
4. See (Parmanand 1986; Dahal 1992; S. G. Shah 2006; Gautam 2008; Nayak 2011; Parveen 2012; Hachhethu 2013; Sijapati 2013; Bose and Niroula 2015a).
5. Other meanings of *Pahicān* are to identify, recognize, discern something or someone.
6. The locations that are part of this study were primarily determined by the interviewees who were present there during the time of fieldwork and because central Tarai was the epicenter of the Madhes movements.

7. Both Pahāḍe and Pahādi mean ‘a person from the hills’ or ‘of hill origin.’ Pahāḍe is the colloquial and also derogatory form of Pahādi which also means an ‘wild, uncultured or uncivilized’ (“Pahadiya/Pahadi/Pahade” 2010).
8. The CPN (Maoist) had previously formed the *Thāruvāna Mukti Morcā* (Tharuwan Liberation Front) in 1998 and in 2003 declared 13 provinces in Nepal two of which in the Tarai - Thāruvāna Province in Western Tarai and Madhes Province in Eastern Tarai. This demonstrates a history of considering indigenous groups in the lowlands to be distinct and separate from Madhesi.
9. The Madhesi Commission has listed 151 *jāṭjāti* (caste/ethnicity) as groups that fall under ‘Madhesi community’ including Tharu and Muslim.
10. Pahādis living in the lowlands are not a homogenous group. It refers to hill-castes including hill Dalits, and hill *janajāti* or indigenous groups.
11. Madhes is the shortened form of Madhya Desh (Middle Country) or ‘the land lying between the Himalayas and the Vindhya’ (Turner 1931, 491).
12. Here it is important to link instances of discrimination on being perceived as ‘Madhesi’ with institutionalized discrimination faced by ‘Madhesi’ from the Nepali state historically. Madhesi activists and scholars therefore reject the claim to Madhesi identity by hill origin people who live in the lowlands even though they might be looked down upon by hill-based population due to their residence in the lowlands.
13. In 1983, a government report on migration in the Tarai districts triggered riots in the region.
14. Karn et. al. (2018: 279) contend that hill dwellers perceive Madhesi as people of Indian origin or proxy Indians, while “Madhesi themselves claim that they are original inhabitants of the Tarai region.” The authors, however, neither define “originality” nor address the Tarai Janajati’s claim to autochthony to the region.
15. In 2018, India’s External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj had to apologize after referring to crowds gathered to listen to the Indian prime minister in the city of Janakpur in Eastern Tarai as an Indian diaspora on Twitter.
16. “These are languages spoken by people who live on the Gangetic plain, either on the Indian or Nepalese side of the border. The major languages are Hindi, Urdu, Maithili, Bhojpuri and Bengali; languages spoken by fewer people include Jhangar, Marwari, Rai and various dialects of these languages such as Awadhi and the Morang Pradesh dialects” Gaige (1975: 216).
17. My respondents mentioned that they identified as members of a certain caste line prior to being ascribed the label “Madhesi.”
18. Pinderhughes (2011, 236) defines internal colonialism as a “*geographically-based* (emphasis in original) pattern of subordination of a differentiated population, located within the dominant power or country.”
19. Since the time of the interview, the separatist movement has ended and Province 2 consisting of eight districts in the plains - Saptari, Siraha, Dhanusha, Mahottari, Sarlahi, Rautahat, Bara, and Parsa - has been named Madhes Province, partially materializing the long-held demand for a separate province in the lowlands.
20. This in part is due to a history of mass eviction of Nepali-speaking populations from Myanmar in the 1940s, from the northeastern Indian states of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Manipur in the 1980s, and from southern Bhutan in the 1990s, resulting in Gorkhas’ “anxious belonging” (Middleton 2013a) to the Indian state. The association of Gorkhas with Nepal does not help Gorkhas’ attempts at securing recognition as indigenous tribes from the Indian state either (Middleton 2015).

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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

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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

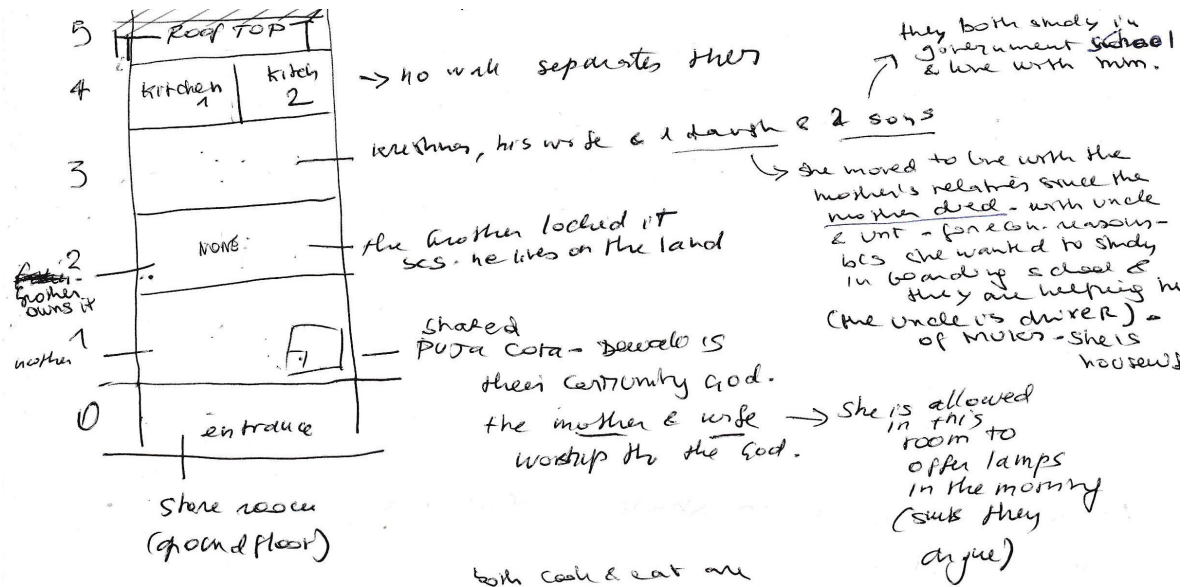


Figure 2: A Page from My Fieldnotes Showing a House with a Kitchen Divided in Half

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 adharmā 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

PROJECT I
काठमाडौं नगरीमा
तपाईंको सुन्दर घरको सपना
हामी पूरा गर्छौं

PROJECT II
Exclusive Living ...
...for Exclusive People.

TODAY IS LAST DAY OF OPENING OFFER

at corporate office
DOWNTOWN HOUSING COMPANY (P) LTD.
JAWALAKHEL, LALITPUR
with Exclusive Opening Offer

TOTAL UNITS : 200
UNITS LEFT : 41
PRICE STARTS FROM : 18,99,000

TOTAL UNITS : 38
UNITS LEFT : 14
PRICE STARTS FROM : 55,00,000

DOWNTOWN HOUSING CO. P. LTD.
Corporate Office: Jawalakhel, Lalitpur, Nepal.
Tel: 5000223, 5000224, 5554017, 9849074921, 98033701744
Email: info@downtown.com.np
Website: www.downtown.com.np

For further details visit:
www.cityview.housingnepal.com

Online Partner:
HousingNepal
www.housingnepal.com

Health Service Partner:
Narvik International Hospital
with experienced staff

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 *visēṣa* (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 jīvāna* (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 householders (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 household 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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Photo Essay

What Makes a Family? A Visual Approach to Ontological and Substantial Dimensions of the Domestic in Nepal

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Abstract

What makes a family? On the one hand, tangible aspects such as a shared household, eating practices, and marriage alliances come to mind. On the other hand, that ineffable dominium of feelings of attachment that is difficult to articulate also must have its role. I define the former a ‘substantial’ dimension, and the latter an ‘ontological’ dimension of kinship. Substantial and ontological dimensions are often profoundly intertwined in familial groups in most societies, yet in differing ways. Also, while substantial elements are not necessary for a group to identify as a family, as demonstrated by transnational family arrangements that do not share a household or eating practices, at the same time the expected exchange of substances might also follow obligations that do not correspond to one’s personal sense of belonging. The present essay visualizes the intersubjective processes through which middle-class people conceive of the family in the Newar city of Bhaktapur (Nepal), through the negotiation of domestic spaces and practices. Drawing upon fifteen months of ethnographic research in 2018-2019, I show how ontological and substantial dimensions come together to shape modern ideas of family.

Keywords

domestic relationships; family; Nepal; visual methods

Recommended Citation

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Introduction

What makes a family? On the one hand, tangible aspects such as a shared household, eating practices, and marriage alliances come to mind. On the other hand, that ineffable dominium of feelings of attachment that is difficult to articulate also plays its role. Gray (2008: 23) defined the former 'substantial' and the latter an 'ontological' dimensions of kinship. Substantial and ontological dimensions are often profoundly intertwined in familial groups in most societies, yet in differing ways.

While substantial elements are not necessary for a group to identify as a family (as demonstrated for example by transnational family arrangements that do not share a household or eating practices), the expected exchange of substances might also follow obligations that do not correspond to one's personal sense of belonging. This sense of belonging resonates with what Sahlins (2013) has referred to as 'mutuality of being', and to what Carsten (2004) has defined 'intrinsicity'. In a Nepali context, Zharkevich (2019) has addressed this notion in terms of 'affective kinship'.

The present essay visualizes the intersubjective processes through which middle-class people conceive of the family in the Newar city of Bhaktapur (Nepal)¹ through the negotiation of domestic spaces and practices. Drawing upon 15 months of ethnographic research in 2018-2019, I show how ontological and substantial dimensions come together to shape modern ideas of family. For example, living together is problematized in relation to an emic affirmation of modern ideas of family based on love and intimate attachment, and this is leading to the increase of nuclear households that are substituting the traditional joint household format. Most of the people represented in this essay are the same informants whose stories I explored in the paper 'Two Kitchens and Other 'Modern' Stories: Rethinking the Family Through Household

Conflict and Fission in Contemporary Nepal' (Tiné 2022a). By rethinking those narratives through drawing, I bring here together people's voices and my own handwritten fieldnotes to communicate the working of layers of intersubjectivity in the process of sense-making around emic notions of family.

The methodology used in this project follows a technique that I have been developing in the last ten years under the name of 'art-tool' method (see Tiné 2017, 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2022b). According to this theory, the artist-anthropologist can contribute an added value to the ethnographic work in terms of both analysis and expression to better communicate existential contents. In the present case, art is used to capture and express those ontological aspects making a family that are somewhat invisible, in combination with the substantial aspects that are material in nature, where both of these aspects make up the essence of kinship as mutuality of being.

Through a combination of figurative and abstract elements (such as handwritten backgrounds), and playing with colours and shadows, the proposed images contribute not only to account for substantial dimensions of kinship, but also to bring the viewer to move to grasp further spheres of intersubjectivity and introspection involved in relational processes. These works thus provide a window of reflective inquiry and observation, rather than finite answers. Ultimately, by treating artistic (in this case visual) work as both a means of ethnographic reflection and representation, I aim to show that among Newar families in Bhaktapur it is both through individual perspectives and intersubjective processes of negotiation that families are conceived.



Image 1: 'Two Kitchens'

In the past, the Nepali law would consider a family undivided as long as its members formed a commensal community and shared a kitchen (Khatiwoda, Cubelic and Michaels 2021: 54). The kitchen's centuries-long legal connotation may not exist any longer in Nepal, but its symbolic power in defining a household is still strong (Löwdin 1998): the cooking area establishes the domestic unity of a household and marks its boundaries.

When, following a quarrel, economic constraints or moral obligations prevent people from dividing their households, they usually divide the kitchen, as in the case of Krishna Hara who separated from his mother, Biku. The creation of two distinct stovetops is particularly common nowadays; earlier, the two families would cook over separate fires.



Image 2: 'Bikram Thinking'

Those who separate from the joint family experience guilt. This is true particularly of men. Bikram Hara, for example, often reflects on his choice, but always concludes that his decision was right, as there were no other options, since there was no longer mutual understanding (*aapasi samajdari*) in the joint household.



Image 3: 'Biku by the Window'

What is a family? One keeps wondering. And do older people have a different perspective than their grown-up children? Take, for example, the case of Biku. Her mind often goes to the condition of her widowed sister, Dhriti. Biku's sons refused to donate part of a land sale profit to Dhriti, saying that it should be her own children to take care of her instead.

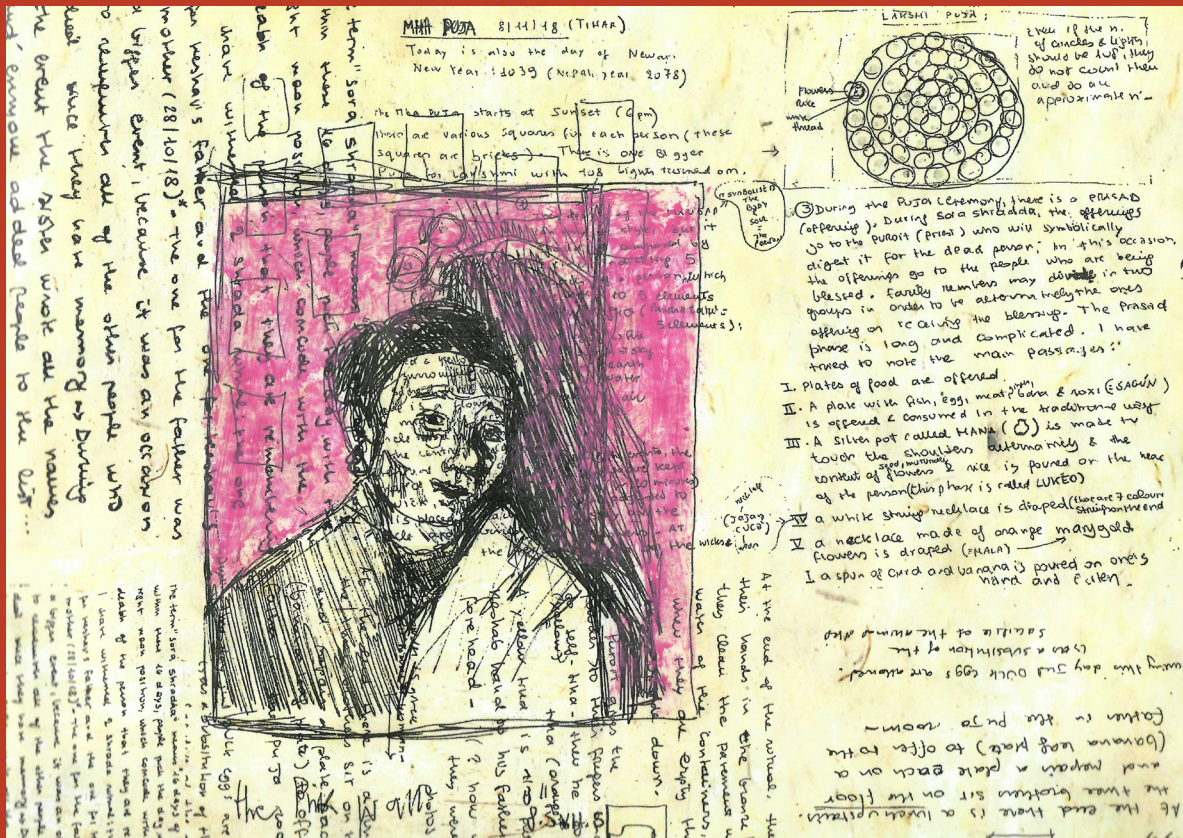


Image 4: 'The Pink Wall'

Dhriti lives in a small house just outside Durbar Square Gate. Facing severe economic hardship, and careful to save gas, her son and daughter in law do not allow her in the kitchen of her own house.

Dhriti has put up some black-and-white photographs of her children when they were younger on the pink walls of her house, joyous memories in stark contrast with her condition.



Image 5: 'Cutting Vegetables'

Bikram helps his wife in her daily chores by cutting vegetables and preparing them for her to cook. When they lived in a joint family, he did not help her as much as his relatives would laugh at him or criticize him harshly. To avoid embarrassment, she would often ask Bikram to leave the kitchen.

While his desire to help her has not changed between household structures, the perception of not being judged has made it easier for both of them to act more freely and in accordance with their private desires without the fear of clashing with their expected public persona.

Bikram is mourning his father's death; the drawing shows him shaven-headed and dressed in mourning clothes. All the direct male descendants (*fukē*) must wear white in mourning period, and they may not enter the kitchen or cook. Married daughters are exempt because they are part of their husband's family.

Some exceptions are becoming common to suit changing needs and lifestyles: Preparing and eating raw, simple food is considered acceptable, as is dressing in shades of grey or beige for work, particularly outside the valley. However, the importance given to religious beliefs and to the care for the dead does not seem to me to have lessened.



Image 6: 'Family on Motorbike'

This drawing shows a family on a motorbike and some of my fieldnotes on the ritual of commemoration for a dead father (*shradha* ritual).

A motorbike is a sign of middle-class status in Nepal. It suits the need for people to quickly move between areas of the valley. It is as if they were moving all together towards the future. At the same time, old and new concerns, material needs, and spiritual beliefs are very much entangled, and form the essence of much kinship tapestries.

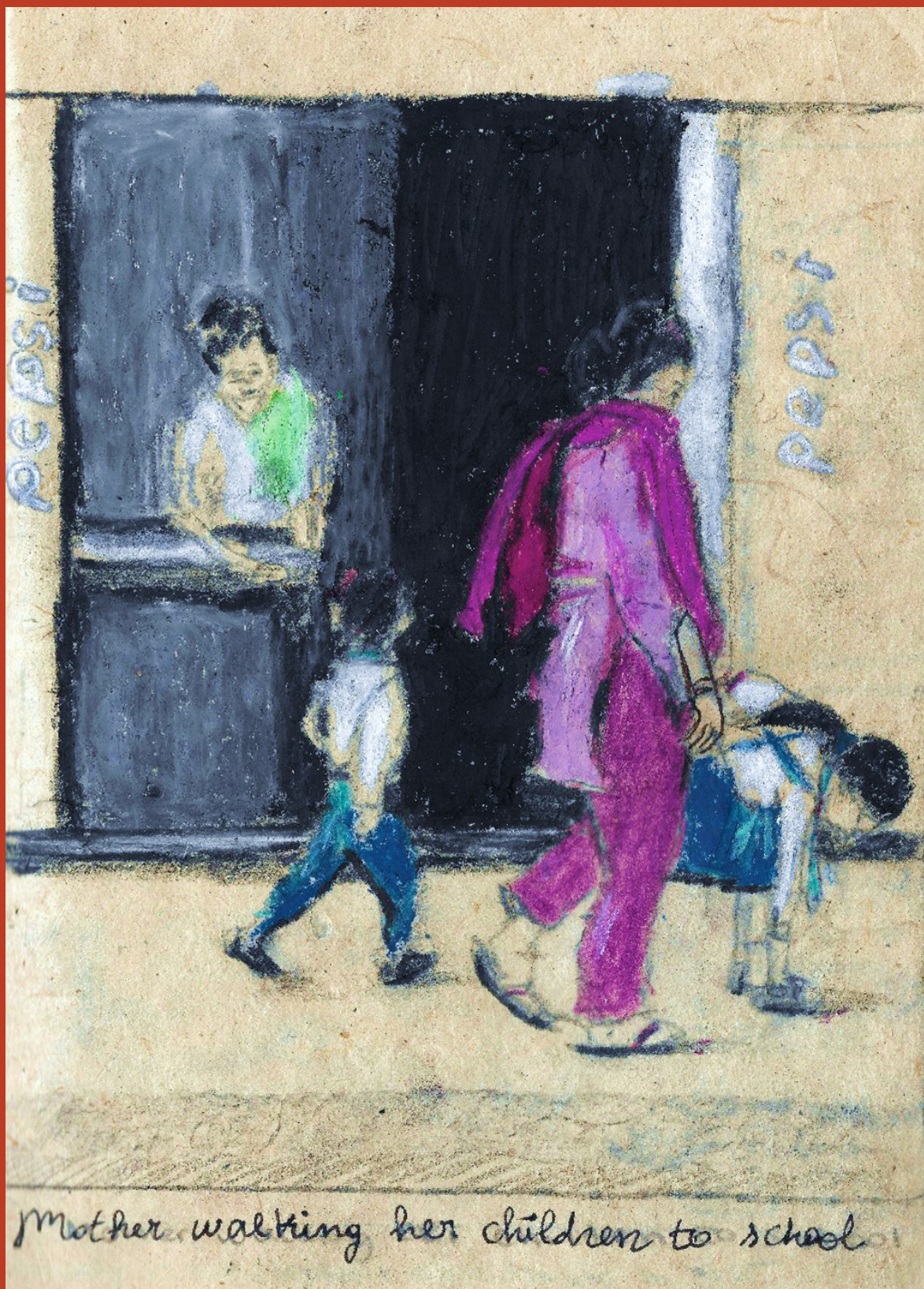


Image 7: 'Mother Walking Her Children to School'

Among middle-class families, education is considered essential for providing one's children with 'better lives' (*ramro jivana*) (see also Liechty 2003).² This constant sacrifice is one of the foundations of an ontological dimension of kinship (see also Zharkevic 2019).



Image 8: 'Romantic Date'

Love is not new in marital relationships in Nepal. However, whereas companionship and attachment were discouraged in the past, nowadays they are considered progressively more important in a marriage.



Image 9: 'The Pillow Insect'

A *phunga ki* (Newari for pillow insect) is a metaphor for the influence a wife can have on her husband, to the point of leading him to conflict with the members of the joint household.

Levy (1990: 116) defined it through his own informants' words: "the wife talking in bed at night, and [they say] that if a man listens to his bride's opinion, everything will be over".

The power of social change—embraced through, and enabled by, intimate relationships—is another dimension of ontological kinship.

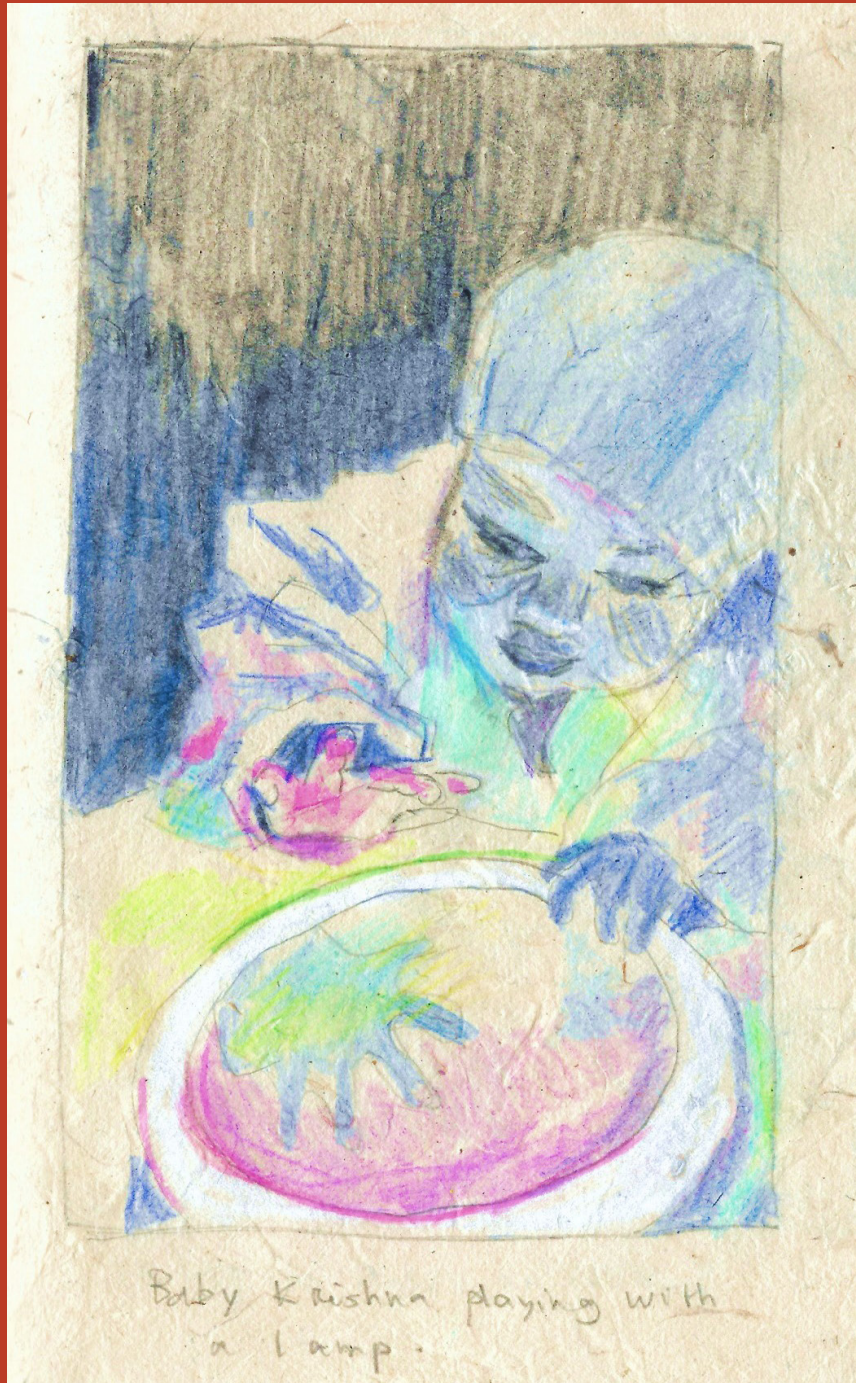


Image 10: 'Baby Krishna Playing with a Lamp'

People say children need more love because they are innocent and they need more protection.

Yet, while love as an impalpable substance is demonstrated through the dispensing of care accordingly to one's need, preferences between members start to emerge as they grow up, and crucial disfunctions in the provision of care gradually develop, particularly to ageing kin.

Ontological kinship seems to have to do with new norms and types of love.



Image 11: 'A Good Father'

"A good father", many told me, "cares about the future of their children and grandchildren."



Image 12. 'Family at a Restaurant'

The display of intimacy in public spaces, and practices such as eating from the same plate, would previously have been taboo.

While eating separately was (and still often is) a marker of hierarchy in more traditional families. Eating out together, a new practice in Bhaktapur, is charged with meanings of intimacy and attachment.

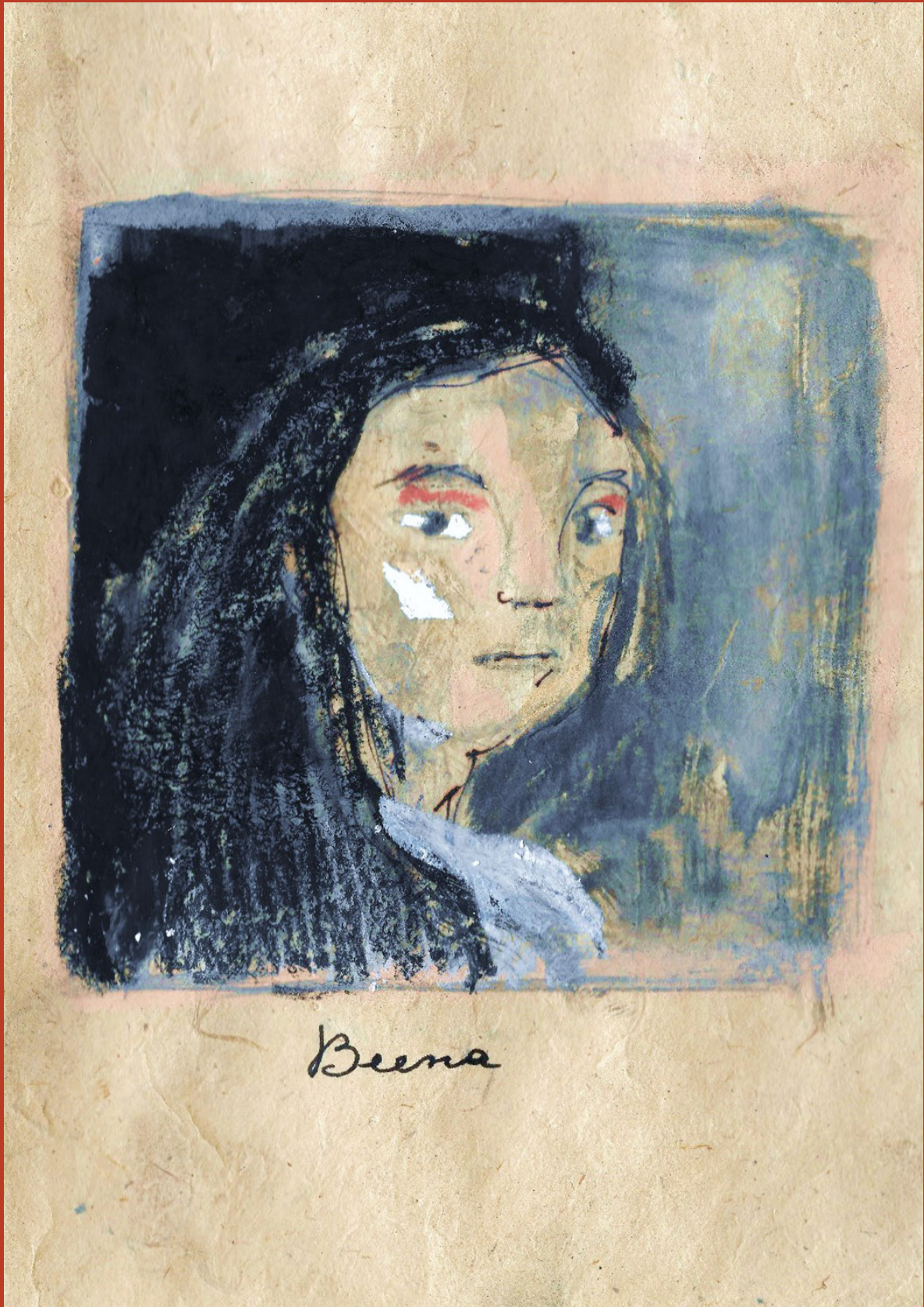


Image 13: 'Beena'

As an informant named Beena said to me once: "There are many different types of love in the family, and you love most those people who are closer to your heart".

Conclusion

Through my drawings, in this essay I have reflected on what makes a family among the participants of my research in Nepal. What emerged in front of my eyes was a combination of practices of intimacy, the influence of memories of the past, the working of aspirations for the future, of wrestling with types of love, and of social change that is initiated and enabled (when not resisted) through and within networks of relationships. Of course, ‘what is a family’ remains an open question, and each family will be different from one another.

Perhaps what makes families similar is their struggle through the currents of time, their power to navigate them, their vulnerability to lose and fall, while always reflecting on ways to act in a moral manner, often holding on to traditional norms and religious beliefs. These rather fleeting existential dimensions can sometimes be captured through a spontaneous drawing, or through the choice of certain words, in a process whose rules are difficult to pin down.

But these answers are never final and continue to mutate indefinitely, gaining and losing definition. These transitions happen in the eyes of those who looked at them first, then in the hands of those who drew them, and then again in the perception of those who saw the same drawings later, in a turn of interpretations and meanings.

My suggestion—which my drawings have helped to support and shape, and which remains open—is that Newar families in Bhaktapur conceive of the ‘family’ through intersubjective dynamics and negotiated processes that regulate how the substantial and ontological dimensions of kinship intertwine.

Paola Tiné is a doctoral candidate in Social Anthropology at the University of Adelaide, South Australia. Her research investigates social change in contemporary Nepal, with a focus on domestic transformations as influenced by and contributing to a local ethos among middle-class families in the Newar town of Bhaktapur. With a background in both anthropology and the fine arts, she is interested in methodological approaches that enhance the insights of ethnographic research through visual representation, particularly drawing and painting.

<https://www.paola-ts.com/artworks>

The author would like to thank the people of Bhaktapur and her research assistant Mr Binod Manandhar; the Malla family; her supervisors John Gray and Dianne Rodger; her artistic mentor Greg Donovan; and Jeevan Sharma, Kapil Babu Dahal, Josh Smiech, Stefan Lueder, Ambika Rai, Surit Das, and Niels Gutschow.

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Endnotes

1. Studies on middle-class families in Nepal are still scant. Such studies are important as the middle-class strata increases in extent (WB 2016: 14). Additionally, while middle-class people form the backbone of economic development in Nepal, they also face a precarious condition of economic instability (see WB 2016; Liechty 2008: 211; also Nepali 2015: 423) and studies unpacking the existential and relational consequences of these factors are only starting to emerge. I discuss such dimensions of aspiration and vulnerability and their link to domestic relationships elsewhere (Tiné 2022c). More specifically, my current research (from which the present essay is developed) addresses the evolution of social relationships in Bhaktapur where available studies are fairly dated.

2. This is not only true among middle-class people or among people in Bhaktapur. In fact, while the present research only focused on that group, other studies have demonstrated this reality among other classes, ethnic groups, and locations (see e.g. Zharkevich 2019).

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Perspective

A Tibetan Porter's View of the 1960 Chinese Everest Expedition

Geoff Childs, Melvyn C. Goldstein and Puchung Wangdai

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A couple of years ago, Freddie Wilkinson posted an article on National Geographic's website titled, "He's the last surviving member of the first expedition to summit Everest."¹ Kanchha Sherpa, 86 years old, recalled what it was like to work on the expedition, the help he received from Tenzing Norgay, and how mountaineering transformed Sherpa society. The article took us back more than a decade to the time when we were interviewing elderly people in rural Tibet, investigating the impacts of rapid socioeconomic changes and labor mobility on the family-based care system for the elderly.² During the first round of interviews, we asked people a few questions about their personal histories. Pemba Hritar, born in 1930, told us,

I was a city resident [in Shigatse] in the past and had to do corvée labor. In my case, I had to sew clothing. Around 1951, I moved here [to a village outside Shigatse] and then got land at Democratic Reform (1959).³ I went to Jomolangma (Everest), came back home, was sent to do road construction, and then came home again.

Pemba Hritar's reference to Everest piqued our interest, but with 150 in-depth interviews to complete in a short time, we lacked the capacity to explore tangential topics. So, we took a mental note to follow up when time permitted.

During our third round of research in the summer of 2007, Pemba Hritar was among a narrower sample of interviewees. With the stiff gait common to those who have toiled in the fields over a lifetime, he strode into our courtyard at the appointed interview time. His lanky physique and thin, taut muscles hinted at a once powerful frame. Pemba Hritar told us that family members advised him against talking to us researchers and that nothing good could come of it. "I ignored them," he stated with a nod of defiance. Like many elderly Tibetans, he was usually sequestered at home, tending to the animals and grandchildren while other family members went outside to

work. Pemba Hritar enjoyed a break from domestic confinement, especially when it entailed chatting with interested listeners.

We welcomed him into the house we had rented and offered him tea. As our cook Döndrup fussed about in the makeshift kitchen, Pemba Hritar stroked his long, wispy beard while we engaged in small talk about health and family. When Döndrup served the tea, we got straight to the point by asking Pemba Hritar to tell us why he had gone to Everest. Here is what he said.

I went on the expedition with Gonpo and the Chinese climbers.⁴ I had heard of *Injis*⁵ going before that time.

[In the 1950s] I was a tailor. I was a subject of the *labrang* (the Panchen Lama's religious estate).⁶ Then Shigatse Dzong (the government administration) became more powerful, so I had to pay an additional tax to the *dzong*. I was a subject of the *labrang*, so I didn't want to work for the *dzong* and the aristocrats. But I had to sew for the rich people. If I had been sewing for the *labrang*, I felt I was sewing for the Panchen Lama.⁷ It didn't matter how hard I worked, I did it willingly.

Later I was enrolled in the Shigatse Chitso Labtra (Shigatse Society School). I started there just before Democratic Reforms (1959). They picked the stronger students. We got one month of special training. We would carry backpacks loaded with rocks up a mountain and leave them at the top. We also went jogging. Nobody told me the purpose, and nobody knew what we were doing. We got red suits and every day carried rocks up mountains. In Shigatse, many people were saying that a war was coming and that we would be sent to the front line. There were sixteen of us in the team. One of them said he was ill, so he left. I didn't know the purpose of what we were doing but nevertheless wanted

to do it. Before, the landlord made me suffer a lot. I didn't have food and didn't get any support from the wealthy people. The Communist Party came, supported the poor, so we got a better life.⁸ To show thanks, deep in my heart, I decided to do it, whatever the purpose was. If it were a war, I would kill others or be killed. If it were a mountain, I can't kill the mountain, but it can kill me. At the time, I wanted to work successfully and had visions of meeting Chairman Mao. But that never came true.

I sold my bicycle, gave the money to my wife, and said, "Use this for yourself. I'm going to do it, whatever it is." Then we left Shigatse for Jomolangma. There were fifty to sixty of us porters from all over.⁹ We went by truck from Shigatse to Lhatse in one day, then to old Tingri the next day, then to Dza Rongbuk [Monastery],¹⁰ then one more day to a base camp. We stayed there for three to four days before starting to carry stuff up higher.

This was the first Chinese expedition. There were many soldiers from the Panchen Lama's bodyguard regiment. There was Gonpo, the first to climb, and two Chinese climbers. The climbers stayed at Rongbuk while we stayed at the base camp. Our job was to carry food and oxygen up the mountain. We didn't use oxygen. The tanks were small, so we carried three or four at a time. They told us to set them down carefully; otherwise, they may explode. We followed their advice. But, when we got tired, we sat down suddenly, and the tanks bumped against rocks. Nothing happened.

A few porters got almost up to 8,000 meters. They promised that I could go to 7,000 meters, but I didn't get that high. When leaving and returning to camp each time they gave us a

physical exam. I got headaches and snow blindness. I was not weak, but they didn't send me higher. No porters went above 8,000 meters because that required technical climbing. We received 22 yuan per day in salary. I brought home 300 yuan. They gave us free food—good food and all we could eat—but at that altitude, I couldn't eat much. We had access to high-quality cigarettes that we had to pay for. We smoked. A Chinese man charged us for the cigarettes.

Two Chinese died on the expedition. They were part of the support staff. One manned the radio; he climbed to 6,600 meters and died of altitude sickness. I don't know how the other one died. Some other porters and I found his body buried beneath some stones. We wondered if somebody had killed him.

After Gonpo and two Chinese climbers reached the summit, we had a big celebration together in the base camp. Rongbuk sent gifts of meat and *tsampa* (parched barley flour), and the Chinese government sent gifts, including ten baskets of tea, rice, and flour. After returning to Shigatse, I got prizes, and the government arranged jobs for those of us who made up the expedition's support crew. I was appointed to go to Lhasa but had wanted to go to China. I thought it is useless to go unless I went to China, so I didn't take the job.

That was the extent of Pemba Hritar's recollections of the Everest expedition nearly five decades before—or at least the sum of what he could tell us under time constraints. He mentioned that he needed to return home soon to continue his chores, so we switched to our normal interview questions on aging and household relations. We learned that Pemba Hritar eventually settled in his wife's village. They had no children of their own but adopted an orphaned boy. As Pemba

Hritar explained, “He never even had a spoonful of his own mother’s milk. We raised him from infancy.” At the time of our interview, Pemba Hritar was a widower living with his son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren, who all treated him with kindness and respect.

Pemba Hritar’s story is a very minor contribution to the history of Himalayan mountaineering. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to share because eyewitness accounts of the first successful expeditions have by now faded with the passing of the last remaining participants.

Puchung Wangdui, a member of the Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences, completed a MA in medical anthropology with a focus on aging at Case Western Reserve University. He is an accomplished ethnographer who specializes in the study of families and socioeconomic changes in rural Tibet and is co-author of numerous papers on this topic.

Fieldwork in rural Tibet, in collaboration with the Tibet Academy of Social Sciences in Lhasa, was facilitated by a National Science Foundation research grant (# 0527500) titled Economic Development and Intergenerational Relations in the Tibet Autonomous Region of China.

Geoff Childs, Professor of Anthropology at Washington University in St. Louis, is an anthropological demographer who collaborates with scholars across disciplines to study the interplay of culture and population processes in Tibet and the Himalayan region. He is the author of *Tibetan Diary: From Birth to Death and Beyond in a Himalayan Valley of Nepal* (2004, University of California Press) and co-author with Namgyal Choedup of *From a Trickle to a Torrent: Education, Migration, and Social Change in a Himalayan Valley of Nepal* (2019, University of California Press).

Melvyn C. Goldstein, John Reynolds Harkness Professor and Co-Director of the Center for Research on Tibet at Case Western Reserve University, is a socio-cultural anthropologist specializing in Tibetan society. His topical interests include family and marriage (polyandry), cross-cultural and global aging, population studies, cultural ecology, and economic development/change. He is the author of numerous books including, most recently, *A History of Modern Tibet, Volume Four, 1957-1959: In the Eye of the Storm* (2019, University of California Press).

Endnotes

1. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/2019/05/first-everest-expedition-kanchha-sherpa-nepal/>, accessed May 31, 2019.
2. The project, titled Economic Development and Intergenerational Relations in the Tibet Autonomous Region of China, was supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation (# SES 0527500).
3. Democratic Reform refers to China’s dismantling of the Tibetan system of governance together with land and class reforms following the flight of the Dalai Lama into exile in 1959.
4. The three team members who reached the summit on May 25, 1960, were Gonpo, a Tibetan, and the Chinese climbers Wang Fuzhou and Qu Yinhua. For the first English-language description of the expedition, see Shih Chan-Chun’s “The Conquest of Mount Everest by the Chinese Mountaineering Team” in *The Himalayan Journal* Volume 23, 1961. The article was followed by a lengthy treatise pointing to evidence that potentially contradicts the summit claim, including the lack of a photograph from the top.

5. Literally “English people,” the term is generally used by Tibetans to describe any foreigner of European descent.

6. In pre-1959 Tibet, most commoners were hereditarily bound to an estate to which they owed various tax obligations. The three major landowners were monasteries, aristocrats, and the government centered in Lhasa, with *dzong* (forts) as administrative centers across the land. Social mobility was limited, and labor exploitation was common.

7. The head of a large group of estates and of Tashilhunpo Monastery in Shigatse. He was also one of the most revered lamas in Tibet.

8. Many Tibetans at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum supported the Communist Party of China because it promised to create a more equitable society and end all corvée labor obligations to lords. At the time of democratic reforms, the poor peasants also typically received fields and some possessions that had been confiscated from the upper classes.

9. This is consistent with Shih’s report in *The Himalayan Journal* (1961), which states that the expedition comprised “214 men and women, one-third of them being of Tibetan nationality.” Shih also writes that among these were “serfs who had just been freed from serfdom in Tibet,” a description that conforms to China’s official description of Pemba Hritar’s pre-1959 social status.

10. Rongbuk Monastery sits on the north side of Everest and has played an interesting role in mountaineering history. See, for example, Alexander Macdonald’s article “The Lama and the General” (1973, *Kailash* Volume 1), in which he compares C. G. Bruce’s notes from a 1922 expedition on his interactions with Rongbuk’s abbot, Ngawang Tenzin Norbu (1867-1940), with the lama’s own recollections recorded in his Tibetan-language biography.

Conference Report

Himalayan Studies Conference 6, 13-16 October 2022, Toronto, ON, Canada

Nadine Plachta and Katharine Rankin

University of Toronto

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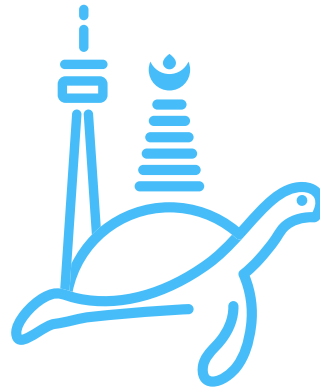
The Himalayan Studies Conference 6 took place at Victoria College at the University of Toronto from October 13–16, 2022. It was co-convened by Nadine Plachta and Katharine Rankin, who were supported by a conference committee of the Executive Council of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies (ANHS), a local University of Toronto host committee (Pushpa Acharya, Christoph Emmrich, Frances Garrett, Elsie Lewison, and Sarah Richardson), a volunteer coordinator (Adrian Khan), and a member of the HIMALAYA editorial team who handled the Zoom Events platform (Stefan Lüder).

Over the course of two and a half days, the conference was run on hybrid modality with a total of 209 participants (115 in-person and 94 online). 47 panels and roundtables featured many participants from Himalayan countries, including: India (38), Nepal (17), Bhutan (2), and China (1). Thus, HSC 6 had an almost equal number of participants joining from the Himalayas as those coming from North America, the UK, and Europe. HSC 6 was certainly the most international Himalayan Studies Conference so far.

Theme and Logo

“Himalayan Futures” was identified as a conference theme that could attend to both climate crisis and environmental challenges in the Himalayas, and the activism pushing back for life—human and non-human—for hope, for creativity, and for transformation. There is currently much to be worried about—rising temperatures, glacial lake outburst floods, seismic instability, rapid infrastructure development, border conflicts, and tensions over territorial claims. The conference strove to focus on how Indigenous, Dalit, and other historically marginalized communities bear witness, sustain hope, and take action in the wake of these developments. It aimed at envisioning alternative understandings and trajectories of environmental, social, and political change to engage multidisciplinary perspectives of justice, struggle,

and solidarity in the making of shared Himalayan futures.



HIMALAYAN STUDIES CONFERENCE 6

The conference logo reflected the commitment to including Indigenous perspectives, as well as the geographic location of discussions in Toronto. It creatively brought together North American Indigenous forms of knowledge and worldviews, symbolized by the turtle, with Himalayan Buddhist principles of peace and compassion depicted by the stupa. The CN Tower, a communications and observation tower in downtown Toronto, was added to represent a widely recognized landmark of the city. The logo was developed by artist Thinley Gyamtso Lama from the Indigenous Tsum community in Nepal’s northern Gorkha District.

Keynote

Both keynote speakers and discussants were selected with the conference theme in mind, as well as with the objective of representing diverse regional expertise and different career stages. The keynote speakers addressed the topic of climate change in relation to histories of oppression faced by Indigenous and marginalized groups in contested territories. Mona Bhan (South Asian Studies and Anthropology, Syracuse University), in her presentation *Weathering the Occupation: Meteorological Wars and Climate Contestations in Kashmir*, argued that climate and weather perform an agentive role by showing that they constitute a geopolitical force that have

the potential to challenge the fiction of national cartographies. Focusing on Ladakh, Karine Gagné's (Anthropology, University of Guelph) talk, *Taming India's Northernmost Border: Ecologies of Violence, Care, and Resistance in the Himalayas*, explored climate change as a terrain for claiming citizenship and resisting state abandonment. Karine also made a case for including multispecies relationships within the ambit of scholarship that troubles the violent practices associated with state and border making. Galen Murton (Geography, James Madison University) and Pasang Yangjee Sherpa (Asian Studies, University of British Columbia) served as discussants for these two keynote talks.

Contributions to Himalayan Studies

The various panels at HSC 6 showcased well how Himalayan studies have complicated broader debates on issues of climate, sustainability, infrastructure, and disaster—all critical matters of Himalayan futures. For example, scholarship on and in the Himalayas has long made influential contributions in political ecology by posing political-economic explanations of environmental change—emphasizing the role of the state and elites in driving deforestation—that challenged racist and classist Malthusian frameworks. It pioneered in making the case that community empowerment justifies decentralization—providing a key rationale for Nepal's large-scale community forestry systems that would be reproduced around the world as mobile policy.

Himalaya-based scholarship has also led the way in infrastructure studies, with insights about the imperative to consult and mobilize local and Indigenous knowledge; in disaster studies, with consolidation of the science of geologic instability, landslides, glacial lake outburst floods, and grounded examinations of everyday lives in landscapes of crisis; and in decolonial studies by highlighting the politics of citational practices, theoretical lineages, and institutional structures of academia.

The panels at HSC 6 picked up on these themes by demonstrating how anthropology, geography, history, education, art, and religious studies come to bear in disciplinarily specific and collaborative ways on existential questions about Himalayan futures. Some panels were formulated explicitly in relation to the conference theme, such as *Himalayan Linguistic Futures: Language as Expressive Practice, Learning, and Survivance*; *Bhutanese Futures: Tensions, Preparations, and Prospects*; and *Reckoning with New Uncertainties on a Himalayan Scale*. There was a cluster of panels on art and literature connecting across the Himalayas, and a cluster on education, pedagogy, and youth perspectives. As always, Nepal remained a key geographic focus at the conference, but related Himalayan geographies were also featured, including in the keynote talks. Finally, HSC 6 took up issues of decolonizing Himalayan studies through panels on *Reindigenizing Research*; *Doing Ethnography*; and *Publishing Himalayan Scholarship*.

Film Screening and Discussion

HSC 6 also screened the film *Ningwasum*, followed by a Q&A with director Subash Thebe, who joined on Zoom from London. Subash is a visual artist from the Indigenous Yakthung community in eastern Nepal, who uses a multimedia approach in his film and artwork. He draws on both science and speculative fiction to address Indigenous struggles resulting from the effects of (internal) colonization, capitalist practices, and climate change.

Developed from extensive ethnographic research, *Ningwasum* places the Yakthung community in a futuristic space travel scenario. The documentary centers around two Indigenous astronauts and time travelers from an alternative future, in which a Yakthung nation coexists with other nations and allies that have created their own advanced technology. *Ningwasum* explores concepts of time, memory, and belonging as well as experiences of colonization and the cultural erasure that comes with it. Instead

of succumbing to histories of domination and marginalization, *Ningwasum* imagines a future in which Indigenous people have asserted their identities through the use of technology, a creative space that Subash calls “Adivasi Futurism.” In that way, *Ningwasum* offers a counter-narrative and envisions life beyond the state. It tells the story of how Indigenous communities also create spaces of hope and possibility for what is yet to come. *Ningwasum* was filmed mostly in the Nepal Himalayas, including the Wasanglung region that is believed to be the shamanic home of the Yakthung people. The dialogue is spoken entirely in the Yakthung language, with English subtitles, and weaves oral narratives, animation, and electronic music into its storytelling.

Additional Highlights

An additional highlight of the conference was the inaugural meeting of the Canadian Himalaya Initiative, hosted by Christoph Emmrich (Study of Religion and Historical Studies, University of Toronto) at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy. A field trip to the Tibetan Collection at the Royal Ontario Museum with Sarah Richardson (Historical Studies, University of Toronto) and a momo lunch provided by Surendra Lawoti’s family business, *Nepali Momo*, on the last day of the conference, successfully rounded off the program.

Logistical and Technological Challenges

Conference organization also came with significant logistical challenges and complications. What was initially planned and intended as a primarily in-person event became a truly hybrid conference in the months before. This outcome was in part due to the lingering effects of the global Covid-19 pandemic and the backlog in visa processing at Canadian High Commissions around the world—serious situations that were entirely out of control of the conference organizers. For example, while some international participants were issued a visa to Canada just a couple days before the

conference, despite having applied months in advance—and were therefore lucky to get on a plane—others needed to shift to a virtual participation at the last minute because of not receiving a visa. Many of the pivots to online participation were only confirmed within the week or even days before the conference, including for one of the keynote discussants and the filmmaker.

On top of these challenges posed by the pandemic and visa access, the Zoom Events platform itself proved to require significant technical know-how. Fortunately, Stefan Lüder was able to travel from Frankfurt to Toronto on short notice to help maintain the hybrid Zoom technology. One of the enduring images of the conference for all who attended in person will no doubt be of Stefan gliding in and out of the session rooms, exuding calm and alleviating the ever-present anxiety that technology would interfere with substantive academic exchange.

As many of us have learned through numerous conferences over the past two years, the future of academic meetings will remain hybrid. HIMALAYA welcomes suggestions for hosting the next Himalayan Studies Conference in North America, and we look forward to future conversations at HSC 7, in person and online.

Nadine Plachta is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Geography and Planning at the University of Toronto. Her work focuses on Indigenous knowledge systems, conservation area policies, and local governance. She has explored this theme in the context of emerging environmentalisms, development discourses and practices, infrastructure landscapes, as well as disaster, conflict, and political mobilization. Plachta's scholarship is based on long-term ethnographic engagement in South Asia and especially in Nepal, where she served as Resident Director at Heidelberg University's South Asia Institute in Kathmandu (2014–2019).

Katharine Rankin is Professor and Associate Chair in the Department of Geography and Planning at the University of Toronto. She has contributed broadly to scholarship on market and state formation through a decolonial, area-studies orientation engaging ethnographic approaches—and featuring case studies of infrastructure development, post-conflict and post-disaster governance, commercial gentrification, microfinance, and a trans-Himalayan trading entrepôt.

Book Review

Review of *Reworking Culture: Relatedness, Rites, and Resources in the Garo Hills, North East India* by Erik de Maaker

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 328 pages. ISBN 9788194831693

Reviewed by Mélanie Vandenhelsken

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Reworking Culture

*Relatedness, Rites, &
Resources in Garo Hills,
North East India*

ERIK DE MAAKER

Recommended Citation

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Reworking Culture focuses on culture and its recent transformations in and around the village territory of Sadolpara in the West Garo Hills of Meghalaya. For a few decades, social science research on Northeast India has shed light on the consequences of the ‘rewarding’ of cultural specificity by the state, in particular through the granting of tribal status and its benefits. This framework has sought to highlight the political construction of ‘ethnic identity’ and its staging as a means of attaining political visibility (Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh. 2017. *Dancing to the State: The Ethnic Compulsions of the Tangsa in Assam*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press), as well as the production of new hierarchies and intra-ethnic relations of domination through the rise of ‘tribal politics’ (Sanjib Baruah. 2013. “Politics of Territoriality: Indigeneity, Itinerancy and Rights in North-East India.” In *Territorial Changes and Territorial Restructurings in the Himalayas*, edited by J. Smadja, 69–83. New-Delhi: Adroit Publishers and Paris: Centre for Himalayan Studies) as responses to policies intending to ‘domesticate’ cultural difference (Arkotong Longkumer. 2010. *Reform, Identity and Narratives of Belonging: The Heraka Movement of Northeast India*. London: Continuum). The politicization of ethnic identity in the region, together with the questioning of ‘methodological nationalism’ in the social sciences, has led in particular to a rethinking of research on the culture of a single ethnic community: How can we approach culture and ethnic identity without reifying ethnic boundaries? In this context, the main challenge faced by an ethnographic study on a localized community is to give full account of the sense of belonging and ‘cultural coherence’ that are meaningful to people and are organizing principles of their social relations while also reflecting the cultural diversity within ethnic communities, the fluidity of ethnic boundaries and cultural dynamism.

Reworking Culture convincingly discusses Garo practices and representations in a way that sheds light on their inherent capacity to transform, and contesting prevailing views of upland societies in Northeast India

as culturally homogeneous, geographically contained and isolated, and disappearing. The book focuses on “what people experience as Garo culture” (p. 42), and the emic concept of ethnic identity is represented by orally transmitted principles called *niam*, which rather than being “inflexibly prescriptive serve to legitimate ‘re-worked’ ideas and practices by connecting them to the past” (p. 85).

The ‘House’ is an institution central to social relations in Saldopara. It includes a building, and is more generally a unit of property, rights, and belonging. It is a central element of the ‘social order’, and its continuity is ensured by the practice of replacing the deceased spouse, which is the responsibility (and right) of the deceased’s matrilineal group. The House also brings two matrilineal groups into a relation of exchange that can last over several generations, and organizes the share of resources between large kin groups. Houses that are hierarchically related to one another get rights over fields on which swidden agriculture can be carried out. The traditional Garo community religion is embedded into the village social and economic organization, and the maintenance of Houses and swidden agriculture particularly involve the cult of traditional Garo spirits.

Many of the concerns of this book would also be found in a classical ‘village study’: kinship and social organisation, the role of the house in the social organization, religious practices, land ownership, and so forth. It differs, however, from such a study by approaching these ‘fields of study’ as “relational categories.” Firstly, they are embedded into each other; consequently, economic, social and religious changes are also interrelated. Secondly, the ‘stable’ cultural elements are malleable. For example, the hierarchy of the Houses, based on their relation with the first settlers, was gradually reinterpreted following the disappearance of some Houses (p. 112). The organization of kinship relations in terms of categories also allows people to move from one category to another. Thirdly, they allow the transformation of social relations.

Thus, on one hand, the maintenance and transmission of Houses, kinship organization, ritual performances, and ‘tradition’ organize Garo culture, in the sense that they maintain exchange relations between matrilineal and affine groups, and foster respect for social hierarchy. On the other hand, they serve as a referential framework that bestows authority upon people’s relationships and commitments allowing for their reinterpretation and renegotiation according to the situation at hand. Ritual performances, in particular funerals, provide the ground for the revision of relationships between Houses in particular through circulation of different types of gifts.

“Far from adopting an essentialist approach, the book places the Garo community in the flux of time, and shows how it deals with changes that affect society as a whole.”

- Melanie Vandenhelsken on *Reworking Culture*

Far from adopting an essentialist approach, the book places the Garo community in the flux of time, and shows how it deals with changes that affect society as a whole. The study focuses on the period of the author’s fieldwork (from 1999 to the early 2000s), and also discusses the changes introduced during colonization (notably as a consequence of the endorsement by the colonial state of the position of village head) as well as the consequences of increasing numbers of Garo converting to Christianity since the 19th century. This has brought about important changes as Christianity is considered incompatible with the practice of the traditional community religion (or “Songsarek”) which is embedded in the social and economic organization of the village. The gradual increase in cash crops and paddy cultivation to the detriment of swidden agriculture has also led to a loss of meaning for the spirit cult since maintaining good relations with spirits is necessary for swidden agriculture: “Songsarek’s religious practices are gradually losing their economic relevance” (p.

126). More recently, the growing role of the state and market in the life of the community has favoured limitations on the number of beneficiaries of local economic resources, which has led to an increase of inequalities within the community.

Nevertheless, collective celebrations linked to the annual cycle of shifting cultivation are maintained for their social aspects. More generally, Songsarek followers’ “ideas, attitudes, practices, and *niam* are by no means frozen in time but flexible enough to incorporate the modernization of economic practices and to adapt to changing political contexts” (p. 246); Garo ‘culture’, the author argues, is a living resource for the community that enables it to adapt to changing economic and political conditions, and this concerns both Songsarek and Christians as, in practice, “Garo *niam* is encompassing; it defines social principles that transcend divisions of religion and class” (p. 248).

Based on a long-term ethnographic field study that focuses on cultural worldview and knowledge as enacted and transformed through collective practices that help communities adapt to changing societal conditions, de Maaker’s approach echoes other recent publications on Northeast India—for example, Michael Heneise’s work on dreams and agency as providing the Nagas with the means to negotiate everyday uncertainty and unpredictability (2018. *Agency and Knowledge in Northeast India. The Life and Landscapes of Dreams*. London and New York: Routledge), and Dolly Kikon’s exploration of identities and cultures as mediated by food (2021. “Bamboo Shoot in Our Blood. Fermenting Flavors and Identities in Northeast India.” *Current Anthropology* 62, supplement 24).

The fluidity of the writing is one of the strengths of *Reworking Culture*. The analysis is based on the description of concrete events and situations described in a lively way that leads the reader smoothly into the

complexity of Garo culture and its transformations. The theoretical debate does not obscure the life and views of the people. The writing also highlights the heuristic value of description in anthropology: not, in this case, to provide ‘data’—the descriptions of rituals, for example, include only the information relevant for the discussion—but rather to underpin analysis, which is the final purpose of the book. The book thus provides an insight into the concrete consequences of economic and political changes in a rural community of Northeast India. It also highlights the relevance of rural, localized, and ethnic studies, renewing such studies in a way that reintegrates communities into temporal, cultural, and geographic movements.

However, the book offers limited space for comparison. This remark is not intended as a criticism since the text indeed constitutes a well-proportioned whole, but rather reflects a wish for more comparative studies, and for more studies of trans-ethnic relations in Northeast India and across its borders. A comparative approach to a number of particularly salient topics in the book—such as the replacement of the deceased spouse, matrilineality, marriage by abduction, and the role played by community religious practices in swidden agriculture—would be of particular interest.

The author clarifies the confusion made by some between matriarchy and matrilineality, but a comparison with other matrilineal societies based on ethnographic literature may have shed more light on the specific nature of the Garo House. Marriage by abduction and spirit cults related to shifting agriculture are also found in ethnic communities of Northeastern Nepal such as the Limbu (Philippe Sagant. 1996. *The Dozing Shaman: The Limbus of Eastern Nepal*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press). In this regard as well, a comparison would highlight the continuities across ethnic boundaries and borders in the whole region.

Mélanie Vandenhelsken is a social anthropologist, lecturer at the University of Vienna, and Associate Researcher at the Institute for Social Anthropology (Austrian Academy of Sciences). Her research mostly focuses on the Northeast Indian state of Sikkim, and her research interests include ritual performances and dynamics (with a special focus on the Limbu community), the construction of ethnicity, and citizenship.

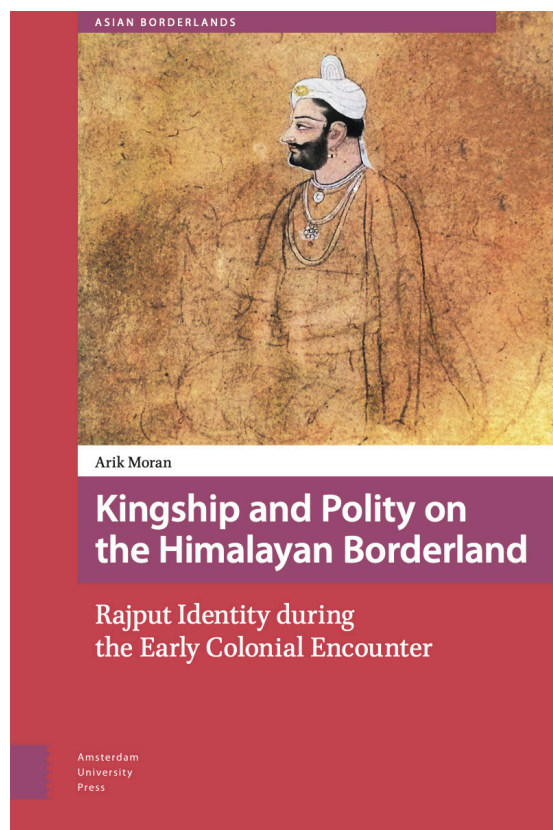
Book Review

Review of *Kingship and Polity on the Himalayan Borderland: Rajput Identity during the Early Colonial Encounter* by Arik Moran

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019. 248 pages. ISBN 9789462985605

Reviewed by Himani Upadhyaya

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In his new book, historian Arik Moran takes the reader to the dynamic political world of kings and queens in the Himachal region of the Indian Himalayas. The political events studied in this book are set during the early colonial period (1790s-1840s), when the territorial frontiers of the British East India Company (EIC) first expanded into the Western Himalayas. Resonating with recent writings on adaptation strategies adopted by communities along Himalayan frontiers, this book outlines how ideas of kingship and sovereignty were transformed and adapted as political elites interacted with the new political regime of the EIC.

Connected both by kinship ties and ancient rivalries, the three hill kingdoms discussed in the book—Bilaspur, Kangra, and Sirmaur—were situated at the shifting geo-political frontiers of large empires: the Sikh, the Gorkha, and the EIC. Against this backdrop, the book sheds light on the consolidation of a West Himalayan Rajput ethos which continues to animate contemporary socio-political realities in the hill state of Himachal Pradesh. *What were the historical processes and events that led to the formulation of a Pahari Rajput identity?* This question is addressed through the book's five chapters in which we traverse a landscape shaped by several regional and imperial battles. Moran convincingly shows that interactions of Pahari Rajput elites with the new political regime of the EIC produced important reconfigurations in their identity.

The rich historical analysis offered by the author is best exhibited in the first chapter, which offers a critical study of a vernacular Pahari oral narrative of the martial-historic genre, the *Jhera* of Chinjhiar. The *Jhera* recounts events during the battle of Chinjhiar (1795) fought between traditional rivals—Kangra and Bilaspur—who claimed descent from the Chandella Rajputs. Through a close reading of the *Jhera*'s language and the context of its production, Moran is able to highlight the inventiveness of later 20th century accounts in which Pahari Rajputs are recast as “modern versions of the Kshatriya sovereigns of

antiquity” (p. 54). The author also carefully notes significant omissions in the *Jhera*. For instance, the oral narrative subordinates the power and agency of Bilaspur's regent queen, Nagardevi Katochi, who was at the helm of political affairs, to that of her son, the young prince Maha Chand, who is refashioned as a powerful Rajput king.

An extended discussion on gender and kingship follows in chapters 3 and 5. Based on the premise that it was the family rather than the person of the male king who was the locus of political power, Moran demonstrates that the marginality assigned to royal hill women (Pahari Rajputnis) was more prescriptive than real. In fact, regent and widowed queens played a vital role in political and military matters of the state. His study of their correspondence with EIC officials reveals that Rajputnis such as Bilaspur's Nagardevi Katochi and Simaur's Guleri Rani were far from being politically insignificant. The centrality of Rajput women to politics is remarkably demonstrated in the last chapter that reconstructs an episode involving Guleri Rani's female descendants, the two widowed Ranis of Bilaspur, who orchestrated an armed rebellion to establish their short-lived reign in Bilaspur. Yet, in regional accounts as well as colonial narratives, this phenomenal moment is reduced to an aberrative episode in history.

The dominant narrative of Pahari Rajput kingship was constructed largely around the figure of Kangra's Sansar Chand Katoch II alias Pahari Padshah, the “Mountain Emperor,” whose portrait adorns the book's cover page. With Kangra as the main geographical focus, chapter 2 discusses how the Pahari Rajput ideal sought to distinguish itself from the Gorkhas who held sway over the region for a brief period. Dominant imperial British and Kangra-centric regional histories converged in the vilification of the Gorkha regime but Moran's study shows that responses to Gorkha rule were, in fact, differentiated. Faced with their own Raja's failure in governance, Sirmauri subjects showed a preference for Gorkha rulers.

Events in belligerent Bilaspur are analyzed in chapter 4 in the context of new political shifts following the Treaty of Amritsar (1809) that was signed between the Sikhs and the EIC. The Treaty recognized the Sutlej River as the imperial boundary demarcating Sikh territories north of the river from EIC territories to its south. As Bilaspuri kings were uniquely affected by the Treaty – their territories lay both north and south of the river – they handled this precarious position by drawing on highly adaptive strategies. To retain their power in a politically unstable climate, they not only mobilized warrior groups of the precolonial Hindustani military market, such as Chandela warrior-peasants and Afghan Rohilla cavalymen, but also quickly exploited new advantages arising from their proximity to rising commercial centers such as Ambala and Patiala.

The range of archival sources consulted by Arik Moran is vast and diverse, including EIC correspondence, official publications, regional court narratives, European travel accounts, vernacular oral narratives, and even a contemporary Hindi historical novel. This diversity enables the author to take a nuanced approach to kingship in the Western Himalayas. For example, he observes that chroniclers of the Pahari Padshah deployed coeval and overlapping models

of sovereignty borrowing from Indo-Persian, north Indian Rajput, and local Himalayan contexts.

Additionally, the study is illustrated with visual sources such as maps, photographs, and

Pahari paintings associated with the three regional kingdoms of Bilaspur, Kangra, and Sirmaur. The book has a particular appeal for scholars of Himalayan regions, yet its accessibility for lay readers may be limited through its rich scholarly description of kingship and gender. Given that much academic focus on Rajputs and the process

of Rajputization has been on Western India and the Indo-Gangetic plains, the book offers new insights from the Himalayan context for historians of medieval and early modern South Asia.

Moran skillfully illustrates the vast potential of regional histories in the Himalayas but the reason for choosing the three hill kingdoms of Kangra, Sirmaur, and Bilaspur would deserve a more focused discussion so as to guide the reader through the dramatic trajectory of courtly and kinship politics in these kingdoms. Pahari Rajputs, as the author notes, belong to the Khas ethnic group which currently comprises one-third of the population in Himachal Pradesh. The primary narrative in the book revolves around politically dominant royal elites, though Moran shows that Chandella peasant-warriors and non-Rajput groups, such as Brahmins, ascetics, monastic advisors, Sikh Sodhis, and Afghan Rohillas, played a significant role in regional politics as well. Given the multitude of trans-regional historical networks of military labor, trade and pilgrimage spanning through the Himalayas, I wonder how the Pahari Rajput identity interacted with that of mobile groups and communities who also made claims to a Rajput status, as in the case of the Shauka people in the neighboring Kumaon Himalayas.

“Arik Moran’s monograph is successful in demonstrating that the interactions of regional political elites with the British in the Himalayan borderlands of present-day Himachal were marked by adaptive vitality.”

- Himani Upadhyaya on *Kingship and Polity on the Himalayan Borderland*

That aside, Arik Moran’s monograph is successful in demonstrating that the interactions of regional political elites with the British in the Himalayan borderlands of present-day Himachal were marked by adaptive vitality. His study is particularly commendable for steering clear of simplistic binaries, such as indigenous/

colonial, community/state and oral/written. It is a valuable contribution to academic scholarship on the history of state and identity formation in the Western Himalayas.

Himani Upadhyaya is pursuing her doctoral research in History at Ashoka University, India. Her thesis explores the situated history of mapping and surveying practices in 19th century Kumaon, with a focus on local and Indigenous communities in the region.

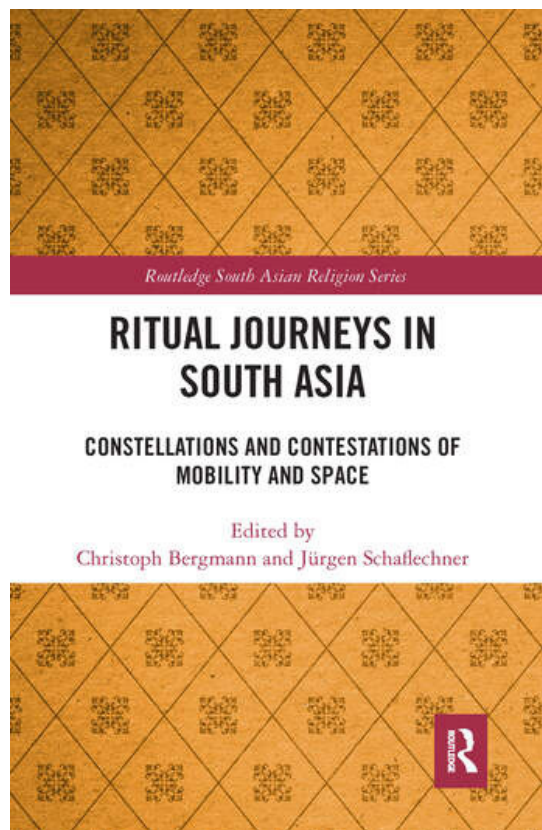
Book Review

Review of *Ritual Journeys in South Asia: Constellations and Contestations of Mobility and Space* edited by Christoph Bergmann and Jürgen Schaflechner

London and New York: Routledge, 2019. 226 pages. ISBN: 9781138055001

Reviewed by Vineet Gairola

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2218/himalaya.2022.7813>



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In 1985, *The Drama Review* 29(3) published a special issue on “processional performance,” which covered pilgrimages and processions across the world and their linkages with performance studies scholarship. Thirty-five years later, the dynamics of space, mobility, and pilgrimage are again addressed in *Ritual Journeys in South Asia: Constellations and Contestations of Mobility and Space*, edited by Christoph Bergmann and Jürgen Schaflechner. The origin of the book can be traced to a conference on ritual journeys at Heidelberg University’s International Science Forum in 2012, in which some of the authors participated. Pilgrimage, understood as a sacred form of travel, is certainly not a new concept for scholars of South Asia or the Himalayas. Yet, instead of taking this category for granted, *Ritual Journeys* breaks disciplinary silos through its interdisciplinary framework of contextualizing the ritualized movement of people through space. Each chapter of the edited volume skillfully demonstrates how space and mobility across territories are constantly re-created, contested, and re-vitalized through ritual journeys and their “strategies of ritualization” (p. 2). In essence, the book argues that site (space) and route (mobility) are interconnected and mutually constituted.

Drawing on pilgrimage studies, *Ritual Journeys* interrogates the ritualization of movement, exhaustive traveling, and participation in fieldwork. It combines case studies about significantly different forms of mobility, such as a strenuous trek undertaken by Ladakhi nomads to the holy lake of Rewalsar, also known as Tso Pema, in Himachal Pradesh. Here, a thick description of the pilgrimage done by author Nike-Ann Schröder with Tibetan refugees brings three layers together: geographical landscapes, tantric ritual practices, and personal memories of the author/pilgrim’s own past. Contrastingly, Deepra Dandekar takes a narrative analysis approach in deciphering

the “shrine literature” (p. 181) of a religious monument in Viśālgadh, Maharashtra. Additionally, Michel Boivin’s fieldwork in Sehwan Sharif in northern Sindh, Pakistan shows how diverse communities such as Shias, Sunnis, Ismailis, and even Hindus disagree over the interpretation of a saint and its shrine for centuries.

The book also discusses ritual journeys that invoke divine possession and powers. The processions of *Jākh devtā* in the Garhwal Himalayas, described by Karin Polit, and of *Mahāsu*, the divine king of the Western Himalayas, discussed by Lokesh Ohri, show how local communities continue to follow the ritualized regimes of their ruling deities. Both ritual journeys allow devotees to transform the cultural memory of the deity through embodied affects where local histories are relived through procession and possession.

“Each chapter of the book skillfully demonstrates how space and mobility across territories are constantly re-created, contested, and re-vitalized through ritual journeys.”

- Vineet Gairola on *Ritual Journeys in South Asia*

Rather than describing rituals as already predetermined, the edited volume provides a covert critique of such a theorization by demonstrating that rituals are a dynamic play in which variations are not only possible but highly likely. Hence, the case studies are grounded in varied contexts and unique cultural dynamics that shape the everyday lifeworlds of people. Furthermore, ritual journeys are also marked by organizational challenges, tensions, and negotiations. This becomes apparent in chapters that focus on the ambivalent and difficult ways through which planning and journeying of people come together as ritual action. For example, in describing the Anglo-Indian pilgrimage of *Vailankannī Mātā*, Robyn Andrews and Brent Otto reflect on how Catholicism is mixed with Hindu rituals to illustrate the importance

of contextualizing the processual nature of procession.

The book unearths how ritual journeys are produced in South Asia's culturally varied, politically charged, and socio-economically uneven landscapes. It broadens the conceptual scope of classical pilgrimage studies by delving into the revitalization of pilgrimage practices through empirically rich case studies. For example, the modification of devotional songs by young people participating in a Buddhist pilgrimage to Sri Pada in Sri Lanka demonstrates that youth are "innovators" or "social shifters" (p. 145) in transforming pilgrimages. *Ritual Journeys* is a venture that goes beyond orientalist stereotypes by documenting the importance to address the relationship between religious and non-religious processes given the fast-paced socio-economic changes in the broader South Asian region.

Ritual Journeys effectively conveys that each South Asian community creates its own cosmos through pilgrimages. Each chapter skillfully demonstrates how movement is not just about covering distance but holds symbolic and ceremonial importance as well. Ritual movement promises peace and security by connecting with the environment in a manner where personal and collective experiences fuse with each other. *Ritual Journeys* showcases how fieldwork put into writing enables the reader to understand the *Weltanschauung* of a people. The book is structured around a socio-spatial perspective which, in my view, can be understood as an extension to the concept of "eco-sociality" (Whitmore 2018) in that it allows scholars of South Asia to make connections among deities, processions, and the environment.

Drawing on Tim Cresswell (2010), *Ritual Journeys* proposes an understanding of the "new mobilities paradigm" (p. 4) that theorizes the ever-changing geographies of ritual journeys. Accordingly, space is not seen as a fixed entity but rather as constantly created, contested, and transformed through movement. The importance of pilgrimages lies in the practice of

embedding the relation of people with a deity "into their being-in-the-world" (p. 81). Although the book redefines space and movement for the reader, paying attention to the spiritual work of a pilgrim during a ritual journey would have enabled an even broader understanding of mental phenomena and processes within the framework of pilgrimages, deities, and religious sites. For example, applying Donald Winnicott's (1971) theory of "transitional space" would have allowed elaborating on a space of experience that is in between the inner and the outer worlds of a pilgrim, neither totally objective nor totally subjective, which bestows symbolic power to the pilgrimage in the context of South Asian ritual journeys.

An eloquent examination of cultural expression and community interaction, *Ritual Journeys* asks questions about politics, power, agency, and the ever-changing meaning of culture. The book provides not only a history of the field of ritual journeys and pilgrimages but an outlook into the future as well. It demonstrates that the modalities of relating to particular spaces and places are transforming. By focusing on pilgrimage, ritual movements, and socio-spatial ideas across the Garhwal Himalayas, Maharashtra, Tibet, Sri Lanka, and Sindh, the book takes an interdisciplinary approach and examines important themes for scholars and students interested in anthropology and religious studies, as well as in South Asian and Himalayan area studies.

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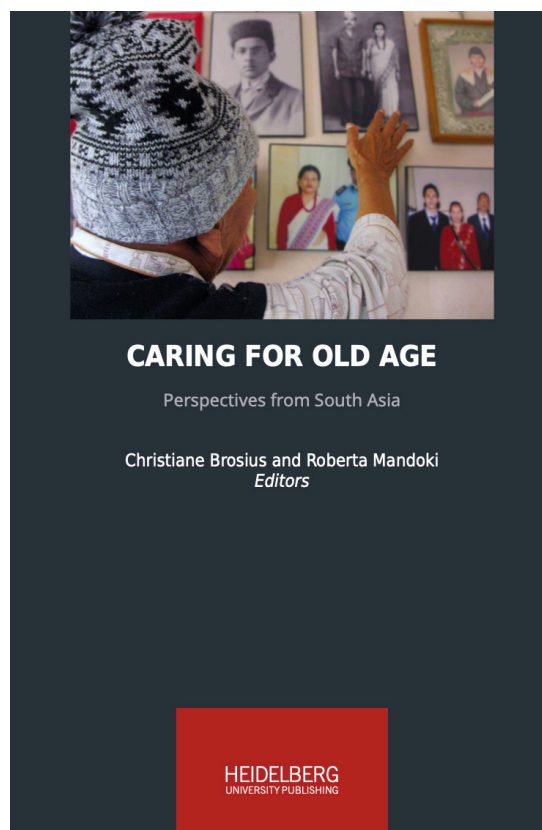
Book Review

Review of *Caring for Old Age: Perspectives from South Asia* edited by Christiane Brosius and Roberta Mandoki

Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, 2020. 352 pages. ISBN: 9783947732951

Reviewed by Sarah Speck

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Ageing. An inevitable development of the 21st century with all imaginable consequences for our societies. The global demographic transition to aged societies is having extensive implications on living arrangements and the way our economies and policies work. We need to (re) negotiate how we want and can live in and with ageing societies, (re)schedule policy action plans, (re)distribute finances, (re) built infrastructure, and (re)think how we “do family” and care about ageing, old age, and older people. Ageing brings about a range of urgent challenges regarding social, financial, and health issues. In the Global South, ageing is gaining increasingly more attention, yet the South Asian demographic transition towards aged societies has been largely omitted in academic research due to its relatively young population share. However, rapid urbanisation and mobilisation in South Asia, combined with demographic shifts, transforms societies and creates new demands for families, societies, and policies.

“We need to (re)negotiate how we want and can live in and with ageing societies, (re)schedule policy action plans, (re) distribute finances, (re)built infrastructure, and (re)think how we “do family” and care about ageing, old age, and older people.”

- Sarah Speck on *Caring for Old Age*

The edited volume *Caring for Old Age: Perspectives from South Asia* by Christiane Brosius and Roberta Mandoki is a timely collection for scholars and students interested in ageing and care in the South Asian region. By taking a predominantly transcultural approach, eleven authors provide deep ethnographic case studies based on original research with local communities. Reflecting on the multidimensionality of how old age and ageing is experienced, perceived, and shaped, this book offers inspiring and innovative perspectives on transcultural concepts and discourses in the field of care and ageing. The authors

aim to shift the discourse of old people as a burdensome matter of our societies to a more positive direction by highlighting their individual roles and responsibilities within family and society.

Caring for Old Age is structured into three main parts: Caring Places and Spaces, Caring Mobilities, and Narratives of Care. The first part, Caring Places and Spaces, offers glimpses into lived experiences in different spaces elderly people occupy in the urban areas of Delhi, Goa, and Kathmandu, particularly the classic retirement homes and other newly emerging spaces and places for the old, such as senior citizen’s day care centers or care homes. Applying the concept of *elderscapes*, adopted from Stephen Katz’s (2009) research on retirement communities in Florida, the authors show how environments in which culture, history, and older people’s own life (hi)stories are interwoven, play an important role for the well-being of senior citizens themselves. Their agency and diverse forms of participation in

everyday urban life clearly takes centre stage. The chapters are not so much about how urban space is created for senior citizens but how they are an active part of the development of “age-friendly cities.”

Part two, Caring Mobilities, follows female migrants by focusing on the intersection of migration, care, and “doing family,” including practices of care for aging parents. Concepts of family and kinship are transforming and (re)negotiated as people find new ways and strategies to make a living while at the same time (needing to) care for their loved ones, be it financially or emotionally. The three chapters of this section fill a significant gap in migration research, where grandparents and their important role as caretakers for grandchildren or the ancestral home are often overlooked. By interrogating how care

and maintenance of intergenerational relationships happen across borders through Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) – even if it is just to comfort the conscience of migrated daughters or sons – the chapters skilfully demonstrate that ICT possibilities not only connect migrants and their parents but also expand to include grandchildren as well. In so doing, these new and digital technologies help to overcome feelings of loneliness and being “left behind” among grandparents.

Part three of this book, *Narratives of Care*, deals with the spatio-temporal and socio-cultural embeddedness of ageing, or how aging is described in different narratives and discourses in a global context. The reader is introduced into discourses about old age and ageing in Europe and North America, e.g. concepts of ageing well that convey the image of senior citizens’ activeness and independency. In contrast, everyday discourses about aging in South Asia are summarized by the phrase, “In old age especially, to be able to sit and be served (...) is a sign of privilege” (p. 329). This section carves out quite clearly that South Asian concepts of successful ageing are reflecting long-standing understandings of family, care, and old age that are deeply rooted in cultural and religion traditions as is shown, for example, in Axel Michaels’ chapter about the holy joint family (pp. 285-304).

In summary, the edited volume *Caring for Old Age* provides an excellent introductory overview of the transcultural entanglements and interconnectedness of different perspectives and experiences of

care and ageing. The authors succeed in overcoming the negative image of ageing societies in which older people present a burden. However, the announced program to approach issues of care and old age from a balanced perspective, including authors from the region, to counter dominant Western discourses, is not adequately achieved as Eurocentric perspectives still overweigh South Asian discourses. In addition, some assumptions are based on relatively sparse qualitative data. Though qualitative data does not claim to be representative, a handful of cases do not seem to be enough to draw overarching conclusions. By failing to contrast statements and experiences of older people with those of younger family members, for example, the book misses an opportunity to expand the holistic picture of ageing in South Asia, including trends induced by the young related to care and life in old age. These minor shortcomings notwithstanding, *Caring for Old Age* is a timely and valuable contribution for scholars and students of South Asian Studies, Social Gerontology, Social Anthropology, and Human Geography.

Sarah Speck is a human geographer currently working in the Institute for Ageing Research at the University of Applied Sciences of Eastern Switzerland. Her research includes ageing and digitalization, newly emerging social institutions for elderly people in the Global South, and daily living with dementia in Switzerland. Sarah Speck holds a PhD in Human Geography from the University of Zurich.

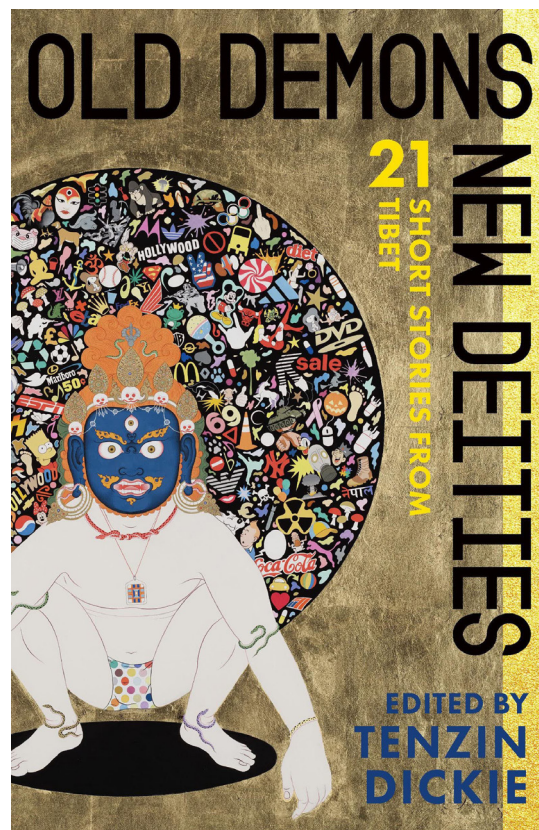
Book Review

Review of *Old Demons, New Deities: Twenty-One Short Stories from Tibet* edited by Tenzin Dickie

New York: OR Books, 2017. 296 pages. ISBN: 9781682191002

Reviewed by Kabir Mansingh Heimsath

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On a recent afternoon in Kathmandu, some friends were discussing the new collection of short stories edited by Tenzin Dickie, *Old Demons, New Deities*. A senior scholar quipped in reference to the cover image, “Maybe they should have called it ‘Old Deities in Underpants’”. The comment was crass but fitting—there is something disturbing about the face of a wrathful protector squatting with an all-too-human torso. Most of the 21 stories that follow also convey a sense of impropriety, as if we are seeing a part of Tibet, its people, and gods that we should not. In her introduction Tenzin Dickie writes, “fiction, of course, begins with desire” (p. 3), yet the desires conveyed here are decidedly *not* about independence, enlightenment, or other sentiments we have come to associate with Tibet.

Prior scholarly work on Tibetan literature has focused on the ‘Tibetan’ aspect being either regionally or linguistically defined (Hartley and Schiaffini-Vedani 2008). Given her background as an exile Tibetan as well as a literary scholar, we can be sure that Tenzin Dickie is more than aware of the political issues at stake with these distinctions. But instead of providing a structural designation of Chinese or exile, Tibetan or English, Dickie dissolves prior discursive boundaries and allows the authors to tell their own stories. In a particularly sophisticated contribution, Tsering Wangmo Dhompas’s “Letter for Love” ingeniously juggles tropes of love, mistaken identity, and infatuation within a girlish mimicry of Cyrano de Bergerac. The trans-national, bi-cultural love affair not only questions norms of family, friendship, and marriage, it also turns language and authorship into contested terrain. Tsering Woesser’s “Nyima Tsering’s Tears” addresses the question of identity most explicitly when a monk from the Jokhang temple in Lhasa accompanies a state-authorized visit to Europe and encounters exiled Tibet supporters for the

first time. The eponymous tears come as the monk confronts layers of misunderstanding between exiles and foreigners, officials and monks, Chinese and Tibetans. Both stories grapple with the questions of identity politics that scholars debate, but are narrated here with compelling prose, personal experience, and metaphor.

“... the high quality of translation done by Tenzin Dickie and others in this volume brings an edgy, youthful voice to stories originally written in three different languages.”

- Kabir Mansingh Heimsath on *Old Demons, New Deities*

Another issue shaping prevalent discourse on contemporary Tibetan literature is the tension between traditional and modern antecedents (Shakya 2000, Jabb 2015). Again, the current volume does not conform to the customary opposition between tradition and modernity. Instead, many of the stories overtly blur boundaries and mix conceptual distinctions into lived events in which the binary makes no sense. Pema Tsewang Shatri’s “The Flight of the Wind Horse” transforms the traditional offering of prayers (*rlung rta*) into helium balloons and a message-in-a-bottle type of story that brings two teenage doppelgängers from across the plateau together in Lhasa. Pema Bum’s “Wink” subverts reputed Tibetan fascination for puns, prophecies, and amulets into a Kafkaesque story of iconoclastic politics and childish obsession with a Mao badge. “The New Road Controversy” by Takbum Gyal deliberately pokes fun at non-violent forms of protest for which Tibetans are celebrated but that were borrowed from Gandhi’s anti-colonial movement. It’s no surprise that these tactics are most-often ineffectual against the mechanized imperatives of Chinese infrastructure development. The majority of stories collected here are blatantly contemporary in their context and concerns. The situations they convey are often unique to a very particular time and place in India,

Nepal, Tibet, or the USA. But the underlying oddness, if not absurdity, present in many of the contributions certainly blow open the classical dichotomy of tradition and modernity.

Jamyang Norbu's "The Silence" typifies a sort of nostalgia that characterized earlier depictions of Tibet. The hero is an old Tibetan man and sole-survivor of a guerrilla raid against the Chinese army who knows he has fought the good fight. He recites *Om Mani Padme Hum* and longs for the white crane from the east to take him away. This rendering may have appealed to a previous generation, but it is no surprise that the hero dies at the end. The naivety of Norbu's approach is at odds with the rest of this collection. The remaining stories are more humorous, nuanced and cynical even as they portray death. In search of childhood friendship at his old school, Buchung Sonam's character in "Under the Shadow" watches the execution of a soul-tree (*bla shing*), is disparaging towards the construction of a stupa that prompted this murder, and begins to have ghostly visions before seemingly throwing himself into a river. Pema Tsenden's "The Dream of Wandering Minstrel" also contains visions, this time of an unreachable lover, as well as death in a river. The paranormal sightings continue: ghosts during a cosmopolitan political workshop; manifestations of Aamir Khan in a Kathmandu movie house; imaginary affairs with a pop icon on the Amdo steppes; mythical or fabricated snow lions in the hills above Dharamsala. We read of a childhood love who grows into both a slut and a pilgrim; a wife who may, or may not, be a prostitute; a prostitute who conveys AIDS just as she falls in love for the first time. The range of characters running through these

stories seem to be aware of their misplaced hopes and confused perceptions. Instead of bemoaning the impossibility of love or the loss of faith, they poke fun at themselves and the shifting, often disturbing, expectations of their social condition.

By dissolving major categories present in Tibetan studies, this volume provides a significant contribution to our understanding of contemporary Tibetans. At a recent book launch in Kathmandu, Tenzin Dickie made the point that Tibetan fiction, "is a deterritorialized literature that's obsessed with territory". Dickie's own presentation at the event as a US Fulbright scholar studying her Tibetan family living in Nepal embodied a hybridity in which conventional notions of identity and territory no longer apply. Speaking English to a primarily Nepali audience about Tibetan literature also crossed linguistic boundaries in a way that is familiar to anyone living in this part of the world. Finally, the high quality of translation done by Tenzin Dickie and others in this volume brings an edgy, youthful voice to stories originally written in three different languages. For this reason alone, we should pay attention to the writing here and open ourselves to the desires, and deaths, this volume depicts.

Kabir Mansingh Heimsath teaches Anthropology and Asian Studies at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon. His research focuses on urban space, visual culture, and development in Tibet and the Himalaya. He has lived and worked for several years in Kathmandu and Lhasa as tour guide, development expert, and director of academic programs.

Book Review

Review of *Historical Sites of Changthang, Leh, Ladakh* by Quentin Devers

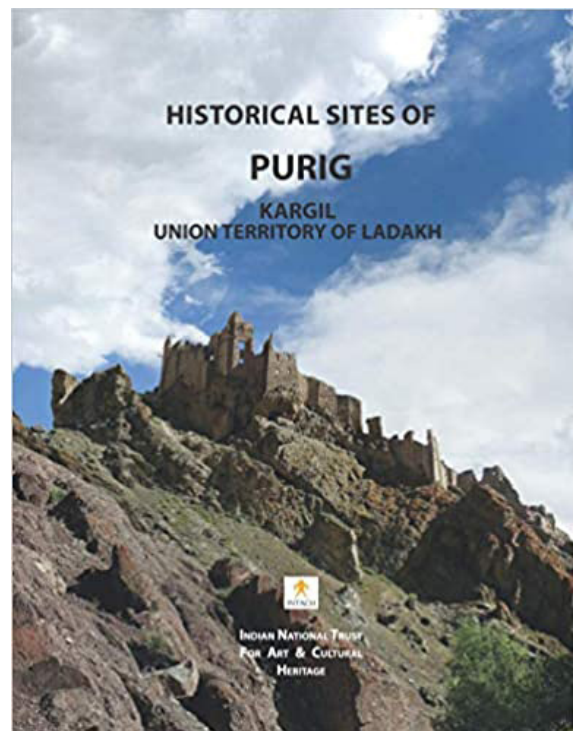
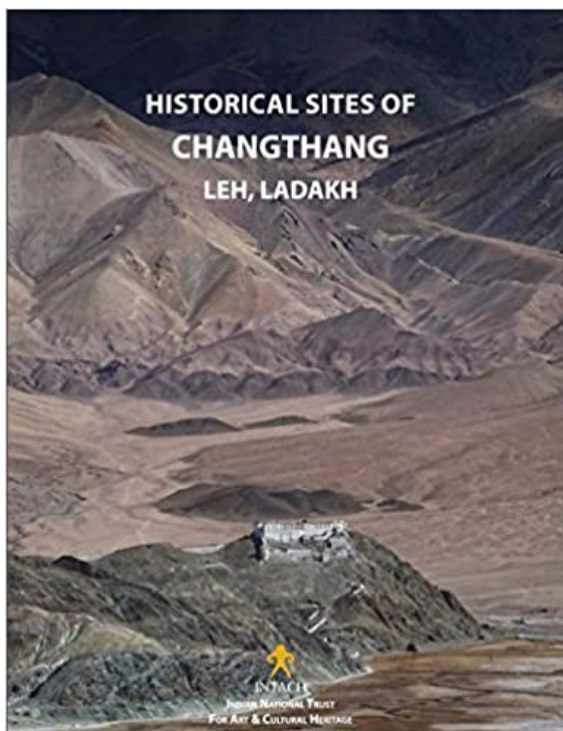
New Delhi: INTACH, 2019. 253 pages. ISBN 9798550322055

Review of *Historical Sites of Purig, Kargil, Union Territory of Ladakh* by Quentin Devers

New Delhi: INTACH, 2020. 196 p. ISBN 9798550807101

Reviewed by Patrick Kaplanian

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We owe Kacho Mumtaz Ali Khan, co-convenor of the Ladakh chapter of the Indian National Trust for Art & Cultural Heritage (INTACH), the initiative of these two exquisite volumes. The idea was to create a comprehensive documentation of historical sites of Ladakh. Two volumes have already been published (Purig and Changthang), and four more are being expected (Zangskar, Nubra, Lower Ladakh, and Upper Ladakh).

“These volumes are the first attempt at a comprehensive inventory and initial assessment of the heritage of the region.”

- Patrick Kaplanian on *Historical Sites of Purig and Historical Sites of Changthang*

Ladakh is not at all a uniform region. The areas documented in Dever’s first two volumes are very different. Purig is the westernmost part of Ladakh, and it is separated from Kashmir by the Great Himalayan Range. Purig is an area of lower altitude than the rest of Ladakh, the average being less than 2,700 meter (or 5,000 feet). It covers 7,000 square kilometers (or about 2,700 square miles). Population density now comprises 18 inhabitants per square kilometer. This area is Muslim dominated, who follow Twelver Shi’ism, the largest branch of Shia Islam, with a few Sunni pockets and several Buddhist villages in Purig’s eastern valleys.

Changthang is the easternmost region of Ladakh. It consists of a high plateau with an average altitude above 4,000 meter (or 12,000 feet). Winters are extremely cold, with temperatures often dropping below 30° Celsius (or 22° Fahrenheit). Changthang represents about 36% of the territory of Ladakh, a figure that goes up to 48% when including the Upper Shyog valley, also studied in this volume. According to the 2011 census, the Changthang population comprised 6% of the population of Ladakh, and the density in the five main sub-regions is 0.7 inhabitants per square kilometer, a

figure that goes down to 0.5 inhabitants when adding the Upper Shyog valley. By comparison, Purig, with about only 10% of Ladakh’s territory, shelters around half the population of Ladakh, for a density of 18 inhabitants per square kilometer. Changtang’s population is Buddhist, with many inhabitants leading a semi-nomadic lifestyle, breeding yaks and the famous pashmina goat.

The Purig volume includes 258 historical sites, out of which only 60 had been published on before. As far as the Changthang volume is concerned, 255 sites are documented, which is a lot for an area so scarcely

populated, and probably a hint at the aridification and desertification process Changthang, on both sides of the border, has gone through over the past centuries and perhaps even millennia. Among the 255 sites of Changtang, about 80 have been previously published on. To sum up, the extensive surveys behind the first two volumes of this series enabled the discovery of nearly 380 previously unknown historical sites. The documentation of this corpus represents about 1,500 kilometers of tracks covered on foot and another 9,000 kilometers driven across the mountains of Ladakh.

The goal of each volume is to list heritage sites that contribute to understanding the history of Ladakh. Every fortification, temple/monastery (intact or in ruins), petroglyph, pictograph, cave complex, meditation place, and abandoned mine, and, in the case of Purig, also every mosque (*masjid*) and tomb of a saint (*khanaka*) over a hundred years old, is mentioned. When it comes to Buddhist carvings and *chorten* (both painted and regular), mostly those from up to the 15th century are included.

Each site is described along with at least one good color picture. The volume on Changthang incorporates additional full-size pictures of the most important sites, based

on feedback received from the first volume for Purig. The age of remains is tentatively assessed, when possible, based on their material reality, not on what oral tradition states. As the author reminds us in the introductions to both volumes, archaeological and historical research in Ladakh is only at its very beginnings, as we lack ample data for almost every period of the history of the region—no extensive radiocarbon dating or excavations have ever been conducted. These volumes are the first attempt at a comprehensive inventory and initial assessment of the heritage of the region.

To evaluate the different heritage sites the author provides various grades, each from A to D. There are different grades from archaeological, architectural, and historical points of view and, in some cases, from a social/cultural perspective. They are followed by a final grading that follows a different scale: I, IIA, IIB, and III. The state of conservation is also mentioned. For the fortifications the author added a ‘defense grade’, from one to four stars, to evaluate the strengths of their defenses factoring in their architecture, use of topography, and

defensive features. The inventories have a section entitled “Further Readings” for some of the sites. They present books and articles that remind us of complementary descriptions already published and of different points of view. All this is completed by a series of good and detailed maps.

It is too early to draw important conclusions about the early history of Ladakh. But we can already notice some important points. For instance, we now know that Kushan or post-Kushan sites have existed in Purig, and protohistorical fortifications, which are outlets of commercial routes, are an integral part of Changthang. Two of those routes in Purig come from Kashmir (Dras and Panikkar) and one in Changthang comes from the Tarim Basin (Tangtse).

Overall, the book series is a very useful work for both scholars and students that sheds light on a hitherto obscure era of Ladakh’s history.

Patrick Kaplanian is an independent researcher working on the ethnology of Ladakh since 1975