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EDITORIAL

With issue number 53, my second three-year stint as editor of the *Bulletin* comes to an end, and it seems appropriate to cast two glances, one backward to the founding of the *Bulletin* and one forward towards its future.

With regard to the *Bulletin's* past, I am reminded once again of its founder, Prof. Richard Burghart, who was my predecessor as Professor of the Ethnology of South Asia at the South Asia Institute. One of the contributors to the current issue, Prof. Ulrike Müller-Böker, recalled in a recent e-mail exchange with me that the idea of such a publication “was put forward at the German-French Conference (D.F.G.- C.N.R.S.) *Anthropology and History of Nepal*, which took place in Arc-et-Senans, in June 1990, with strong support from Martin Gaenszle” (now Professor at the Department of South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, University of Wien) and András Höfer. (András and Martin did much of the work during my first stint as editor.) Professor Müller-Böker writes that there was a strong collaboration in those days amongst Nepal scholars in Europe, and that Burghart “was an innovative newcomer in this community” whose idea was received very positively by participants at the conference. I am happy to have been able to carry on with many of Burghart’s interests: the ethnology of the Himalayas, the Anthropology of Health and Illness (“Medical Anthropology,” which is our focus in Heidelberg), and of course the *Bulletin*.

As is customary, the rotating editorship of the *Bulletin* now moves on to Paris, where plans are afoot to transform it into an online journal. I congratulate my colleagues in Paris for their initiative, and I look forward to reading future issues of the *Bulletin* in its reincarnated form. It has been an honour to serve once again as editor, and I have every confidence that the *Bulletin* will retain and build upon what have always been its strengths: multi-disciplinarity, a broad geographical reach, and the making available of new and exciting work by young and creative scholars as well as older and more established ones.

William Sax, Editor
European Bulletin of Himalayan Studies

Affirmative Action to Target Dalits: Practices of Swiss Development Agencies in Nepal

Annabelle Jaggi and Ulrike Müller-Böker

Abstract

With a focus on Nepal's Dalits, this article examines how development agencies adopt affirmative action measures that produce intended and unintended implications. The article delves into a qualitative case study of a nationwide vocational skills training project called the *Employment Fund Nepal* and two Swiss development agencies that are involved in its planning and implementation. In this project, economically poor members of various groups (including Dalits), who are discriminated based on social categories such as caste or ethnicity, are subsumed under the category 'Disadvantaged Groups' and treated as priority target groups. Academic literature shows that targeting based on social categories can unintentionally foster these categories and risks ignoring intra-group inequalities. Our research indicates that these pitfalls of affirmative action might also emerge in the Employment Fund. Nevertheless, the case study suggests that the breadth of the Disadvantaged Groups category also facilitates inclusivity and emphasises commonalities, and might prevent an enforced division along traditional social boundaries. We assume that the inclusion of Dalits into broad categories such as Disadvantaged Groups reduces their traditional stigmatisation. Still, we argue that certain Dalit-specific livelihood realities should be given extra attention within development projects and that affirmative action measures need to be highly contextualised and flexibly implemented.

Keywords: Affirmative action, development practice, targeting, Dalits, caste, Nepal

Introduction

In September 2015, the Nepali constituent assembly promulgated a new constitution, which aims at ending the prevailing discrimination and

socio-economic inequalities that stratify Nepal's society along factors such as class, caste, ethnicity, gender, region, religion and language (CAS 2015: 2, 6, 26). Affirmative action policies followed from the constitution's goals that placed inclusive development at the top of Nepal's national agenda. Against this political background, national and international development agencies design and implement development interventions. When constructing their target groups, they often combine indicators for economic poverty with social categories such as gender, caste or ethnicity, which serve as indicators of social discrimination (Contzen & Müller-Böker 2014: 1, 7-9, cf. Shneiderman 2013: 46). Nepal's Dalits are almost always addressed as a priority target group (cf. Cameron 2007, CAS 2015: 6, Kisan 2005).

This article aims at creating a deeper understanding of how development agencies adopt affirmative action measures in practice – encompassing Dalits as a target group – and which intended and unintended implications these measures can produce. It draws its empirical insights from a qualitative case study of a nation-wide development project – the Employment Fund Nepal (EF) – and the involvement of two Swiss development actors: the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the non-governmental organisation HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation (here referred to as Helvetas). Even though the presented findings are based on a case study, the social context of the project is comparable with the context of other development interventions in Nepal.

Studies that bring together the research strands addressing the disadvantaged social situation of Nepali Dalits with the ones examining affirmative action measures adopted by development agencies appear to be scarce. The existing literature on affirmative action in Nepal for the most part focuses on governmental policies (e.g. Dong 2016, Druzca 2017b, Kisan 2009, 2012, Pyakurel 2011, Shah & Shneiderman 2013) or concerns affirmative action policies of foreign development agencies, mainly in relation to Nepal's ethnic groups (e.g. Middleton & Shneiderman 2008, Sapkota 2012, Shneiderman 2013), and issues of social inclusion and identity politics (Druzca 2017a).

We first provide a literature-based overview of the social situation of Dalits in Nepal. Subsequently, we offer a glimpse of the scholarly debate

regarding affirmative action policies in Nepal and India. The following sections delve into the case study of the EF. After outlining the EF's targeting approach, we shed light on various aspects of the targeting and participation of Dalits in the EF. The article ends by drawing conclusions and providing recommendations on how the social situation of Dalits can be addressed through affirmative action and how unintended implications of affirmative action can be mitigated in the context of development programs.

Dalits in Nepal

Large parts of the multi-ethnic Nepali society are stratified along caste lines. The largest social group in Nepal that is stratified by a caste hierarchy are the Hindu 'hill castes' (Höfer 1979: 43), which can be split into high and Dalit castes. Brahmins (*Bahun*) are considered as the highest hill caste group, followed in rank by the high-caste *Thakuri* and *Chhetri* (ibid). The Dalit hill castes are positioned in the lowest social stratum and are considered to be ritually impure and untouchable (Bennett et al. 2008: 2, Müller-Böker 1998: 21). Apart from the Dalit hill castes, the intra-ethnic caste system of the *Newars* of the Kathmandu valley (cf. Müller-Böker 1988: 25-26) and the regional caste system in the *Terai* (lowland) comprise their own 'impure' castes (cf. Höfer 1979: 46). Since the 1990s, the term Dalit¹ (literally: "oppressed") has been used most frequently to refer to these different 'impure' and 'untouchable' caste groups (Adhikari & Gellner 2016: 2018).

In 2002, the National Dalit Commission identified 21 Dalit castes (Kisan 2009: 47). Some Newar Dalit castes had demanded to be excluded from this list, emphasising their Newar identity. Dalits make up around 13 per cent of the Nepali population (CBS 2014: 27, 29). However, Dalit activists and Dalit non-governmental organisations (NGOs) consider this figure to be over 20 per cent (Cameron 2007: 25, DWO: 2010). Drucza (2017b: 176) explains that many Dalits 'do not identify as Dalit during census data collection because they have spent considerable time investing in moving locations and changing their surname to escape their "low caste/untouchable" status.'

1 The Indian reformer B.R. Ambedkar introduced the term Dalit to Nepal's Dalit leaders in the 1950s (Cameron 2007: 16).

Since Nepal's unification in 1769, state power has remained in the hands of the elites from the high hill castes (Pfaff-Czarnecka 1989: xxi). In 1854, the *Rana* rulers passed the *Muluki Ain*, Nepal's first legal code (Höfer 1979). The creators of this code conceptualised a nationwide caste hierarchy and assigned specific positions to each caste as well as to the different ethnic groups (*janajati*) of Nepal. Castes and ethnic groups were classified and ranked based on an assigned degree of ritual 'purity'. The code regulated many aspects of people's life and interactions. In 1963, the caste-based code was abolished and replaced with a new code, which made no references to caste and considered all citizens of Nepal as equal (Adhikari & Gellner 2016: 2016). But 'unlike in India, no measures of positive discrimination were undertaken on behalf of those at the bottom of the hierarchy' (Adhikari & Gellner 2016: 2016). Only in Nepal's constitution of 1990 was caste discrimination declared a punishable offence (Kisan 2005: 65).

Even though caste discrimination and untouchability practices are legally banned and punishable, it is frequently criticised that the law is not enforced and that Dalits still suffer from their low social status (Cameron 2007: 24, Kisan 2005: 3, 61, 65, 96). In some localities, Dalits are denied access to temples, water taps, ponds, canals, funeral ghats or hotels (ibid: 67). Discrimination is not only practiced against Dalits but also between different Dalit groups, which are positioned differently within the caste hierarchies (IIDS 2008: III, Pariyar & Lovett 2016: 136, Pfaff-Czarnecka 1989: xxiii). Many Dalits lack access to land, health care, education, employment and decision-making processes (Basnet 2012: 85, Khadka & Pabst 2012: 102, World Bank & DFID 2006). The group displays the highest poverty incidence of all of Nepal's caste and ethnic groups: 43.6 per cent of the hill Dalits and 38.2 per cent of the Terai Dalits fell under the national poverty line² in 2011 (ADB 2013: 1, 8).

Traditionally, caste systems are occupationally segregated (Bishwakarma 2004: 2). Dalits are compelled to perform occupations in which they engage in activities that are regarded as ritually impure such as the processing of leather, the forging of metals, the playing of certain

2 Poverty line: 19,261 Nepali Rupees (NPR) per capita per year (≈ 180 US Dollars). 25.2 per cent of the Nepali population fall under the poverty line (ADB 2013: 1, referring to the National Living Standards Survey 2011).

musical instruments, scavenging or the removal of animal carcasses (Bishwakarma 2004: 3, Cameron 1998: 7, Thieme 2006: 83). They are prevented from taking up certain occupations, such as working in food-related businesses, due to their alleged untouchability (Kisan 2005: 165). Some scholars therefore use the term occupational castes to refer to Dalit castes (Cameron 1998: 126).

In rural areas of Nepal, the labour division between the castes is institutionalised in a traditional patron-client system (Cameron 2007: 15, Pfaff-Czarnecka 1989: 181, Soliva et al. 2003: 172-173). This system binds poor and landless Dalit families to landowning high-caste families, whom Dalits provide with labour and artisan products in exchange for harvest shares, food or cash payments (Cameron 1998: 75, 2007: 13, 15). The caste system can thus be closely intertwined with economic interdependencies (cf. Müller-Böker 1988: 25) such as different allocations of resources and land (Cameron 1998: 50, Gupta 2005: 409).

The continuing oppression of Nepali Dalits and other discriminated groups has fuelled demands for governmental measures of affirmative action and has encouraged national and international development actors to advocate the social advancement of these groups. New categories and indicators have been developed in order to identify the stratum of society which is disadvantaged. Coherently, the Dalits are designated as socially disadvantaged or excluded and identified as a main target group of affirmative actions.

Affirmative Action in India and Nepal

Affirmative action policies aim to ‘correct historical disadvantages and unfair discrimination by enabling access to full opportunity and benefits to groups that have been excluded’ (World Bank & DFID 2006: 91). These policies create access for disadvantaged groups to education, formal employment or political representation (Higham & Shah 2013: 81) and aim to ‘create the conditions for disadvantaged groups to compete equally’ (Shah & Shneiderman 2013: 4).³ In this section, we offer a brief

3 Affirmative action is often distilled to the idea of ‘positive discrimination’ (Shah & Shneiderman 2013: 4). Positive discrimination can be broadly defined as the prioritised selection of individuals of targeted groups over people who would qualify only on merit (Higham & Shah 2013: 81). ‘Positive action’ is another form

overview on affirmative action in Nepal and the discussion of its social implications. We integrate some findings from scholarly literature on India because India has a much longer experience of affirmative action than Nepal and can serve as a valuable reference point for Nepal's more recent affirmative action efforts (cf. Shah & Shneiderman 2013: 5, 10).

In Nepal, processes of negotiation about how to address persisting socio-economic inequalities and issues of discrimination have become prominent in the country's political discourse since the People's Movement of 1990, especially in the post-conflict and state-restructuring period following the decade-long Maoist insurgency (Bhattachan 2009, Dong 2016, Hachhethu 2009, Manandhar 2011, Pfaff-Czarnecka et al. 2009, Shah & Shneiderman 2013). Affirmative action to benefit the economically and socially marginalised, for example in the form of quotas or so-called 'reservations' of civil service jobs, was first included by the Government of Nepal in the Interim Constitution of 2007 (Kisan 2012: 115). Nepal's new constitution of 2015 continues these efforts (cf. CAS 2015: 6).

While the debate about affirmative action is relatively recent in Nepal's political discourse, India's affirmative action policies date back to the colonial period (cf. Jaffrelot 2006: 173). Today, India's nationwide state-led affirmative action system includes reservations of government seats, jobs in the public sector and seats in educational institutions for Dalits, ethnic minorities, women and other disadvantaged groups based on their proportion in the population (Chandhoke 2006: 2289, Higham & Shah 2013: 81, Shah & Shneiderman 2013: 4-5). The entitlements of reservations are assigned to people based on their group affiliation (Michelutti & Heath 2013: 57).

In Nepal, affirmative action with the aim of inclusive development has not only become a core agenda of Nepali state actors, but also that of national and international NGOs and foreign donor agencies (cf. Contzen & Müller-Böker 2014: 8, Dong 2016: 120, Shneiderman 2013: 43). Bhattachan (2009: 20) states that the international development community had long been reluctant to engage in the discourse on social inclusion and exclusion due to the 'associated political overtones' shaped

of affirmative action, through which designated groups receive special encouragement without disadvantaging others (Higham & Shah 2013: 81).

by the Maoists' political program. However, in the 2000s, several donors started funding social inclusion projects. This reorientation toward social inclusion has also found expression in policies regarding workforce diversity adopted by many development agencies, through which the recruitment of women and other disadvantaged groups within these agencies is promoted by means of affirmative action (Khadka & Sunam 2018: 2).

To construct target groups for their development interventions, NGOs, donor agencies and the Government of Nepal alike started to intertwine economic indicators for poverty with social categories (cf. CAS 2015: 6, Contzen & Müller-Böker 2014: 7, 9). Different classification schemes emerged. Further, detailed donor-financed studies were conducted that aimed to operationalise and document inclusion and exclusion within the Nepali society.⁴

Unintended Implications of Affirmative Action

In both India and Nepal, the construction of target groups based on social, identity-based categories as indicators of social discrimination (e.g. gender, caste or ethnicity) is contested because of the unintended social implications this targeting strategy can have. We focus on: i) the fostering of inter-group differences, and ii) the fostering and/or ignoring of intra-group inequalities.

Fostering of Inter-Group Differences

Frequently discussed is that affirmative action can foster inter-group differences and cause a polarisation between targeted and non-targeted

4 For example, as part of a Janajati empowerment project funded by the British Department for International Development in 2004, the non-governmental umbrella organisation Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities classified Nepal's Janajati according to their level of economic marginalisation (Middleton & Shneiderman 2008: 42). The Royal Norwegian Embassy invested considerable resources in the creation of a Social Inclusion Atlas and Ethnographic Profile, which aims at understanding the social diversity of Nepal and the development status of different caste and ethnic groups (Tuladhar 2014). Bennett and Parajuli (2013) developed the Nepal Multidimensional Exclusion Index aiming to make smaller social groups visible and to create a baseline for tracking results on social inclusion.

groups. With respect to India's reservations for Dalit castes, Michelutti and Heath (2013: 57-59, 61-63, 66) state that political representation as well as educational and economic opportunities have increased for some Dalits. However, they emphasise that affirmative action has also encouraged the emergence of caste politics, new forms of economic and social competition and an enforced polarisation between Dalits and higher castes. Still (2013: 68) argues that discrimination against Dalits by higher castes is no longer articulated on the basis of ritual impurity, but rather expressed through the language of reservations. Members of higher castes perceive the reservation system to be symbolic of a pro-Dalit state and thereby feel threatened and treated unfairly (*ibid*: 72-73). Dalits in turn consider it to be vital to overcome social inequality and as a sign of the state acting in their favour. Still (*ibid*) suggests that the symbolic value attributed to the reservation system, rather than the changes it brings about, is the most influential driver of the increasing polarisation between Dalits and higher castes.

Scholars concerned with affirmative action in Nepal also discuss the risk of fostering inter-group differences if target groups are defined using social categories. Toffin (2014: 234-235) elaborates that the adoption of constructed ethnic and caste boundaries into the political sphere and the government agenda revitalises people's perception of these boundaries as 'quasi-biological groupings' and entails the risk of promoting identity politics. By operationalising social discrimination according to people's birth (e.g. their caste or ethnic affiliation), development actors including foreign donors and NGOs may unintentionally reinforce caste and ethnic consciousness (Contzen & Müller-Böker 2014: 7-9). The resulting increased sense of belonging to a specific caste and ethnic group causes processes of 'othering' (Critchfield 2010, Freeman 2010) between groups and can perpetuate the caste system, i.e. the social categories that are actually intended to be dissolved (Contzen & Müller-Böker 2014: 7-10). Foreign donor agencies and NGOs are confronted with the paradox that their intention to promote the empowerment and positive discrimination of targeted groups can lead to the political radicalisation of these groups (Shneiderman 2013: 50). They run the risk of facing accusations of being political and of fuelling conflicts between different social groups, which

is for example visible in the debate over Nepal's ethnic federalism (cf. Sapkota 2012: 74).

Being labelled as a target group is a kind of stigmatisation; however, it leads to being entitled to the benefits of affirmative action. Therefore, some groups are encouraged to strategically highlight their belonging to a target group. Middleton and Shneiderman (2008: 41-42) observed social groups in India feigning their cultural traits or transforming their cultural practices as part of their competing identity politics to make themselves fall into the target group categories. In Nepal, it was reported that people with mixed marriage backgrounds emphasised one or the other aspect of their caste identity depending on the situation (Contzen & Müller-Böker 2014: 7). For example, if the allocation of a reserved seat is concerned, a person may highlight his or her affiliation to a discriminated group. In other contexts, the person may stress his or her high-caste identity (Contzen & Müller-Böker 2014: 7).

Fostering and Ignoring of Intra-Group Inequalities

Another thread of debate about affirmative action centres on the question of whether only the better-off among the target groups benefit from the affirmative action measures. It is suggested that heterogeneities within targeted groups (e.g. economic inequalities within Dalits) are ignored and thereby aggravated (Contzen & Müller-Böker 2014: 9, Shah & Shneiderman 2013: 6, Still 2013: 72, 78).

Teltumbde (2009: 17-18) argues that only an influential minority of India's Dalits has been able to benefit from reservations, while 'the issues of the vast majority of dalits – landless and marginal farmers in the villages and workers in the informal and unorganised sector in the urban areas – have been completely marginalised.' Still (2013: 72) also mentions that very poor Dalits do not have access to reserved seats because they have to ensure their everyday livelihoods, or they cannot afford the investment in gaining the necessary qualifications to get a reserved government job. However, some scholars note that the presence of more affluent Dalit families can be seen as evidence that these Dalits could escape their subservient position, and for the success of the affirmative action measures provided (Deshpande 2008: 161, Moodie 2013: 30).

In Nepal, Dong (2016: 135) identified the risk that providing benefits only to elite applicants of disadvantaged groups can create a dominant class within the target groups with respect to Nepal's reservation policy for civil service jobs. Similarly, Subedi (2016: 12-13) states that Nepal's reservation policies have been mostly to the benefit of socially and economically advantaged Dalits and ethnic groups, and argues that affirmative action based on caste and ethnicity cannot capture intra-group inequalities and socio-economic marginality.

In contrast, Drucza (2017b: 173, 177-178) observed that there are difficulties in filling the civil service seats reserved for Dalits because relatively well-off Dalits, who would fulfil the required educational qualifications, are denied the possibility of applying for the seats as the eligibility criteria are limited to economically poor applicants (2017b: 178). His interview respondents regarded this limitation as a deliberate attempt by the political elites to hinder the recruitment of Dalits for the reserved seats.

Apart from potentially ignoring heterogeneities within target groups, there is a risk that inequalities within non-targeted groups are ignored as well: For example, people in need of special provisions who do not fall into the social categories used to construct target groups (e.g. poor Brahmins) are excluded from affirmative action measures (cf. Contzen & Müller-Böker 2014: 9, Dong 2016: 137).

This review of selected literature shows that India's reservations and Nepal's affirmative action policy are highly debated within both societies as well as among scholars.

Case Study: The Employment Fund

How does affirmative action work in development practice, and what intended and unintended implications occur? Our case study is concerned with a nationwide, large-scale development project called *Employment Fund Nepal* (EF). Two Swiss development actors are involved: the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) as a main donor⁵, and Helvetas, which manages the EF through the Employment Fund Secretariat (EFS). The EF finances basic three-month vocational

5 The EF also receives funds from the British Department for International Development and the World Bank.

skills training for un- or underemployed, economically poor and socially discriminated youth who have a low level of education.⁶ The EF collaborates with private sector Training and Employment Service Providers (T&Es) who select the participating youth and implement the vocational skills trainings. Between 2008 and 2014 (the project phase taken into consideration for this case study), the EF provided training for more than 90,000 youth across Nepal and successfully linked more than 70 per cent of them to employment (EFS 2015a: 3-5).

The primary part of the data material analysed for the case study was collected in 2015 during a qualitative impact study of the EF (see Hollenbach et al. 2015). For the study at hand, we could fall back on the datasets collected by the impact study team. These include twelve semi-structured expert interviews with EF staff, donor representatives and officials of the governmental Technical and Vocational Education and Training sector; 87 semi-structured interviews with EF graduates and their family members, youth who applied but were not selected for the project, T&Es, employers of EF graduates and district-level government officials related to the working area of the EF; and finally, eight focus group interviews with current EF participants. Whereas most of the expert interviews were held in Kathmandu, the interviews with EF participants, T&Es and the other mentioned actors took place in the districts of Kanchanpur, Jumla, Kaski, Parsa and Terhathum, covering the different ecological and development regions of Nepal. In addition to these empirical data, the case study draws upon the review of 27 policy papers and other official documents authored by SDC, Helvetas and the EFS (e.g. country strategies, annual reports, guidelines, learning series). The analysis of the data material was conducted as part of Jaggi's (2016) Master's thesis with a focus on using interpretive-categorising procedures.

The Disadvantaged Groups Approach of the Employment Fund

SDC and Helvetas follow the same rationales when conceptualising their target groups. Both organisations emphasise addressing poverty and

6 In one EF program component, which aims at supporting business-minded youth in establishing their own micro-enterprises (EFS 2015a: 5-6), trainees do not have to meet the criterion of 'economically poor' (EFS 2016).

social discrimination, which shape the unequal distribution of political, social and economic opportunities in Nepal (Helvetas 2011: 11, SDC 2013: 1-2, Druzca 2017a). Since 2000, the social inclusion of members of Disadvantaged Groups (DAGs) has become a core focus of SDC's development interventions (SDC 2010: 6, 32). SDC (2013: 19) and Helvetas (2015: 7) aims to reach a target group composition of 60 per cent DAGs and 50 per cent women. Dalits are part of DAGs (cf. Helvetas 2011: 7, SDC 2013: 6). There is no proportion reserved for them within the DAG category.

The definition of DAGs, which is provided by SDC and adopted by Helvetas (cf. Helvetas 2011: 2), is based on a combination of indicators for economic poverty (although the two organisations use different thresholds) with social categories as indicators of discrimination:

Disadvantaged Groups (DAGs) are groups of economically poor people [...] that also suffer from social discrimination based on gender, caste/ethnicity and regional identity (regional identity denotes people's origin, i.e. "mountain people", "hill people", or "Terai/ Madhesh people") (SDC 2010: 6).

The EF collaborates with two governmental programs and uses their well-being rankings to identify the economically poor (EFS 2014a: 17, 2014b: 1-2). Moreover, the category of DAG is complemented with so-called 'groups with special needs', which include for example people with disabilities, widows, internally displaced people, ex-combatants or formerly bonded labourers (EFS 2014b: 4, 2015g: 13).

A results- and category-based payment system aims to encourage the T&Es to enrol youth belonging to DAGs. T&Es are paid only after delivering the agreed services. To be qualified to receive payment, they have to prove that their trainees have successfully completed the training and are 'gainfully employed'⁷. Through weighted category-based incentives, T&Es are paid at a higher rate for training and facilitating employment for women and members of DAGs. Accordingly, training women from DAGs, e.g. Dalit or Janajati women, yields the highest

7 'Gainful employment' is defined as having an income of at least 4,600 NPR per month for a minimum of six months after training completion (EFS 2015g: 7).

possible category-based payment, whereas training economically poor men who do not belong to a discriminated group yields the lowest payment (EFS 2015g: 5-7, 13).

The responsibility of identifying possible participants for the EF program lies with the T&Es (cf. EFS 2012b: 18). In collaboration with and closely monitored by regional EF staff, they fine-tune the targeting modalities predetermined by Helvetas. According to interviewed EF staff, the T&Es have a lot of freedom to adapt to local contexts.

The reviewed official project documents indicate that the participation of DAGs in the EF trainings is high. Their proportion of the total number of trainees ranges from a maximum of 88 per cent (in 2012) to a minimum 70 per cent (in 2014) (EFS 2012a, 2013, 2014a, 2015a).⁸ The proportion of Dalits of the total number of participants was at a maximum of 14 per cent (from 2009 to 2011) but declined to 11 per cent in 2013 (EFS 2010: i, Hollenbach et al. 2015: 27-28). Considering that the proportion of Dalits in Nepal's total population is at 13 per cent or even more and that 41 per cent of Dalits belong to Nepal's poor (25.2 per cent of the total population) (DWO 2010, Folmar 2007: 46), it is apparent that Dalits are underrepresented in the EF target groups of the economically poor and socially discriminated.

The Participation of Dalits in the Employment Fund

In the following sections, we shed light on various aspects of the targeting and participation of Dalits in the EF. First, we outline how the social situation of Dalits and their targeting through the Disadvantaged Groups approach is presented and elaborated on by SDC, Helvetas and the EFS in the reviewed official documents. Second, we examine the challenges and barriers of integrating Dalits into the EF based on the interview material. A third section investigates how the EF deals with the traditional caste-based labour division and caste discrimination against Dalits in the labour market. Finally, we discuss what effects the participation in an EF skills training has had on the livelihoods of Dalits.

8 The proportion of participating women over the reporting years was over 50 per cent (Hollenbach et al. 2015: 27).

Consideration of Dalits in Official Documents

Of the analysed official documents, Helvetas (n.d.) published one outstanding learning series paper called ‘Empowering Dalits’ in the early 2000s. It provides insight into the organisation’s understanding of the social situation of Dalits by illustrating the persisting relevance of caste discrimination in Dalits’ lives (Helvetas n.d.: 3, 8-9). It further mentions the need to address the heterogeneity of the Dalit community and possible social problems (e.g. intra-caste discrimination) existing within Dalit caste groups. Lastly, it advocates strengthening a unified Dalit identity (Helvetas n.d.: 3, 8, 10, 16). It states that Dalit issues should thereby not be addressed in opposition to the interests of higher castes but rather opts for a sensitisation of non-Dalits for Dalit issues (Helvetas n.d.: 14).

The bulk of the official documents authored by SDC, Helvetas and the EFS that we reviewed, however, address neither possible adverse and unintended implications of the DAG-targeting approach nor reflect upon the specific social situation of Dalits (apart from mentioning that Dalits often face social discrimination and poverty thereby falling into the category of the targeted DAGs). If targeting strategies, challenges and outcomes are elaborated on in these documents, Dalit issues are subsumed under DAGs as a whole or under the targeting of women in particular.⁹

Challenges of Targeting Dalits

In the following section, we shift our focus towards the insights gained from our interviews. We examine the challenges and barriers that complicate the participation of Dalits in the EF.

The interviews with EF staff, donor representatives and T&Es indicate that most of the challenges to reach out to the EF’s target groups do not exclusively affect Dalits, but also affect other economically poor and/or discriminated youth. Major challenges are raising awareness for the importance of skills training among the target groups, linking EF graduates to financial institutions, reaching out to people in remote

⁹ In several four-page ‘Learning series’ papers and an implementation guide, the EFS shares its experiences with the enrolment and employability of women (EFS 2015b, 2015c, 2015d, 2015e, 2015f, 2015h, 2015i, 2015j).

areas and enrolling and creating linkages to employment for women. The interviewed youth, irrespective of their caste or ethnic affiliation, mentioned the same barriers to participate in the skills trainings. A barrier that especially impedes women's participation in the EF is that they often bear the sole responsibility for household chores and childcare in their families. These responsibilities are difficult to combine with training hours and employment and bind many women to their homes. Some T&Es therefore suggested increasing the age range as a selection criteria (from 40 to 45 years) to make the program accessible to women who already have grown children.

A further major targeting challenge that was mentioned by EF staff members is facilitating the participation of people who are very poor in their specific regional context and within their specific caste or ethnic group. Correspondingly, some interviewed youth were of the impression that only rich people and people with connections get selected to participate in EF trainings. A woman, whose application for the EF was rejected, stated, *'I don't have anyone who can refer me for the training. Only the rich and the ones who have people who can refer them are enrolled in the training'* (Parsa, 20 February 2015).

In this respect, an EF staff member expressed the concern that in view of the great heterogeneity of the Nepali population, the overall target group definition of DAGs oversimplifies and blurs socio-economic inequalities within seemingly homogenous categories such as Dalit or Janajati (Kathmandu, 4 March 2015). She added that even the T&Es' and regional EF staff's flexibility to adapt to local contexts might not be able to do justice to the heterogeneity of local communities. The interviewee further mentioned that the incentive for the T&Es to enrol the very poor is understandably small due to the risk of sustaining financial loss if the trainees drop out of training and cannot be successfully linked to employment. Moreover, the problem of low education levels makes it difficult for many very poor to follow the trainings. Their dependency on daily wage labour to sustain their families' livelihoods cannot easily be resolved, especially for young men who are the principle income earners for their families. About his struggle to combine training hours and daily wage labour, a Dalit man aiming at taking an advanced training on mobile phone repairing explained, *'Even though the training was free of cost,*

due to the lack of a person working at home I couldn't take the training. I had to work to earn for my family at that time' (Parsa, 20 February 2015). To address this difficulty, some interviewed T&Es suggested that EF participants who depend on a daily income should be entitled to an allowance to enable them to take training.

While the described challenges and barriers apply to youth from all of the EF's target groups, the interviewed T&Es addressed challenges (and opportunities) concerning the targeting of Dalits in particular. Some T&Es explicitly claimed to prioritise Dalits as trainees: *'Dalits and women are more trustworthy'* (Jumla, 5 April 2015). In contrast, other T&Es stated that they do not favour DAGs despite the higher incentive payments linked to their (successful) participation. One of them said that Dalits tend to drop out of the trainings as there exist many skills training programs that target disadvantaged communities: *'Taking the disadvantaged group is attached with the incentives, but we don't prioritise it. There is a risk in taking Dalits in the training as they have many opportunities in the market, they can leave the training any time'* (Terhathum, 26 March 2015). We question whether Dalits drop out because of their 'many opportunities in the market' or whether their dependency on a daily income, lack of basic education and caste discrimination play a more significant role in hampering their successful participation in the EF (cf. EFS 2015g: 14, Hollenbach et al. 2015: 48-49).

With respect to caste discrimination, another T&E brought forward a further difficulty of targeting Dalits: *'Dalits face a challenge in going to work for others, people first take their own people in their business. There is a challenge to [train Dalits as] cooks, as people don't eat food prepared by Dalits'* (Jumla, 5 April 2015). This statement indicates that persisting untouchability practices diminish Dalits' opportunities in the labour market. Concerning the training itself, however, Dalits did not report about discrimination within the gender- and caste-mixed training groups. *'Trainers treated everyone equally. There was no such discrimination,'* a Dalit woman reported (Kanchanpur, 13 March 2015). Similar statements were made by a range of other EF participants.

The interviews with T&Es reveal contrasting views on the targeting of DAGs and Dalits in particular. The category-based incentives seem to encourage some of them to target DAGs, whereas the results-based

payments prevent some of them from taking high financial risks and make them prefer trainees who have a higher employability (Hollenbach et al. 2015: 48, Seithel 2016: 72).

The Employability of Dalits

Dalits' employability can be restricted due to prevailing caste discrimination in the labour market. We therefore look at how the EF deals with the traditional labour division between the castes and the related ascription of low-status occupations to the Dalit caste groups.

One EF implementation guide states that 'Dalits and occupational castes may be supported with upgrading their skills in their relative trades (e.g. blacksmiths, shoe-making, etc.)' (EFS 2014b: 13). While the reviewed documents do not provide information on whether Dalits are actually often trained in their traditional caste-based occupations, some interviewees indicated that caste affiliation indeed influences which trades are offered to and chosen by Dalit participants. Interviews with EF participants show that there is some tendency among Dalits to choose trainings in occupations according to their caste affiliation. A Dalit woman, who opened her own tailoring shop after completing EF training, explained: *'This trade [tailoring] was our culture by birth, so I took this training. [...] I want to continue this business until my old age. In the future, I also want to teach tailoring to my children'* (Terhathum, 25 March 2015). On the one hand, it could be an advantage for Dalits to be supported in holding a 'monopoly' over their traditional caste-based occupations. On the other hand, we argue that training Dalits in caste-based occupations reinforces the caste-based labour division and related social and wage discrimination.

The EF addresses traditional labour division only in relation to women and gender roles. Special focus is placed on the enrolment of women in so-called 'non-traditional trades', i.e. occupations that are stereotypically perceived to be male-dominated (EFS 2015e: 1). The enrolment of women in non-traditional trades is encouraged because these occupations generally yield higher incomes and challenge traditional gender roles (EFS 2015b: 9, 2015e: 1). While the labour division between the genders is taken into account, the traditional ascription of occupations to different caste groups is not considered in

the program. The following idea deserves further consideration: if women are encouraged to take training in non-traditional trades, why not encourage Dalits (and other EF participants) to take training that is 'non-traditional' for their caste group to challenge caste roles? We argue that training EF participants in occupations that are non-traditional to their caste affiliation could loosen the connection of caste and occupation and might help diminish discrimination based on rules of ritual purity and impurity. The statement of a woman not categorised as DAG, who formerly made her livelihood as porter and agricultural worker, supports this line of thought:

'My family members weren't supportive of taking tailoring training since stitching works are considered to be done by the lower caste groups. [...]. In the past, only the lower caste people used to do this trade, but now my family is also happy seeing me do this work' (Terhathum, 24 March 2015).

We suggest that actors like T&Es and EF staff involved in vocational skills trainings carefully compare the effects of training Dalits in caste-based occupations with training EF participants in occupations non-traditional to their caste affiliation. Possible negative outcomes might thereby be detected, along with some potential to challenge discriminatory social norms. Such attempts to train EF participants in non-traditional occupations would have to take account of regional and intra-group differences and most importantly, of the EF participants' individual livelihood realities and everyday discriminations.

Effects of Taking Training on Dalits

As the most salient effect of taking EF training, a majority of the interviewed EF participants¹⁰ reported that their economic situation improved. A young family father and trained carpenter stated: '*Before, I couldn't feed my family but now, I am working in a monthly paid job, so it has been easy for me and I am also saving money from my income*' (Jumla, 6 April 2015). As a consequence of an increased income, many of the interviewed

10 It has to be noted that most of the interviewed Dalit and non-Dalit participants reported similar changes in their lives after participating in the EF.

women stated that they can now cover a part of their families' expenses. A widowed single mother of three children, who was an agricultural worker before taking training and now owns a tailoring shop, proudly reported: *'When I became a single woman, I used to think, "How will I raise my children?" But after I received this training, I feel I can do anything'* (Jumla, 6 April 2015).

As an effect on a personal level, the interviewees frequently mentioned that they have gained self-confidence and have developed a self-assured demeanour. The statement of a tailor employing two women in her shop illustrates this: *'I feel that I have a weakness, I can't speak up. I am shy. I feel scared all the time. But after getting into the training I have developed self-confidence. I can talk.'* She also highlighted that *'[t]here has been change in the family as well. Before training only I used to do the household chores. But now my husband and I do them together'* (Kanchanpur, 13 March 2015).

The EF participants' improved financial and personal situation seems to have had a positive effect on their status in their families and communities. An unmarried Dalit woman, who was trained and is employed as an aluminium fabricator, emphasised that she gained self-confidence and mental and physical energy. Now her parents and neighbours 'put trust in her': *'Before, people didn't recognise me, now they do. They tell me that, being a daughter, I've been working as hard as a son. This gives me strength and willpower'* (Kaski, 28 February 2015).

Another Dalit woman, who took training as a mobile phone repairer and now works in a mobile phone repair shop, narrated that the skills she acquired are in high demand in her community: *There has been change in the behaviour of the people as well. They look at me in a good manner. I have also earned respect in society and at home. I have become an example to society'* (Kanchanpur, 14 March 2015).

Similar to the young women quoted above, a man highlighted his newly acquired skills as carpenter, saying, 'Now, I have an identity – I am called "carpenter". [...] In the village, the behaviour of people has changed. I feel that after having money, my prestige has increased' (Kanchanpur, 14 March 2015).

It could be argued that the improved reputation of EF participants – of Dalits in particular – might contribute to reducing social discrimination in their communities. Statements by interviewed EF staff

and donor representatives support this assumption. Most of them emphasised that the EF helps reduce social tensions and discrimination between the genders and different caste and ethnic groups. An donor representative whom we interviewed said,

The Dalit is outcast in our context, but now people are living together, taking training in one room, eating together. [...]. Previously, people did not want so-called outcast people to enter their house. But if you're a plumber, an electrician, you have to enter the house. Nobody asks about your caste. That's the major social change we can see (Kathmandu, 4 February 2015).

However, some interviewees conceded that the impact of a project like the EF on society as a whole is limited. Nonetheless, these interviewees did suggest that the EF might induce small social changes or at least contribute to their multiplication in society.

Neither the development practitioners we interviewed, nor the official documents we reviewed discussed the possibility that the DAG approach might foster inter-group differences along the social categories used to define the target groups. Nevertheless, a few of the youth we interviewed expressed their discontent with the selective targeting of DAGs. A man not categorised as DAG said, *'I think the training should be provided to the poor instead of categorising according to caste'* (Jumla, 6 April 2015); and a non-DAG woman, whose application for the EF trainings was rejected, said, *'I feel the disadvantaged groups are getting more training compared to others as everything is focused on them. I feel they have more opportunities. Since there is a quota system, we can't get enrolled'* (Kaski, 28 February 2015). Similarly, a non-selected man assumed that *'The reason that I was not selected may have been that I don't belong to a Dalit caste'* (Jumla, 6 April 2015). Especially the latter two statements imply that giving priority to DAGs entails the risk of provoking resentment among people who do not fulfil the criteria of DAG but feel in need of skills training. This risk seems to exist despite the fact that the EF targets economically poor people not belonging to a socially discriminated group (e.g. economically poor Brahmins) in addition to DAGs.

Our interviews indicate that EF staff, T&Es and the targeted youth themselves reflect on the EF's DAG approach. Some interviewees implied that possible risks of affirmative action, such as ignoring of inequalities within socially constructed target groups and the fostering of differences between the groups who receive benefits of affirmative action and the ones who do not, might also arise from the DAG approach of the EF.

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

Through this case study of the EF, we aimed to understand how affirmative action practices are applied in a large-scale development project in Nepal and, with a focus on Dalits, which intended and unintended implications these practices can have. Existing scientific literature and the results of our case study give hints about possible pitfalls and points to be considered by development actors when adopting affirmative action and using social targeting categories to define their target groups.

The interviews showed that the EF's DAG approach, in which target groups are defined based on a combination of economic indicators for poverty and social indicators for discrimination (e.g. gender, caste and ethnicity), entails some pitfalls. It has become apparent that development actors' official reporting provides – in contrast to the interview data – little discussion of the pitfalls of affirmative action or of how the social situation of Dalits is taken into consideration within the DAG approach.

Nonetheless, our interviews show that EF participants – irrespective of whether they belong to a Dalit or higher caste or an ethnic group – are confronted with similar barriers when seeking participation in the EF trainings and experience similar economic and social empowerment in their families and communities after completing training.

We therefore argue that despite the risk that the overall target group definition of DAGs ignores certain heterogeneities and the special social situation of Dalits, the subsuming of various social groups within the broad term DAG has largely positive effects. The broadness of the term DAG may contribute to the fading-out of the traditional group-boundaries and might emphasise commonalities instead. We believe that by providing training in mixed group settings (i.e. DAGs and other

economically poor trainees training together) the EF helps create a sense of belonging and of sharing similar constraints and opportunities among its trainees. Since difference within the group do not seem to be emphasised during the skills trainings, and because participants with different social backgrounds take training together, this might contribute to diminishing the relevance of caste affiliation and counteract discriminatory social practices. With respect to Dalits, we assume that the inclusion of Dalits into the broad category of DAGs has the positive effect of reducing their traditional stigmatisation.

Nevertheless, our case study has shown that it might still be necessary to give certain Dalit-specific challenges extra attention when integrating them into the DAG category. We illustrated this with the topic of caste-based labour division, which influences the employability of Dalits and is critically linked to caste relations and issues of discrimination.

Recommendations

Below, we provide a set of recommendations to support development actors in critically reflecting their affirmative action measures and the priority targeting of Dalits. Above all, we believe that to avoid and detect unintended implications of affirmative action, a deepened understanding of the social and regional contexts in which they are implemented is required.

We suggest that development actors take into consideration the available academic analyses, which provide insight into the risks of affirmative action and show how socio-economic inequalities and discrimination against Dalits and other disadvantaged groups are produced. The insights gained from the scholarly literature can be translated into awareness programs to sensitise local project implementers to the social conditions of disadvantaged groups and to train them in detecting possible unintended implications of applied targeting modalities.

Further, we recommend that the experiences of local project implementers be systematically considered and evaluated on an overall program and reporting level. This means that qualitative data (e.g. data on the tacit knowledge and experience of the T&Es) should be

systematically collected and analysed. We consider the T&Es to be the main actors in the EF that can facilitate the participation of Dalits and might contribute to social change. They have to develop an understanding of the trainees' social contexts in order to promote social equality, even if this means confronting social norms. Their role is especially interesting because they implement affirmative action in field of the private sector.

In conclusion, we consider the adoption of affirmative action measures in the provision of labour market-oriented and free vocational skills training as a valuable tool to ensure outreach to and participation of members of disadvantaged groups. Affirmative action can be a good way to ensure that certain social groups – especially, in our case, Dalits – have access to positions that they would not have otherwise. We suggest adopting broad social target group categories in combination with economic indicators, as is the practice within the EF. We argue that categories that encompass different social groups facilitate an inclusive targeting approach. However, affirmative action measures need to be highly contextualised: they require a careful assessment of local social contexts and a deep understanding of social exclusion. This means that in our case, certain livelihood realities of Dalits need to be given special consideration. Affirmative action measures must be inclusive in the sense that they do not neglect the 'others', i.e. they should consider the views and needs of groups that do not fall into the target group categories in order to prevent fuelling of resentment against the positively discriminated target groups. In addition, affirmative action measures need to be flexibly implemented. They must be constantly reviewed and adapted. Finally, affirmative action programs must make use of the symbolic power they hold, by demonstrating that Dalits and other traditionally discriminated and excluded groups are appreciated as vital parts of a society.

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Sending the Sons Away: Western Himalayan Songs of Women Alone at Home

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The subsistence agricultural economy of the Western Himalayas necessitates the migration of men in search of jobs to far off places. This theme is well-documented by social scientists and fiction writers. However, little is understood or written about what happens in these men's homes once they leave their families. How does the family fend for itself? What are the economic and social pressures on the women of the family and how do they negotiate the vicissitudes that come their way in the absence of men? What emotional traumas do the wives face in the absence of their husbands, who are often the only ones who provide them with emotional support? Some of these themes are articulated in the songs sung by waiting women of Kangra in Himachal Pradesh that have been transmitted over generations. These songs help us to understand the much-neglected women's perspective, and provide a vital resource in the reconstruction of their worlds, as they battle the absence of men from their homes and lives.

A miniature painting on paper from Kangra (dated c. 1800), vividly captures the emotions of a couple when the husband returns from war (Fig. 1). The bow, reminiscent of a pre-modern mode of warfare, is thrown down carelessly as the couple embrace each other passionately, while the maids discretely keep their distance. The length of the couple's separation is cleverly indicated by the painter. In the top right frame, a *sais* or stable boy ties the horse of the warrior, whilst the warrior's personal attendant, who carries the shield and *huqqah*, is stopped in the doorway by the lady of the house, whom he salutes, ostensibly to afford the long-departed couple a moment of privacy. In the left lower frame, closely following the personal attendant, a servant carries the warrior's bedding and luggage, suggesting a considerable period of time away from home.



Fig. 1: The return of warrior, ca. 1800. Kangra. The British Museum, No. 1948, 1009,0.122. (Credit: Trustees of the British Museum).

This painting poignantly documents a popular emotion of a region that was low in agrarian resources, barely having a subsistence economy, where it was normal for men to be absent from their homes for long periods, to earn money. Men-away-from-home is a literary trope made famous by Mulk Raj Anand's 1936 novel *Coolie*, which recounts the travails of Munoo (literally, a young boy), who flees the poverty of his village in the Kangra hills as he moves from place to place in search of food and shelter. If not as heart-searing as Anand's novel, such movements away from home to work have also been the subject of recent quantitative research (Kishtwaria: n.d., Thakur and Kishtwaria 2003, Santhapparaj 1998), which concludes that the migration of married men from the hills of Kangra is due more to push factors (poverty, illiteracy, small size of land holding, little job opportunities) than to pull factors (enhancing economic status and prestige). Visits to wives and families are infrequent. It has been argued that as a consequence of long

absences of men from their families the major decision-making power shifts to women (Naveed-i-Rahat 1990, Gulati 1987, Jetley 1987, Kumar 2014 - for nuclear families, Adhikari and Hobley 2015). The women left behind face psychological problems like loneliness, depression and insecurity; problems such as raising children alone while managing household expenses with meagre means, despite being supplemented by their husbands' better earnings; social problems associated with being single women, such as the non-cooperation of other family members, little communication with their husbands, and a lack of support with immediate, day-to-day crises, or with the tedium of everyday living.¹

The emotional trauma of separation and physical and social difficulties resulting from this emigration, a subject movingly depicted by the painter, is a major theme in the singing traditions of western Himalayan women (see Kwon 2015 for cross-cultural similarities). Separation and meeting are two themes common to South-Asia, reverberating in the Vaishnava devotional theme (e.g. Surdas); in popular Sufi compositions (e.g. Amir Khusrau, Farid, Bulleh Shah); which, since the mid nineteenth century, finds amplification in classical Urdu poetry (e.g. Mirza Ghalib). It is therefore not surprising that this perennial theme is coloured by the Pahari painters (Goswamy and Fischer 1992), and the oral traditions as well in the hills of the western Himalaya (Narayan 1997, 2016). The above painting can be interpreted in this context as well.

While women take comfort from such devotional songs, the uncertainties arising from long absences of husbands, the management

1 The man who emigrates for work is a global phenomenon, but here also the literature about the women who are left behind is not extensive, although it is growing. One recent example is the analysis of the popular transnational Korean-Chinese song, 'Everyone is Gone', which expresses the anguish of waiting associated with work-related emigration. Kwon (2015: 477-500) has analysed the uncertainty, vulnerability and anxiety of partners 'who might have an affair or try to obtain a divorce, which would cause the influx of remittances to come to a sudden halt' (ibid: 479). In such scenarios, the temporality of everyday life actually makes waiting a necessary condition in life. Such waiting stories are numerous, and full of frustrations, betrayals, and breakups, and in them money and love can become intermixed and interchangeable. Kwon argues that waiting is often unappreciated and largely unrewarded even though the act of a spouse's waiting facilitates the flow of money (ibid: 495).

of the joint family, social probity, and emotional traumas, are realistic themes discernable in their singing. In this paper I will analyse some of these songs from Kangra, to conjure up the world from a women's perspective including the type of challenges women face when male family members are away from home for the better part of their lives.

The songs, the genre, and the socio-economic context

The theme of war taking sons away from mothers and husbands away from wives is often found in songs sung by the women of the western Himalayas. In the song translated below,² a wife wonders how a mother could send her son away to the war. Even as her mother-in-law reminds her how difficult it is for mothers to send their sons away, and that men would move out of the house to work and contribute economically, both women are worried for the safety of the one who binds them together, who makes them part of a family. While the worst is imagined, the song navigates us through the process by which daughters-in-law were taught to hold warriors in the highest esteem, even if it means losing them one day. The song is sung as truism, repeating an age-old scenario where the wife becomes a mother herself and is besotted with the same anxiety and questions as those she herself was once asked by her mother-in-law. The song, usually sung in the households of warrior-Rajput castes, compliments the emotion of meeting again after separation, meeting after returning alive from war, which was so beautifully narrated above by the Kangra painter.

sunmerisasu ve/dhanterakalaja/ dhanterajigara/ je putrabhejedurpardesa ve ...

Hey, my mother-in-law,
I salute your heart.
I admire your courage,
that you could send your son away,
to the land that is far and far away.

Oh, my daughter-in-law,
my heart burns!

2 All translations are by the author, except where mentioned otherwise.

My courage be cursed!
Only the greed, the need of money
could send my son to the land
that is far and far away.

O my daughter-in-law,
climb up the roof-top.
Climb up and see all around.
See the battleground,
where a war is being fought,
in the land that is far and far away.

The spring bird sits on the rooftop.
She cries on and on.
She cries on and on,
so much that we might be washed away in her tears.
The old mother sits and cries.
She cries,
the war is being fought
in the land that is far and far away.
O my son's wife,
if you ever wish to care,
remember not to care for traders
who visit the marketplace
and keep their accounts straight.
The old mother sits and cries.
She cries, who sent her son,
to the land that is far and far away.

O my daughter-in-law,
if you ever wish to care,
remember, not to care for faqirs,³
who wear torn patched clothes,
and display these tattered rags.
The old mother sits and cries.

3 A wandering, poor carefree spiritual seeker, a Muslim holy man.

She cries, who sent her son
to the land that is far and far away.

O my son's wife,
if you ever wish to care,
remember to care for soldiers,
who wear crisp uniforms, are buckled tight,
willing to lay down their lives.
They fight battles in the land,
in the land that is far and far away.

The spring bird sits, crying.
The old mother sits and cries.
She cries, who sent her son
to the land that is far and far away.

O my daughter-in-law,
if you care to fall in love,
remember to fall in love
only with the soldiers,
with a soldier, a soldier,
who won and came back,
from the land that is far and far away,
the land that is far and far away.

The uncertainty of war and notions of the warrior-hero are two themes that are lauded and decried by mothers and wives alike in folksongs from Kangra. While the motif of the warrior (upheld as the highest norm in these songs) and his waiting wife is a subtle strategy employed for Rajput gender construction – masculinity in war and death; femininity in sacrificing conjugality and love – the motif of war becomes a binding agent between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, who are otherwise paired in pan-Indian folksongs in a binary, both vying for the affection and control of son or husband. This song, however, is a part of the larger genre of songs of separation, whereby the husband sets out to work in faraway lands. Such songs are sung by women across caste boundaries,

even though they mostly deal with and draw from the experiences of the members of the high castes, particularly the Rajput clans.

The songs of women are collectively sung on auspicious occasions. For convenience, we may think of sacred time and secular time to designate auspicious occasions in a month in the lives of a western Himalayan village community. The auspicious hour (*subhe de ghadi*) may be, as distinct from the sacred (*tith*, literally solar day), a secular occasion, such as the celebration of the birthday of a son, husband or any of the male members of the household; or the getting of a first job by a young male member of the house; a job promotion, etc. Importantly, the occasion need not be of sacred or religious nature, but auspiciousness is a mark of what is considered to be significant, special, and different from the humdrum daily grind. The singing sessions (*gitan de sade* or the invitation to sing) and songs (*git*) acquire special meaning in terms of binding an exclusive sisterhood, to which men are usually not allowed. Singing sessions provide time to interact, exchange notes, gossip, and learn. They are the place where transmission lineages of songs are standardised, learnt and passed on. Membership of these singing sessions is guarded and exclusive. Not everyone is allowed to participate. In one village, there might be three or four such exclusive singing communities, based on the layout of the village and the caste clusters in it. For example, in village X on the slope of a hill, where hamlets are spread out in different castes but each caste hamlet has a small number of households, there are five discernible communities. The first community is one of Gaddi shepherds and Kohli peasants, the second one of warrior-Rajputs and their Brahman priest, the third one consists of exclusive Rajput households which are distinct from the other Rajputs, and the fourth and fifth ones are made up by two different Brahman *gotra*-clan settlements. These singing sisterhoods transcend caste lines, and are also determined by political relationships in the village. For instance, in another agrarian village, settled on a plateau and having distinct caste hamlets of considerable population, the number of singing sisterhoods is smaller, but the number of members in each sisterhood is larger. However, one may observe that such caste memberships give an insight into the way relationships are constituted. For instance, in one such singing sisterhood, the members are exclusively from the dominant

Rajput clan, the Jariyal. They do not invite members of other Rajput clans (Mandiyals), who sing with the small community of Tugnait-Brahmans instead. In this sisterhood the Girth-peasants are also included. There is a third sisterhood in which the Julahas (weavers), Kumhars (potters), the Brahmans of another clan (Pancakarna) and a third Rajput clan (Guleria) in the village, who are both socially and politically marginalised, gather for singing. The point I am emphasising is the heterogeneous nature of such organisations, where the members obey general caste rules, but form a kind of female singing sisterhood that shares or is bound by other, common concerns.

Auspicious occasions also have functional aspects, as they are opportunities for interaction and collaboration away from the daily drudgery and grind. There might be a period of time in a particular singing sisterhood where there is no occasion to sing for a while. In such times a particular household takes the lead to give out a call for singing. There is a feeling of a particular space and time reserved for women, which is demanded and respected just like a gathering for auspicious singing. For sacred occasions of religious significance, for example rites-of-passage, the organisation of these communities is different, since the larger caste communities or the high caste communities coalesce, or the entire village comes together, depending on the nature of the occasion. Such large gatherings are more conventional, caste rules are strictly adhered to, and singing is more formal and suited to the occasion. This also means that the auspicious rituals follow a certain temporal logic. They begin with devotional elements, followed by secular themes dominated by genres such as songs of separation. It is through these songs that the singing group acquires the characteristics of a kind of sorority or sisterhood, where individual pain is understood, empathised with, and shared by means of singing.

Performers may be divided into lead singers, associates, and workers. In more orthodox communities, elderly women are usually the lead singers. For instance, Kanta – a sixty year old house-maker with married sons, whom I interviewed in 2010 – told me that until recently, her mother-in-law dissuaded her from being a direct participant: ‘If the singing session was in our house, my mother-in-law and *jethani* (wife of husband’s elder brother) would give the orders and gossip while my

derani (wife of younger brother) and I would serve water, or tea. We were excluded.' This was particularly painful for her as she was interested in songs and singing and wanted to learn new ones. Moreover, she said that 'My mother (*amma*) was neither a good singer nor had much interest in singing. She just sat in such sessions. I had no one to look up to in my birth home. Here [in husband's village] there is a more vibrant and varied repertoire, and I wanted to learn, but was not allowed to be there. So I would stand at a respectable distance where I could not be seen, and listen intently. Also, I made my services to the singers sincere, and this paid off when, on occasion, I would get a chance to visit other households. That is where I learnt. I always had informed suggestions - "Come, elder sister (*bhenji*), sing that song you sang the other day - you sing it so melodiously!" - and flattered the vanity of the singer. That's how I learnt.' The occasions when she could make it to such singing sessions were rare. Only when her *sas* and *jethani* were indisposed or away from home, would she be allowed to participate. She looked forward to it, even if it meant extra work at home. It was only much later that she was accepted into the group, 'almost twelve years after my marriage', she quips. She was married when she was only sixteen.

But this is not always the rule. In another sisterhood that I was allowed to interact with, the young entrants were encouraged to participate and sang with more passion and energy than the elderly, if somewhat more influenced by the Bollywood music. Kanta, the sexagenarian singer whom I interviewed in 2010, informed that changes such as the influence of Indian film music have only recently been taking place (see also Sharma 2015a). Some of these young singers, however, acquire a reputation and respect in a short time, because of their tone (*sangha*), rhythm (*bhakh/tarz*) or the new repertoires (*bare chhail git*).

Exactly what kinds of songs are appreciated, marvelled at, and learned in order to complete the transmission of the singing genre to the younger generation? In other words, how is a cultural tradition or cultural knowledge handed over from generation to generation? At every auspicious occasion, women would first sing a few devotional songs, often Vaishnava, centring on Krishna, Draupadi, or Sita. Occasionally Rama would come in somehow, even though Lakshman, his younger and devoted brother is the main figure. These devotionals

would have differing senses: sometimes they would explore and look for a sense of security afforded in the understanding of Krishna, at other times they would seek solace in his help to Draumpada (Draupadi), or inspiration from the plight of Siya (Sita) (Narayan 2016). But the main focus would always emerge later on in the singing session. By consent, the women would wind up the formal session and start gossiping and exchanging household notes. In the mean time somebody would be persuaded to sing more informal songs, and thus a personalised singing session would start, during which the women would sing, amongst others, songs of separation (Raheja and Gold 1994). These songs are called *pakharu* in Kangra. The singing session would end with a devotional song. This format is rather structured and would be followed even if the songs were being sung in an informal gathering, i.e. when there is no particular occasion in the singing calendar.

One may think of *pakharu* as a genre of everyday songs as opposed to seasonal songs or ritualistic songs (Flueckiger 1996). For instance, *basoa* is sung in *Vaisakh*, *barsati* during monsoon, *kale-mahine de git* or songs of the monsoon, *dholarus* are sung by professional bards in the spring, just like *jogi-magh* towards the end of winters; *suhag* or marriage songs, *bidai* or songs sung at the departure of women from their birth homes after marriage, and *badhoha* or congratulatory songs are more event-oriented. Moreover, these genres are more exclusive. *Dholaru* and *jogi-magh* are not to be sung by anyone except members of designated professional communities. *Basoa* are songs for married women to be sung in the beginning of summer only, usually by the male members. *Barsatis* are sung on paddy fields only during the monsoon by peasant women. Monsoon songs are songs of separation or *viraha*, a pan-Indian theme, sung by women who move to their place of birth during these months of agrarian non-productivity; ritualistic songs are sung at particular events only. But *pakharu* are evergreen, sung in homes by women in communities as also alone, all by themselves. Unlike other genres, there are no prohibitions on singing them (Singh 1962, Randhawa 1963, Vyathit 201343-90).

Etymologically, the word *pakh-ru* means ‘that which changes sides’, thus the songs mapping the vicissitudes of women’s lives are *pakharu*—sometimes here, sometimes there; the dark and light. This is an omnibus

category, where all kind of emotions fit in, songs of mirth and joy as well as mournful and haunting tones. They are popular because they relate to everyday life, irrespective of their sentiment. One may see women singing and weeping, or singing and smiling, depending on the sentiment of the song. This is how these songs bind women in a sisterhood empathising shared emotions, where men as a rule are excluded, unable even to hear them (cf. the songs of daily grind in Jassal 2012: 71-115).

There is some scholarly dispute about the meaning of this genre. Vyathit (1973: 129) calls them fillers, i.e. songs that fill in a temporal gap before the women choose the next devotional they want to sing. Vyathit calls them accusatory songs, and associates this genre of singing with the daily morning practice, *pakhari*, of opening the inner sanctum of household to the divine by worshipping thresholds (*dehra*) after purifying and decorating them. Thresholds are the resting place, segregating the outer public space of nature and the inner private space of domestication. They are purified by smearing cow dung and water and decorated by floral motifs (*aipan*), or plastering of white paint with small motifs (cf. Hart 1995: 127-50, for an equivalent Kumauni *aipan*). Finally, they are worshipped by offering water, leaves and flower petals, rice grains and incense. This morning ritual is called *pakhari*, which is conceived in its movement from the outer to the inner premises called *pakhari-handani*. It is the changing of the date (or of time, more precisely), *pakh*, which brings about this morning ritual – the date changes from sunrise to sunrise. The *pakharu* singing genre is similar; it is about the changing time in the lives of women as they are domesticated within household walls and segregated from the gaze of the outside world, confronted with issues of the presence and absence of men from their married lives.

Kirin Narayan relates caste distinctions to genres of secular singing, unlike the composition of different caste members in a singing community that I recorded. Significantly, she argues that *pakharu* singing ‘index[es] social difference’ (1997: 26). These songs are peculiar to upper caste women who are ‘traditionally restricted through practices of gender segregation and veiling’ (ibid). These women were forbidden to participate in agricultural activities, and thus they had ‘leisure to

gather together and sing' (ibid). This is in contrast to the women of lower castes, who sang while they participated in agricultural practices, a genre called *barsati*, or songs of the monsoon, sung while working on paddy fields. These are workers songs, and the themes are the same, except that they have a more tilting end tones, 'a prolonged final note: 'oooooooo' (ibid: 27). These songs, singing of similar concerns, are also participatory and could be heard in earlier times. The last I heard such singing was in the 1990s, but the songs have now been discontinued as agricultural practices have become mechanised or declined, with many fields lying fallow. In earlier times, the fields resonated with these various songs, as if being sung in waves, each merging into the other. They made their own kind of sisterhood, undefined, but there in sentiment.

The *pakharus* are of various kinds, but all associated with the life of married women and the daily grind, leading to different kinds of injustices and demands within their homes and the larger joint-family patriarchal system. We shall however restrict our discussion to songs of separation. Unlike the songs of forced separation sung during the monsoon months of the overcast sky (*kale-mahine*), when a young bride stayed in her birth home away from her husband, these songs are about real-life situations where a husband had to leave his home for his workplace, which was usually far away. These songs are about how women managed their households, how they lived in the absence of their husbands, what their expectations of their husbands were and what their husbands expected in return, and how they managed their relationships. In other words, they conjure the world from a woman's perspective: what labour migration means to them as individuals, as wives and lovers, and as family members. They pose significant challenges to our understanding of family and society, and construct an alternative world view.

Using songs as texts to construct alternative history is contested by folklorists in particular. They argue that the meanings attributed to songs are changing and contextual in the lives of performers and should be analysed by inviting the performers to comment or explicate their own texts (Narayan 1995: 23-24). This is contrary to the position that I take in this paper, which is that these songs are standard texts, contemporised by simple word substitutions or by 'filling in contextually

relevant details' in performative settings (Finnegan 1977). I see these songs as a reliable guide to construct local history, through which the 'shared meaning' and 'tacit knowledge' is communicated (for a similar approach see Sax 1990: 504, 505-06).⁴ The numbers of variants therefore only emphasise and sharpen the nuances within the lines of the songs, they do not really change the overall meaning. The performance has a meaning within the larger structure of singing. Even if the performer has a particular reason to sing a particular song and has personal meanings attached to it, it only accentuates the significance of the song which is sung because it invokes or becomes a medium to express a particular sentiment or situation. Yet the performer is central both in terms of adducing meaning, bringing meaning to the song through the context of her life history which might influence the choice of singing, and for the further transmission of the song. However, the nature of the song and the questions posed in it continue to make it a general or standard text which may be used for the construction of an alternative history from the perspective of women (Sharma 2015b). Let me illustrate this by the inquisitive questions and situational queries made by a woman whose husband was living far away from home, in Kabul (Afghanistan). Folksongs about Kabul are many, it has been a place etched in popular imagination for varied reasons ever since it came within the administrative jurisdiction of British Indian Empire, even though the region, particularly Balkh, Bukhara and Kandahar, finds idiomatic mention in Indian memory since the times of the Mughals.⁵ As early as the 1880s, Temple (1882: 151-225) collected one such song about the Afghan wars and Kabul. The song is structured as a dialogue wherein the information about this new place is sought by, and provided to, the wife

4 Sax (1991, 2002) also focuses on women's songs of separation, albeit not from their husbands but rather of women from their birth villages.

5 In the modern Indian imagination, a person from Kabul is remembered as a hawker of raisins and nuts from Afghanistan, immortalised by a short story by Rabindranath Tagore titled *Kabuliwala*, which translated into a popular 1957 film in Bengali and 1961 Hindi movie. In common parlance, the earlier saying is 'Jo Sukh Chhaju de chaubare/O na Balkh, Na Bukhare', that is, nothing pleasant like home than far off places like Balkh or Bukhara.

living somewhere in Punjab.⁶ This is similar to the questions posed in the opening lines of the song translated below, though it has a different plot and serves a different purpose as the main body of the song progresses.

sunadola ji/, Kabul, Kabul, Kabul akhde/ Kabul des kadehahai...

Listen, dear husband.
Kabul, Kabul, you say Kabul:
How is the country of Kabul?

Listen, my fair-one:
Kabul, Kabul, they say that Kabul,
is also our country, far and far away.

Listen, dear husband:
You do not come home.
You write no letters,
nor care for accounts.
How can I while away this separation for years?

Listen, my fair-one:
I shall come home,
write letters, and settle accounts.
Be exultant and expectant,
even in separation.

Listen, my dear husband:
The roof is getting old.
It also leaks; and the cane
of the cot is old and worn-out.

6 'My pretty dear come into the house;
Laughing she is, oh, bursting with laughter.
'I have heard about the Kabul war, my friend,
And oh I have remained ill at ease.
Kabul we have conquered and taken into our possession,
But have not conquered the road to Hirat...'
(Temple 1882: 235, song 64)

Listen, my fair-one:
When I shall come home,
I will get new tiles for the roof
and new cane for the cot as well.

Listen, dear husband:
The sister of yours,
my sister-in-law,
forces me to cook bread (*phulke*)
on a Pipal leaf.
She gives me moist grains to grind.
It's tough to make flour.
It is hard to bear, dear husband,
this everyday misery.

Listen, my fair-one:
When I shall come home,
I will get my sister, your sister-in-law, married.
Then you shall live as you please,
without this everyday misery.

Listen, dear husband:
The mother-in-law,
who indeed is your mother,
forces me to cook bread
on a Pipal leaf.
She gives me grains dipped in water to grind.
It's tough to make flour.
It is hard to bear, my dear husband,
this everyday misery.

O listen, fair-one:
She who is your mother-in-law,
who indeed is my mother,
who forces you to cook bread
on a Pipal leaf,
who gives you wet-grains

to grind and make flour:

This, my dear, is a misery
that is not for a day.

This, my dear, is a misery
that you have to bear for life.

This song provides interesting insights into labour migration, social structure, process, and personal history. The personal misery is in fact a collective misery: the leaking roof, the broken cot are merely indicators of poverty, of paucity of money in the rural society. Yet the operative part is the subjugation and exploitation within the family. All relations are senior relations and need to be obeyed. Tests are devised during the oppressive everyday work. Grains are to be ground to make flour in order to prepare daily bread (Sharma 1980). However, moist grains are supplied to make it difficult. Similarly, the leaf of the Pipal tree is used for making bread. While these are either imagined or real strategies employed to make life difficult for the woman left behind, she can only write (mostly women had letters written or read by confidants, usually a sympathetic male relative!) to her husband. The husband promises to look and find ways out of all situations except when it comes to his mother. He expresses his helplessness against her authority. In a certain sense, the woman is left to defend and make the best of what she has by her own ingenuity rather than the moral support of her husband, who has not only deserted her but even refuses to intercede on her behalf with his mother. It is also indicative of how authority functions in the family, and how domestic politics are projected as a women's war to win the affection of the bread winner (Gold 1997).

The song, recorded in 1995, was sung by Godan, known only as Babainiji (the wife of Babu, a colonial government clerk in Kabul in the 1920-40s), from a village near Bodha, Kangra. This recording was made in one of the women's singing sessions in the village where all assembled requested her to sing this song. Later she was asked to talk about her own experience, as apparently she had visited Kabul once and was not shy of narrating her ordeal. She had accompanied her husband for four months around 1940 – after pestering her husband to no end, while also creating constant consternation (*kallah*) in the joint household for years

- but could not cope with the lifestyle and high inflation, as she put it (huge expenditure, *badabhdrikharca*), and decided that she was happy looking after her children (five daughters and two sons) in her village. She died in 1996, at the age of about 90. While she sang this song humorously, following her own experience, she agreed that the significance was deeper and that she related to it before she set out, as she too had similar questions to her husband in her mind before setting out for Kabul. She used to wonder how her husband, a Brahman, lived without family when he had to cook his own food, as he could not eat out for fear of ritual pollution. She wondered if he had a co-wife there since he stayed away so long (and there were instances of mistresses), and she often quarrelled with her larger joint family asking why she had to work when her husband sent money that sustained the household. She had a difficult mother-in-law, whom she only addressed as 'j' (the honoured one). She could relate to the situation described in the song, where the husband is *mau-da-bhagat* (totally devoted to his mother), and unable to hear any complaints about her, even when he knew they were genuine. She felt that her husband's siblings were undermining her position in the family and unprotected with her husband so far away. Fed up with the constant bickering, her mother-in-law actually suggested that 'she go and stay in Kabul with her husband'. But her experiences in Kabul were not happy, from the journey in the train to the unruly bazaars and the 'filthy' living of the Pathans. She always feared losing her righteousness (*dharma brisht karanwali gal*) and decided that she was happiest in her own village. She decided to live alone, raised her children by herself, and insinuated that even after retirement (*pinson aouna*) her husband knew little of how families were run. He could only earn, she sneered.

But all stories are not like that of Godan. Many are drearier from a woman's perspective. These are the tales of insecurities, expectations, drudgery and the fatigue of the daily grind, mistreatment and neglect (Sharma 1978 and 1980, Jassal 2012). Often they are compounded by fears, imagined and real, of the husband having a concubine or a co-wife that keeps him away from his family for an extended period; of the husband siding with his mother at his wife's expense and mortification; of latent physical desires taking undesirable turns. Such imaginings sometimes have catastrophic results, like suicides and murders. There is

no annulment of marriage: If one is unhappy, one simply has to bear it. The husbands escaped their dissatisfaction by moving out; while wives' only option was to bear it silently and conform, or to die or be forced to die.⁷

In the hills, a young wife's only emotional and protective support is her husband, as her ties have been severed with her birth world, kin and

7 In Kangra, Chamba, Mandi and Bilaspur districts of the Himachal hills this was mostly true for the women belonging to higher castes. Those belonging to lower castes could return to their places of birth, though it was frowned upon, and could contribute in the fields where extra hands were welcome. However, there was a strong stigma of women from upper castes returning to their birth homes and such families were looked down upon and may be scaled down in the local caste hierarchy (Parry 1979: 88, 225). Hence there are stories of women bearing the torture and making do with their in-laws, discouraged and stigmatised if they were to return to their place of birth. There are songs where they were murdered, the reasons being suspicions, misconduct, and high-handedness. These songs, though not part of this paper, are also sung occasionally during singing sessions. Here is one translated by Kirin Narayan (1997: 40-41) where a wife is forced by her suspicious husband ,who returned after a long absence, to sip poison and die.

'Without happiness with my in-laws,
without happiness with my parents,
my destiny splintered.
Foreigner husband.
Filling a bowl, the Beautiful One
sipped poison.
She's off beyond the limits,
foreigner husband.'

This is not the only story. There are at least a dozen such songs that I have recorded from Kangra (Sharma 2012: 291-94). Such women's songs are different from the bardic tradition (*dholaru*) that valorises women buried alive and subsequently worshipped as fertility deities (Sharma 2015b).

The situation of high-caste married women never moving back to their birth homes is different from the situation in the shepherding community, as the Gaddis of Chamba, or the Khas-Rajputs of the Shimla and Kullu hills in Himachal, or those from the Garhwal and Kumaun hills of Utrakhand. In these regions, neither married women leaving their husbands and going back to their birth homes were stigmatized as in the Kangra hills, nor were their birth families. For an analysis, see Sax (1991).

friends. Shortly after marriage her husband leaves her alone with his family, who are effectively strangers to her. Therefore she shares her fears with her husband, asking how she could live without him. Such questions explore the meaning of relationships, conjugality and family. One may observe how women parody the patriarchal voice, sarcastically using the dialogic form to drive home how patriarchal structures function (Gold 1997). Such a voice is used to advocate peace in relationship through deference to patriarchal norms of hypergamy, virilocality, joint-family, kinship ties and clan rules (Parry 1979:146-48, 175-77, 213-15). In a way, the songs can be cathartic for women through the questions they pose. At the same time, the questions can be construed as dissenting voices, but the protest always seems to deflate, even in the body of the songs. It always falls to the women to maintain and recognise the sanctity and sensitivity of relationships and traditions as dictated by patriarchal perspectives. Although women's fears are not always directly portrayed, a deft imagery is used; the questions posed to husbands are more direct. For instance, in the song translated below, the imagery of flowers is used. *Chamba* (Magnolia) is a sweet scented flower that represents the husband's bed in his wife's memory, while the *Marua* is a wild flower associated with the concubine/desert. The wife wishes him well by offering him a rose to place atop his turban. This is her world and space. She calmly accepts his co-wife and wishes for his triumph, only asking for him to come back, seeking a space that is due the legally wedded wife, as in the song *chamba, chambarandiyā/vomarua, maruarandiyā/ manjhmanjhrandiyā/ boasalgulabaie...*

Chamba, we plant the sweet scented *chamba*,
Marua, we also sow the wild [tree] *marua*.
 In the middle we sow
 the real flower, the Rose.

Spray the fragrant *Chamba* on your bed.
 The dry *arua* is for your mistress.
 Put atop your turban the majestic one,
 which is the true Rose.

Why did you decide to go away,
 leaving me all alone?
 When you leave me so alone
 how shall I live this separation?
 How will I manage all alone,
 with a baby yet to be born?

Think of your mother-in-law
 as your mother.
 Think of your father-in-law
 as your father.
 Think of my brother
 as the one born of your mother's womb.

My mother-in-law refuses
 to be my mother.
 My father-in-law refuses
 to be my father,
 My brother-in-law, too, refuses to be
 like the one born of my mother.

Put your back to the wall.
 Put your heart in the spinning wheel.
 Make things happen, try to live happily,
 for the baby is still in your belly.
 I cannot put my back to the wall.
 My heart is not in the spinning wheel.
 I shall live in misery:
 my baby is still in my belly.

The in-laws gave me the wall.
 From my birth home came the spinning wheel.
 Both make me so miserable,
 and my baby is yet to be born.
 Just make me one promise:
 That your feet shall turn homewards
 Soon enough...soon enough...soon enough!

Chamba, we plant the sweet scented *Chamba*.
Marua, we also sow the wild *Marua*.
 In the middle we sow
 that which is the real flower, the Rose.

Not only are there fears expressed in these songs, but the meaning of family is also contextualised and ridiculed, and even the basis of work-related migration is challenged. While it has been noticed that the Rajput landowning classes served the local Raja's army as warriors and the British later recruited them in large numbers, Brahmans also provided scribal services to the landowners, Rajas, and other landed elites. They, too, were later employed in the British administration, in various capacities. The need to earn a livelihood away from the native place was necessitated by meagre landholdings and the large size of joint families. Such employment provided much-needed income, and it also enhanced social prestige at the village level. Owing to such prestige, those with steady employment attracted better matrimonial alliances, with better-off and locally influential families. Thus there were both pull and push factors, which impacted various castes differently, until recent times (roughly after the 1950s, though in the Panjab plains the tradition of artisanal castes migrating out for railways and other menial jobs to the cities goes back to the 1850s, cf. Saberwal 1976: 192-227), when members of all castes began to move out to find better livelihood options (Thakur and Kishtwaria 2003: 281-85).

Out-migration had other causes as well. Brahmans and Rajputs, members of the upper castes in Kangra, were barred from ploughing their fields themselves, and those who did were derogated by their castes. Such Brahmans were called *bhatherus* and such Rajputs were known as *Rathis* or *Rangars*. They came to occupy a low status within their castes and clans, like the Khas-Rajputs vis-a-vis Rajputs from the plains, only slightly higher than peasant castes, and they were excluded commensally and in matrimonial ties (Parry 1979: 78, 208, 212). Along with peasants, traders, and artisanal castes, these Rajput agriculturists stayed on as permanent residents; the job-led emigration being high among the upper castes only. While earlier, the state of Chamba, Kangra

and later the Lahore Durbar of Ranjit Singh enlisted administrators and warriors through such rules of prestige and derogation, the British too benefited from it, as it ensured a steady supply to the army and administration (Parry 1979: 78). The land was managed by tenants, who provided grain at the prevalent rate of sharecropping, and also provided domestic help to the families of these migrants. Songs of work-related separation may also be analysed through such social dynamics, in which women – mostly belonging to upper castes – were left at home to manage farms, while men earned money in far-off lands. But did this lead to empowerment? In a recent study of a similar geographic area in the hill districts of Nepal, Adhikari and Hobley (2015) assessed the impact of such migration by assessing indices like the well-being of the household and women, decision-making, participation and the voices of women in public and household spaces and social-psychological conditions. They concluded that while economic advantages were undeniably present, the workload of women and girls increased in all spheres – public responsibility, household chores, and management of family and resources. Psychological strains were more visible, whereby women ‘self-censor[ed] their outside contacts’, particularly men, to make them free from disapproval or any unsavoury suspicions (Adhikari and Hobley 2015: 20). Though men still made major decisions (even by telephone), and took back their patriarchal roles upon their return, there was nevertheless an evident rise in the authority of women both in public and household decisions. Nevertheless, the authors conclude that to date, there is little by way of empowerment of women due to these seasonal job related migrations.

Were such arrangements appreciated by the women of Kangra? The question is also about what constitutes well-being. In all the songs that I collected, women challenged an exclusively economic logic, as can be seen in the song translated below. In it, a woman wants to understand the meaning of economic and social prestige, symbolised by an ostentatious house with a large courtyard, which does not provide her with the social and emotional space she desires, as her husband is mostly absent. The questions asked by the wife are significant as they question the basis of social prestige and economic well-being. As is evident, the

husband's answer that these are luxuries earned for her sake is unconvincing.

[Wife:] Why do you build such a grand house?
 Why spend on the upkeep of the courtyard?
 O soldier, why do you spend on the upkeep of the courtyard?
 [Husband:] The grand house is for you to live.
 The grooved courtyard is where you will spin yarn.
 O Gori, the courtyard is for your spinning wheel.

[Wife:] You set out to your job afar:
 Who will live in your house?
 O soldier, who will look after your house?
 [Husband:] Don't worry, my wife.
 My brother will look after my house.
 O Gori, there is a brother to look after my house.

Again, we are reminded how women were managed within the larger patriarchal discourse of marriage, whereby the husband was the prime focus of a woman's life, which moved in the orbit of his family. Since the life of an unmarried woman was not conceivable, women were threatened by the idea of eviction. The theme of how a woman's social world changes after marriage is addressed with much subtlety and sensitivity in these songs. There was no place for a married woman in her place of birth, as it was considered shameful for a married woman to stay with her parents (Berry 2014, March 1997, Sax 1991). In the song below, the husband reminds his wife of this, because she rather fancies staying with her parents during his absence than with his family. He is finally able to coerce his wife by threatening an alternative relationship in his workplace, which is a veiled threat of abandoning her.⁸ Such

8 Life outside marriage was not conceivable and therefore the threat of abandonment was worse than a death threat. It is due to such sensitivities that women played upon this theme in these songs as a muted protest, often imagining replacement by a co-wife, or total abandonment, wherein the blame always lay with women, who were stigmatised. With the advent of education in the western Himalayas things are finally changing and today more women are challenging the patriarchal structures. Examples include women-focused NGOs

threats, both real and imagined, which added to the insecurity in the world of women, have a prominent place in many of these songs.

[Wife:] Your brother is such a bully!
 He is my hated enemy.
 O soldier, he is my number one enemy.
 [Husband] One should not utter such words!
 He shall look after your house.
 O Gori, my brother will look after your house.

[Wife:] I will put locks on the house!
 I will live in my birth home,
 O soldier, I will live with my parents.
 [Husband:] Only maidens live in their birth home!
 What will you do with your parents?
 O Gori, what you will do in your birth home?

[Wife:] I will help my mother with embroidery.
 There is enough food in my birth home,
 O soldier, there is enough food in my birth home.
 [Husband:] Your mother will call me names, and
 then you will think of me,
 O Gori, then you will think of me.

[Wife:] I will sit with my girl-friends.
 There will be no time for your memory,

for single women, who are reinventing their lives on their own terms, which as recently as twenty years ago was unimaginable in the closed hill society. Berry (2014: 43-55), for instance, documents the struggle of the single women's movement in Kangra—consisting of never-married, divorced, separated, abandoned and widowed women—to collectively re-craft their lives to gain the respect and dignity denied within the patriarchal relations produced by marriage. She shows how a collective becomes an empowering movement that has both emancipatory as well as disciplinary possibilities. She examines how the collectivity empowers single women to overcome sexual prejudices associated with being single that provides them 'new discourses for imagining themselves, and new opportunities for crafting lives beyond the limitations of heteropatriarchal scripts of womanhood' (ibid: 53).

O soldier, why will I think of you then?
 [Husband:] I will while away the time with my friends.
 I do not have to think of you,
 O Gori, I will come to forget you.

[Wife:] Do not worry, my husband:
 I will stay put in your house,
 O soldier, I will stay put in your house.
 [Husband:] Do not worry my wife:
 I shall visit you soon enough,
 O Gori, I will visit you soon.

Such songs conjure a world of drudgery and grind, helplessness, emotional frustration and dissatisfaction, of having to raise the children single-handedly and to manage the household, facing all kinds of adversities, and of loneliness, even while being a part of the extended family. It is against this backdrop that the genre of *baramahi*, or the cycle of twelve months, acquires significance (Wadley 1983, Vaudeville 1986). These songs, though not falling within the genre of women's community singing, recount the cycle of seasons and corresponding months, and for each season the wife imagines an excuse to keep her husband from going away from her to his job (cf. Narayan 1997: 30-31, for a variant from Kangra). These songs with their overt sexual undertones are indicative of the cherished desire to make a family in togetherness, rather than a notional family with two centres, economically and sexually, two temporary abodes during the productive years of life. Yet there is little hope, for the family must survive and the husband has to depart.

Hoisting pitcher, the 'fair wife' Gori was just setting out
 To fetch water from the well,
 When her father-in-law happened to notice her.
 'Why, O daughter-in-law, is your appearance unseemly
 Has anyone uttered a harsh word?'

'Neither, O father-in-law, is my appearance indecorous
 Nor has anyone bad-mouthed me.
 The one born of my mother-in-law,

who is also the brother of your daughter,
wakes up early and sets off to his job.'

'Take care, keep him locked up, O daughter-in-law
Don't let your husband go away!'

'Don't go away, my husband, in this month of *Chait*.⁹
The flowers blossom on every tree;
nor in the month of *Baisakh*, my dear,
when the vine-grapes ripen.
Don't go away in the month of *Jeth*, my husband:
The summer is at its worst, it is hot;
nor in the month of *Hada*, my dear,
when the mangoes are so sweet!
Don't go away in the month of *Soan*, my husband:
The black clouds threaten, it's always raining;
nor in the month of *Bhadon*, my dear,
when the nights are dreadfully dark!
Don't go away in the month of *Suj*, my husband:
How shall I bide the time, counting each night passing by;
nor in the month of *Katti*, my dear,
when we shall celebrate the festival of light (*Diali*)!
Don't go away in the month of *Magher*, my husband:
Anticipating cold nights, I stuff the quilts;
nor in the month of *Poh*, my dear,
when mornings are wet with dew; the cold is extreme.
Don't go away in the month of *Magh*, my husband:
We shall light the fires of *Lohri*;¹⁰

9 *Chait* is the month of spring that ushers in the local New Year, which at certain places takes place in the next month, *Baisakh*, the month of harvest and therefore gaiety. The next two months are hot months, when fruits like mangoes and lime ripen. The calendar of twelve months thus narrated in the song is tied to the peculiarity of each month or season to remind us of cultural nuances as well as reasons for being at home at that time. What it leaves open to the imagination is that the reasons for being together are the same reasons for missing the husband all the time.

10 This post-harvest festival celebrates the winter solstice.

nor in the month of *Phaggan*, my dear,
when we shall play *Holi*.¹¹

I have heard, O Gori, your saga of twelve months.
Now comes the time for my departure.

Go away; you go away my husband.
Get up always early in the morning.
May you find work as soon as you reach abroad.
May you get to eat, my husband,
the coconut and dried grapes every day,
May you get the the fragrant vine's stem
with which to brus your teeth!

The woman's world: missing husband, absent brother

*veer ta giyachambenaukari/ bhena da dityabiyah/
chaunikaharandaulichuklayihai/ rahe ca milyabhra...*

The brother has gone for work in Chamba.
The sister is getting married.
Four litter-bearers pick up the palanquin
and carry the bride away.
In the middle of the path
the sister sees her brother.
"Put down my palanquin, O litter-bearers,
Let the sister meet her brother!"

The absence of young economically active male members in the family is a dominant theme in many songs. Often, it was the case that the husband left immediately after marriage, without providing the woman sufficient time to be emotionally integrated and socially accepted, and on an equal footing within the larger family. This resulted mostly in the gendered scarring which is reflected in the unhappy tones in some songs. It is therefore revealing that husbands are portrayed as insensitive beings, who are willing to subvert their wives' voice to that of the dominant

11 Holi is a carnival of colours.

voice of the extended family — parents and siblings. For them the codes of family honour and patriarchal norms are dearer than the emotional, social and economic requirements of their wives; the obligations of the joint-family outweigh the obligations to their wives (Sharma 2015b). By singing these songs, however, women forcefully raise these issues, providing us a nuanced glimpse of their world view, and affording an alternative perspective on patriarchal social dynamics.

While I have emphasised the absence of husbands (as well as sons) in the lives of women, which provides us a glimpse into the workings of joint families, we also need to analyse the role of brothers in the lives of married women. All the more so, since there are a number of songs that show how the brother steps in for his parents and how his role is critical to the well-being of his sister in the house of her in-laws.¹² Since the visit of her parents to the daughter's marital home is viewed unfavourably, especially since they cannot accept food there and are expected to carry gifts which are not always within their means, the brother stands in for them. He invites the sister to her birth place; he is responsible for her emotional and economic well-being and for that of her children (*bhanja/bhanji*); all economic transactions between the families are routed through the brother; it is left to him to help his sister integrate into the family of her in-laws. He listens to the complaints against his sister, he is her advisor, and he hears her grievances against her husband, his family and her own kin. He is the confidant, support and intermediary (a messenger of peace and hope), who acts to achieve the well-being of his sister, whilst remaining aware and supportive of the patriarchal norms of community. Thus, it is not surprising that the brother is called by the sister for every odd job, is addressed with fondness and admonitions in the songs, and is called names after his marriage as the distance grows between his sister and her family as he gets immersed into his own family and its needs. It is against this backdrop that the songs about absent brothers, who like the husbands were in distant lands due to their jobs, become critical. Consider, for instance, the angst of a little sister (little refers here to the young age of the girl being married) who is setting off to her husband's house, yet her

12 For the brother as a rival, see March (1997).

brother is not there to see her off. The song is significant because on the one hand it highlights the economic obligations on the part of the family to their daughter's house (the spinning wheel would form a part of the dowry), and on the other hand it shows the trust between siblings. She could only confide to her brother the workings of her in-law's family, while he as a helpless listener could only comfort her and perhaps advise her to be non-confrontational, possibly even submissive. Yet his position as a responsible peacemaker between the two households is undisputed.

mainimerichhotidahicharkhi/ saurihyanpauchai de/ dhiyeni tera veer
niaaya/ charkha kiyankaribhejiye...

O mother, send to my in-laws' home
my little spinning wheel.
O my daughter, your brother has not yet arrived:
With whom shall we send your spinning wheel?
Who shall acquaint you with the paths and lanes?
O mother, pack me my little bag.
My brother might meet us on the way.

The brother met her in the middle of the way.
The sister cries unceasingly.
Oh my sister, why do you cry so?
What makes your heart so heavy?
Oh brother, my mother-in-law is quarrelsome,
my sister-in-law is so sour.

O mother, send to my in-laws' home
my little spinning wheel.
O my daughter, your brother has not yet arrived
With whom shall we send your spinning wheel ...

Let us conclude with a song that rounds up the world view of women by contextualising the absence of the two foremost male relations in their lives – husband and brother. The absence of either creates a vacuum in their lives, but the simultaneous absence of both, a social reality in the western Himalayan hills, acquires catastrophic dimensions. For instance,

in the song translated below, the emotional and economic significance of such absence is highlighted. While it is emphasised that the two most sought-after relations are missed acutely in the ritual, all others present being meaningless to the woman in question – even referred to as aliens – still, the notions of prestige and respect vis-à-vis poverty are also underscored. In other words, the song shows how the pretence of well-being in the face of poverty hides an unstated agony. Such pretence is necessary for the perceived honour of both the families and clans – the husband's clan as well as the birth clan of the woman. How interesting then that a woman has to bear the emotions emanating from such situations all alone: her shame would be hers and hers alone. Thinking of the ritual without the brother, for instance, her parents are supposed to send someone with congratulatory offerings, usually the village barber (*nai*) or the family priest (*purohit*). It is obligatory to present them with gifts on this occasion. This results in a crisis for the poor household, particularly the woman in question, as these gifts ought to be significant enough to uphold and redeem the prestige of the household within the eyes of kin and clan. The brother's absence thus constitutes an existential crisis for the entire household. But if the brother is present, outsiders like priest or barber are not required. The brother is an insider, associated with the economic wellbeing of his sister's household and sensitive to their economic position. He is therefore likely, if not to provide for their material needs, then at least to gloss over their problems, in order to uphold their prestige and respect within the wider community. The relationship between brother and sister therefore becomes a relationship of conspiracy and confidence, one that upholds the delusions of grandiosity in the eyes of others. This illusion is, however, integral to the personhood and self-respect of women, not only for their own sakes, but also for the prestige of her husband and his family, as well as her birth family. The role of the brother therefore acquires a critical dimension: his absence breaks apart the world of women by bringing about untold commiserations – both real and imagined.

My courtyard is full of *dhrek* trees.

They are the perch of crows, my mother:

When I go out to drive away the crows
the cloth covering my bosom falls down, my mother.

I stand in the doorway overlooking the street.
Hundreds of people pass by:
Hundreds come, hundreds go away.
The one who is born of my mother's womb
is not one of them; all other are alien to me, my mother.
That other, born to my mother-in-law, does not turn up.
All others passing by are alien to me, my mother.

My courtyard is full of *dhrek* trees.
They are the perch of crows, my mother.
Do not send the barber with the message, my mother:
The barber seeks money for the congratulatory message.
Do not send the priest with the message, my mother:
The priest seeks clothes for the congratulatory message.

Send the message through my youngest brother.
He is the one born of my mother's womb, my mother.
In my courtyard are *dhrek* trees.
They are the perch of crows, my mother.

Conclusion

This essay maps imagery where written literature is scarce, perhaps because literary instruments were controlled exclusively by men. The limited literature that exists only points to the hardships faced by emigrating men and the significance of their remittances to the local economy. How the women left behind fend for themselves and raise their families is not often discussed. This paper therefore tries to put into perspective the nature and tenor of hardships that women face, which are not only economic but also social and psychological. Since there is little by way of women's literature, we have used folksongs and legends sung by women to represent a female perspective, an inimitable voice about their circumstances and problems. One might suggest that this choice is quite limited, however this is the closest we can get to represent a women's perspective over a considerable, though not precise, length of time, and it is supplemented by personal narratives.

Using oral literature as a credible source to look into the past also enhances our understanding of the day-do-day workings of rural society wherein women are neither invisible nor unnoticed. It adds vibrancy to the historical process by producing new insights and previously unasked questions.

These songs may be read in many ways: as voices of empathy, of protest, as coded insinuations, or means of catharsis. As they relate to the personal situation of many women, they help in constructing a sisterhood, even if this sisterhood is inflected by the contexts of caste, class, work, and family. Finally, the songs are about women missing men, not only husbands but also brothers, and obliquely about absent fathers, an inclusive patriarchal category that is a signifier of curbs and control over sexuality, procreation, mobility, productivity, and privileges. These songs, informed by the peculiarities of castes and professions, are about women-in-waiting battling socio-economic inequities and psychological scarring and offer a glimpse into women's worlds and world-views in which eloquent questions about family, home, money, prestige, and honour are raised. Though articulated and interrogated by women, these are the basic questions that define patriarchy, the questions upon which the notions of masculinities and femininities are based.

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‘Bringing the Light’: Youth, development and everyday politics in post-war Nepal

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Abstract

Drawing on the case-study of how a remote Nepali village got access to electricity without either the support of the state or NGOs, this article explores the role of youth in community-led development in the former Maoist base-area of Nepal. In doing so, it problematizes the ‘crisis of youth’ narrative and explores the constructive role of young people in generating development in post-war settings. By examining young people’s participation in everyday politics, the article demonstrates that young people’s engagement in ‘generative politics’ (Jeffrey and Dyson 2014) is based on pre-existing forms of civil society, on a strong local tradition of self-organizing, and on the practice of running ‘people’s governments’ during the People’s War. The article cautions against romanticizing the notions of ‘generative politics’ and selfless ‘service’ and demonstrates that in the context of South Asia the notion of ‘service’ (development work) is inextricably linked with the operation of Politics and with the process of becoming a ‘big person’. Thus, young people’s engagement in everyday politics allows them to amass social capital and attain respectability within the local community. Furthermore, while ‘social service’ becomes an important part of young people’s social becoming and a route to their social mobility, it conceals the labour contribution of ‘ordinary’ villagers to development projects performed through a system of obligatory and unequal labour.

Keywords: Nepal, Youth, Generative Politics, Civil Society, micro hydropower projects

Introduction

‘The Maoists have brought the light’ (*maobadile ujhelo bhanayo*), said an elderly Kham Magar woman in what was known as the heartland of the Maoist base area during Nepal’s civil war (1996-2006). While the bitter

smoke from the hearth was still filling the living quarters of most houses in the village when I was doing fieldwork in 2011, the recently arrived electricity or 'light' transformed people's everyday lives. Women no longer had to wake up before dawn to grind corn, children could study in the evenings by the lamp, and villagers started gathering in front of the first TV sets which were brought by the migrant villagers on their return from the Gulf States or Malaysia.

In 2011, the village of Thabang, perched in mid hills of the Nepali Himalayas, was still a one or two-day walk away from the nearest transport hub. It was a relatively remote place, with most of the surrounding villages still living in 'darkness', that is without electricity. This was not an exceptional situation, because, as I knew from my one-month stay in Kathmandu in the spring of 2011, even in the capital, load shedding could reach up to fourteen hours per day, with only intermittent supply of electricity during the evening hours. In comparison with Kathmandu, Thabang seemed like a haven where I could jot down my thoughts every evening and even charge the laptop. As Thabangis explained to me, electrification of the village was a significant step to realizing their dream of 'development' (*bikas*), which was reminiscent of Lenin's post-revolutionary plan for Soviet Russia with its focus on huge infrastructural projects such as roads and electrical power stations as well as equal access to education. Indeed, Thabangis had every reason to be proud of their hydro-power projects. Even though during my fieldwork in 2011 the electricity was supplied only in the evenings and at night (during the day time it was used for grinding grain), still this was a remarkable achievement for a place that did not have a single motorable road and that did not receive any funds from either the state or development agencies for the construction of electrical power stations.¹

As I came to realize later, Thabang was no average village. Its uniqueness lay not only in the fact that it had been a capital of the

1 Selected as one of fifteen model villages under the Maoist government of 2008-2009, Thabang received a sizable budget for development purposes. However, the money was spent mostly on paving roads inside the village and in its vicinity. None of the centrally administered budget was used for the electrification project.

Maoist base area during the civil war of 1996-2006 but also that it had been celebrated as an origin place of Nepali revolution that led to the transformation of a Hindu Kingdom of Nepal into a secular republic. Thabang also represented a remarkable case of political and social organization that survived the vicissitudes of the People's War and the dissolution of the people's governments (see Ogura 2007; Sales 2010, 2013; Gidwani and Paudel 2012; Zharkevich 2015). As I came to learn during my fieldwork, Thabang was a place where there was no dichotomy between "politics" regarded as participation in electoral party politics and "politics" regarded as everyday participation in discussions and initiatives around local political and social affairs. Consensus was prized over dissent and multiplicity of opinions, the goal of Politics was to make 'work' and development happen, and the notion of selfless service (*sewa*) - so central for civil society and political discourse in South Asia (Mines 1994) - became so controversial that the terms community work (*samajko kam*) and corvée labour (*jarakara*) were often used inter-changeably.

Furthermore, Thabang was a remarkable case of community-led development. If one stayed in the village for some time, one could witness quite a few development projects accomplished without the support of the state or international development agencies: electricity installed in almost all the households of the village development committee (VDC, the smallest administrative unit in Nepal before the administrative reform in 2017); community primary schools opened in the distant hamlets in order to spare the children an hour-long walk to school in the main village; additional teachers hired for the local high school in order to solve the problem of over-crowded classes - all projects accomplished using resources and labour generated by the village community. While it was the village community as a whole that did the work to make these development initiatives happen, distinct groups in the village - committed Maoist party workers (and village leaders) and entrepreneurial young people (men), members of the local Youth Club - were behind their organizing, planning, and execution.

By drawing on the case-study of Thabang's electrification project, this paper explores the role of young people in generating development and engaging in what Jeffrey and Dyson (2014) refer to as 'generative

politics', that is politics aimed at protecting and multiplying resources rather than obtaining protection or pursuing self-interest through engagement with the mainstream political parties or patronage networks. In examining the contribution of young people² to development projects in one of the most conflict-affected districts of Nepal, this paper emphasizes the constructive role that they can play in post-war settings on the condition that there are channels for incorporation of youth in community life. It argues that the 'generative politics' of young people in the former Maoist capital draws on pre-existing forms of civil society, a strong local tradition of self-organizing, and the Maoist practice of running people's governments during the People's War. While young people spearheaded many of the initiatives that drove development in Thabang, the paper shows that they followed in the footsteps of the pre-existing rich associational life in the village: a dense network of Maoist unions, such as Maoist Student and Children Unions, Maoist Women's Associations, Maoist Teachers' Associations etc. on the one hand; and local forms of self-organisation and self-help, such as communal work and labour exchange typical of many high-altitude communities around the world on the other.

By focusing on young people in rural Nepal who have attained social adulthood and transcended the category of youth by early 30s, this paper illustrates that the compelling and mostly accurate narrative of 'waithood' which has become dominant in theorizing the condition of youth in the global South (Jeffrey 2010a; Honwana 2012; Sommers 2012) is not always helpful in understanding sizable groups of the so-called 'ordinary' youths in the developing world. Concentrating on young people who have self-consciously chosen to live in rural areas and who have extensively engaged in 'generative politics', I demonstrate the importance of looking beyond the urban metropolis for exploring the diversity of youth people's modes of socio-political expression and of

2 Young people discussed in this paper belong to the Kham-speaking Magars, often referred to as Kham Magars. Dalits were conspicuously absent from the activities of the Youth Club and the only woman who was active during the proceedings of the youth club was certainly beyond the category of youth. Most of the young people discussed in this paper were well-educated in relation to their age-cohort, i.e. had +2 (12 class) or BA degrees and had been affiliated to the Maoist Movement during the war in various capacities.

young people's pathways into adulthood. In this article, I am using the term 'youth' largely based on the chronological age of my informants who have not reached the age of 35 at the time of my fieldwork. While the majority of my informants would avoid the term 'youth' when talking about the private domain of their lives and household matters (because most of them were married), they would use it when talking about their engagement in community affairs and political life in the village. As shown by Snellinger (2007), it is not uncommon for Nepali political activists to refer to themselves as youth well into their forties, especially if their activism revolves in the student wings of the mainstream political parties.

By exploring what kind of young people engage in 'generative politics' in post-conflict Nepal, I argue that it is young people who have access to distinct forms of social and cultural capital and the means to participate in everyday politics and community-led development, and that new forms of livelihoods are central in enabling young people to engage in 'generative politics' and lead a life of 'social worth'. Not only were the young people in question exposed to the operation of politics through their participation in various Maoist Unions during the war, many of them came from families of communist activists of the older generation and thus were socialized into politics and social activism early on in their lives.

Despite the fact that the village of Thabang supplied almost a battalion of young male and female fighters to the Maoist People's Liberation Army during the war, few of them were present in the village at the time of my fieldwork. Neither were they active in the local Youth Club. Instead, these were young people who managed to secure the necessary education and technical skills during the war, often through internal migration,³ who could afford the luxury of non-migrating and engaging in 'generative politics' after the war.

3 I would like to note here that when I talk about education, I refer mostly to school-level education, because getting the School Leaving Certificate (the successful completion of 10 class) was an extreme rarity in Thabang during the war; likewise when I write about technical skills, I refer to skills that were learned mostly in informal settings, i.e., through apprenticeship in jobs which were far from being safe or well-paid. Whereas youth described in this paper would be

Based on the analysis of young people's engagement in everyday politics and development projects in post-war Nepal, this paper demonstrates that 'social service' remains an essential means of earning respectability and prestige within the village community as well as becoming a political figure. As noted by Byrne and Shrestha in their work with local-level political leaders who self-identified predominantly as 'social workers': "Building social standing and trust through social work was a transparently articulated political profile building strategy" (2014: 447). Likewise, this article demonstrates that a dichotomy between the notion of selfless 'service' (*sewa*) and politics taken on by some youth activists in India (Jeffrey and Dyson 2014) obscures the ways in which social service, even if cast in apolitical terms, has been central to the operation of Politics in South Asia.

Finally, by discussing the ways in which people in Thabang use such idioms as community work (*samajko kam*) and service (*sewa*), the paper shows the contentious nature of these concepts and the ways in which they might conceal the labour contribution of 'ordinary' villagers to development projects, which are often framed as 'service to the community' by the local leaders.

A Short Note on Methods

This paper draws on the material gathered during my year-long ethnographic fieldwork in 2011 and its multiple methods: participant observation (being present at the Youth Club meetings, court-proceedings and festivals managed by the youth club), informal interviews with members of the Youth Club, life-stories of the older villagers whose narratives were full of references to the political and associational life of the village in the past. I also drew on the writings on the history of Thabang (Ogura 2007; Sales 2007, 2010, 2013; Gersony 2003) in order to historicize young people's political engagement.

The focus of my doctoral research was not on youth activism per se, but rather on the impact of the civil war on people's everyday lives. However, doing ethnographic research I could not help noticing the

considered well-educated in the context of the young people of *their* generation in the village (not the generation coming after them), they would be considered to be under-educated in the context of urban Nepal.

centrality of a distinct group of young people in the life of the village. I could not ignore the court procedures led by the local Youth Club, nor the centrality of the newly-established electrical mill for the social and economic life of the village. Likewise, observing all the communal work performed by the villagers, I started asking questions about the nature of communal labour. When I started piecing together the community development projects for which the work was done – from providing electricity to establishing a community school, from providing law and order during the local religious festivals to fund-raising money during the religious festival of Tihar – I saw that a lot of these initiatives were led by a group of young men in the village . . . and so I started talking to them.

The virtual absence of young women in the political life of the village – there was only one unmarried woman in her early forties present at the proceedings of the local Youth Club and certainly no women masterminding development projects – made me talk mostly to young men on political matters. The absence of women in the Youth Club and the major village development committees was striking, given a sizable representation of women at the national level, in the Constituent Assembly in the past and in the Parliament at the moment. One of the explanations could be that although all the political parties are mainstreaming gender equality at the national level, representation of women at the village level is not deemed as important, since it will not make headlines, but might challenge local institutions, which do take decisions that matter (local level politics/democracy is much more direct than the representative one at the national level). Arguably, it is by looking at everyday politics – who is able to contribute to the formulation of local-level policies and debates – that one can grasp how the old structures of domination are being reproduced despite alleged inclusiveness at the national level.

My positionality as a young unmarried woman did not hinder the research process. On the contrary, it helped in many ways, but largely because of the fact that I was treated more as an ‘honourable man’ rather than a young inexperienced woman that I was: studying for a DPhil degree, travelling on my own, earning a livelihood in my youth as well as wearing trousers – all made me seem like a peer with whom young men

could discuss their political engagement and social initiatives at length. Looking back at my fieldwork in 2011, I should admit to have been gender-blind, for I have never asked young women whether they wanted to participate in the Youth Club and various development activities, or whether they have been excluded from them. Neither did I challenge male members of the Youth Club about this, perhaps because I never intended to write on the Youth Club or youth politics.

It is only after going through my notes on return from the field that the story about young people's ability to organize, fund-raise and contribute to the local development – accomplishing the projects which are often thought to be within the purview of the state or NGOs and beyond the capacity of the village community – emerged as a noteworthy, though not necessarily representative case of young people's participation in everyday politics and community development in Nepal.

'Crisis of Youth' or its 'Generative' Potential?

A lot of the recent literature on youth in the Global South has been framed in terms of the crisis of youth and the crisis of social reproduction. The focus of this literature has been predominantly on urban young men who struggle with uncertainty, political instability, social exclusion and lack of employment opportunities by joining radical violent or vigilante groups (Vigh 2006; Utas 2005; Richards 2005), by migrating abroad (Vigh 2009; Langevang and Gough 2009), taking up precarious jobs (O'Neill 2015; Cole 2004), seeking patrons among elites (Hoffman 2003) or indulging in consumerism (Newell 2009). The major theme that runs through many of the recent studies on youth is that young people are stuck in a period of prolonged youth, being unable to attain social adulthood, that is, have a decent job, build a house and marry, despite all their agency and 'social navigation'. In the conditions of late capitalism, being 'unproductive' or unemployed is essentially equated with social death, so that young men who do not have a formal job are described as failures, 'killing time' or 'loitering around'. Semi-educated urban youths are confined to the state of limbo, 'waiting', 'sitting around', and 'being stuck' (Ralph 2008; Mains 2007; Honwana 2012; Sommers 2012; Jeffrey 2010a) - the metaphors that do not

necessarily describe the state of young people's idleness but rather a disjuncture between young people's aspirations towards a particular social and economic status and the reality they face in their everyday lives – a reality which has a lot to do with neoliberal policies, which make precarity and uncertainty the norm of the day. However, as the studies illustrate, even though young people use the metaphors of 'waiting' to describe their situation, they engage in a multiplicity of strategies in order to find livelihood opportunities and cope with their underemployment – from liaising with political leaders and patrons to engaging in informal market economy, and finding their ways to far-off destinations (Jeffrey 2010a; Langevang and Gough 2009; Honwana 2012).

The striking feature of this literature is that it focuses predominantly on semi-educated (defined in different ways depending on the context) and underemployed young men living in urban areas, who, as the literature illustrates, suffer from social exclusion, the dire structure of the labour market and the dismantling of the social functions of the state in the wake of the structural adjustment reforms. Yet, on closer reading of the literature it appears that young people who are 'stuck' in limbo state being unemployed often *choose* not to work. As shown by Mains (2007: 683), in the context of urban Ethiopia, 'to work or not to work was a social decision', and 'boredom' as well as overabundance of time was a privilege of young men from cities who could reject menial jobs (because of the fear of shame and the loss of honour). Young people could indulge in 'timepass', because they could rely on the support of their kin for the maintenance of their everyday lives. As shown by Jeffrey (2010a) in his discussion of 'self-consciously' unemployed lower middle-class young men on a provincial university campus in India, the category of 'timepass' or 'waithood' denotes a distinct discourse which is used by young people to explain their exclusion from the world of consumerism and from a distinct kind of future (jobs) that young people aspire to. Further, similar to youth described by Mains in the context of Ethiopia, young men in India (Jeffrey 2010b: 477) not only self-consciously resigned themselves to 'timepass' but also used it as a sign of cultural distinction:

Rather than resign themselves to a return to rural areas, where they might enter agriculture (in the case of Jats) or labour (in the case of most Dalits and Muslims), many young men reacted to their failure to acquire government work by cultivating identities as “unemployed youth” and simply remaining in college in Meerut, almost always as bachelors (ibid: 472).

Young men who remain in rural areas or who choose to return to rural areas from the metropolis do not seem to attract much scholarly interest. Yet, young people in rural areas (often on their return from cities or from guerrilla movements) could provide us with a different picture of young people in developing countries – not of men loitering around (even if the loitering itself is productive in terms of forging networks, connection and getting knowledge through such interactions) or seeking patronage networks, but rather engaging in development projects, participating in civil society groups, in some cases rediscovering an interest in traditional livelihoods like farming and herding, and modernising them (Fanthorpe and Maconachie 2010; Gaibazzi 2015; Jeffrey and Dyson 2014; Temudo and Abrantes 2015).

The bias towards the ‘extraordinary’ in studies of youth and their obsession with vigilante groups, unemployed young men and child soldiers (for critique see Gaibazzi 2015, 15–23; Temudo and Abrantes 2015) is also present in the literature on youth in Nepal (see review by Snellinger 2013). The literature on youth in Nepal has disproportionately focused on youth activism within the mainstream political parties (Snellinger 2005, 2007, 2013) as well as young people’s participation in the Maoist Movement during the civil war (Hirslund 2012, 2015; Evans 2008; Ghimire 2002; Thapa 2003; Zharkevich 2009, 2013).

Studies of ‘ordinary’ young people have been scarcer. Liechty (2003) explored the ways in which young people in Kathmandu constructed their identities through consumption of particular consumer goods, media, and recreational activities, providing the first analysis of mainstream urban youth culture in the context of Nepal. Based on fieldwork at one of the public campuses in Kathmandu, Koelbel (2015) drew an unusual and refreshing portrait of contemporary Nepali youth, which stands out precisely because of its focus on ‘normal’ youth who

are actively crafting their lives through combining education and work (and even marital life). While these young people think about the future and consider migrating, the present is the point around which their lives revolve. 'Waithood' in the sense of boredom is not their predicament. As shown by Snellinger (2007), the situation is different for student youth activists who are stuck in the category of 'youth' well into their early forties on the grounds that they have not reached their aspirations, i.e., become 'big people' in the political hierarchy, and have therefore not attained social adulthood. The 'waithood' of these unfulfilled politicians is rooted in the condition of being left behind in relation to others and their inability to achieve the future they have dreamt of. That for a lot of young people in Nepal the present is something to be endured rather than lived through is also shown by Korzenevica (2016) who worked with young people in Eastern rural Nepal: young people there devalued the productive work they did for their households by referring to it as 'doing nothing' while dreaming of better educational and migration opportunities. So one might wonder what kind of ideology underpins both the discourse of 'waithood' and the discourse according to which agricultural labour on one's own farm is equated to 'doing nothing'.

Similar to many other developing countries, Nepal has a high proportion of youth, with 70 per cent of the population being below the age of 35 (Sijapati 2015, 6). Particularly in post-conflict settings, fears over unemployed young men are magnified to the extent that they are often posited as a cause behind political upheavals and instability. A lot of the international development reports commissioned by the international development agencies draw an alarmist picture of unemployed young men as a source of danger for post-conflict reconstruction and recovery. For instance, Upreti et al. contend that

[i]n a situation of crisis and transition, the youth should have been involved in constructive works and become the agents of peace, harmony and collaboration. Contrary to it, the majority of youth in Nepal seem to be engaged in confrontation, fights and violence to fulfil certain vested interests . . . [a] large number of youths is unemployed, under-employed and ultimately being mobilized for

coercive activities. This has seriously pushed the productive cohorts of youths into the net of militarisation (2010: 193).

There are a number of problems with this report. First, the picture is distorted because so many young males, who would have otherwise been unemployed, simply leave Nepal for the Gulf States, Malaysia, or India. In 2013-2014, almost half a million Nepalis, mainly youth, left the country to work abroad (Sijapati 2015: 1). Second, the report assumes that any kind of young people's political engagement is fraught with violence and destruction. Third, it assumes that young people get organized on their own rather than acknowledging that they are often drawn into pre-existing political networks and political parties, the access to which is often the only way to 'move forward' in life *and* earn a decent living if one wants to stay in Nepal.

Understanding young people's participation in politics within the local context – especially in such a diverse country as Nepal – does matter. In her work on young people's political engagement in Eastern rural Nepal, Korzenevica (2016) demonstrates that young people attempt to distance themselves from Politics as something dirty and corrupt. However, those young people who do business have no other choice but to provide at least token support to the political party in power, if only to obtain protection for their entrepreneurial endeavours. (The contracting business and its association with political party patronage is beyond the scope of this paper.) Whereas Korzenevica demonstrates that young people were virtually invisible in local community development projects at her field site in Eastern Nepal, this article argues that in the former Maoist base area of mid-Western Nepal, young people were a driving force behind many community development projects. Despite the outward differences, there is something that unites young people in these different sites: regardless of whether they are politically active or passive, they do not fit into the alarmist discourse on youth which neglects all the productive, social and political work done by young people – either through direct social involvement, 'generative politics', remittances sent from abroad, or productive labour performed for the household – which remains the key economic unit in Nepal. By discussing the 'generative politics' of rural youth in mid-Western Nepal,

this paper hopes to widen the boundaries of the ‘crisis of youth’ narrative and demonstrate varied modes of young people’s political engagement and social becoming.

The Culture of Everyday Politics in Thabang

Thabang is a village development committee with a population of around 4,000 people situated in the district of Rolpa, mid-Western Nepal. It is populated by Kham Magars, a small group of Tibeto-Burman origin, and the service castes of Damai and Kami, formerly known as untouchables. Located at an altitude of 2,000 metres Thabang is perched in the mid-hills of Nepali Himalayas. Its people have traditionally engaged in transhumant herding and agriculture centred on two main crops: maize and wheat. At present, semi-subsistence farming is supplemented by the flow of remittances from the villagers who migrate mainly to the Gulf States or Malaysia (increasingly to Japan, Korea, and a few to the USA).

During the People’s War, Thabang was known to be the centre of the Maoist stronghold (for history see Ogura 2007; Sales 2013; Gersony 2003; Gidwani and Paudel 2012; Zharkevich 2015, 2019). It was the place where the Maoist people’s government functioned as a parallel state from 1997: the people’s government collected taxes, ran the local justice system through the people’s court, organized a system of ‘voluntary labour’, and provided education for children who were orphaned during the war. Arguably, in no other village even within the Maoist base area did the Maoists receive such support as in Thabang where already by 1997 the few dissenting villagers had fled to the headquarters of Rolpa district or to Kathmandu. Shortly before the end of the civil war, Thabang was declared the capital of the Magarant Autonomous area, one of the ethnic federalist units created by the Maoists. After the conflict, it was selected as one of fourteen model villages in Nepal, designated to represent cases of exemplary rural development to be emulated throughout the country.

The constellation of local politics is quite unique: for several decades, the people of Thabang voted unanimously in most elections. In the 1959, the village voted for the communist party; in the referendum of 1980 the village voted against the partyless panchayat regime; in 1981, the villagers boycotted the elections organized by the state, even if such boycott, as I have argued elsewhere (Zharkevich 2015), was more a result

of the elite decision communicated down to the villagers. The unity of Thabangis during election times over such a long stretch of time surprised me for quite a long time, until one Thabangi herder explained to me the major principle of local politics: *'Wherever the leader goes, there will the people follow; whatever the big people say, so shall it be'*. As 2013 Constituent Assembly elections showed the unilateral pattern of voting reflected the decision of the local elite, which was then communicated to the villagers. In 2013, the local elite decided to boycott elections, supporting the decision of the most recent splinter-group from the mainstream Maoist Party. The whole village had to boycott elections. The voices of dissenting villagers, even those of distinguished people in the village – a former Member of the Parliament, a former Maoist commander, a teacher, and one of the leading journalists of the Maoist radio station – were silenced and viewed as hampering the 'unity' of the village (Pokhrel and Gharti Magar 2013; 2013a). In short, consensus-politics – so often prized as a technique of enabling civil co-existence in post-conflict Nepal (Byrne and Shrestha 2014) – has had a long history in Thabang, and apparently not always a non-violent one (Ogura 2007; Sales 2013; Zharkevich 2015).

The unique political culture in Thabang is also evident in the rich history of local civil society. The first formal union, the Peasant Union, was formed in 1955 in order to settle a political dispute in the village. Political and social activism flourished from 1950 onwards: retired Gurkha soldiers and communist teachers organized evening literacy classes in the 1960s, students led campaigns to eradicate social ills such as gambling and drinking in the 1970s, women led mother's groups waging campaigns against alcohol-drinking and domestic violence, and some villagers participated in the underground communist movement for several decades (Ogura 2007; Sales 2010, 2013). While civil society was dynamic, it is clear that not all the villagers were active participants (Zharkevich 2015).

The situation changed during the People's War when politics and activism became an inseparable part of people's everyday lives. The multitude of Maoist Unions that existed during the war – from Children's and Women's Unions to Peasants and Retired Gurkha Soldiers' Unions – did not leave anyone in Thabang outside the network of political

activities. People exercised their membership not only by making monthly monetary contributions and performing the work for the needs of the People's Liberation Army, but also by attending various consciousness-raising sessions, participating in political discussions, and witnessing the sessions of the people's courts, even if participation in these activities was not always voluntary.

It was during the times of war and its revolutionary zeal for all kinds of unions and committees that young people described in this paper came of age. Furthermore, quite a few Youth Club members grew up in the families of committed communists of the older generation: teachers, postmen, even the head of the first people's government. Growing up in families where fathers frequented underground communist meetings, many of the members of the Youth Club were socialized into politics and community activism early on. However, even for those coming from apolitical families – like Basanta and Nirash, the major protagonists of this article – growing up in Thabang during the war made the world of politics and activism natural rather than alien to this generation of youth. Thus, Basanta was an active member of the Maoist Children's Club as most of the other members of the Youth Club and the years spent there did no pass without consequences.

Youth Club, Development, and 'Generative' Politics in Thabang

Despite the unique political culture of Thabang, the mode of young people's political and social engagement in community life is strikingly similar to the Indian Himalayan village of Benmi described by Jeffrey and Dyson (2014). While not eschewing Politics, young people in Thabang engage in different forms of 'generative politics': they are active in repairing electric lines, present at the hearings of the local court, and key figures in fund-raising activities aimed at financing the local education system and the construction of sports facilities for youth. One could argue that the generative politics performed by young people in Thabang goes beyond the activities of young people in Benmi. Rather than engaging in political work by petitioning the state for resources or participating in deliberations about how to repair the water supply system (Jeffrey and Dyson 2014), young people in Thabang do the actual development work themselves: they bring in electricity, fund-raise for

additional teachers and community schools, build basketball courts and run religious festivals. In fact, one could argue that they take on the service delivery functions of a national state that was slow in delivering services to the rural hinterland before and after the conflict, let alone in the aftermath of the 2015 earthquake.

Young people who are active in everyday politics in Thabang are members of the local Youth Club. Formed shortly after the end of the conflict by a young man who was active in the political wing of the Maoist Movement during the war, the Youth Club has gradually transformed into one of the major institutions of local governance. The prominent role of the Youth Club could be explained by the power vacuum created by the absence of local elections in Nepal for more than a decade.⁴ While the Youth Club had more than a dozen founding members, most of them male, a group of five youths performed most of the work of the Club in 2011. Far from what might be assumed judging by its name, the Youth Club was not an informal club for social or cultural activities of young people but rather an informal governing body complementary to the village council. During my fieldwork in 2011, it was the institution which took on the functions of the local court – it looked into the cases as different as divorce, domestic violence and debt; it was also responsible for managing the local festivals and fund-raising activities; its members were key in organizing a series of campaigns in the village, such as campaigns against alcohol-drinking. To a certain extent, the local Youth Club can be seen as a successor to the war-time people's government that tried to regulate and manage the village's social, economic and cultural life.

While members of the Youth Club, the only existing club in the village with a Statute of its own, stressed that it was not a political organisation, because it dealt largely with cultural, development and social issues, still it was political in that it collected and redistributed resources, participated in local conflict resolution, and wielded a great degree of control over what was happening in the village. For instance, at the time of my fieldwork, the Youth Club was responsible for raising resources for funding four additional teachers in the local high school. In 2011, there were 20 teachers in the local high school, four of whom were

4 The local elections were eventually held in 2017.

financed by the money raised by the Youth Club. The local leaders decided that in order to avoid overcrowded classes and ensure better quality education, it was important to hire additional teachers. The Youth Club succeeded in raising money for the salary of four teachers through a series of events: *jaljala* religious festival (130,000 NPR), *bailo kelne* (traditional dance) at the *tihar* festival (80,000), and by using the rent from land that belongs to the school (40,000).

In organizing the local community and raising funds during the local religious festivals, the Youth Club was building on long-standing traditions of self-help and community organizing in Thabang. The strength of Thabang's community in getting access to services before they are delivered by the state can be seen in the education sector. It was the communist village leaders in the 1950s who were pivotal in petitioning the state for the opening of the first school (eventually opened in 1961). They had to raise initial funds and think of a way for the school to generate resources in future (for instance, rent out the land which was given to school by the village leaders). Several decades later, the community had to deposit eight hundred thousand rupees into the school's bank account in order to open an intermediate or college-level education in Thabang. At the time, each teacher from Thabang had to donate one month's salary, teachers coming from other districts had to donate half a month's salary, and government employers and retired Gurkha soldiers also contributed a sizable proportion of the required sum. In short, it was through self-reliance and internal generation of resources that Thabangis got access to higher-level schooling, and the Youth Club builds on these local institutions of self-help.

Most of the active members in the Youth Club are young people who came of age during the People's War and were thoroughly politicized during the conflict. Often raised in families of the local communists of the elder generation, these young people spent part of their childhood and youth in the Maoist Children's Organisation (*Balsangathan*) and later on in the Maoist Student Union serving as messengers, participating in political meetings, raising funds for the party, organizing torch-light processions and conscious-raising campaigns, and even helping with making the first explosive devices for the People's War. Several members spent a short period of time in the People's Liberation Army, one as a

'barefoot doctor' curing the wounded guerrillas during the war. Even though most members of the Youth Club were subject to the socializing influence of the Maoist Movement, nearly all of the most active members were young people who migrated at least temporarily to urban areas of Nepal during the conflict and thus escaped the dangers associated with being a young male in the heartland of the Maoist stronghold, like being interrogated by the state security forces or actively recruited by the Maoists. These young people came from the families who had resources to send their children out of the village at the height of the conflict. They were also the ones who did not stop their schooling during the war and who learned new technical skills and livelihood strategies, such as providing electricity, repairing radios and mobiles, and using new agricultural techniques. Many of these young people returned to the village at different points during and after the war with skills and knowledge which allowed them to engage in livelihoods that made them into respectable men: they became teachers, electricians, local handy men repairing electric devices. In short, young people who learned new technical skills during the war did not have to migrate from the village in the aftermath of conflict in order to live a life of 'social worth'.

Young people who migrated abroad or who joined the People's Liberation Army for a sizable amount of time were conspicuously absent from the Youth Club (even though all of the members of the Youth Club had some sort of affiliation to the Maoist Student Union, Children's Organisation etc.). In 2011, many of the former Maoist combatants were still waiting for their post-war lot in the cantonments and/or hoping to be integrated into New Nepal's Army (mostly in vain as it turned out later); others had already left the cantonments and migrated to the Gulf States in search of livelihood opportunities; and a small group that never entered the cantonments joined the Young Communist League in the wake of the war (Hirslund 2015). Looking at who was active in the Youth Club confirmed some of the post-war disillusionment narratives voiced by the former Maoist combatants: instead of fighting 'with their eyes open', one former Maoist political worker told me, young people should have studied during the war and not sacrificed their youth for the cause which the Maoist leaders betrayed when they joined the political

mainstream. Even though the Maoist Movement provided varied opportunities for learning and social mobility, these were not the skills that were in demand in the post-conflict environment. After the war, young people, including the former Maoist fighters, started leaving for the Middle East. As in most of rural Nepal, in Thabang every second household has members who are currently abroad or who have recently returned.

While the exodus of able-bodied men during the war was often underpinned by young men's desire to escape recruitment into the Maoist Movement or avoid persecution by the state security forces (for every Thabangi was regarded as a Maoist during the conflict), migrating in search of work became a more important motivation closer to the end of the conflict and during its aftermath. Quite a few of the former committed Maoist cadres regretted having missed out on the educational opportunities during the war, which left them with international migration as the only way to earn a good income and avoid the shame associated with tilling the fields or working as a wage labourer in the village in the prime of one's youth. Unlike many of the Maoist combatants who returned to the village only to leave it for the Middle East, young people who formed the backbone of the Youth Club returned to the village to stay: to set up new development initiatives, engage in new livelihood opportunities, and eventually to govern the village. As will be shown further, it is often by bringing in new technical knowledge and skills, not connections to political leaders, that young people managed to earn prestige within the village community, which eventually propelled them into positions of authority.

For young men with new technical skills, returning to the village was a logical choice. Thabang was a sea of untapped opportunities to use: no electricity and no electricians, no mobile repair shops and no handy-men, no money-transfer agencies etc. Young people who saw the opportunity and used it became successful businessmen, at least by local standards.

I suggest that the uniqueness of the group of young people described in this paper lies not so much in their class position or educational status – even by the standards of the village they were not the most well-educated or well-off -- but rather in their ability to see opportunities,

seize them, and transform them into possibilities for personal growth as well as social development. As will be shown further, while fleeing the war, some of these young people managed to get informal technical skills by combining school and work, and upon their return to the village they were able to use these skills for local development. Other young people, not discussed in this paper, managed to gain medical skills in the People's Liberation Army and one of them even earned a formal medical degree in radiology; yet another person used his experience in Maoist Unions to start working with various NGOs. Some young Thabangis migrated abroad and gained electrical skills, but on their return could not do anything with them, partly because they had no experience of working in different associations and partly because they could not tap into or draw on the existing Political networks in the village. But the young people discussed in this paper are remarkable for their ability to engage in community affairs, which many of them owe to their politicized leftist parents, access to political networks in the village, and their turbulent war-time childhood full of gatherings and responsibilities in the Maoist Children's and Student Unions.

In one sense, the group of young people described here is representative of rural youth in Nepal, many of whom grew up during the war, had to stop schooling in their villages and migrate to the Terai, make choices between 'return' and migration to the Gulf afterwards, whose lives are often spent in-between bazar towns and their home villages, and who can't afford the luxury of 'timepass' while getting higher education degrees. Even when they enrol in University, these young people combine work – in some cases agricultural work in their fields – with distance learning.

Basanta⁵: New Technical Skills as a Route to Respectability and Status

By the age of 32, Basanta became an active member not only of the Youth Club but also of the village council. In 2011, he was running the main electric mill in the village, used to grind grains in the daytime and to generate electricity at night. He was behind the first micro hydropower station built in Thabang VDC, in the hamlet of Gotabang 2003-2004. It was a small station built for the needs of one household, which was later

5 All names are pseudonyms.

replicated on a bigger scale in the Maoist Women's Model Village at the end of the war. He was also the first person to have learned about electrical work in Thabang. Like many of his peers, Basanta was an active member of the Maoist Children's Union during the war. However, unlike some of his peers who joined various departments of the Maoist Movement or migrated abroad, he spent some of the war years learning new technical skills outside the village and then applying them in his rural community. After migrating to the South of Nepal at the height of the conflict, he combined education with work: during the daytime he studied at school and in the evening he worked in a shop that specialized in repairing electronic devices. After acquiring these skills, Basanta returned to Thabang and opened a shop for repairing radios, solar panels, and tape recorders. After the Nepalese Royal Army destroyed all of his equipment during one of its operations, several of which were carried out in Thabang after the declaration of the state of emergency in 2001, he decided to learn a different trade - that of an electrician, for which he was trained in Lumbini Technical Institute in Ghorai.

Having acquired the initial practical experience and having installed the first hydropower projects in Thabang, Basanta started passing on his knowledge to a group of young men in the village. He taught them the basics of working with power-lines and of installing the necessary equipment. Some of his 'students' went on to get proper formal training and became professional electricians. Other young people combined the technical skills with employment as teachers, shop-keepers, or tilling the family fields.

Basanta's work on the electrification of the village, running the mill, and training a whole group of young people earned him respect within the village community and made him into a 'big person' at a relatively young age: the only member of the local village council under the age of 35. He was consulted by the village leaders on all the major projects in the village, from paving the village roads with stones to organizing the annual *bhume* festival, worshipping of the Goddess of the Soil. Importantly, other young men who learned the electrical trade were highly visible in the public life of the village, and central in the running of the Youth Club.

I suggest that new kinds of technical knowledge earned young people a respectable status, provided them with opportunities to engage in 'generative politics' and, in some cases, even opened the doors of the village council to them. While these people were based in the village, agriculture was marginal to their pursuits: even if they lived in the village, they were highly mobile individuals who could work up to several months in other districts on hydro-power assignments or who undertook frequent trips to urban areas. In short, their rurality had a 'cosmopolitan' touch to it. Furthermore, it was not enforced but rather chosen, precisely because of the abundance of development, productive and social work that they could engage in – something not necessarily available to them in urban areas where they would be mostly doomed to a condition of 'waitthood'.

On the Ambiguous Nature of Community Work: One Man's Social Service is Another's Man's Forced Labour

The electrification of the whole Thabang VDC based only on internal resources is an extraordinary achievement of the village community which would not have been possible without the development vision of the local leftist leaders and the pre-existing culture of self-organization in the village. Arguably, Thabang's culture of self-organization and consensus politics was central for enabling its 'generative politics'. For instance, in order to provide electricity supply in the main village, each household in the main village had to gather ten thousand rupees (£100 in 2011) and provide almost a month's labour for carrying the equipment necessary for the project from the nearby bazaar town. As straightforward as the project may seem, it required a great degree of consensus among Thabangis on how much money should be gathered, how much work required from each household, and agreement that the families of different economic standing should contribute the same amount of money and labour to the project. By contrast, people in a comparable village in Eastern Nepal failed to organize an electricity project after six years of discussions and deliberations (Korzenevica 2016: 25). Likewise, it is quite telling that by the time of my fieldwork in 2011, all nine wards in Thabang, except for one, had electricity in the evenings and early mornings. The only ward where the project failed

was the one where the villagers started arguing about how much money which family should donate (they wanted to differentiate between rich and poor) and how much work should be carried out. In short, the lack of unity or consensus thwarted the implementation of the electrification project in this hamlet.

Much 'generative politics' in Thabang – be it the electrification of the village or the running of a small primary school in one of the distant hamlets – relied heavily on the unpaid labour of 'ordinary' Thabangis. In other words, many benevolent development initiatives from above required tangible contributions from below. The ways in which the village leaders and 'ordinary' Thabangis referred to 'public works' was telling: whereas the Maoist leaders of the village and young people from the Young Club would use the terms 'community work' (*samajko kam*) and service (*sewa*), the villagers would mostly use the term *jara-kara*, which was also the term used to describe corvée labour performed by the villagers for the extractive Rana state in the past (where *jara* stands for the work one has to do and *kara* stands for the money one can pay in order to avoid otherwise obligatory work). In addition, *jara-kara* was also used to refer to the Maoist system of unpaid labour during the conflict, which included anything from building roads to carrying the wounded from the battlefields. One of the elders in the village complained to me, 'Now there is a lot of *jara-kara*. In the past there was not that much *jara*. Now the Maoists are making trouble: one has to work for the school, for the electricity, for roads'. In the view of the elder, such an abundance of public compulsory labour distracted the villagers from their own domestic and agricultural work.

Jara-kara could be a heavy burden for households with few members and for migrant families. For them, the necessity to perform *jara* effectively meant putting their own work on hold. Often it was women whose husbands were abroad that performed the most arduous labour of carrying baskets of supplies, cords and pipes up and down the hills. In contrast, better-off households could simply buy out their obligations for time and labour; that is, pay *kara*. The commensurability between work and money caused some resentment among the villagers: whereas better-off households could 'buy out' their labour obligation during the electrification project, most of the households had to do unpaid work,

often stealing highly valuable time from the agricultural work necessary for sustaining the household.

While the Maoist cadres eulogized free labour as a sign of revolutionary transformation and the sacrifice and selflessness of the people during the war, the ‘ordinary’ villagers were much more dubious about the Maoist labour policies. Not being full-timers like the Maoist activists, the villagers had to be enthusiastic *about their own work, their own productive labour*. In a semi-subsistence economy, the work that one does is equal to the food that one eats. In the past, when families were much bigger and children were not going to school, the problem of *jara* (free labour) could have been solved relatively easily, because household human resources were plentiful. Especially during the war, the villagers had little choice over *whose* work they had to do: with many men abroad, able-bodied youth in the Maoist movement, children at school and much smaller families in vogue, a household often had only one or two active productive members. In such circumstances, neglecting one’s own work for the sake of the community imposed a heavy burden on many households. Despite this, during the war Thabangis had to spend up to a month every year doing *jara*, ‘community work’. It could entail anything from carrying the wounded from the battle fields to building paths, small bridges, and Maoist model schools, often far away from their own village. Ghambhir, a young Kham Magar girl, described the Maoist rule at war as ‘overloading (grinding) people with work (*kamharuma pelne*), telling people what to do, and not letting us do our work, giving is sorrow (*dukha dine*), asking for money, doing campaigns, gathering people to do the work’.

Despite some disgruntled voices in the village, it was clear that even the villagers who were ‘upset’ with the Maoist policies on labour realized that it was the only way to bring in ‘development’. Furthermore, in the view of the local leaders it was the only way to be ‘self-sufficient’ and less dependent on the state, which did not deliver the services that people needed. One of the local Maoist leaders explained, “There is no money and the state is weak, so we have to do the work. Without work there will be no development. Some people only want to work for themselves, not for society, even though they are the ones who use electricity, roads and schools.”

That ‘generative’ politics in Thabang was successful despite all its contradictions can be seen if one compares the electrification project in Thabang with that in the neighbouring villages. In Thabang, the electrification project took less than a year to be realized. In order to get an electricity supply, each household in the village had to contribute ten to fifteen thousand rupees as well as donate up to two months of work (depending on the hamlet of residence); that is, carry pipes and other equipment from the nearest transport hub. The process was swift and well-coordinated, for local people themselves organized and implemented it. Quite a different story is the village of Mahat, which is only a two-hour walk away from Thabang. Despite the presence of the road (which makes it easy to bring the necessary equipment, sparing the villagers from performing many weeks of *jara-kara*), electricity was installed only in two wards at the time of my fieldwork. Further across the high mountainous ridge, in Lukum, another village in Rukum district, the supply of electricity was limited to the houses of the elite, who managed to get the hydropower projects done on an individual rather than community basis. The rest of the villagers waited for electricity to be supplied by the state or by NGOs. According to the NGO project, the villagers had to perform labour – *jara*, using the local idiom – because according to recent development theories it is only by contributing a share of work or resources for the project that the locals can have a sense of ownership of an externally funded enterprise. And while the villagers in Lukum had performed *jara* for quite a few years in a row, they had been waiting for the ‘light’ for five years. In the words of one Thabangi villager, had Lukumi people organised the project themselves, they would have been enjoying the fruit of their work for several years, but since it was organised by external actors, the villagers might have to wait for another five years.

Nirash: On the Perils of Prioritizing Community Work

The contradiction between ‘community work’ and one’s personal work, that is, between commitment to the community and commitment to one’s kin, was a theme running through the narrative of Nirash, one of the young electricians who was not actively engaged in the local Youth Club. I met Nirash when he was returning from one of the hamlets after

having tried to repair the local electricity supply. The young man complained to me that none of the people from the local electricity committee came to greet him. It was clear that there was a conflict between the villagers and the young electrician: the inhabitants of the hamlet suspected that Nirash was negligent and had appropriated the funds they had gathered for the repairs. Nirash, on the other hand, maintained that this was his fifth visit to the distant hamlet – trips for which he had hardly received any payment at all. According to him, people in the hamlet did not understand that each time he came to their village to repair the electricity, he left his business in the village which specialized in repairing radios and mobile phones. Since Nirash's wife did not understand anything about electric devices, the business would come to a halt when he was absent. The inhabitants of the hamlet expected that Nirash would do 'service' or 'community work', especially given the fact that they had already contributed both money and work for the electricity project.

Feeling quite bitter about the whole situation, Nirash said that he had to mind his own business. He explained to me that in the past, he did a lot of 'community work', but life taught him a lesson: he could hardly rely on the community in case something happened to his family. His path to becoming an electrician was not straightforward, nor was his gradual rejection of the notion of 'community work'. Having seen the killing of several school students in Thabang after the onset of the war and not fancying joining the Maoist Movement, Nirash decided to run away to the Terai foothills of Nepal where the conflict was hardly felt until later in the war. There he found a job as a driver's assistant and also learned how to repair different technical devices. Soon he was promoted to being a truck driver. One day, when driving in the Terai, he was stopped by the police and asked where he was from. On having replied that he was from Thabang, he was beaten up. When he returned to visit his parents, he was once again beaten by the police, and thus decided to join the People's Liberation Army where he spent five years fighting for the Maoist cause. After the end of the conflict, Nirash spent two years in the cantonment of the Maoist fighters, working as a driver for one of their commanders. When news came that his daughter had a serious heart problem, he asked for help: 200,000 (2,000 USD) rupees was needed

for the girl's operation. Having served for so many years in the PLA, Nirash hoped that he would receive some financial support. But his 'party father' in the village gave him only one thousand rupees. Furthermore, he was told that getting help was not feasible: according to the party leaders, he was still young and would have children in future. The underlying message was that one should not sacrifice the interests of the country (or community) for the sake of one's personal interests. This was typical of what happened after the war: the loyalties of the former Maoist cadres no longer lay with the Party but rather with their own families, the fictive kinship ties within the Maoist Movement dissolved and, looking at the Maoist leaders in Kathmandu who started engaging in 'Politics as usual', many of the former revolutionaries questioned their war-time sacrifice and neglect of their kin during the war.

Before that incident, Nirash told me, he would fight for the community cause and perform a lot of community work: he would repair FM stations, technology and do whatever was required for the needs of the community. But now when he is asked to do 'community work', he is always hesitant, because life has taught him that 'community' does not always return the 'service' of individuals. Importantly, Nirash is not an active member of the Youth Club, neither does he take part in the development committees of the village. After his experiences and despite his active political stance during the war, he minds his own business and prefers individual work to community service. Unlike some members of the Youth Club who claim to be apolitical but who actually engage in politics, Nirash has left politics altogether. In contrast, young people who are active in the Youth Club not only participate in 'generative politics' but also earn prestige, social and political capital, which is likely to propel them into positions of authority in future. And while young people in the Youth Club do a lot of organizing work, which can be regarded as selfless 'service to the community', ordinary villagers are aware that it is through their labour contribution and good will that much of the 'generative politics' and development has become possible in Thabang.

Generative Politics as Substitute for the State: ‘The state is never there and never will be.’

While the ‘generative’ politics of young people in Thabang can be seen as a continuation of the local culture of community organizing and self-help, it should also be examined against the weakness of the Nepali state. In Nepal, one can see a paradoxical situation where the weakness of the central state is compensated for by the presence of resilient communities and a rich associational life. Even during the power vacuum created by the absence of local elections, many village communities had de-facto governing bodies, which performed the functions of the state. As one of the electricians behind the electrification project in Thabang put it to me: ‘People hope that the government will come and do everything for them, but the government has never been here and will never be. People do not want to do things themselves, but even if they do not want to do, they have to’. While Thabangis had learned to be self-sufficient and get by without the state during the war, in the post-conflict environment the villagers expected the state to deliver all the usual public goods, such as education, healthcare, roads etc. This was not happening at a pace that the villagers had expected before the war.

Apart from a small group of enthusiasts within the village council and the local Youth Club, few of the villagers were ready to sacrifice their personal interests or work for the sake of ephemeral ‘service to the community’ (*samajko sewa*). Indeed, quite a few young people who were previously active in the Maoist Movement talked about the necessity of ‘walking one’s own way’ (*afno batho hidne*). Instead of engaging in ‘generative politics’, these young people had to generate resources for their families by migrating abroad, for unlike many members of the Youth Club, they could not wield resources necessary to sustain one’s engagement in ‘community service’. The war-time spirit of ‘service’ and sacrifice (*balidan*) so commonly invoked by people had been gradually replaced with increasing individualism and ‘greed’, with people allegedly no longer caring about the public good but rather their own well-being. According to the teacher of the Maoist model school in Kengsi, Rukum district:

During the war the people were different, there was a sense of sacrifice (*balidan tiyo*), there were human resources, but now people are greedy, everyone is thinking only about jobs. During wartime, people did a lot of work and had few expenses, but now it is the other way round. Earlier, the people would help and wouldn't think only of themselves. Thus, during the war the teachers (in the Maoist school) were working for free and people were giving *mausami* (a share of the crop) without a problem, which would be impossible now.

Yet, as I was able to witness during my fieldwork, the spirit of 'service' or 'community work' could still be seen in the everyday life of Thabang, largely because it was channelled into a particular institution that outlived the extraordinary times of war. Even in the wake of the conflict, when the Maoist people's governments are no longer in place, *jara* remains an important local institution illustrating the continuity of the local traditions of self-organizing and self-help. It is through *jara* that the villages upgraded the local electrical grid to 22-hour functioning in 2012, it is through *jara* that some of the local roads were repaired and the primary school in one of the distant hamlets was run. Though the elders told me that *jara*, i.e., the principle of work, was increasingly undermined by *kara*, i.e., the ability of the more well-off to pay and exempt themselves from voluntary labour, *jara-kara* was present after the war as ever, causing a lot of complains by 'ordinary villagers' who had to rely on themselves rather than the state to see the cherished hope of development.

Upon leaving the field, I saw tangible proof that the Maoist attempts to organise labour during the war for large-scale construction projects resonated with the hopes and dreams of many rural Nepalis. In Uwa, the VDC adjacent to Thabang, the villagers armed with various instruments, gathered for a day of unpaid work to speed up the construction of a road to connect Sulichor, one the neighbouring bazaar towns, with Thabang. The construction of the road slowed down but the distance between the motorable road and Uwa was not that great. The villagers decided to bring the road closer. Several dozen people, armed with simple spades, picks, and shovels, laboured under the bright sun, trying to get into the heart of the rocky terrain. Music accompanied the whole event, and

participating villagers were clearly keen to show their determination to speed up the process of road construction. For, if left to the state, who knows when the road would come?

Conclusion

By exploring young people's positive contribution to everyday politics and development projects in one of the most conflict-affected areas in Nepal, I have tried to draw attention to case-studies which enable us to go beyond the 'crisis of youth' or 'waithood' narratives in theorizing the social condition of young people in the global South. If researchers focused more on young men from rural areas and on young men who 'stay behind' rather than migrate (see Gaibazzi 2015), one might be able to get a more nuanced picture of young people's modes of political engagement as well as their pathways into adulthood. While the trope of 'waithood' accurately describes the life experience of large groups of youth in the Global South, it loses its sharpness and analytical rigour if applied broadly across different geographical contexts and diverse groups of youth. Thus, as recent studies on immobility have shown (Gaibazzi 2015), there are a lot of young people who choose to stay rather than migrate, who choose to return to rural areas and thus redefine the meaning of rurality. Investigating how young people craft opportunities in the 'here and now' rather than wait for better opportunities to come, and finding out how they are able to foster political careers through social work and 'generative politics,' can help us understand how young people avoid being trapped in the condition of 'waithood'. Unfortunately, with the demise of the Maoist radical project, such activities are increasingly linked to the patronage of political parties, but such 'politics as usual' is beyond the scope of this paper.

Spending their formative years under conditions of high politicization and high levels of political engagement (e.g. the Maoist Children's Organization) had a crucial bearing on young people's active social engagement after the war, and on their ability to plot their lives and develop ideas and initiatives. The non-linearity of these young people's life trajectories – drifting in and out of the Maoist Movement, in and out of the village – could be considered another important factor, which taught young people to adapt and become creative in realizing

their life-projects. Thus, the hallmark of the young people described in this paper was their ability to utilize their skills and knowledge both for earning personal social capital and furthering community development projects, along with their ability to find opportunities to learn in the adverse conditions of war, and to seize opportunities for productive work in the community of their origin. It is remarkable that of all the members of the Youth Club, it was those young men who acquired technical skills – not ‘dubious’ social science degrees – who managed to return to the village to lead a life of ‘social worth’. They were also the ones who could afford engaging in ‘generative politics’: their technical expertise made them into respectable members of the local community, their social capital, ability to tap into local political networks, and open-mindedness and curiosity compelled them to move further at every stage, not being content with what they had already achieved.

The case discussed in this article is unique, because the ‘generative politics’ of young people in Thabang was based on a distinct (leftist) culture that encouraged youth activism and participation, did not take generational hierarchy as a means of according social status, and put a strong emphasis on community work and self-organizing. In other words, young people in the former Maoist base area had a whole range of pre-existing forms of civil society and self-governance through which they could promote their initiatives. Even if development work in Thabang was cast in apolitical terms, it was thoroughly political because it took inspiration from a communist vision of development and the indigenous ethos of self-reliance and communal work, typical of many high-altitude communities around the world. The dichotomy between ‘generative politics’ and ‘social service’, on the one hand, and politics on the other has never been sharp in Thabang, and arguably not in South Asia generally. While many of the Thabangi activists framed their political participation in the idiom of ‘service’, this paper illustrates the ways in which the dichotomy between the notion of ‘service’ and politics (Jeffrey and Dyson 2014) obscures the ways in which social service, even if cast in apolitical terms, is central to the operation of politics in South Asia and remains key to the process of becoming a ‘big person’ (Mines 1994). In the end, as shown by Byrne and Shrestha (2014, 446–447), to participate in ‘social service’ one needs free time that allows one to

frequent the meetings of all kinds of committees. It also requires commitment and energy, with quite a few of the young people enjoying the process of participation itself.

The article also demonstrates that the notion of selfless ‘service’ is highly political in contexts where the state does not deliver basic social services – the niche that is eagerly filled by guerrilla movements who seek to earn legitimacy by providing what the state has failed to give. In the context of much of rural Nepal, certainly before the local elections of 2017, one could argue that the state was run locally, with the local Youth Clubs or village councils taking on certain of its functions. Thus, in the context of Thabang it was the local community – the village council and the Youth Club – that took on the mission of generating internal resources for a whole plethora of development projects, ranging from electrifying the village, to building an additional primary school and a basketball court for local youths. While the work done for all these projects was framed as ‘community work’ and ‘service’, it was not always voluntary: Thabangis had no other choice but participate in development works planned by the local leftist elite who were so keen to bring ‘light’ to the village and save it from the predicament of ‘backwardness’ and stagnation. While the latter goal was somewhat unachievable and reminiscent of ‘building communism’, the goal of electrifying the village was successfully achieved within the village community due to the rich associational life, young people’s activism, and civil society, which paradoxically thrived in the context of a one-party Maoist regime and ‘exceptional’ times of war.

Instead of an epilogue

In 2016, when I returned to Thabang to do fieldwork for another project, I noticed that the Youth Club was no longer as active as it used to be, and civil society was no longer thriving. ‘Politics’ has stayed the same – people followed the latest decisions of the local political leadership on which of the Maoist splinter groups to follow, but *‘politics’* has changed: no longer were various unions active and no longer were people engrossed in political meetings and discussions. The Youth Club was also in a dormant state. ‘Times have changed’, I was told. Politics was no longer an intrinsic part of people’s everyday lives as it used to be during

the war and its immediate aftermath. The state of disillusionment was high – many people appeared to have lost faith in Politics altogether. The small ‘p’ is gradually becoming capitalized, with Politics becoming more of a profession that requires time and resources and generates them in return. My subsequent trip in 2017 only confirmed the mood and developments observed a year earlier: ‘apolitical generative politics’ gave way to dirty Party Politics. The former brothers-in-arms who fought for the revolutionary cause together during the war were now fiercely fighting each other (the Prachanda and Biplav sections of what was previously known as the CPN-M).

What I observed in 2011 appeared to have become history by 2018. It is only the longitudinal nature of my fieldwork that has allowed me to capture not only the speed with which life as lived and politics as practiced are changing, but also the limitations of research based on a short period of fieldwork, especially when it is approached as a social fact frozen in time. Thus, in 2011, five years after the war, young people were still building on the euphoria of the revolution and people’s enthusiasm for change. When the euphoria vanished, individual life-projects became more important than community ones. By 2016, members of the Youth club had started going abroad: some of the members of the Youth Club reached as far as the USA. Others, like Basanta, migrated to Butwal, one of the major industrial centres in the Terai district of Nepal. The economic and social capital Basanta earned in Thabang allowed his family to live comfortably in the Southern belt of the country. Nirash ‘stayed’, and he was doing well running the same shop and doing occasional electric work.

In the end, many of those who intended to stay, left, but only after having earned the capital necessary for their next move. For these young people, ‘generative politics’ and ‘social service’ were powerful means to social mobility and social becoming at a distinct stage of their lives. Once young people no longer saw a further horizon in their village, they decided to move on. Some of those who first went to the Gulf, started thinking of going to the so-called ‘big countries’. Investing thousands of dollars into a highly risky business of irregular migration, young people waited in a state of suspense, not boredom, for imminent departures, some of which were never realized. Even young people who used to be

staunch 'stayers' in the past, started setting their sights on going abroad. Politics is gradually taking over politics, with the patronage of political parties becoming increasingly key to any 'generative politics', such as building roads, and with few chances being left for 'generative' leftist politics of the style one could observe during the war. In fact, the business of contracting, with its dubious association with politicians, is rapidly becoming one of the key avenues where young people with technical skills – at least those who self-consciously choose to stay in order to lead a life of social worth – can fruitfully contribute to in 'New Nepal'. The revolution has come full circle, and counter-revolution is settling in.

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Bhaktapur revisited: Dīpaṅkara Buddha's life in a Hindu city

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If, as John Locke stated, the uniqueness of Newar Buddhism 'is related to the fact that it is embedded in a dominant Hindu society confined within a very small geographical area [as compared to India]' and therefore is 'very much a part of its (Hindu) surroundings' (2005: 267), then it must be particularly telling to look at Newar Buddhism in Bhaktapur, the former seat of the Hindu Malla kings (1200-1768 CE). The town's reputation as a Hindu city secured its place in scholarly literature at the latest with Robert Levy's monumental and widely known work *Mesocosm* (1992), which portrayed Bhaktapur as a paradigmatic Hindu climax community. Although several scholars noticed the absence of information about the Buddhist community in the book, to date almost no research about this community exists. Much of the other published literature on Bhaktapur likewise reinforces a Hindu-centric perspective. An examination of the existing literature will therefore bring forward the question of how Bhaktapur has been represented and new findings will question older assumptions to show an alternative point of view. The article will identify some contours of the hitherto largely unknown Buddhist sphere of Bhaktapur and, whenever possible, bridge gaps in the current knowledge. To that end, the Buddhist deity Dīpaṅkara – of vital importance in the whole Valley of Kathmandu, but particularly in Bhaktapur – will serve as a crucial point of reference. Likewise, the role of Pañcadāna will be evaluated, as it is the city's greatest Buddhist festival and involves a dramatic procession of five iconic Dīpaṅkara images.

Keywords: Dīpaṅkara Buddha, Bhaktapur, Pañcadāna, Newar Buddhism, representation

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Hindu climax community? Important points about Bhaktapur and its representation in scholarly literature

Bhaktapur¹ lies about 15 kilometers east of Kathmandu and is the former center of the Malla rulers (1200-1768 CE) in the Kathmandu Valley. It is famous for having preserved its special religious and vernacular architecture and in 1979 UNESCO declared the central parts of the city a World Heritage Monument Zone (Silva 2015). Great efforts are put into maintaining its living cultural heritage since it is one of the major attractions of cultural tourism in Nepal. Hence tourism is also the main source of income for the municipality since the 1990s (Dhakal and Pokharel 2009: 194f). Bhaktapur has recently received considerable attention due to the devastating effects of the earthquakes in 2015, from which it is still recovering. The total population of the municipality is 81,748 (Government of Nepal 2014: 16) which makes it the third largest city of the Kathmandu Valley, next to Lalitpur and Kathmandu, the other former royal towns of the Malla kings. Moreover, Bhaktapur is well-known for its social cohesion and homogenous population, which is almost entirely Newar.² The city is credited with an extraordinary sense of community and a collective emphasis on interpersonal relations with family, friends and neighbours. These values manifest especially in the form of the numerous ritual and festive activities that occur in Bhaktapur, perhaps more often than in any other Newar town, and which find their vivid expression within the picturesque setting of the myriad of temples and shrines clustering the city (Silva 2015).

To provide the necessary background information, an excursus to the history of Nepal is warranted. The political power in the Kathmandu Valley always lay in the hands of non-Newar Hindu rulers. From the early Licchavi periods (400-750 CE) onwards, it was always Hindu kings who ruled over a society of Hindus and Buddhists. With just a few exceptions proving the rule, this principal frame never changed throughout Nepal's history (Petech 1958: 202f). This means that even though Nepal was amongst the first places where Buddhism was introduced (Tuladhar-Douglas 2006: 9), it never assumed a political position comparable to the one it has in neighbouring Tibet or Bhutan.

1 I refer here to the municipality and not the district of Bhaktapur.

2 The Newars are the indigenous inhabitants of the Valley of Kathmandu.

Depending on the historical time frame, the situation of the Newar Buddhists was therefore challenged to varying degrees, since not all rulers were sympathetic to Buddhism. That the Buddhist tradition of the Newars uninterruptedly continued as a distinct religion in this Hindu setting – instead of having become completely absorbed – is what makes it so very special. But it is also what challenges the analysis of it, due to the complex socio-religious and historical interrelations which resulted in various adaptive strategies employed by the Buddhist community.³ For studies of Bhaktapur, the famous Hindu city in the Valley of Kathmandu, it is important to be aware of this overall context.

Although Bhaktapur's history prior to the Licchavi period is unknown, it is considered an indigenous settlement. Indicative factors are its location between two streams right in the middle of the best farmland of the Valley and that its original name (*Khoprñi*, New. for 'good cooking') appears, with variations such as *Khvapa*, in Licchavi inscriptions. Since these inscriptions are found in the eastern part of today's Bhaktapur, the ancient *Khoprñi* must have been situated in this part of the town, which was historically also located on the trade route to Tibet. The city later grew westwards and king Ānandadeva made it his capital in the twelfth century. Apparently, the present name of Bhaktapur appeared only later, probably as the result of a Sanskritisation of the indigenous name, with *bhakta* meaning 'food' or 'cooked rice' (and *pur* indicating a town).⁴ Since *bhakta* also means 'devotee' or 'devout', Bhaktapur is usually translated as 'city of devotees' (Slusser 1982: 101f) referring to the Hindu devotion found in a town that has become predominantly Hindu.

While Hindu shrines and temples are far more numerous in Bhaktapur than Buddhist locations, Slusser suggests that *Khoprñi/Khvapa* may have been mostly Buddhist in earlier times, before the city's westwards extension. She assumes that its Hinduisation must have started between the ninth and thirteenth century, at the time when the

3 An important issue in this regard is the absence of celibate monks in Newar Buddhism. For a recent assessment of this historical process see Sinclair 2016, chapter 1.6.

4 Bhadgaon is again another Nepalese name for Bhaktapur.

name Bhaktapur came into being (ibid.: 103).⁵ Bhaktapur subsequently served as the capital for Jayasthiti Malla at the end of the fourteenth century, who is known to have codified the structure of Nepalese society according to Hindu ideals (Gutschow 1982: 28). His influence and local presence might have caused further Hinduisation. While Bhaktapur was influential in earlier times when it was ruled by different Malla kings, it lost its position as the center of power shifted in the second half of the eighteenth century when Nepal was unified and Kathmandu became the capital under Prithvi Narayan Shah (Becker-Ritterspach 1978: 2).

There currently is a lack of archaeological evidence to substantiate the claim of a Buddhist past, but several pieces of information serve to support this suggestion. Not only are the town's two oldest Buddhist monasteries located in this eastern area (see Locke 1985), but my own research also showed that the greatest proportion of Buddhist high castes traditionally lives in the eastern part of town as well. Another clue is that only in this part of the city members of the Prajapati caste are found, who are affiliated with Newar Buddhism; everywhere else in Bhaktapur they are Hindu (Bāsukalā Rañjītkār 2007:106). As only minimal investigation about this has been done so far, more indicators might exist. While the nature of the Buddhist past of Bhaktapur is currently debatable, the town's traditional role as Hindu city on the other hand side is undisputed. It is always highlighted in literature as a predominantly Hindu town (e.g. Gellner 2001: 96) where Buddhism never played the same role or had the same support it has in Patan or Kathmandu (Sharkey 2001: 236). Moreover, it is assumed that the modern religious composition of the three towns is still the same as it was in the distant past (Lienhard 1991: 109) with Bhaktapur being a primarily a Hindu town, Kathmandu being half Hindu and half Buddhist and Lalitpur being mainly Buddhist (e.g. Ruegg 2008: 79). Robert Levy thus wrote his book *Mesocosm: Hinduism and the Organization of a Traditional Newar City in Nepal* (1992) centered on the Hindu Newars, with the aim of describing the Hindu social system and symbolic organisation of the town. He illustratively named Bhaktapur a 'Hindu climax

5 The name Bhaktapur appears in the colophon of the Cambridge MS Add.2833, *Prāyaścittasamuccaya*, which is a Shaiva text dated NS 278 (1158 CE). (Information kindly provided by Iain Sinclair.)

community' (ibid.: 27) that 'represents a Hindu community in its full development' (ibid.: 2) and described the symbolic organisation of Bhaktapur by showing how the city forms a sacred model of the universe that represents a mesocosm, connecting the macrocosm of the universe as a whole with the microcosm of its inhabitants. Its base is an archaic system of marked symbolism that is related to a variant of Hinduism and spatially projected onto the city, which transforms it into a maṇḍala.⁶ *Mesocosm* received high praise, but also some critique and still is a classic source on Bhaktapur. Lewis pronounced it a 'landmark in Newar Studies' but also observed that *Mesocosm* seems to 'underrepresent the role of Buddhists and Buddhist festival observances within the non-Brahmanic sectors of the mesocosm in Bhaktapur' (1992: 969f). I also noticed the absence of the Buddhist Newars' ideology and practice in Bhaktapur in Steven Parish's *Moral Knowing in a Hindu Sacred City* (1994) (see Cohen 1998), which is unsurprising as this work 'takes the social structural and religious analyses of Mesocosm as given and, after a brief introduction, focuses on the experiences of six key informants' (Gellner 1997: 543) – who are not Buddhists.

Two decades later, there still is not much information available about the Buddhists of Bhaktapur. Based on the above, I argue that *Mesocosm* not only influenced the scholarly representation of Bhaktapur as a perfect example of a Hindu city, but simultaneously diverted potential interest by obscuring the visibility of Newar Buddhism in Bhaktapur.

The emphasis, certainly reasonable, on the city's social harmony and cohesion, outlined above, may be another aspect that has contributed to the ambiguity of conceiving the town's Buddhists as a distinct part of the city's social fabric. By considering Bhaktapur's Buddhists as an integral element of the organic whole, their Buddhist identity automatically becomes blurred, which again dampens any awareness of their distinctiveness. This will be further discussed below.

6 As the whole Valley of Kathmandu is sacralised (Gutschow 1982: 15), the spatial organisation of the three royal cities in particular is characterised by various shrines, arranged in concentric circles configuring a maṇḍala (Bickel and Gaenzle 1999: 11). The religious organisation of Bhaktapur represented here goes back to the Malla kings, who are said to have established the socio-religious ordering of the whole Valley based upon Hindu texts (Vergati 1995: 156).

Another issue is the high importance given to architecture in Bhaktapur. As Bhaktapur's socio-cultural Hindu tradition is literally engraved into the built structure, the corresponding associations are constantly evoked as the city's main trademark. Tourist highlights, such as the magnificent Golden Gate or the Palace of Fifty-five Windows, are all Hindu institutions. While Locke did list 23 Buddhist monasteries (Skt. *vihāra*, New. *bāhā* and *bahī*) in the town of Bhaktapur and showed Buddhist sites to be a part of the urban life (1985:425f),⁷ they are mostly not a part of the touristic scene of Bhaktapur. The main exception when it comes to cultural touristic interest is perhaps the Caturbrahma Mahāvihāra, an architecturally extraordinarily appealing site (see Gail 1991) centrally located close to the Royal Palace and surrounded by restaurants and shops.

My fieldwork showed that Buddhist religious tourism taking place in Bhaktapur is mostly confined to Tibetans, who go for pilgrimage primarily to the Mūla Dīpaṅkara shrine.⁸ The Tibetan pilgrims usually arrive there with a guide as they would otherwise fail to find the place due to its rather hidden location. The local *saṅgha* would welcome the arrival of more pilgrims since it would also be an opportunity for economic endeavours. Currently there are no shops or restaurants close to the shrine.

The last comprehensive report about the local Buddhist monasteries comes from Sharkey, who notes that half of those earlier counted by Locke had been abandoned or converted to other purposes (2001: 236). Although Owens (2014) revisited the Buddhist monasteries in the Valley listed by Locke, he was only able to research Patan and Kathmandu and his article did not extend to Bhaktapur. My own field work in 2016 showed that some places have indeed been renovated but others have deteriorated further. However, their physical appearance is not always an indicator of whether the place is ritually active. The Prasannaśīla Mahāvihāra, for example, currently lays in ruins due to the 2015

7 Locke (1985) conducted a foundational, decade-long survey of 363 Newar Buddhist monasteries located in the Kathmandu Valley.

8 They are mostly not aware that the deity in the shrine is Dīpaṅkara (Tib. *mar me mdzad*) and conceive of it as Speaking Tārā (Nep. *Bolne Tārā*, Tib. *sgrol ma gsung byon*).

earthquake but nonetheless continues to be the main place for monastic ordination in Bhaktapur for about 200 households – a fact that is not suggested by the appearance of the place. Furthermore, Theravāda Buddhism is also on the rise in Bhaktapur and results in the growing popularity of Theravāda Vihāras in Bhaktapur, about which minimal research exists (see LeVine and Gellner 2005).

To sum up, Bhaktapur's Buddhist population is found contextualised within an overall representation of their home town as a Hindu city that derives from the legacy of former Hindu kings and rests on the city's architectural plan. Political motivations, social considerations and architectural features seem to be the most obvious factors contributing to an underrepresentation of local Buddhists in the literature.

The Newar caste system, its composition in Bhaktapur and its representation

To understand the socio-religious context of the Newar Buddhists' situation in Bhaktapur it is necessary to introduce the Newars' double-headed caste system. Two priestly castes appear in parallel order on top of the Newar caste system: the Hindu Brahmins (Skt. *brāhmaṇa*) on the one hand and the Buddhist Vajrācāryas and Śākyas – who together account for one Buddhist priest-monk caste and constitute the *saṅgha* – on the other hand. They stand in an asymmetrical relation to each other because there are only very few Brahmins (Gellner 1992: 45ff) compared to the numerous Vajrācāryas and Śākyas. This dual dimension of the caste system structurally embodies the coexistence and interaction of these two different religious traditions for a very long time and is an important characteristic of Newar society. The Brahmins and Buddhist priest-monks have definite, determinable religious identities and follow the respective traditional religious practices that serve to reaffirm their identity as either Buddhist or Hindu (von Rospatt 2004: 130). Directly below them are the Śreṣṭhas and Urāy, with predominant Hindu and Buddhist identities respectively (Gellner 1986: 106). The categorisation of the other Newar castes does not conform to these two concepts of religious identity which assume separation. The castes below the Śreṣṭhas and the Urāy take part in festivals or frequent shrines of both religions whom they hold in somewhat equal esteem. It is said that the

application of different religious labels is not important for them since they have a more holistic religious experience of their surroundings (von Rospatt 2004: 130). The group directly following the Śreṣṭhas and Urāy are collectively referred to as Jyāpu (comprising various farmer castes). Various artisan and service castes come right after the Jyāpu and below them are the unclean castes (Gellner 1986: 105). The absence of strict religious distinctions among agricultural and artisan castes is a key component of the Newar socio-religious context (Tuladhar-Douglas 2006: 10) and of considerable importance since these groups do account for the majority of the population (Gellner and Quigley 1999: 311).

Although religious identity can be seen as ambiguous, a criterion often applied by outsiders for determining whether an individual is Hindu or Buddhist is to look at the religion of the family priest and thereby force a single religious affiliation. However, other applicable criteria might lead to a different identification of the same individual, such as considering a person's religious preference, which can contradict a caste-based, socio-religious context that is hereditary – for instance, a person born as a Hindu may identify more as a Buddhist. Political considerations are also a factor. As Hinduism always had been the religion of the rulers, to adopt the devotional style of those who hold power was a strategic consequence and to register as Hindu during the census traditionally brought an advantage.⁹ To identify the religious affiliation of certain castes thus is a controversial subject related to social, religious, political and circumstantial factors.

Bhaktapur shows that contradictory information about the numbers of Buddhists and Hindus exists.¹⁰ Gutschow writes that to 'come up with a dubious estimate, one could classify some fifteen to twenty percent of the population as Buddhist' (2016: 367). But which castes are referred to

9 The only castes for whom it would be next to impossible to claim to be Hindus are the Vajrācāryas and Śākyas. All other castes normally register during censuses as Hindu, which results in large numbers of people who employ Buddhist priests and follow the path of Buddha claiming to be Hindu during censuses (Gellner 1992: 54).

10 The *National Population and Housing Census 2011 of Bhaktapur* (Government of Nepal: 2014a) understands Newar only as one single caste (see also Government of Nepal 2014b) and therefore it is impossible to give a number based on official, and current, data.

here and what is the overall structure?¹¹ According to an older publication of Gutschow, there are apparently only 0.9% Brahmins but 4% Vajrācāryas and Śākyas. Noteworthy for our present purpose are also the 10.5% of Chathariyās — which include various Hindu groups such as astrologers or former ministers of the Malla kings — and the 3.6% Panthāriyās, who subsume Hindu tantric priests (Karmācāryas, Hindu priests who perform many functions similar to the Vajrācāryas) and others. 62.8% of the population are accounted for by Jyāpus and artisans (Gutschow 1982: 45). Levy offers another segmentation of Bhaktapur's castes and says that 'in the 1971 census 92 percent of the Newar population called themselves "Hindus"; the rest, the remaining 8 percent, identified themselves as "Buddhists",' and that it is the 'great preponderance of Hindu Newars who are at the center of our treatment of Bhaktapur's symbolic organization' (1992: 59). However, out of approximately 6,450 households in Bhaktapur only 32 are Brahmin, while 260 are Vajrācārya and Śākyā households (ibid.: 96f). As Gellner already observed, this means that the Śākyas and Vajrācāryas are more than eight times the number of Brahmin households in Levy's counting (1997: 549). The representation of Bhaktapur as a Hindu city seems not to depend on a large proportion of the Hindu high caste members.

One could, as Levy later suggests, not only count Brahmins as Hindu high castes but group them with the aforementioned Hindu astrologers, Hindu tantric priests and Hindu auxiliaries to consider them 'in some contexts, as the dominant high "castes" or levels of Bhaktapur society' (1992: 80). Not only is it unclear which contexts Levy refers to here, but when looked at their number one can hardly speak of dominance. In *Mesocosm* these groups appear as Chathar (677 households) and Pa(n)cthar (247 households). Even if they were grouped together, they would not legitimately account for a preponderance of Hindu Newars since they comprise not even a quarter of the 6,450 households. The reason for the Hindu predominance found in Bhaktapur must thus be the numerous Jyāpus, which are a problematic determinant. In Bhaktapur, they are stratified on different levels, resulting in their own

11 Next to Vajrācāryas and Śākyas, Gutschow mentions only Mānandhars, Rañjītkārs and Citrakārs as being classifiable as Buddhists, which are said to comprise 8% of the total population. It is unclear what the additional percentage refers to.

sophisticated Jyāpu hierarchy — they comprise at least 3,000 households (ibid.: 97). Even Levy found them difficult to classify, but instead of recognising them as both potentially Hindu and Buddhist, he arrived at a conclusion that annuls any chance to count them as Buddhist. Without further explanation he states that, although next to Hindu priests, also Vajrācārya priests perform priestly services in different ways for various castes, these castes ‘are not, therefore, necessarily to be considered “Buddhists”’ (ibid.: 86f). Thus, instead of defining Jyāpus who consult Buddhist priests as Buddhist or at least as sympathetic to Buddhism, Levy emphasises the opposite.

Levy’s depiction of the Hindu predominance relies upon the census data and overlooks that the Jyāpus’ situation needs in-depth research. It also obscures the fact that Śākyas and Vajrācāryas locally outnumber the Brahmins. That some Hindu castes may, contextually, ascend in the caste hierarchy and thereby happen to dominate the Buddhist priestly castes, as Levy proposed, must be related to a status difference. Their dominance seems only justified if simultaneously a lower significance is assigned to the Buddhist high castes. In this regard, a closer look shows that in Bhaktapur the status of the Śākyas and Vajrācāryas in the life of the community is indeed ‘significantly lower’ than in Patan or Kathmandu (Allen 1996: 57). This is a crucial issue as qualitative differences inform the exclusive emphasis of certain viewpoints and reach their quantitative peaks during censuses. The implications for the visibility of the local Buddhism are too complex to be analysed here. My own impression is that since a peaceful atmosphere without conflict is very much a local priority, Bhaktapur’s Buddhist residents prefer not to elaborate on the subject of status, to avoid any potential divisiveness. Perhaps they even go so far as to insist upon their own low status.¹²

12 Levy has described the Śākyas and Vajrācāryas of Bhaktapur also as being outside of the ‘core system’ (1992: 105f), an issue later discussed by Gellner, who identified this as a purely Brahmanical construction – unimaginable in places other than Bhaktapur, as Buddhist and Hindu priestly castes are usually of equal social status (1997: 549). Locke mentioned a similar account, but when he asked local Śākyas and Vajrācāryas, they agreed to belong outside of the caste structure (1980: 12). The Brahmanical order thus has not only been imposed by Levy’s Brahmin informants upon the authoring of *Mesocosm*, but currently seems to be the accepted social order in Bhaktapur.

While systematic accounts of Bhaktapur's religious stratification convey the picture of a clearly structured society, I suggest that the structures therein described should not automatically be regarded as the foundation of social harmony. This is not only a known atmospheric quality but also a base for the collective identification with Bhaktapur (see Silva 2015). To credit a Hindu social order with the responsibility for the existing sense of a local group identity or social cohesion eventually amounts to relating everything communally happening in Bhaktapur to Hinduism. This simply cannot be accurate as the city's Buddhists have their own distinct view, practices and traditions. Their interest in maintaining the local social cohesion is likely to come from another source of motivation than conforming to Hindu social norms. To conceptually separate the aspect of social cohesiveness from the political power of a Hindu social system not only prevents the downgrading of the local Buddhists' distinctiveness but enables a nuanced consideration of their agency in a Hindu environment.

Apart from the elite, the point is to see that most people in Bhaktapur belong to castes that are able to choose among religions. While for Levy they are basically all Hindu, Locke offers an alternative view. In his opinion the Buddhists of Bhaktapur do not comprise a local minority since all of the local Śākya and Vajrācāryas and nearly all of the Jyāpus of Bhaktapur do consult Vajrācārya priests, which together amounts to 55% of the population (1980: 35). However, in Levy's *Mesocosm* this consultation does not automatically make them Buddhists, as has been discussed above. Information from yet another source shows that there are clear ideas about the religious identifications of castes other than the highest. Bāsukalā Rañjītkār states that not only the Vajrācāryas and Śākya are Buddhist in Bhaktapur, but also the Mānandhars, Citrakārs, Jyāpus, Rañjītkārs, Śīlpakārs and Sthāpits (2007: 106). My own research amongst Vajrācārya priests yielded that today about 50% of Bhaktapur's Jyāpus consult Buddhist priests, and that next to the Jyāpus the clientele of Vajrācāryas further includes Mānandhars, Citrakārs and Rañjītkār. No thorough study about the exact numbers of concerned people and their dispersion in town exists, but it clearly seems to be more than the 240 households suggested before by Levy (1992: 87).

In a nutshell, to consider Bhaktapur's Buddhists as an insignificant minority is only possible if the status of certain Hindu castes is elevated above the Newar norm so that they can be grouped together with Brahmins to outnumber the Buddhist high castes, and if the Jyāpus and all others are collectively identified as Hindu.

Notes on previous studies about Newar Buddhism in Bhaktapur

Newar Buddhism in Bhaktapur has, in its entirety, not been a subject of research yet. The numerous architectural-anthropological studies of Niels Gutschow concerning Bhaktapur primarily focus on the spatial aspects of the city, though combined with a social component and paying attention to Buddhist places or customs in Bhaktapur (e.g. 1982, 1997, 2006 and also Gutschow and Michaels 2005, 2008 and 2012). Since these works are not explicitly aimed at introducing the Buddhist side of the city the information is limited from a Buddhist Studies perspective. The emphasis of the local integration of both faiths further complicates matters. Gutschow's most recent publication about Bhaktapur does include a chapter specifically titled *Buddhist Bhaktapur* (2016: 365–392), which mostly deals with the city's five Dīpaṅkara Buddhas and their public appearance during the festival of Pañcadāna. This chapter will be discussed further below and serves as an example for the problematic of the holistic approach. Anne Vergati's works also provide some information (1995, 2000). Contrary to Gutschow, Vergati emphasises that Buddhism and Hinduism are two different belief systems that, despite appearances and a very long history of coexistence, entail ideological conflicts and are 'in no way impartial' (1995: 24). These two contrasting approaches once again exemplify the crux of the matter. Junu Bāsukalā Rañjītkār (2007) specifically examines the festival of Pañcadāna in Bhaktapur at length – but not only does the work appear solely in Nepali, it has also been out of print for the last years. Puṣpa Ratna Śākya (2015) is another Nepalese source, on the Buddhist festival of Samyak in Bhaktapur. Gregory Sharkey (2001) again discusses the daily *pūjās* in the Kathmandu Valley and devotes a section to 'Variations in Bhaktapur' (2001, chapter 5.3). The research monograph *Khvapyā Bāhā Bahī* (Bajrācārya et al. 2004), only available in the Newār language, builds on

Locke's foundational research on Newar Buddhist monasteries in the Kathmandu Valley (1985).

These sources do not convey a coherent and complete picture of Newar Buddhism in Bhaktapur, only a few of its aspects.¹³ In particular, the social organisation of the Buddhist community is hardly known and incomplete or even inaccurate information still circulates. An example from my own findings contradicts Locke's statement, to this day uncontested, that Bhaktapur has 'no overall organization such as the Ācārya Guṭhī of Kathmandu' (1985: 429). Bhaktapur does in fact have an *ācārya guthi*.¹⁴ This newly found information signifies that the Buddhist community of the city is not as fragmented or debased as assumed. Another relevant piece of information in this regard, which hitherto also seems lacking in the literature, is the fact that the head of the *ācārya guthi* of Bhaktapur must traditionally reside in the Mūla Dīpaṅkara shrine, which is a building that lies in the eastern part of town and belongs to the Prasannaśīla Mahāvihāra complex. The shrine houses the city's oldest Dīpaṅkara Buddha image. In the eastern part of the town we thus find not only references to the Buddhist past, in the form of the oldest Buddhist places, but also the hierarchically highest Buddhist priest locally present, as well as the most important local Buddhist image.

13 Moreover, these descriptive accounts do not establish links to the overall socio-political context of Bhaktapur, namely the political domination of the Nepal Majdur Kisān Party (Nepal Workers Peasants Party) since the 1970s and its role in social cohesion. Due to the scope of this article it is not possible to discuss this point here. For a general introduction to the subject see Gibson (2015, chapter 4).

14 Generally, a *guthi* in the Newar context is a socio-religious association with male members, meant to ensure the obligatory performance of various activities, such as religious rituals. As for the *ācārya guthi* of Bhaktapur, its members are all local Vajrācāryas who have received the initiation of *ācārya abhiṣeka*. Unless they are members of this *guthi* they cannot act as priests for others (Nep. *purohita*). The *ācārya guthi* of Bhaktapur gathers only once a year for communal rituals and a feast. Locke has explained that the members of the *ācārya guthi* of Kathmandu have an annual meeting which is 'not much more than a social event, a common pūjā and a feast, and that the significance of this association is that all Vajrācāryas belong to it (1980: 24). The situation of the *ācārya guthi* in Bhaktapur is similar.

Among Bhaktapur's set of five Dīpaṅkaras it is particularly the Mūla Dīpaṅkara¹⁵ who is always highlighted as the principal one, being the oldest and most revered of the five (e.g. Gutschow 2016: 372) – he is mentioned in all the sources listed above, and has vital impact, not only in a religious sense but also in the context of the local social fabric. This is so because the position of the head of the *ācārya guthi* of Bhaktapur depends upon an intimate connection to this Dīpaṅkara. Only Vajrācāryas who have been initiated into the Mūla Dīpaṅkara Guthi are eligible for this hierarchically highest position. Once the position is acquired by seniority of initiation, the priest not only has to move into the first floor of the Mūla Dīpaṅkara shrine building but also holds the sole right to perform the *pūjās* for the deity.¹⁶ The place is regarded by the local *saṅgha* as the centre of Newar Buddhism in Bhaktapur, and a sizable and diverse lay community of approximately 100 people who daily come for the *nitya pūjā*, as well as the Tibetan pilgrims frequently visiting, add to the significance of the shrine. (Fig. 1) & (Fig. 2)

Dīpaṅkara Buddha and his role in Bhaktapur

Dīpaṅkara Buddha is a prominent deity in the Valley of Kathmandu and of great popularity since the seventeenth century, with the history of Dīpaṅkara imagery ultimately going back to early periods of South Asia. Newar Buddhists specifically understand Dīpaṅkara as an Ādibuddha, which is reflected in the distinctive Newar iconography popularised between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries (Brown 2014: 141ff). Soteriologically, this means he is regarded as the 'highest deity of the Buddhist pantheon' since the self-existent Ādibuddha embodies the absolute (Bhattacharyya 1958: 43ff).

In Nepal, Dīpaṅkara Buddha is typically depicted in a standing position with his hands forming the *abhayamudrā* (the gesture of 'non-fear') and *varadamudrā* (the gesture of 'granting boons') (Shakya 1994:

15 Mūla Dīpaṅkara currently is the name used by the community. The local pronunciation is either Mul Deepankara or Mul Deepankar. A lot of older documents use the term Ajājudeva (see Bajrācārya et al. 2004) which indicates that this is probably the popular former name of the deity. Ajudyah/ Ājudyahyā is also sometimes found in the literature (e.g. Gutschow 2016, Sharkey 2001).

16 The *pūjās* are in this case both exoteric and esoteric – a peculiarity that cannot be discussed here further but which is not a feature found with other Dīpaṅkaras.

63).¹⁷ The great quantities of Dīpaṅkaras that are found in the Valley can be grouped into large and small images. Large images have hands and head (often made of brass or copper, gilded with gold, but sometimes also made of clay and painted red) attached to a hollow basketry torso which allows an individual to stand inside and carry the torso, giving the impression of the deity walking. They are common offerings to Buddhist monasteries by wealthy donors and are usually kept there in side shrines (Slusser 1982: 293). Large images are supposed to leave their shrines two times a year, for Pañcadāna and Samyak – the most important rituals of worship related to Dīpaṅkara, next to the Dīpaṅkara Yātrā, a festival that does not feature the actual images (Michaels 2013: 329).

Dīpaṅkara is the principal deity connected to the virtue of *dāna*¹⁸ in Newar Buddhism (Shakya 2014: 47) and, as the archetypical recipient of alms, provides a tangible support for engaging in the act of offering to the community. This ritually happens on a grand scale during Pañcadāna and Samyak. In the Newar Buddhist context, both celebrations are reminiscent of the values expounded by the *Kapīśāvadāna* and are examples of the localised domestication of Buddhist narratives (see Lewis 2015). The *Kapīśāvadāna* summarises several previous lives of Śākyamuni Buddha with the intention to point out the value of selfless giving. The tale starts at the time of a famine when a starving monkey offers a jackfruit to Dīpaṅkara Buddha and as a result is born as a child with the name Dharmasrī. In this life, he is poor and has nothing to offer to Dīpaṅkara Buddha than a pile of dirt, which he presents him with a pure mind. As a reward the child is reborn as the wealthy king Sarvānanda, who this time invites Dīpaṅkara Buddha for a meal and offers his kingdom (von Rospatt 2003: 4). The act of making offerings to Dīpaṅkara on Pañcadāna and Samyak is obviously to be done in emulation of king Sarvānanda's devotion and generosity. Since Dīpaṅkara eventually predicted the king's future enlightenment as Śākyamuni Buddha, to follow in his footsteps carries the assuring quality of eventually reaching enlightenment as well. The offerings made during

17 For information about the art historical aspects of Dīpaṅkara Buddha see Brown (2011).

18 The Pāli and Sanskrit term *dāna* denotes 'gift,' 'giving' as well as 'generosity' and is, for example, the very first of the *pāramitās* (Skt. perfections).

Pañcadāna and Samyak are for the Buddhist *saṅgha* as well as for Dīpaṅkara Buddha, with the first being the eventual recipients of all alms. The festivals thus have a clear soteriological component but at the same time also serve to reaffirm the social status of the Vajrācāryas and Śākyaas as the embodiment of the monastic community. These two spheres of meaning should be distinguished in order to avoid reductionist interpretations of one to the other.

On a religious level, the act of offering is purely of interest because of its soteriological quality. Numerous Buddhist texts discuss *dāna* at length, which shows its central position in the Buddhist path to salvation, specifically in Mahāyāna Buddhism. While an elaboration is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to see that the offerings made in a Buddhist context refer to a particular view, with non-reciprocity being one of the key elements:

One classic example of an ‘unreciprocated’ gift in Buddhism is the layperson’s gift of alms to the Saṅgha. When a layperson gives alms to a monk, the monk constitutes a non-transactional partner who receives and enjoys the alms but is in no way expected to reciprocate. Though it often seems to the outside observer that the monk ‘repays’ the layperson’s gift by preaching a sermon or performing a ritual – the gift of alms and the gift of dharma thus constituting a direct and balanced exchange – the Buddhist tradition itself generally holds that the two gifts are independent of each other, and one is in no way a ‘repayment’ for the other (Ohnuma 2006: 144f).¹⁹

Next to this religious dimension, Pañcadāna and Samyak also work on another level where they serve to reinforce the social identities of not

19 In short, it is sufficient to understand that unenlightened beings have the capacity to make three kinds of gifts: 1. reciprocated gifts, which means gifts that are of worldly nature and have no soteriological quality whatsoever; 2. transcendently reciprocated gifts (= unreciprocated gifts), which are gifts made with the intention to accumulate spiritual merit; and 3. perfect gifts, which are beyond both reciprocated or unreciprocated gifts and are, in the case of an unenlightened being, only possible when gifts are offered with the Bodhisattva-intention, attaining enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings (Ohnuma 2006: 144ff).

only of the Buddhist *saṅgha* but also of the laity. Here unreciprocated gifts have a sociological impact and bind together the Buddhist community. Toffin therefore interpreted these festivals as links that ‘combine hierarchical and egalitarian socio-religious values’ and said that they ‘single out the Newar Buddhist community from the rest of the Newar population, which is Hindu’ (2015: 425).

Alexander von Rospatt further highlighted that for ‘the Buddhist sense of identity the cult of Dīpaṅkara is even more important than the worship of the Karuṇāmaya (alias Avalokiteśvara) deities of Buṅgamati and Jana Bāhāl because these also have a non-Buddhist identity in the form of “Rāto” and “Seto Matseyendranātha”’ (2003: 7). Thus, Dīpaṅkara is an unambiguously Buddhist deity whose relevance cannot be overestimated. As an expression of the Newar Buddhist identity he signifies the survival of Newar Buddhism in a Hindu environment. That he manifests through a collective effort – an interrelation that Owens termed human-divine interdependency (1995) – in the form of a living deity²⁰ not only reinforces individual and collective Buddhist identity but also seems to socialise the soteriological significance of Dīpaṅkara, as his mere presence inspires generosity and devotion.

Given Dīpaṅkara’s undisputed religious affiliation, one would assume that his presence epitomises the existence of a Buddhist community. Not so in *Mesocosm*: The Dīpaṅkara Buddhas are indexed, but the reader is then redirected to the entry on the Five Pāṇḍava Brothers to eventually uncover the two pages that deal with them. What does Levy have to say about them on these pages?

In other festivals the same festival image will be defined differently by Buddhists and Hindus so that the jatra is relevant to both groups. An example is the predominantly Buddhist festival centering on images

20 This means for example that the deity repeatedly undergoes all the *daśakarma vidhis*, the rites of passage, and other consecrations applied to important living images (e.g. Locke 1980: 208f).

of the Five Dhyani Buddhas²¹ which are identified by Hindus as the Five Pandava Brothers (1992: 435).

On the fourteenth day of the fortnight, Pa(n)cara(n) Ca:re, there is an important Buddhist festival, that of the five Dipankar Buddhas. Five giant and dramatic images of these Buddhas (supported by and enclosing the body of a dancer) march through the city, each coming from a different direction to a central point. These images are associated by local Newar Hindus with the Five Pandava brothers of the Mahabharata epic. Hindus make respect gestures to the images as they are moved through the streets and take prasada from their attendants (ibid: 452).

This is all that is written about Dīpaṅkara in *Mesocosm*. While it does not reveal much about Dīpaṅkara, each passage superimposes a Hindu identification. Not only does it underline Lewis's guess that the Buddhists and Buddhist festival observations of Bhaktapur are underrepresented in *Mesocosm* but it echoes inclusivistic Hindu ideas (see Hacker 1983). How is this attempt to Hinduise the five Dīpaṅkara Buddhas to be understood? The identification of the Dīpaṅkaras with the five Pāṇḍava brothers, from the ancient Indian *Mahābhārata* epic, is relatively often mentioned in literature and seems to be regarded as a special feature of Bhaktapur (e.g. Slusser 1982, Gutschow 2016 and 1982, Wegner 2009). Bāsukalā Rañjītkār is the only one who sets out to explain this association as erroneous – but she also notes that the Buddhist community, who is aware that this identification exists, does not intend to correct this belief. As a potential reason she offers the guess that it might be for the sake of overall harmony (2007: 85).

Although multiple identities of a deity are not unusual in a Nepalese setting and can often lead to economic advantages (Tuladhar-Douglas 2005), this case is unique because it concerns a clearly unambiguous Buddhist deity. Except for Bhaktapur there is no place where Dīpaṅkara has a Hindu alter ego. While, viewed from one angle, this peculiarity of

21 It was pointed out to me several times by members of the local Buddhist community that the five Dīpaṅkaras are not to be equated with the *pañca tathāgatas* and that they are unrelated.

identification supports a hypothesis that deities are anchored in their environment and grounded in the localised context of their surroundings, it is of interest to also examine the actual consequences of this identification on a ritual level before arriving at any conclusion. When, how, why and by whom the Dīpaṅkaras are worshipped as Pāṇḍavas will be discussed below.

The festival of Pañcadāna: five Dīpaṅkaras walking through a Hindu city

Pañcadāna²² is the biggest communal Buddhist celebration in Bhaktapur. It revolves around a spectacular procession of the city's five Dīpaṅkara Buddhas (Fig. 3). As a 'remarkable variation' of Pañcadāna (Vaidya 1986: 81) it is different from how it is celebrated in the other cities. The festival is of acknowledged local importance and annually takes place during the holy month of Gūṃlā, which approximately falls on August. It is only in Bhaktapur that a well-known set of five iconic larger-than-life size Dīpaṅkara images exists who walk out of their monasteries on Pañcadāna for an epic day-long procession that involves citywide participation and lasts about ten to twelve hours.²³

The route of the five Dīpaṅkaras always starts in the eastern part of town, close to the Dattatreya Square in an area called Suryamadhi, where the Dīpaṅkaras initially gather. Throughout the procession they walk in a hierarchical order and stop at various places for about ten to fifteen minutes so that people have an occasion to make their offerings.²⁴ The

22 *Pañcadāna* (Skt., commonly interpreted as 'offering of five kinds') is the spelling mostly used today and derives from New. *paṃjādān* (offering of boiled rice to the learned) (Lienhard 1999: 179). For the etymology and related conceptions see Bāsukalā Rañjītkār (2007: 25ff). The five kinds of offerings are said to be husked rice, unhusked rice, wheat, salt and coins, but neither is this what must always be offered nor must the offerings necessarily be of five kinds. Items such as flowers, biscuits, chickpeas and various other things also appear (Lienhard 1999: 179).

23 The Dīpaṅkara procession of Pañcadāna is now sometimes called Dīpaṅkara Jātrā, previously simply *dyo pihām bijyākegu* (New. taking the deity outside).

24 The stops in between are loosely established, but there currently is no written evidence of a standardised itinerary. Gutschow counted 59 stops in 1989 (2016: 375). Bāsukalā Rañjītkār named and chronologically listed 89 stops (including double stops) (2007: 160ff).

festival is not only charged with delight and an intense celebratory spirit, but is also highly interactive. Unlike a parade, it is brought about primarily by the energy and enthusiasm of the people and first and foremost their colourful and multifarious offerings. The procession cannot be conceived of without the ocean of offerings coming from the hundreds of plates directed towards the Buddhas and the *saṅgha*. Most of the offering plates that I saw in Bhaktapur on Pañcadāna included a *gulpa*, which is a tiny alms bowl, reminiscent of the Buddha's alms bowl. Unlike all of the other items, which are not specifically Buddhist, a *gulpa* will never be placed on a Hindu offering plate. (Fig. 4)

The procession always ends close to Taumadhi Square, at the junction of Sankotha, where the Buddhas ritually separate. It is here that the four other Dīpaṅkaras take turns circumambulating the Mūla Dīpaṅkara once and then slightly bow to receive his blessing before they continue separately to their monasteries.

Although other Dīpaṅkara images exist in Bhaktapur, they do not join the procession on Pañcadāna. It is always the established group of five Dīpaṅkaras that sets out for the walk and they appear in a determined order. Participation in the festival is not restricted in any way but it is very clearly Buddhist. Inter alia, this is so because the procession is of course conducted by the Buddhist communities to whom these Buddhist deities belong. The only men to carry the Dīpaṅkaras are selected members of the *saṅgha* respectively attached to each image. Moreover, the five Dīpaṅkaras of Bhaktapur are of course housed in Buddhist monasteries where they are taken care of by Buddhists and worshipped in a Buddhist context, every day. They are never worshipped with Hindu rituals while in their shrines. That the Dīpaṅkaras leave their monasteries twice a year, on Pañcadāna and Samyak, not only means that they inhabit a wider space but it also signifies the only occasions throughout the year where people find the opportunity to receive Dīpaṅkara's blessing by touch. (Fig. 5)

It also is the only day in the year where they are venerated as the five Pāṇḍavas. Contrary to Vergati's statement that Pañcadāna is exclusively observed by Buddhists (1995: 198) there is indeed also Hindu worship taking place on this day, but little is known about the exact mode of worship and the concerned people. Gutschow provides details about

which Dīpaṅkara is identified with which Pāṇḍava brother, writes that ‘this multiple identification demonstrates to what extent the deities of the city belong to the entire population’, and goes on to infer that the ‘overwhelming ambience [during Pañcadāna] renders the question of the religious affiliation of the actors meaningless’ (2016: 374). The intention of conveying a sense of local and integrative harmony is understandable, and on the level of emotional experience it might not make much difference whether a person is Hindu or Buddhist, but in a socio-religious context this holistic approach does not advance the understanding of the local situation of Newar Buddhism – especially in the light of the representational favour given to Hinduism in Bhaktapur.²⁵ It also poses the question as to how numerous the segment of the population is that accounts for the multiple identification and has, according to Gutschow’s interpretation, the power to blur the line between religious distinctions and thereby transform a Buddhist celebration into a festival where religious affiliation is suddenly irrelevant. Gutschow does not give more details on this and it is not revealed how the Dīpaṅkaras are worshipped as Pāṇḍavas and by whom.²⁶ But, in order to again highlight the extent of Hinduistic identification surfacing during Pañcadāna, he points out that after the five Dīpaṅkaras have left their initial meeting point ‘more than a hundred women form a line to worship Kuntī, the guardian deity of the neighboring Ādipadma Mahāvihāra [located close to Suryamadhi] and mother of the first three [Pāṇḍava] brothers’ (ibid.). When it comes to the Pāṇḍava-identification, Bāsukalā Rañjītkār, as well, mentions only the Ādipadma Mahāvihāra in relation to this. According to her, only one group of local people living around the Ādipadma Mahāvihāra regard the five Dīpaṅkaras as five Pāṇḍavas. On the morning of Pañcadāna they make offerings to the Śākyamuni Buddha statue in the Ādipadma Mahāvihāra, which they consider as Kuntī, before proceeding to the Dīpaṅkaras at Suryamadhi. They credit Kuntī, alias Śākyamuni, with the rebuilding of the Ādipadma Mahāvihāra after its historical destruction.

25 An earlier publication of Gutschow in fact interpreted the Pāṇḍava-identification as part of a Buddhist adjustment to the dominant Hindu structure of the town (see 1982: 69).

26 However, an earlier publication stated that all of the local Hindus identify the Dīpaṅkaras as the five Pāṇḍavas (Gutschow 1982: 69).

Bāsukalā Rañjītkār here clarifies that Vajrācāryas, Śākyas, Mānandhars and Citrakārs refer to the statue as Śākyamuni and only some others identify it as Kuntī – but it is not said which castes. However, they certainly are not Brahmins, as my own local sources, which include various members of the Mūla Dīpaṅkara Guthi, revealed that high-caste Hindu Newars never participate in Pañcadāna – except for a few individual families who pursue agriculture and consider Dīpaṅkara to be patron of the harvest. Hence, it may be fair to say that only a low number of people in town accept the identification with the Pāṇḍavas and ritually also act upon it and that presently it is not known who they are.²⁷

The Pāṇḍava-identification, so often prominently mentioned, is a subject not well understood, neither in its current form nor in its origin.²⁸ It seems that the acknowledgement of this ‘multiple identification’ (e.g. Wegner 2009) mirrors the disproportionate attention given to the Hindu sphere of Bhaktapur and diverts from the socio-religious significance of the whole festival when seen from a Buddhist viewpoint, where the Dīpaṅkara Buddhas are symbols of the Buddhist faith.

It further overlooks that Pañcadāna in Bhaktapur not only entails a procession of grandeur not found in Kathmandu and Patan but features several noteworthy and unique elements. It is, for example, only in Bhaktapur that the five Dīpaṅkaras dance exclusively on Pañcadāna. Their dance requires the special sounds of the *ponga* and the musicians playing this long thin wind instrument are a local group of Mānandhars. Whenever they start to play on their horns, the Dīpaṅkaras begin to dance as this is said to be their favourite music and they wait specifically

27 Ritually active people should be distinguished from others who do not participate in Pañcadāna (such as Karmācārya, Malla or Śreṣṭha) but, according to the members of the Mūla Dīpaṅkara Guthi, are most likely to propagate the identification.

28 There may be a historic reason for this identification as it seems that at one point, a dance-drama (Skt. *nāṭaka*) involving the five Pāṇḍavas has been performed in Bhaktapur; the source being MS NGMPP G44/3 (catalogued under the title *Pañcapāṇḍavasamvādanāṭaka*). But without further analysis the case remains uncertain. (Information kindly provided by Iain Sinclair.)

for the musical cue.²⁹ Their choreography is a clockwise rotation where they also slightly bow in the various directions to give their blessings and show respect to the Buddhas of the four directions as well.³⁰ Apparently nothing similar is found in the other cities (see Vaidya 1986). (Fig. 6)

Likewise, the set of five Dīpaṅkaras and their hierarchy is unlike what we find in other places. Given the peculiarities of Pañcadāna in Bhaktapur, which corresponds to the Dīpaṅkara cult on a larger scale, both the festival and the set of deities deserve more attention.

That the city's Dīpaṅkaras inhabit a wider city space during Pañcadāna is itself also another striking aspect that only manifests in Bhaktapur. What does it mean that these Buddhas walk for a day, and even dance, only in the Hindu city? While the procession clearly serves to reinforce the internal structures of the Buddhist community – which again is a point that remains uninvestigated by the holistic approach – little is known about its outward significance. As Buddhist deities here supposedly move through a Hindu maṇḍala, which they are not a part of, the concept of a single sacred space is challenged. The local Buddhist view on this is unknown. Considering the spatial points of reference, it shows that the five Dīpaṅkaras' monasteries are spread throughout the city. However, on Pañcadāna they do not meet in the middle of town but always gather in the eastern part first. After walking through the whole town, their separation in the evening happens quite close to the Royal Palace, in a central location of the Hindu maṇḍala. It is impossible to interpret the socio-religious significance both of the route and the individual stops since the history of the development of Pañcadāna is unknown (see Bāsukulā Rañjītkār 2007). However, it is tempting to see their initial meeting in the east as another reminiscence of a Buddhist past of the city.

29 I saw only one exception to this, which was when the Mūla Dīpaṅkara returned to his shrine at the end of the procession. On this occasion, he danced without the sound of the *ponga*.

30 Gutschow stated that the Buddhas' dance mostly is meant to pay respect to the various places of the Mātrkās and Gaṇeśas that they pass en route (1982: 69). This was not confirmed during my fieldwork, members of the Mūla Dīpaṅkara Guthi said this was inaccurate.

Conclusion

Bhaktapur is constructed in scholarly literature so as to not only underrepresent Newar Buddhists but also conceal their visibility with a Hindu-centric overlay. Critics have pointed out that 'Bhaktapur is not a living museum' and that the frequently cited scholarly representations of Bhaktapur as timeless or unchanging depict the city as an isolated and stagnant community (Dhakal and Pokharel 2009: 181). But while an overemphasis on the preservation of traditional ways of life in Bhaktapur has been criticised, the local Buddhists still seem to be conceptually captured by the religious stratification of the town as found in *Mesocosm*.

To move beyond discussions of identity politics it is necessary to conduct further research among the actual Buddhist community of Bhaktapur and to generate more knowledge about their distinct history, social organisation and viewpoints. It is, for example, completely unclear if or how the situation of the local Newar Buddhists has changed since the abolishment of the Hindu monarchy in 2008 and which changes are now to be expected following the new constitution of 2015. Regarding future research, ideally it should also be questioned to what extent *Mesocosm*'s spatio-ideological isolation of the city detracts from the ritual and economic connections between the Buddhist people of Bhaktapur and its surroundings.

Of special interest are the wider implications of the importance of Dīpaṅkara Buddha in Bhaktapur. Not only does Pañcadāna in Bhaktapur involve elements not found in the other cities – which is significant, considering that Newar Buddhism in Bhaktapur survived in a highly Hindu environment where it would be rather expected to degenerate – but the current practice is clearly long established. The historical importance of Bhaktapur's Dīpaṅkaras is attested to by an early reference to seven Dīpaṅkaras who gathered in the presence of Jayasthiti Malla in or around Bhaktapur in NS 511 (1391 CE).³¹ No previous study has investigated the association of the development of the Dīpaṅkara cult in Bhaktapur with the whole Valley of Kathmandu. To research the

31 This information is found as a side note in a manuscript that records another event (see Manandhar 1974: 101). (The concerned part of the document and its translation were kindly provided by Iain Sinclair.)

history of Bhaktapur, to which Dīpaṅkara is so closely tied, might contribute to a systematic understanding of the development of the cult. It is long known that the (un-)popularity of different images often is subject to socio-political, economical or environmental changes (e.g. Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). Taking these structural interdependencies into account, it should be considered that the Buddhists of Bhaktapur perhaps were, compared to the other two cities, most under pressure to preserve their identity while being required to adjust to the Hindu surroundings. The fact that Dīpaṅkara became especially prominent in this Hindu city could thus be an indicator for the socio-religious factors that catalysed the development of his cult.



Fig. 1 Śukla Jyoti Vajrācārya worshipping the Mūla Dīpaṅkara with a yak-tail fan. Due to the fragile health condition of his father, the head priest Karna Jyoti Vajrācārya, who is ninety-four years old, Śukla Jyoti took on his father's duties.

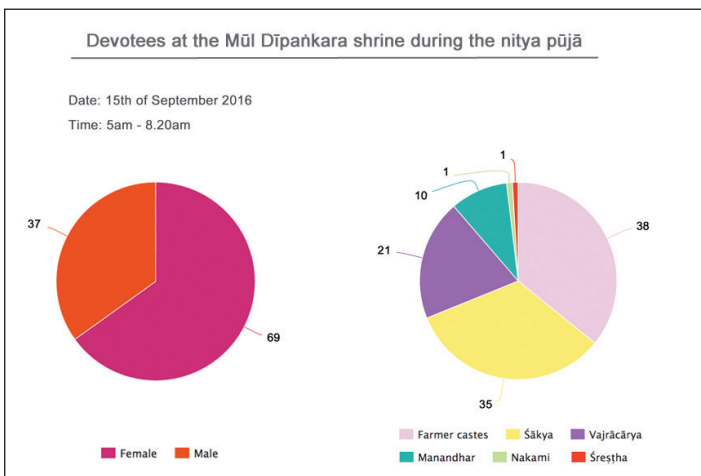


Fig. 2 Pie charts visualising the visitor structure at the Mūla Dīpaṅkara shrine during the nitya pūjā on the fifteenth of September, 2016. Out of the thirty-eight people belonging to the farmer castes, nineteen had different surnames, which are not given in the chart individually. The charts show the average number of people coming every morning.

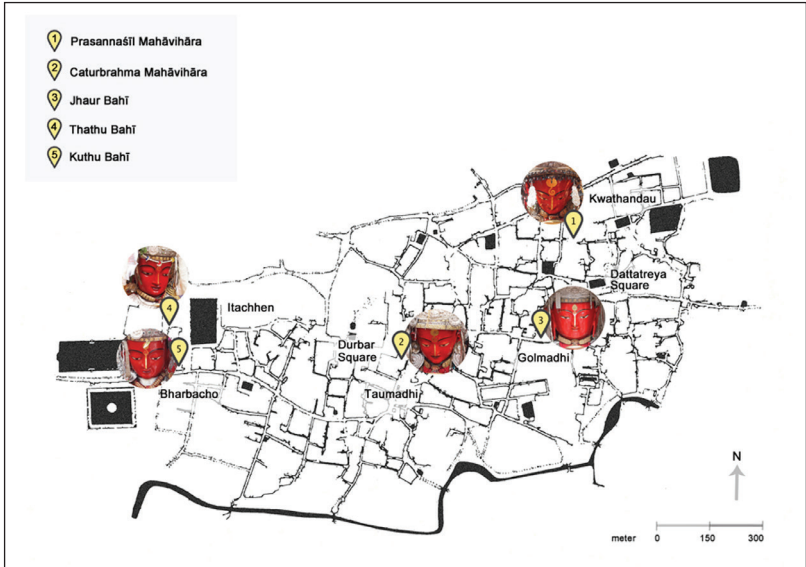


Fig. 3 Map of Bhaktapur indicating the residences of the five Dīpaṅkara Buddhas and their hierarchical order. Map adapted from Pruscha (1975: 213).



Fig. 4 Various offerings made during Pañcadāna. Most plates feature a gulpa (a tiny Buddhist alms bowl that can be made of clay, copper, gold or any other material).



Fig. 5 A woman receiving a blessing from the second Dīpaṅkara Buddha. The third and fourth Dīpaṅkaras are seen in the background.



Fig. 6 Mūla Dīpaṅkara starting to dance in front of the Golden Gate of Bhaktapur.

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BOOK REVIEW

Transcultural Encounters in the Himalayan Borderlands: Kalimpong as a “Contact Zone”

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An edited volume containing studies of Kalimpong in the first half of the twentieth century, *Transcultural Encounters in the Himalayan Borderlands*, may at first glance only attract the attention of regional specialists. The finely interwoven articles, however, offer a methodological and conceptual dialogue on South Asia’s so-called peripheral spaces, which should appeal to a wide audience given recent interest in borderlands and imperial margins.

Volume editor Markus Viehbeck introduces the assorted studies of the eastern Himalayan town by placing them within the multidisciplinary frame of transcultural studies. The stated goal is to “[develop] a more dynamic understanding of encounters” (2), for which Mary Louise Pratt’s formulation, “contact zone”, is used to focus the discussion. This framework explicitly eschews “notions of delineated ethnical or cultural groups as a structuring device” unlike much published research on the Himalaya (Viehbeck, 13). Considering the recent expansion of historical studies of the Himalaya in the western academy, it is interesting to note that what is de-centered in this case is not the nation-state, a worthy goal of many South Asian histories, but rather the community, or static notions of “culture.” By focusing on the relationship between the local and the global, the volume sidesteps the issue of situating Kalimpong within South Asian historiography, although there are certainly promising connections and contrasts to be made.

The studies begin chronologically with the settlement of Scottish missionaries and their institutional imprint on the region from the late nineteenth century. Trans-imperial trade through Kalimpong intensified

following the Younghusband mission to Tibet (1903-4), drawing traders, Buddhist reformers, writers and editors, educators, explorers, artists, spies, and diplomats from Nepal, Bhutan, Ceylon, northern India, Thailand, Western Europe, Russia, China, and many other places. Although Kalimpong thrived as a trade depot, especially for Tibetan wool, linking Kolkata and Lhasa, this route was particularly sensitive to Cold War tensions. Indicative of the cosmopolitan nature of the boom years was the establishment of the first newspaper by a Tibetan editor, Dorje Tharchin, in 1925, and the English-language *Himalayan Times* in 1947, with other newspapers published in Nepali and Lepcha as well (Sawerthal and Torri). The collapse of the cosmopolitan atmosphere with the Indo-China war of 1962 threads through many of the articles in the second half of the volume. Poddar and Lindkvist Zhang note, for example, the long-term effects of the expulsion of many Chinese residents and the forced removal and interment of some in Deoli, Rajasthan, during the war. Tina Harriss nuances the narrative of post-war retrenchment by highlighting the cyclical nature of economic and ecological flux in the mountain town and the changing social consequences of shifting modes of transport from mules to motor vehicles in the mid-1950s. Even with the unpredictability and devastation of landslides and the closing of the border, she emphasizes the resilience of Kalimpong's entrepreneurs and their continued ingenuity in connecting with global and regional markets.

One of the great strengths of the volume is the authors' use of diverse sources to foreground the compelling stories of the people who shaped the encounters of the contact zone. Sharma and May both employ newspaper and photographic archives (May also draws productively upon Scottish archives) to consider how poor and mixed-race children were made into "citizens of the Empire" in the Graham's Homes around the turn of the century ("Appeal on Behalf of Sr. Andrew's Colonial Homes" quoted by May, 57). Material objects provide unique evidence of the social and cultural relationships centered on, for example, transcultural aesthetic understandings of Buddhist statues, *ku*, in the early twentieth century (Martin) or the late twentieth-century production of prayer flags and the ritual transformation of religious objects in the market (Holmes-Tagchungdarpa).

Interviews, oral histories and traditions, literature, and ethnographic writings reveal different aspects of the subjectivities produced through unequal encounters, and the politics of representing such encounters. Charisma Lepcha, for example, explores the making of a Christian Lepcha identity through oral traditions regarding conversion shared within Bom Busty village of Kalimpong. Poddar and Mealor revisit contentious representations of local and global subjectivities in the Booker-prize winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. The ethnographic writings of Prince Peter, who had hoped to lead a Danish expedition into Tibet in the 1950s, reveal his earnest search for authenticity among Tibetan refugees as he led a massive anthropometric study of mostly Tibetan males and waited to gain entry to the closed region. These articles bring to the fore the multiple acts of representation and complex subjectivities formed as empires overlapped and global and local identities comprised shifting sources of value in a small hill town of northern India.

Several articles further highlight the unequal yet creative nature of encounters by exploring the stories of colonial or scholarly intermediaries who were sidelined in international circuits of knowledge production. Clare Harris traces the identity of typically unnamed models, such as Lama Sherab and Ani Chokyi, prominent residents in Darjeeling, in the photos from a late nineteenth-century Darjeeling studio, and, in doing so, imagines a more agentive aspect of the encounter with colonial photography. Viehbeck draws together interviews, privately held archival fragments, and locally published Tibetan-language booklets, among other sources, to assemble a life story of Rindzin Wangpo (1920-1985), a Tibetan teacher, poet, Buddhist reformer, and research assistant, who had assisted a number of western scholars, but was generally left out of their academic accounts as a scholar, too. Bhotia's portrayal of Kazi Dawa Samdup (1868-1922), a Tibetan Buddhist scholar and translator and colonial intermediary, highlights his ability to resist colonial knowledge production in part by accessing global networks of Buddhist modernity. Globally circulating knowledge about the people and spaces of the Himalaya, and especially about Tibetan Buddhism, was crucially shaped by uneven encounters.

The volume opens up many possibilities for thinking about "contact zones" in South Asian history or in borderland studies more generally.

While it will appeal most obviously to an academic audience of regional specialists, the articles are accessibly written and could be productively assigned to undergraduates in topical seminars as well.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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[Monographs]

Bennett, L. 1983. *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters: Social and symbolic roles of high-caste women in Nepal*. New York: Columbia University Press.

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Ishii, H. 1995. 'Caste and kinship in a Newar village'. In *Contested Hierarchies: A collaborative ethnography of caste among the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal*, edited by David N. Gellner and Declan Quigley, pp. 109-57. Oxford: Clarendon.

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