

# **Enduring inequalities: Practices of caste and development in new Nepal**

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The Australian National University

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## **Declaration**

Except when otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own original work carried out as a PhD researcher at the Australian National University between February 2013 and February 2017.

Mandip Rai

February 2017

*I dedicate this thesis to the residents of Patle Gau, Kavre, Nepal, without  
whose stories this thesis could have never been written.*

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Just to think of the many people and institutions who have contributed towards writing this thesis is daunting. It is inevitable that I will inadvertently miss some names. I apologize to them at the very beginning.

As I come from a background which represents the middle class of an economically poor country, pursuing a PhD in any well-recognized university of the Western world was mostly beyond my financial means. And since I could undertake a journey towards such a degree through the scholarship provided by the Department of Foreign Aid and Trade (DFAT – formerly AusAID) of the Government of Australia, I would first like to thank them for financially supporting my study and stay in Australia. I also would like to thank the Australian National University (ANU) for accepting my PhD application without which I would not be writing the words that I am writing now.

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## **Abstract**

In 2007 a new Nepal in the form of Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal was born. The idea of this new Nepal was to create a political space in which all Nepalese peoples irrespective of caste, ethnicity, gender and religion could relate to each other in equal social relations. Yet Nepal continues to harbour a deeply unequal society led by unequal distribution of opportunities for economic and social mobility. This thesis critically examines the difficulties in attaining equality of social relationships through ethnographic observations of everyday lives between Bahun, Dalit and Tamang communities in a rural village in Nepal. In doing so the ethnography investigates how the structure of caste influences the interplay between everyday cultural as well as organized development (*bikas*) practices in changing social and political milieu in creating unequal opportunities.

Informed by location specific as well as national historical- political contexts, the thesis explores how caste status and its associated practices of discrimination link with wealth, leadership roles, education and networks to create uneven playing fields for various social groups in accessing land, utilizing financial institutions and even migrating in ways that only further consolidate their pre-existing structural positions. The thesis shows how the state's rhetoric of equal social relations and its discourses and practices of growth-oriented development ignore unequal social relations and thus prove incapable of eradicating the structural poverty of the Dalits.

## Glossary

*Bahun (Brahmin), Chhetri, Thakuri and Sanyasi:* According to the Hindu caste system these are the “high” or “upper” castes. In the latest national political lexicon they are also known as Khas Arya though this new identity is yet to be widely spread.

*Bastee:* A human settlement, a close synonym to *Tole*.

*Birta:* Land grants gifted by the state to individuals. Birta was tax-free and usually inheritable. The state abolished it in 1959.

*Dalit:* Former *acchyut* (untouchable) caste group.

*Dasain:* A Hindu festival celebrated in September or October

*Khet:* Irrigated lands where rice can be grown.

*Kipat:* A system of communal land tenure system prevalent in some ethnic groups of the hills.

*Janajati:* Ethnic peoples who claim they are outside of Hindu caste system and who have their own cultures, languages, customs, traditions and religions.

*Madheshi:* The people living in the plains (*Terai* or *Madhesh*) but traditionally not referring to the people who later migrated from the hills and mountains to reside in Terai.

*Raikar:* State-owned lands whose tenures can be passed on to individuals who pay taxes to the state for land use.

*Ropani:* A unit of land measurement widely used in the hills including Kathmandu Valley and is equivalent to 5,476 square feet in area.

*Saujee:* Depending on context, it means a property holder, a rich man, a shop-keeper, a business-man, and a local money-lender.

*Tihar:* A Hindu festival celebrated in October or November a few weeks after *Dasain*.

*Tole:* A cluster within a human settlement.

*Zamindar:* A landlord or a class of landlords working as an intermediary collecting revenues from peasants living in villages to pay to the state.



## Major political events in Nepal

1769	Initiation of the territorial expansion of the kingdom of Gorkha by annexing the surrounding princely states which eventually led to the formation of the present-day Nepal
1814-1816	War with the East Indian Company with the subsequent Treaty of Sugauli which decisively halted the territorial conquests of the Gorkhali/Nepali kingdom; much lands lost to the British; Nepalese sovereignty compromised as Nepal needed the British consent before taking any decision relating to international relations
1846	<i>Kot</i> (court) massacre which saw the diminution of monarchy to mere tutelage and rise of all powerful Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana who established a hereditary system to Prime Ministership
1850	Jung Bahadur Rana's visit to Great Britain and France
1854	Promulgation of the <i>Muluki Ain</i> (national code) by Jung Bahadur Rana which legalized caste-based practices and penal system
1857-59	Jang Bahadur's assistance to the East Indian Company with 9,000 military troops to suppress the Indian Mutiny
1859	East Indian Company's return of some of the lands to Nepal which the latter had lost during 1814-1816 war
1914-18	Nepal's support to Britain with about 100,000 soldiers during the First World War
1923	Recognition of Nepal's full sovereignty by Britain
1939-45	Mobilization of Nepal's resources for supporting the British in the Second World War
1951	End of the 104 years of autocratic Rana rule after successful <i>Jana Kranti</i> (People's Revolution); promise of elections for Constitution Assembly (CA); first experiments with ideas and ideologies of modernity, modernization, and democracy
15 December 1960	Dismissal of Nepal's first democratically elected government by King Mahendra Shah
1962	Banning of all political parties by the promulgation of Constitution of Nepal 1962; "Panchayat democracy" launched; monarchy, centre of all political powers
1972	Crown Prince Birendra Shah's accession to the throne of Nepal after King Mahendra's death

1979-80	Amidst speculations of electoral fraud election of a multi-party system defeated in a referendum: continuation of “improved” Panchayat democracy
1990	Panchayat system overturned and replaced by reinstated multiparty parliamentary democracy established through a <i>Jana Andolan I</i> (People’s Movement): Hindu state identity retained and most powers of the monarch curbed by the new 1990 Constitution: many rights and freedoms restored
1996	With the promise of delivering a “new” Nepal, <i>Jana Yudha</i> (People’s War) launched by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists)
27 June 2001	Massacre of King Birendra and his immediate family: accession to the throne of Nepal by Gyanendra, Birendra’s younger brother
2002	The parliament dissolved: more direct political role taken up by Gyanendra
1 February 2005	Political leaders arrested, civil liberties stifled, a state of emergency declared and direct executive powers assumed by Gyanendra
22 November 2005	A 12-point agreement reached between the Maoists and the alliance of seven different political parties with prime goal of replacing “autocratic monarchy” with “democratic republic” and launch of <i>Jana Andolan II</i>
April 2006	The success of the <i>Jana Andolan II</i> (a nineteen-day People’s Movement); the parliament restored; a ceasefire declared
May 2006	Nepal declared a secular state; practices of untouchability criminalized by the state
21 November 2006	The Comprehensive Peace Agreement reached; end of the Maoist War; the political mainstreaming of the Maoists Party; roadmap for CA elections declared
15 January 2007	An Interim Constitution promulgated; 1990 Constitution nullified
10 April 2008	CA elections held; the Maoists elected as the largest party
28 May 2008	Monarchy abolished by the first ever meeting of the CA; Nepal to have Constitution which would recognize its “federal democratic republican” status
21 July 2008	Ram Baran Yadav, a Madheshi man, elected the first-ever President of Nepal
27 May 2012	The end of the term of First CA; a new constitution by the CA remained un-promulgated

19 November 2013	Second CA elections held; emergence of Nepali Congress Party as the largest party; the Maoist Party relegated to a third rank behind the United Marxist Leninist Party
20 September 2015	A new Constitution 2015 which federated Nepal into eight provinces promulgated; largely celebrated but still disapproved by some regional political parties and ethnic groups

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Inequalities in “Old” and “New” Nepal**

Anything new is already transitioning towards becoming old. Yet each time we break with the past, we experience something new. Therefore, each time new configurations of political powers and societal governance structures replace older ones, we sense newness in almost every sphere of life. The year 2006 is one such time in recent memory of Nepal. 2006 marked the end of a bloody ten-year long Maoist Revolution (1996-2006) which took thousands of lives. Soon monarchy was bade farewell. “His Majesty’s Government of Nepal” became just the “Government of Nepal.” The state dropped its Hindu<sup>1</sup> identity to don a secular one. A centralised unitary system of governance was to be replaced by a federated system. A new national anthem and coats of arms replaced the old ones (Hutt, 2012). A man from the marginalised Madheshi<sup>2</sup> community became the first-ever President, marking the end of the custom in which the position of Head of State was held by a monarch. In 2007 the secular country itself got a new formal name: “Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal.”

The country needed a new Constitution not drafted by the king’s chosen “experts” as in the past, but by members of an elected Constituent Assembly. To accommodate the aspirations of traditionally marginalised groups such as women, Dalits<sup>3</sup>, Madheshis, Janajatis (ethnic groups)<sup>4</sup>, people living in rural and

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<sup>1</sup> About 80% of Nepalese population believe that they are Hindu (Dahal, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Madheshis are Nepalese peoples residing in the Southern plains called Madhesh or Terai who are of Hindu, Muslim or of indigenous origins. Many Madheshis see themselves as marginalised groups because they feel that the dominant hill-based social groups use the claim that the Madhesis only recently migrated to Nepal from India and therefore are not “original” Nepalese and exclude them socially and politically (Pradhan, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Dalits, formerly referred to as “untouchables” rank at the most bottom according to Hindu religious system. I investigate this subject more in coming chapters, especially Chapter Four.

<sup>4</sup> Janajatis are the segments of Nepalese populations who claim to be indigenous residents of Nepal and have their own language, culture and tradition exogenous to hierarchical Hindu structure. I explore this further in coming chapters, most specifically in Chapter Four.

remote areas, religious/geographical minorities, and physically/mentally challenged peoples in a more inclusive and more equal “New Nepal”, the elections for the Constituent Assembly themselves were to be held under a system of proportional representation. To improve social relations between different caste and ethnic groups in Nepalese<sup>5</sup> society and to demonstrate a political commitment to eradicate caste-based discrimination, the Government of Nepal in 2006 declared Nepal to be an “untouchability and caste-based discrimination free” nation. It further sanctioned “Caste-based Discrimination and Untouchability (Offence and Punishment) Act 2011” prohibiting any such offence both in public and private spaces with the provision of penalties and punishments against such offences. While past laws had secured the rights of Nepalese citizens to practice religion as per tradition handed down from ancient times and be protected against discrimination on the basis of religion, race, gender, caste, and tribe, many argued that the monarchy’s identity as Hindu, led to the dominance of Hindu values and culture which left much room for the continuation of caste-based discriminatory practices (Bennett, 2005; Bhattachan, Sunar, & Gauchan, 2009; Khanal, Gelpke, & Pyakurel, 2012). So more than 152 years after *Muluki Ain* 1854 (National Code 1854) had legalised and legitimised the caste system and more than half a century later since India had abolished

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<sup>5</sup> I prefer “Nepalese” over “Nepali” to refer to the citizens of Nepal. If I were writing this PhD in Nepali language then I would have to use the term “Nepali” since I would have no other alternative. Many writers, including non-natives, writing on Nepal have adopted the term “Nepali” accommodating the protest by some who argue that “Nepalese” is a colonial term invented by the British. But such an argument hides the fact that “Nepali” itself is a product of internal colonisation. Historically the language Nepali was known as Khas, Parbatiya or Gorkhali language spoken by the “rulers” and the Hindu community of hill-origins of Nepal. “Nepali” only attained its present elevated status once the state recognised it as an official language when many other regional, local and ethnic languages and dialects were dying (Gellner, 1997; Pradhan, 2002; Whelpton, 1997). Since the English language allows me to use Nepalese to denote the peoples from Nepal just like it allows people from Japan, Lebanon, Sudan, and Vietnam to be called Japanese, Lebanese, Sudanese, and Vietnamese respectively without any sense of derogation or colonial overtones, I choose the term “Nepalese” over “Nepali” in my entire thesis. I use “Nepali” only at times when I refer to it as a language and only when it is used for political purposes.

such a practice in 1949, the Nepalese state managers took a firm political step towards establishing a discrimination-free society in Nepal.

These macro changes at the national governance level were also supplemented by reforms at the levels of service delivery. The civil services which had been overwhelmingly led and staffed by “high-caste” Hindu men from the hills were made subject to policies of affirmative action to proportionally increase the employment of the marginalised social groups. A sense of newness and inclusiveness is still felt as—even at the time of my writing in 2017—for the first time ever women have assumed some of the top political and judiciary posts of President, Chief Justice and Speaker of the House.

The “old”, however, is not completely dead. The “old” relentlessly persists, as hill-based “high-caste” men continue to hold the top executive post of the Prime Ministership and disproportionately comprise the leading core of major political parties both at the national and local levels. The tension between the “old” and the “new” is so strong that even when the new Constitution, prepared by people’s representatives elected through the second Nepalese Constituent Assembly<sup>6</sup>, was promulgated in September 20, 2015, not all were satisfied. While the mainstream media telecast many Nepalese people celebrating the event with *dipawali* (lights, firecrackers and candles), many others representing the dissenting voices of women’s groups, Janajatis and Madheshis expressed their utter dissatisfaction by publicly burning the document (Haviland, 2015). Women groups contended that the new constitution unduly favoured men over women. They claimed that the new constitutional provisions made it difficult for a single mother and a Nepalese woman married to a

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<sup>6</sup> The Constituent Assembly elected the first time in May, 2008 had failed to deliver the Constitution in the periodically extended stipulated time of four years. The second Constituent Assembly was elected in November 2013.

foreigner to pass Nepalese citizenship to her children. The Madheshis and Janajatis protested that the federal delineation of the proposed provinces could negatively affect their political representation perpetuating their marginalisation.

This narrative captures the more recent history of Nepal's long-standing experimentation with prajatantra (democracy), a Western idea of governance that penetrated Nepal and Nepalese consciousness during the 1950s when Nepal first initiated its experiments with modernity. I now want to provide a very brief history of the ideology of democracy in Nepal. But before I do that I want to briefly make my position clear on how I have used the concept of ideology itself throughout my thesis. Although the concept of ideology is hotly contested (Heywood, 1992) and even contradictorily understood at times (Eagleton, 1991), I simply follow Martin Seliger's suggestion that it is a set of ideas using which people justify means and ends of any organized political or social action to preserve, correct, rebuild or even uproot a given social order (Seliger, 1976). Therefore, the ideology of (Nepalese) Panchayat system (1962-1990) in which the Nepalese monarchy had absolute political power is in sharp contrast to constitutional monarchy (1990-2006) in which the monarch has limited power. Similarly, the ideology of constitutional monarchy in turn is in opposition to the ideology of a republic (2006-date) which has no room for monarchy at all.

After the toppling of the brutal autocratic Rana regime<sup>7</sup> in 1951 democracy began to extend its first roots into Nepalese soil, accompanying it was the idea of development (*bikas*)<sup>8</sup>. Yet this small seedling of Westminster style multi-party

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<sup>7</sup> The Ranas had reduced the Shah monarchs to titular heads and had re-defined the position of Prime Minister of Nepal as a hereditary position, which allowed them to rule Nepal for 104 years from 1846 to 1951.

<sup>8</sup> Different authors use differently spelt *vikas*, *vikash*, *bikash* or *bikas* to mean the same thing: development. I have chosen to use *bikas*.

parliamentary democratic practices (Weller & Sharma, 2005) got quickly uprooted by King Mahendra (1920-1972) when he decided to “gift” Panchayat democracy to “his” peoples in 1962. Panchayat democracy was democracy in name only. It concealed an authoritarian rule in which all political parties were banned and the King enjoyed complete power. Nepal was only to catch up with the world-wide surge of democracy— which Samuel P. Huntington has called the “The Third Wave” of democracy (Huntington, 1993)— through the successful *Jana Andolan I* (People’s Movement I) in 1990 which established a multi-party parliamentary democracy.

The reinstatement of a multi-party democratic system provided the Nepalese people with unprecedented freedoms, which in turn lead to traditionally marginalised social groups demanding increased participation in shaping national laws, policies and governance systems as well as their fair share of the fruits of *bikas*. These marginalised social groups increasingly challenged the state-managers who had governed Nepal for hundreds of years through the imposition of the hierarchical Hindu caste system that privileged hill-based high-caste Hindu culture, values and norms (Bista, 1991; Cameron, 2010; Gellner, 2001, 2007b; Gray, 2012; Hangen, 2007; Hutt, 2012; Lawoti, 2010a, 2012; Mage & D’Mello, 2007). Unfortunately for many Nepalese, the high aspirations and expectations generated with the 1990 turn to democracy were poorly matched by the disappointing performances of the subsequent governments: corruption rose, nepotism proliferated, *bikas* was stranded (Panday, 1999; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2004).

Discontented with the functioning of democratic practices post 1990, many Nepalese— especially the traditionally marginalised groups from rural areas who felt “disconnected” with urban areas, particularly the capital Kathmandu—were easily lured by rebellious and violent leaders and cadres of the Maoist Party into believing that alternative futures: more prosperous, more

egalitarian, and more inclusive, were possible (Gellner, 2007a; Lawoti, 2010a, 2010b; Muni, 2010; Nayak, 2008; D. Thapa, 2004, 2012). These groups began an armed struggle which they called *Jana Yudha* (People's War) against the state in 1996 and constructed the discourse of a "New Nepal." And when the Maoists were joined by the other democratic forces to successfully launch *Jana Andolan II* (People's Movement II) against an authoritarian monarchy in the year 2006, much newness in almost all facets of life was felt in Nepal.

The ideology of democracy, also introduced the concept of constitutionalism, redefining the Nepalese people as citizens of a nation-state, rather than subjects to divine kings. Throughout its history Nepalese democracy has thus taken various avatars from Panchayat *Prajatantra* (Panchayat democracy) to present-day *loktantra* and *ganatantra* (republic democracy) with elements of *samabeshita* (inclusiveness) (Hangen, 2009, p. 164).<sup>9</sup> Unlike democracy, however, the idea of *bikas* (development) has never weakened since its emergence in the 1950s. It may mean different things to different people, yet it has always remained central to every government whether led by the king or by political parties, centre, left or right. Every government has justified and continues to justify the use (or abuse) of power in the name of delivering *bikas*, whether it is guided by the bureaucratic hands of "big government" or the "invisible hand" of the "free market." Yet many attribute the *Jana Andolan I* (of 1990), the violent Maoist Revolution (1996-2006) and *Jana Andolan II* (2006) to the failure of *bikas*, noting that groups marginalised on the basis of caste, ethnicity, gender, and geography felt that they could not access the benefits of *bikas*, or

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<sup>9</sup> In Nepali language, "*tantra*" means "to govern/rule", "*praja*" means subjects to the king while "*lok*" or "*gana*" mean peoples. Therefore, during monarchical Panchayat democracy and constitutional monarchical democracy, *prajatantra* meant democracy. However, with republic status, *loktantra* or *ganatantra* has more or less replaced *prajatantra*. Not much difference exists between *loktantra* and *ganatantra* but left-oriented parties such as the Maoists Party tend to use *ganatantra* whereas centre left like Nepalese Congress prefer *loktantra*.

received them only in meagre shares (Muni, 2010; Thapa, 2004, 2012). Therefore, each time a new government came to power, it looked to consolidate its position by promising to make *bikas* better, greater, more accessible, more equitable, and more inclusive.

Yet after more than sixty years of *bikas* and decades of democratic practices, statistics suggest that Nepal—with Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita per annum of \$479— is one the poorest countries in the world (GON & UNCTN, 2013). While national statistics using the national poverty-line maintain that poverty in Nepal stands at 23.82%, if the international poverty line of US \$ 1.25/day/person is used the same figure can be as high as 55% (GON, 2011). Likewise, 38% of Nepal’s population of 26 million are food energy deficient, and 23 of its 75 districts are chronically food insecure relying upon national or international food aid for survival (GON, 2012b, 2013b).

Such dismal economic indicators are further marred by distinct social and political inequalities<sup>10</sup> along the lines of caste and ethnicity. Various ethnic (Janajati) and “low-caste” (Dalit) groups continue to feel politically and culturally marginalised as in the “old” feudalistic past prior to 1950s (Gellner, 2007a; Lawoti, 2010b, 2012; Pradhan, 2002). The national rate of poverty is much worse amongst Dalits and Janajatis (GON & UNCTN, 2013, p. 9-10) than “high-caste” groups. Poverty trends between 1996 and 2011 indicated that while all social groups have made some progress in reducing poverty, the improvement was most significant among the “high-caste” Bahuns<sup>11</sup>, for whom improvement was almost three times more than that experienced by the Dalits (Figure 1). Similarly, “high-castes” enjoy a relatively high Human Development Index (HDI) at 0.538,

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<sup>10</sup> Please see (Lawoti, 2010b, 2010c, 2012; Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009b) for discussions on various forms of political inequalities in Nepal.

<sup>11</sup> Although many studies use Brahmin to mean the same group I have preferred to use the more colloquial term Bahun.

Janajatis have “mid” HDI of 0.482 and the Dalits a low HDI at 0.434 (GON & UNDP, 2014, p. 17).<sup>12</sup> Per capita income figures in 2011 for the above three groups follow the same order NRs. 49,878, NRs. 37,726 and NRs. 33,786 respectively (GON & UNDP, 2014, p. 97). These inequalities are also reflected in landownership patterns: Dalits form the bulk, more than 70%, of the landless and marginal landholders in Nepal (Nepali & Khadga, 2012). In the present largely agrarian Nepalese economy in which about 86% of population live in rural areas and depend on land for food production, landlessness and near landlessness translates to high vulnerability to food insecurity (GON, 2013b).

**Figure 1 Poverty incidence by caste and ethnicity in Nepal (selected indicators)**  
(Source: GON, 2005, 2011)

Caste or ethnic group	1995/96 (%)	2011 (%)	Improvement (%)
Bahun (hill)	34.10	10.34	69.67
Dalits (hill)	57.80	43.63	24.51
Janajati (hill)	48.70	25.93	46.75

## Research Questions

Nepal’s trials with modernisation, modernity and democracy since the 1950s are in direct confrontation with long-held and state-supported Hindu caste system. While the first promotes, aspires, nurtures and defends secular notions of democratic citizenship wherein every citizen is considered to be “equal” to another, the latter prescribes birth-ascribed hierarchy and inequality. Yet even after politically forsaking Hindu caste ideology and seeking to implementing democratic *bikas* practices for so many decades, Nepal continues to harbour a very unequal society. All the indicators of human progress measured in terms of HDI, per capita income, landownership etc., show almost one to one

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<sup>12</sup> Since HDI is a composite of four variables namely (i) life expectancy at birth, (ii) adult literacy rate, (iii) mean years of schooling, and (iv) Gross National Income per capita, each HDI score may generally be directly proportional to each of the four components.



correspondence with caste hierarchy. The “high-castes” are the least poor, the most landed, with highest HDIs, while the “low-caste” Dalits are the poorest, landless or land-poor, with lowest HDIs. The Janajatis remaining somewhere in between.

It is against this backdrop of the dialectics between the civic, political and cultural equality granted by the laws in democratic polity and the persistent inequalities that I locate the central questions of my PhD research project:

- (i) How and why do inequalities continue to get reproduced and how are they changing in “new” Nepal?
- (ii) Have the discourses and practices of *bikas* been able to reduce poverty, especially amongst the Dalits?

To answer these questions, I have undertaken an ethnography of a rural village not far from Kathmandu. As I show below it is important to note here that many scholarly works on (in)equality fall within in the discipline of philosophy and many more in the field of economics. However, Charles Tilly’s theorizing of inequality as an asymmetrical relationship between two persons or sets of persons (e.g. caste, ethnic group, etc.) which generates more advantages for one than for another resulting in “unequal control over value-producing resources” (e.g. land, money, etc.) (Tilly, 2000, p. 782) provides a good scope to study (in) equality anthropologically. Therefore, the above research questions have been formed according to the guidance provided by Tilly (Tilly, 2001) for my ethnographic research:

1. What asymmetrical relations prevail among persons, groups, categories, and social locations?
2. How do persons, groups, categories, and social locations end up in the positions they occupy?

3. What effects do 1 and 2 have on individual and collective social experience?
4. How do 1, 2, and 3 change?

### **The Ideal of Equality and the Prevalence of Inequality**

While the notion of equality between citizens and the royals, and between various social groups within the citizenry entered Nepalese discourses only after the 1950s, but particularly after 1990, Western contemplation on the issue has a long history.<sup>13</sup> Yet even in contemporary debates, equality—both as a concept and as ideal—is so highly contested that some have suggested that it has “substantive content of its own” and is actually an “empty” idea (Westen, 1982, p. 596). Yet the idea of equality has so many positive connotations that it is regularly employed in political rhetoric to generate great social movements and revolutions (Westen, 1990). Even if the idea of equality is close to utopia, significant inequalities are thought to polarise societies into antagonistic “haves” and “have-nots” eroding democratic solidarity and inviting instabilities (Rank, 2004; Reid-Henry, 2015; Sandel, 2000, 2012; Stiglitz, 2012; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009).

Debates over equality and inequality are further complicated by the fact that political philosophers to this day continue to debate the precise notion of equality (Anderson, 1999, 2012; Arneson, 1995). Scholars disagree on issues related to equality of what, equality among whom, and its relation to justice (Young, 2001). Further, opinions are divided on whether a society should have equality of outcome, opportunities, or of condition. Likewise, there is

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<sup>13</sup> Please see reviews in (Rees, 1971; Tawney, 1931; Turner, 1986).

disagreement over what it is to be equally distributed: Is it primary goods<sup>14</sup> (Rawls, 1971), resources (Dworkin, 1981), capabilities (Sen, 1992) or welfare (Arneson, 1989)?<sup>15</sup> And since individuals differ in age, gender, physical and mental capacities and if left unrestricted can simply exchange or trade goods in ways that will easily disrupt any form of simple equality, some scholars have suggested that “equality literally understood” where everyone shares the same amount of wealth, power and authority “is an ideal ripe for betrayal” (Michael, 1983, p. xi). Equality understood as such is bound to be disrupted and any forceful egalitarian distribution of wealth may be achieved only at the cost of repression (Nozick, 1974). However, according to Fourie et al.:

While the ideal of equality clearly has distributive implications and may well match certain distributive notions of equality, equality is foremost about relationships between people (Fourie, Schuppert, & Wallimann-Helmer, 2015, p. 1).

And, as Elizabeth S. Anderson argues:

... the agendas defined by much recent egalitarian theorising are too narrowly focused on the distribution of divisible, privately appropriated goods, such as income and resources, or privately enjoyed goods such as welfare. This neglects the much broader agendas of actual egalitarian political movements ... The disabled have drawn attention to the ways the configuration of public spaces excluded and marginalised them, and campaigned against demeaning stereotypes that cast them as stupid, incompetent, and pathetic ... the aim of egalitarian justice is not to eliminate the impact of brute luck from human affairs, but to end oppression ... the aim is to create a community in which people stand in relations of equality to others (Anderson, 1999, pp. 288, 289).

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<sup>14</sup> John Rawls thinks that goods which are desired by every human being are primary goods; these consist of things such as health, liberties, rights, income and social bases of self-respect (Rawls, 1971).

<sup>15</sup> Debates surrounding such questions have been insightfully captured in (Anderson, 1999; Arneson, 1995; Wolff, 2007)

In simple terms, social relations are more or less equal if citizens treat “fellow citizens as equals in social interactions” (Mason, 2012, p. 3). So, if a non-Dalit can freely enter a Dalit’s house while a Dalit cannot enter a non-Dalit’s house; and if a Dalit can readily eat food and water given to her by a non-Dalit but the reverse is not accepted because of the perceived “impure” body of the Dalits, then these clearly are examples of unequal social relations (Bhattachan, Hemchuri, Gurung, & Biswakarma, 2003; Bhattachan, et al., 2009). Ideally social relations are equal if all individuals and social groups are considered to be of equal moral worth; regarded with equal esteem; not subject to contempt, discrimination, shaming or ridiculing on the basis of caste, race, physical and mental disability, sexual orientation, etc.; and are free from arbitrary domination and oppression (e.g. slavery) (Anderson, 2012; Fourie, et al., 2015; Fraser, 1997; Young, 1990). It is this conceptualisation and idealisation of social equality that the state-managers and peoples of various caste, ethnicity and geographic origins in Nepal are currently striving towards rather than aspiring to achieve absolute economic equality.

While the units taken for analysis by most theorists are generally individuals rather than social groups, Iris Young writes that such an approach fails to expose the structural inequalities that constrain substantive opportunities of similarly positioned individuals “from developing their capacities or enacting their morally legitimate claims” (Young, 2001, p. 18).<sup>16</sup> She further argues:

What we refer to by group differentiations of gender, race, class, [caste], age and so on, in the context of evaluating inequalities as unjust, are structural social relations that tend to privilege some more than the others (Young, 2001, p. 2).

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<sup>16</sup> Young defines structural inequality as “a set of reproduced social processes that reinforce one another to enable or constrain individual actions in many ways” (Young, 2001, p. 2).

Following Young and on the basis of my earlier discussion of caste/ethnicity based inequalities, I have chosen caste and ethnic group as the analytic focus my research.

### **Nepal's Approaches to Inequality and the Discourse of *Bikas***

Considering that all individuals are fundamentally moral equals (Anderson, 1999) and if achieving simple distributive equality is indeed doubtful, it is still important that everyone can at least have enough to lead a decent dignified life in accordance to Harry Frankfurt's "doctrine of sufficiency" (Frankfurt, 1987, p. 22).

With respect to the distribution of economic assets, what *is* important from the point of view of morality is not that everyone should have *the same* but each should have *enough* (Frankfurt, 1987; p. 21 - original emphasis).

It is both the considerations that all humans are of equal worth and the notion that everyone should have enough which have guided the democratic citizenship principles and the discourse of *bikas* in Nepal. I now unpack each of these notions as they relate to the Nepalese case.

Except for the Panchayat regime (1962-1990) and the former king Gyanendra's period of direct rule (June 2001 – April 2006) Nepalese citizens have more or less enjoyed democratic citizenship in recent years. Although what constitutes democratic citizenship remains contested (Guttman, 1995), it ideally demands that each citizen irrespective of class, caste, ethnicity, race, religion, gender, and tribe is considered to be equal in worth; possessing equal civic, political and cultural rights; equality of treatment in the court of law; the right to vote; the right to stand for any public office; and the right to enjoy fully their cultural heritage (Arneson, 1995; Barbalet, 1988; Marshall, 1950). The Ranas first attempted to provide this kind of citizenship to Nepalese peoples through the

Nepal Act of 1947. But due to internal conflicts between the progressive Ranas and the conservative ones who felt they were “above” others and were born only to rule, the Act was never promulgated. Had it been promulgated it would have undermined the legitimacy and broken the legal foundation of caste hierarchy inscribed by the first Rana ruler himself through the National Code of 1854. Such a failure, however, was eventually and gradually overcome through the five consecutive Constitutions from 1951 to 2015, each of which consistently maintained that all citizens are to be considered “equal” before law and have “equal protection of the laws” with no discrimination to be made against any citizen in application of general laws on the grounds of religion, race, sex, caste, or tribe.

On the political front after 1950 the state of Nepal attempted to organise the social relationships in Nepalese society according to the principles of secular democratic citizenship instead of caste-based hierarchy. Complementing this, on the economic front the state utilized the tool of *bikas* to try and maximise growth and minimise poverty. Although it started with failed land reform programmes and the equally unsuccessful “Village Development Program” funded by the United States (US) in 1952, *bikas* indeed has come a long way (Fujikura, 2013; Mihaly, 1965; Shrestha, 1993). Its early focus on infrastructure development such as road construction and hospital building has not entirely disappeared, but it is now understood to take many different forms. *Bikas* is to be employed not only to alleviate poverty, increase food security and nutrition but also to empower women and other traditionally marginalised groups. Although *bikas* has been criticised by some as being a top-down, as reproducing evolutionary model of modernisation that imagines the “archaic” developing countries catching up with the “modern” developed world (an idea which itself fails to acknowledge unequal power and trade relations biased towards the developed countries) it

continues to catch the imagination of Nepalese political leaders and commoners alike (Fujikura, 2001). The former king Mahendra rejected multi-party parliamentary democratic system because he claimed that it did not deliver *bikas*. But since many in Nepal thought that Mahendra's "home grown" Panchayat democracy failed to deliver *bikas*, Panchayat democracy was ultimately rejected to give the parliamentary democracy a second chance in 1990. Post 1990, various state managers of Nepal, following the dominant international economic mood of the time, have allowed *bikas* to be largely led by the invisible hands of the "market" in what has been termed a project of "neoliberalism" (Harvey, 2005).

Yet, even after the re-instatement of democracy in 1990 many traditionally excluded social groups such as Janajatis, Madheshis, Dalits and women continued to feel excluded from the processes of *bikas*, and as a result believed that the armed Maoists provided the most hope (Thapa, 2012). Yet although they joined the Maoist War against the state, this did not mark the abandonment of their belief in the promise of *bikas* like many critics and scholars collectively called "post-developmentalists" would argue (Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1994; Sachs, 1992; Shrestha, 1997). Rather, they thought that if the radical Left Maoist were to assume power, *bikas* would be more equitable, accessible and inclusive. Yet, when the Maoists received the opportunity to lead the government after 2007 they only made some cosmetic reforms: increasing budgets welfare programmes while continuing to pursue high economic growth rates relying mostly on market mechanisms. Till the time of my writing despite post-developmentalists' arguments against *bikas*, Nepal continues to play the "catch-up" game as recommended by modernisation theory and harbours the ambition to graduate from the status of a "least developed country" to a "developing" one by 2022 (GON, 2016b).

So *bikas* remains an unfinished business, a goal that will one day be achieved. Such an unfulfilled dream encouraged the likes of Dr Baburam Bhattarai, a former top Maoist leader, to establish political parties aspiring to make Nepal *bikashit* (developed) in less than 25 years. In fact, when Prime Minister K P Oli of the United Marxist Leninist Party resigned from office in June 2015, in his parting speech he challenged the new Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal of the Maoist Party and his government to implement the multiplicity of *bikase* (*bikas* related) projects that Oli's government had initiated. True to the spirit of modernisation, most of the projects Oli mentioned were infrastructure development such as hydro-power development plants and road construction.

Scholarly writing on Dalits, who many argue have least participated in, and least benefitted from the discourses and practices of *bikas*, fit into several categories: those concerned with the past and prevailing practices of discrimination (Bhattachan, et al., 2003; Bhattachan, et al., 2009); those that explore Dalit's political emancipation and inclusion (Aahuti, 2010; Guneratne, 2010) those that chart contestations over identity (Cameron, 2010; Folmar, 2007; Kharel, 2010) and gender relations (Cameron, 2005); and those that explore caste hierarchy within a particular ethnic community, the Newar<sup>17</sup> (Gellner & Quigley, 1995; Parish, 1996). Underlying this scholarship is the pollution-purity system proposed by Dumont (Dumont, 1980) to describe the centrality of power in the concept of caste (Berreman, 1981; Beteille, 1965; Quigley, 1993). There is very little literature that examines Dalit marginality within the discourses of *bikas* and equality within the larger discourse of "New Nepal." Through this research I

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<sup>17</sup>The caste organisations in Nepal which share common similarities but are different by some peculiarities can generally thought to be of three types: the hill-based, the Madhesh-based, and ethnic community: Newar-based. Newars claim to be is an indigenous ethnic group of Kathmandu Valley who have their own complex caste system.



hope to make a small contribution towards contributing to new ways of understanding Dalit lives in relation to *bikas*.

### **Research Interest, Methodology and Positionality**

When I was working with Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in Nepal in 2010, FAO had just launched the “One Billion Hungry Project.” The project intended to feed the hungry who were mostly concentrated in Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia (including Nepal) and the Pacific (FAO & WFP, 2010). About the same time in Nepal, various reports suggested that at least 25% of Nepal’s 26 million population were suffering from hunger (GON, 2013b, 2014).<sup>18</sup> Guided by such discourses Nepal started receiving international aid aimed at “tackling” the problem of food insecurity.

Discourses of food security until the 1970s focused purely on food production and availability. But after Amartya Sen (Sen, 1981) argued based on his study of Bengal Famine of 1943 that hunger and even famine can occur in times of plentiful food production, the discourse of food security switched from a concentration on food production to one of food access. Accordingly, the World Food Summit in 1996 defined food security as a condition “... when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO, 2006, p. 1). Such a discourse on food security reasoned that an individual could be food secure if she is able to access food by adopting any of

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<sup>18</sup>Existing literature suggests that Nepal’s populations who are undernourished and remain most vulnerable to food insecurity can be clustered into three different groups: (i) an economically poor group: those who are landless, land-poor (holding less than 0.5 hectares), or are agricultural labourers, (ii) a geographical isolated group: those living in remote areas such as Mid-Western, Far-Western Regions and other parts of Nepal where road connectivity is not particularly good or reliable, and (iii) a socially marginalised group: those belonging to certain castes (e.g. Dalits) and ethnicities (e.g. Chepang, Mahji, Kumal, etc.) (GON, 2012b, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; USAID, 2010).

the following: (i) producing, (ii) buying, (iii) exchanging or (iv) receiving food in gift form from state or non-state actors (Maxwell, 1996; Sen, 1981). In the 1990s fresh scholarship revealed that in dire situations humans choose to eat “inferior foods”, eat less or even skip meals in order to survive (Maxwell, 1996). For these humans, surviving was more important and urgent than eating. Therefore it was concluded that securing sustainable livelihoods was a pre-condition for securing food.<sup>19</sup> With shifts in discourses of food security from focusing solely on food production, to food access, and later to securing sustainable livelihoods, the academic focus likewise switched its focus from food production, to food access, and finally to investigating a household’s or community’s productive capacities to sustain livelihoods.

Academics of various disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, human geography, political science and economics have debated what food security or sustained livelihoods mean and how to achieve them. Yet the reports that calculate the number and typologies of food insecure populations at regional, national and international scales are still mostly produced by economists. Macro and micro-economists normally estimate the numbers of food insecure populations by using ahistorical statistical and econometric methods and models relying heavily on and analysing economic variables such as food prices, household incomes, labour productivity, agricultural production and productivity, trade statistics and the like. They treat these economic variables as the core factors and either entirely ignore cultural structures and forms local governance or label them as unexplained variables (GON, 2013b, 2014). Since

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<sup>19</sup>According to Ian Scoones, International Development Studies, one of the leading global institutions in the field, based at the University of Sussex, United Kingdom (UK), livelihood and sustainable livelihood is: “A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, while not undermining the natural resource base” (Scoones, 1998, p. 5).

such approaches dis-embed humans from socio-cultural and political structures and also from the historical contexts that shape their actions, the pictures produced are often incomplete, economically deterministic, narrow and ultimately removed from lived reality. Discontented with such approaches and methods and with a desire to supplement them with alternative analysis I have taken an ethnographical approach to investigate the issue of food insecurity in a manner informed not only by economics but also by culture, politics and history, Research conducted using this approach is more holistic than other approaches and constructs pictures closer to reality (Edkins, 2000; Scoones, 1998).

I have also used Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of cultural and social capital to supplement my observations on material and economic possessions in understanding inequality in broader terms. Bourdieu defines cultural capital as:

... what is called culture, cultivation, presupposes a process of embodiment, incorporation, which insofar as it implies a labour of inculcation and assimilation, costs time, time which must be invested personally by the investor. Like the acquisition of a muscular body, it cannot be done second hand (so that all effects of delegation are ruled out) (Bourdieu, 2011, p. 48)

I have applied this conception of cultural capital in Chapter Five, for instance, while discussing the origins of vast inequalities in land ownership, to show how a certain social group utilized the ability to read and write Nepali language, cultivated through investments in time, labour and money, to its advantage to register large tracts of land during the land reform programme in the 1960s, while the social groups completely lacking such an ability or having the ability to read and write Sanskrit language only were considerably at a disadvantage. Similarly, I have also deployed the Bourdieu's conceptualization of social capital defined as:

... durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group [caste, ethnic group] ((Bourdieu, 2011, p. 51)

...

... to illustrate how *afno manche* (one's own people) and *natabad-crypabad* (favouring one's relatives and close friends) were utilized as two more forms of social capital more by some social groups than the others to claim more access to vital resources such as land (Chapter Five).

At this juncture, however, I want to clarify that I have considered the concept of food security and the *bikase* practice of trying to achieve food security only as an entry point to situate Dalits who are economically poor and socially and politically marginalised. Rather than focusing on how Dalit communities produced, accessed and consumed food my research closely scrutinised the changing social relations within which Dalits live their everyday lives, lives that I argue are increasingly affected by the practices of *bikas* and the discourses of democratic equality in the new Nepal (Gellner, 2016). I also approach the study of Dalits, not in isolation, but through their everyday interactions and relations with other non-Dalit caste and ethnic groups, state, non-state actors and markets to understand how and why these relations enhanced or inhibited their productive capacities and access to resources to secure decent dignified livelihoods.

As argued above the discourses of new Nepal are also narratives of equality and inclusion. Here ethnic and caste identities are being re-constructed not by the principle of Hindu caste hierarchy but through the politics of difference and social equivalence (Gellner, 2003; Gray, 2012; Taylor, 1994; Young, 1990). Therefore, my research also had to deal with the ideas and ideals of equality. Although political philosophy is typically the discipline where debates

and discussions of equality/inequality occur, such discussions are usually accomplished via imaginative abstract tropes such as the “veil of ignorance” or the “Original Position”(Rawls, 1971). However, the discipline of anthropology and its chosen methodology of ethnography (Atkinson, 2001) has allowed me to follow “interpersonal relations, reconstruct life histories, participate in social processes, and observe social interactions directly” (Tilly, 2001, p. 301) to

... understand underlying ... mechanisms through which hierarchy is translated ... and inscribe this relationship into a broader historical and sociocultural framework (Nguyen & Peschard, 2003, p. 450).

Taking food insecure Nepalese populations as an entry point and considering that Dalits, the landless, near landless, women, certain Janajati groups and people residing in remote places are more vulnerable to food insecurity than others the first task was to identify the physical spaces where these groups resided. While there are a number of researches studying food insecurity in remote districts (GON, 2012b, 2013b; USAID, 2010) and a number of multi-million dollar projects<sup>20</sup> seeking to reduce food-insecurity, there is a paucity of studies focusing on understanding the food security and poverty vulnerabilities faced by the Dalits, who disproportionately constitute the majority of the landless and the near-landless in both remote and non-remote districts (Bennett, Tamang, Onta, & Thapa, 2006). Therefore, I was determined to choose a place that was not particularly remote from these national discourses.

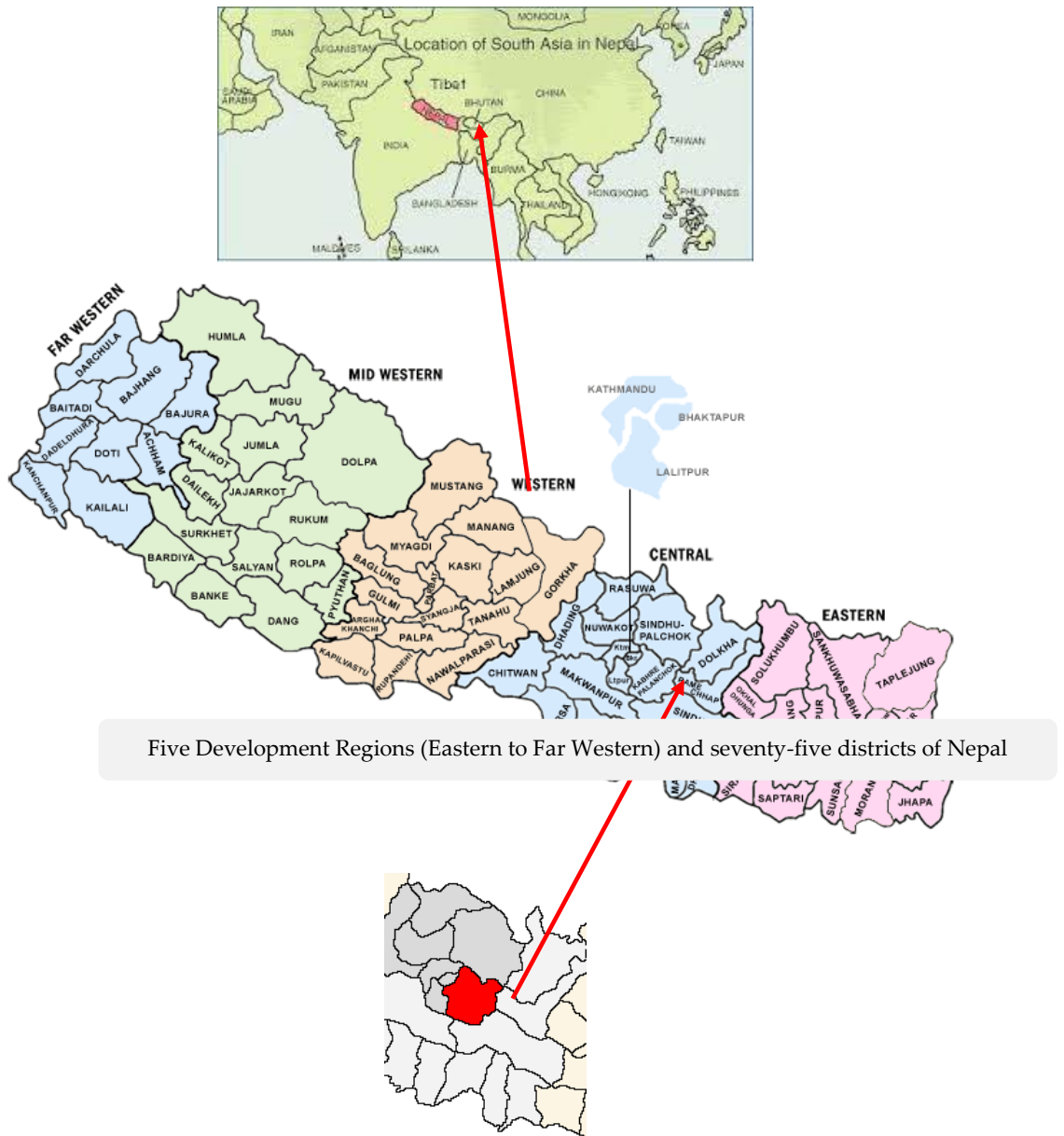
After a few rounds of consultation with my former colleagues at FAO, the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Ministry of Agriculture and after a few

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<sup>20</sup> The World Bank funded 58 US million dollar “Nepal Agriculture and Food Security Project (2013-2018)”, and USAID funded “Feed the Future Initiative Nepal” and *Suaahara* are a few of such initiatives.

pre-field trips, I finally selected a village (*gau*) called Patle Gau in Kavre-Palanchowk (hereafter Kavre) district for my ethnographic research (Figure 2).

**Figure 2 Kavre-Palanchowk (Kavre) district (in red) in Nepal**



Kavre district has later been located in Province Number Three but during the time of my field work, Kavre was one of the hilly districts falling under the administrative territory of Central Development Region. In the classificatory jargon used by the state, Kavre is labelled as a “commercial” districts on account

of its fertile lands ranging in elevation from 300 to 3018 metres, providing climatic conditions ranging from subtropical to cool temperate suited for cultivating agronomic and vegetable crops and raising livestock of many kinds which are traded with other districts in Nepal and across the border with India (GON, 2012a). Demographically 381,937 individuals (male: female = 0.99:1) populate Kavre residing in 80,720 households, 65% of whom pursue agricultural livelihoods (GON, 2012c).

Kavre's population includes significant caste and ethnic diversity. The Tamangs are the most populous constituting about 35% of the district's total population, followed by Bahuns at 23%, Newar at 14%, Chhetri at 14% and the Dalits at 13% with many other social groups such as Bhujel, Danuwar and Majhi of lesser percentages. About 62% of the population in Kavre follow the Hindu religion, 35% practice Buddhism (the religion followed predominantly by the Tamangs), 1.7% are Christians and smaller percentages follow other faiths. A recently completed highway, Arniko Highway, passes through Patle Gau connecting the district to urban centres to the east and west such that agri-products can be exported while agricultural inputs such as chemical fertilisers and hybrid seeds, can be easily imported into the district.

Patle Gau literally translates to "thin village", signifying the presence of only a few houses spread across a large area, but ironically it now has hundreds of houses far too many for me to research effectively. Hence, I deliberately demarcated an area within the larger Patle Gau where a number of poorer, landless or near-landless Dalit households were residing alongside non-Dalit social groups: Bahuns and Tamangs, so that I could minutely observe inter-caste/ethnicity social relations. Defining three social groups (Bahuns, Dalits and Tamangs) in Patle Gau in a physical area demarcated for ease of research meant that administratively the interlocutors were residing in two different but

neighbouring Village Development Committees (VDCs)<sup>21</sup>, the smallest administrative units at the time of research. This meant that when I took information related to political and administrative structures I had to find information on both VDCs. Likewise, since I treat Patle Gau as “a flexible set of social relations ... rather than a fixed point on a map” (Shneiderman, 2015, p. 319) I did not focus only on residents of Patle Gau, but also interacted closely with villagers, especially the social and political elite of the surrounding areas.

I identified the poor community within Patle Gau using a top-down as well as bottom-up process. Remaining cognizant of the methodological problems of measurement I did not use “scientific and objective” absolute definitions of poverty—such as national poverty line of NRs 19,261 per capita per year in 2011 or the US\$ 1 per day per person (ADB, 2012)—for the purposes of identifying the poor. Instead I used the relational and relative method by which the non-poor as well as the poor in larger Patle Gau identified the poor. The non-poor typically identified the poor by saying *uniharu ko halat beegoj cha* (their condition is miserable). The poor also identify themselves as not having anything (*hamee sanga kehi chaina*). I supplemented these relational and relative notions of poverty with my own visual impressions of house-types, and number and status of livestock keeping so that I could observe comparatively their relations with each other especially in terms of accessing resources such as land and money. I started my PhD project in 2013 and went to Nepal for my field work in 2014. My time in the field was split between Patle Gau, neighbouring villages, towns, district headquarters and Kathmandu.

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<sup>21</sup> Current administrative units such as Village Development Committee, Municipality, Metropolis, and so on may or may not eventually change when the federal structure according to the new Constitution 2015 gets fully enacted. But during the time of my research I followed whatever administrative structure was in place.



Before I mention about the local residents of Patle Gau who aided me initially to familiarize myself with the village and its residents and who supplied me with the bulk of the data that comprise my thesis, I want to discuss a little about the names and pseudonyms used. I have used pseudonyms to name all the Patle Gau residents to conceal their identities. I have used real names only of the government officials (e.g. Ganesh Bhatt), political activists (e.g. Aahuti) and other interviewees who provided me with written consent.

Although Siromani Sapkota, a local Bahun elite, had provided me with a guided tour on my first visit to shape my understanding of Patle Gau, I later hired Suman Purkoti to assist me in my research. A local of Patle Gau, Suman was a Dalit adolescent who had failed level ten exams and was preparing re-take the exam the following year and thus had some time to help me connect with others in the village. In Patle Gau I conducted formal interviews with some and used semi-structured questions with most others, yet it was my informal chats with everyone that provided me with the most insight. I have tried to enrich my data by mixing the perspectives of men and women of different social groups and ages. While Patle Gau itself provided the bulk of data for my analysis, I also followed some of the Patle Gau residents to Bhaktapur, about one hour bus ride from Patle Gau and to Kathmandu, still further away.

Since *bikas* is one of the central problematics in my research I interviewed *bikase* agents in Patle Gau, at district headquarters (Dhulikhel) and at the centre (ministerial and department levels) in Kathmandu, some of whom have given me permission to quote them directly. To compare and contrast with local views in Patle Gau, I also formally interviewed Dalit activists like Aahuti and political Dalit leaders like Min Bishwakarma. In Kathmandu I participated in a few social science and *bikase* seminars and conferences to acquaint myself with the latest academic and *bikase* discourses in Nepal.

When I was not formally interviewing my interlocutors in Patle, I spent much time drinking tea or sipping coke in local *cheeyapasals* (teashops). *Cheeyapasals* are a great place for ethnography since many people come there to gossip, eat and drink, get information or just to kill time (Putnam, 1975). Here, most people did not object to me taking notes which recorded events as directly as possible. When I was not in *cheeyaspasals*, collecting first-hand information through participant observation (Tedlock, 1991) I was in (i) agricultural farms (sometimes helping a little, sometimes just watching), (ii) meetings of school management committees or co-op management committees, and in (iii) local bazars where much illegal gambling took place, a field which I believe is highly under-researched in Nepal. I also triangulated my field notes with “the extended case method” (Small, 2009) in which I talked with a number of interlocutors on the same subject until nothing new was emerging or when same or similar things were being repeated.

Because I was also interested in exploring changing social relations in my thesis, I have tried to draw upon relevant historical material. But since much of the written histories have, until recently, functioned ideologically to eulogise the kings, consolidate the powerful and other representatives of dominant cultures (Onta, 1996, 1997, 2006), I have tried to shape my understanding of Patle Gau through a number of oral histories. Highlighting the importance of oral histories, Theresa Hammond and Prem Sikka argue:

... Oral histories are important because, first they focus on individual experiences, interpretations, reactions and aspirations ... Oral histories' focus on the individual has the capacity to illuminate the dissension, resistance and accommodation that shapes the development of accounting ... we call for the use of oral histories to give voice and visibility to those marginalised or otherwise adversely affected by accountancy. Oral history has the potential to give voice to the subordinated, and we consider the examination of axes of

power in accounting - especially along the lines of race, gender, and class [caste and ethnicity] - a crucial but long neglected area of research (Hammond & Sikka, 1996, pp. 79-80).

I took oral histories from elderly people from all three social groups. I was fortunate that I found at least four men who were older than 80 to narrate for me what Patle Gau used to be like and how its social groups interacted with each other and accessed resources in the past.

In terms of my own positionality, I was perceived as an “educated” middle-class, urban Janajati touchable man studying in a *bikashit* (developed) country called Australia. This positionality facilitated my social acceptance and frequent interactions. Therefore, I was welcomed into the houses and kitchens of Bahuns, Dalits and Tamangs alike. Working in a caste-sensitive patriarchal society I do not know if I could say the same had I been a Dalit or a woman. Although caste-based discriminatory practices are still prevalent particularly in private spaces, I was never openly criticized for entering Dalit houses or interacting with them so often. I did not perceive any change in the behaviour of any Bahun or Tamang with who I interacted because of my close interaction with Dalits.

At a time when the identity politics surrounding caste and ethnicity is at its peak, conducting an ethnography where the concept of caste is central is not without its challenges. In the current climate it is quite common to hear Nepalese say, “We were peaceful and suddenly these politicians have started talking about caste and ethnicity. We are disintegrating as a nation.” Because of this I never directly discussed caste or ethnicity, instead I observed what it meant to be a Dalit or a Bahun or a Tamang and how they saw and related to each other. However, while I never asked direct questions about caste and ethnicity, my interlocutors

themselves brought those topics into their conversations on general day-to-day living in the village.

Conducting an ethnography as a research student was also tricky. Some thought or wished that I were a *bikase* agent myself so that I could “bring” to them some *bikase* packages. Patle Gau, like any other village in Nepal, is also a site where different government agencies and non-government organisations (NGOs) continuously intervene to deliver a range of *bikase* projects, such as adult education, micro-finance, pit-latrines construction, bio-gas construction, trainings for commercial vegetable farming and so on. Because of this prior exposure many villagers also anticipated me to be a representative of one particular development project. Therefore, some people initially were very enthusiastic to talk with me only to recoil later after learning that I was only a research student. Some of these people would stop talking or talked less with me, but some with whom I was able to establish friendly bonds in time just continued to chat away.

On one occasion I was also mistaken for an undercover policeman. This happened while I was inquiring into what had transpired between a Tamang money-lending *Saujee* and a Dalit debtor (who was unable to return the money and had to forfeit some land to the money-lender). After only a few minutes the Tamang money-lender just stopped talking. He then directly asked me if I was a policeman in civil dress to which I firmly said no. Yet, that did not entirely convince him. He then made some excuses and did not engage with me any further. This was despite my thoroughly informing him about my research project before the conversation and showing him my ANU Student Card. Thus some in Patle Gau assumed me to be a *bikase* agent, some believed me to be a policeman, and others may have even held out hope that I might bring *bikase* programmes to Patle Gau in the future. The analysis of this thesis and the evidence I have produced here are the result of a unique combination of my

positionality interacting with the positionalities of my diverse interlocutors in Patle Gau.

When I tried to follow a few Dalit families working in Bhaktapur or in Kathmandu, it turned out to be more difficult than I originally anticipated. Mobile and landline phones, taken for granted in modern economies of e-connectivity, are not necessarily available in Nepal, especially in villages amongst poor, illiterate peoples. In Patle Gau it was only the more economically prosperous and literate people who could make use of such technologies. The matter was made worse by the fact that some Dalit individuals and families were frequently absent from Patle Gau and returned only to celebrate *Dasain* (a Hindu festival) or after seasonal work in brick kilns was completed. In any case I used the snowballing method to finally locate these Dalit families and individuals in Bhaktapur and Kathmandu.

### **Limitation**

There are several limitations to my study related to applicability, my positionality, and the limited scope that I have been able to give to women. Situated close to the capital city (Kathmandu), Kavre district and Patle Gau located within Kavre are not comparatively remote areas. Yet this proximity to the largest metro and cosmopolitan city in the country does not make Patle Gau an urban space. Patle Gau's economy and its socio-cultural setting remain very rural. Due to this unique locational and socio-cultural circumstances, my findings will not be applicable to other regions in Nepal. That said, however, the findings may be generalised to other districts and villages like Kavre and Patle Gau in the Nepalese hills which are non-remote, proximate to cities and other urban areas but retain rural characteristics.

I have tried to present the worldviews of the Dalits as far as I possibly can, but this has ultimately been limited by my positionality. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, my WFP colleague had obtained help from Siromani Sapkota, a local Bahun man, to host me in Patle Gau. In the very first meeting, Siromani immediately offered me a room in his house to stay. It was hard for me to reject as the house was only a couple of hundred metres away from the Dalit *bastee* (settlement). And secondly, since the Dalits had poor living conditions they could not offer me any space to live in their houses. Therefore, although I was not living with Dalits, I maintained frequent interactions with them to avoid adopting a “Brahmanical” worldview.

In order to broaden the comparative perspective by incorporating Tamangs into my research I also sought to interact with them as much as I could. I do not speak or understand Tamang language which they speak among themselves. However, most Tamangs speak Nepali so this was not a huge limitation, although I have to acknowledge that it was the younger and the better-travelled amongst them who spoke fluent Nepali. Most Tamangs did not have the same fluency or the range of vocabulary in Nepali language as the Bahuns and the Dalits had which may have limited the precision and intensity of communication. All my research was thus conducted in either English or Nepali.

I also want to concede that much literature on Tamangs also project them as being marginalised, excluded, economically poor, and vulnerable to food insecurity (Bennett, et al., 2006; GON, 2011, 2013b, 2014; Tamang, 2009; Tamang, 1992). I do not want to dispute or challenge these findings. However, my evidence from Patle Gau suggests that in this particular locality they are comparatively richer, landed and have greater representation in the political circles at village and district level than Dalits, although they still have not assumed the leadership roles that Bahuns have. My findings on Tamangs thus

do not exactly correspond to their image in nation-wide discourses, yet this can probably be explained by their population strength in Kavre, where, they are the most populous ethnic group, ahead of any other caste or ethnic group.

The other limitation of this study is that it has given only limited space to women. This thesis does not revolve around gender relations and I do not draw from feminist theory, although some of my interlocutors were women. A few of these women are actually powerful “change” and *bikase* agents in Patle Gau. However, I could spend only limited time with them learning about their work because it is not culturally accepted that I, a married man, befriend local women too much. I only had a few interviews with them, their time and local culture permitting. Still I have tried to discuss gender relations in the broader discussions of social relations, whenever feasible.

Finally, a few words on caste and ethnicity itself. Caste and ethnicity in Nepal is a complex structure. Caste-based relations operate in three spaces: two geographical (hills and Madhesh) and one cultural (Newar ethnic/caste group). Largely disassociated by geography, the hills and Madhesh have developed their own similar yet different caste-systems (the castes found in Madhesh are not necessarily found in the hills and vice-versa) and relations while the Newars living largely in hilly areas have their own internal (and even more elaborate and complicated) caste-system quite distinct from the other two. Because of the location of my field-site, my study excludes the Madhesh and Newar culture and is applicable to hill-based communities only. Another layer of sophistication in caste structure in Nepal is the hierarchy and “disunity” amongst Dalits themselves, wherein many Dalit sub-groups think that Bishwakarma (B.K.), the blacksmith, are the least marginalised among them<sup>22</sup>. In my site there were two

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<sup>22</sup> Personal communication with Min Bishwakarma, Member of the Central Working Committee of Nepali Congress.

sub-groups of Dalits, Pariyar (tailors) and Meejar (cobblers) but I have not looked deeply into intra-Dalit dynamics, and have instead mostly treated both sub-groups as one Dalit group.

## **Chapter Plan**

Since it is a large undertaking to analyse changing social relations among three caste and ethnic groups within the larger discourse of democratic equality, this thesis is organised into three sections. Chapters one to three contextualise my study before proceeding with my ethnography. Chapter One introduces my research topic, issues and gives a brief overview of the related theories, literature, methodology and limitations. Chapter Two critically reviews how since the inception of the nation-state of Nepal, leaders and bureaucrats have used social identities such as caste (*jāt*) and associated hierarchy in order to subjugate the “the other” and legitimise their authority to rule. Chapter Three argues that the discourse of *bikas* was used to distract the masses from existing power inequalities and inequities, sometimes in the name of nationalism, and other times in the names of being good citizens.

In the second section from Chapter Four through to Chapter Seven I provide ethnographic evidence to support my overall thesis. In Chapter Four I argue how caste and ethnic identity amongst the Bahuns, Dalits and Tamangs is expressed through language, ritual performance, endogamy, specific livestock keeping practices and the maintenance of physical distance. In Chapter Five I deal with economic disparities, looking most closely at how the legacies of *Birta* (land gift), *Kipat* (communal land), and the failed *bikase* program of distributive land reform led to (near) landlessness amongst the Dalits and resulted in economic inequalities almost exactly corresponding to caste hierarchy.



In Chapter Six I examine another area of *bikas* heavily influenced by neo-liberalism - the mobilisation of co-operatives and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to provide rural credit. Here I argue that the provision of credit through this mechanism has benefited the elite and non-poor, more than the poor. The Dalits, who are mostly poor, are bound to remain perpetually indebted to local money lenders for survival while even the richer Dalits do not attain the status symbol of a *Saujee*. In Chapter Seven I argue that while Bahuns and Tamangs migrate for economic advantage and prestige (through higher education) advancement, the Dalits migrate for survival and for caste-anonymity. Finally, Chapter Eight presents the main research findings, their applicability to other similar socio-cultural settings and discusses scope for further research.

## Chapter 2

### Creating a “New Nepal”: Dialectics of Cultural Politics

In 1950 the Nepalese state managers had promised that they would deliver a Constitution written *not* by “experts” chosen by the king and the political elite but by the people’s representatives through a Constituent Assembly. But as I argued in the previous chapter when such a Constitution did get promulgated in September 2015, after a wait of 65 years, not all were happy - especially certain women’s groups, Janajatis and Madheshis. The *andolan* (movement) launched by the Madheshis immediately after the announcement of the promulgation of the new Constitution allegedly in September 2015 led to the death of 57 people from violence in a few months (HRW, 2015).

Ever since the nation-state of Nepal was formed in the eighteenth century, it has been the site of protests, movements, rebellions, and revolutions (Lawoti, 2007). The most recent *andolan* is just one of many. The 1950s *Jana Kranti* (People’s Revolution) against the autocratic Ranas sought to establish parliamentary democracy. The introduction to Westminster-style democratic governance it introduced was brief, King Mahendra in 1960 dismissed it, and in 1962 introduced his own Panchayat democracy. Panchayat Democracy (1962-1990) was itself ousted by *Jana Andolan I* (People’s Movement I) that gave parliamentary democracy a second chance in 1990. Yet, this did not stop the Maoists from launching a *Jana Yudha* (“People’s War”) in the name of Maoist Revolution (1996 – 2006) against the state in 1996 which cost tens of thousands of lives. When King Mahendra’s son King Gyanendra suspended the elected parliament in 2002 and assumed all direct powers in 2005, the Maoists and other political parties aligned together against him to initiate yet another *andolan*, *Jana Andolan II* (People’s Revolution II) in April 2006. *Jana Andolan II* successfully

abolished the monarchy and reinstated parliamentary democracy for the second time in 2006.

So why have there been so many *andolans* in Nepal? In order to understand these large-scale conflicts, which have occasionally been very bloody, it is necessary to have an overview of the politics of culture and governance shaping Nepal's state building processes. Most commentators argue that because some groups have felt alienated and marginalised by processes of state making, and have thus—in the name of social inclusion and social justice— occasionally revolted against the dominant group (Gellner, 2007a, 2007b; Hangen, 2007; Hangen, 2009; Lawoti, 2007, 2010c; Vasily, 2009).

Judging by sheer numbers alone, no one particular caste or ethnic group is overwhelmingly the most dominant in Nepal. The “high castes” from hill origins comprise about 31% of the population, followed closely by Janajati at 27%, Dalits at 14% and so on (Dahal, 2014). Nonetheless, the dominance is perceived not in terms of numerical populations, but in terms of the widespread and disproportionate presence of the “high castes” of hill origins in leadership positions of important institutions such as political parties, parliament, civil bureaucracy, judiciary, universities and the armed forces. This access to ‘power’ has given these groups the privileged opportunity to shape and structure state-mechanisms in their favour (Gurung, 1997, 2003, 2005; Gurung, 2012; Lawoti, 2010c, 2012; Pradhan, 1991; Pradhan, 2002). They have advantageously utilised these powerful positions to manoeuvre cultural politics and control political, economic and governance structures which they have used to homogenise the otherwise multi-ethnic (which necessarily did not have Hindu religion-based caste hierarchy and the concept of pollution) into one ‘homogenous’ Hindu society. Doing so they were able to create hierarchy among traditionally non-hierarchised ethnic groups for the purposes of legitimising their political, cultural

and economic dominance during the Shah and Rana rule until the 1950s (Gurung, 2003; Hangen, 2009; Kymlicka, 1995, 2001; Lawoti, 2010b, 2010c; Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009b).

By constructing the character of Nepali nation-state as wholly Hindu (which in fact it was not) these groups ethnocentrically defined Nepali nationalism in terms of “hill Hindu” values and customs during the Panchayat regime (1962-199) which enabled them to successfully acquire legitimate privileges while marginalising and excluding other socio-groups such as Dalits (in terms of caste rank), Janajati (culture), the Madhesis (geography) and women (gender) from nation-building state mechanisms (Gurung, 1985; Gurung, 1997, 2003, 2005). However, these manoeuvres have never been smooth or easy. They have constantly faced resistance, revolts and revolutions organised and executed by the very groups they sought to marginalise (Lawoti, 2007). A long history of tensions between dominant and marginalised communities is the source of the current state of affairs. My main objective in this chapter is to delve deeper into the conflictual dialectics of the politics of culture. Using broad strokes and a chronological approach I provide a succinct historical analysis of Nepal’s political history and changing configurations of power between different groups, in order to better understand the present. I believe such an understanding is crucial as it provides necessary contextual background to my ethnography.

Historians of Nepal would like us believe that Nepal’s history can be divided into three periods: ancient, medieval and modern (Regmi, 1952; Shaha, 1988). Yet considering that the “modern” period gave rise to the nation-state which we now know as Nepal, I shall take up that period to further discuss Nepal’s national and cultural politics.

## **Absolute Monarchical (Shah) Rule (1769-1845): Creation and Maintenance of *Aslee Hindustan***

Historians contend that the territorial expansion of a princely state of Gorkha<sup>23</sup> by its then king Prithvi Narayan Shah (hereafter P. N. Shah) in 1769 and by his immediate descendants thereafter marks the beginning of military conquests and political negotiations which eventually led to formation of the modern day nation-state of Nepal. Before that, however, a large number of non-Hindu shamanistic and Buddhist tribal units were thriving side-by-side within numerous princely Hindu states ruled by “high caste” Thakuri<sup>24</sup> elites such as the Shahs, Sens and Mallas of alleged (Indian) Rajput-origins. This Thakuri ruling elite had fled Muslim conquests in India and entered the Nepalese hills during the 16<sup>th</sup> century ... (Bista, 1991; Gurung, 2003). Claiming “divine” powers to rule, these petty Hindu kings visualised constructing their small kingdoms as “pure” Hindu havens, safely protected from “impure” beef-eating Muslim and later equally “impure” Christian regimes in India (Hachhethu, 2007). Consequently, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century some of the Sen Rulers of the Nepalese hilly states began proclaiming themselves to be “*Hindupati*” (patriarchs of Hinduism) (Gurung, 2005), an act that the Shah Kings later followed. In fact, Drabya Shah, an ancestor of P. N. Shah, replaced the name *Liglig*: a kingdom of the ethnic Gurungs, with Gorkha after he was able to defeat its non-Hindu tribal Gurung king in 1559 (Krishna B Bhattachan, 2000). Some argue that the name Gorkha itself has its etymological origins in the Sanskrit word *Goraksa*, “protector of cow”<sup>25</sup> – “*gō*” meaning cow and “*rakshya*” meaning to protect (Michaels, 1997).

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<sup>23</sup> Situated about 140 kms by road north-west of Kathmandu, the then Kingdom of Gorkha is now an administrative unit, a district, by the same name.

<sup>24</sup> Thakuri is supposed to be “high-caste” warrior Chhetri unlike other “common” Chhetri. Thakuri is “entitled” to be kings and are able to rule.

<sup>25</sup> Hindu mythology treats cow as a sacred animal which symbolises Laxmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity.

It therefore comes as no surprise that P. N. Shah aspired to create *aslee Hindustan* (“real Hindustan” – pure land of the Hindus)<sup>26</sup> in Nepal imposing isolationist form of governance to effectively close it to any outside influence (Regmi, 1978, 1999; Sever, 1996; Thapa, Timilsina, & Dahal, 1997). Using Hindu logic, P. N. Shah also classified Nepal’s residents into four *varnas* and 36 *jāts*. By four *varnas* he referred to the classical four-fold Hindu caste system of Brahmin (Bahun), Kshatriya (Chhetri), Vaisya and Sudra, and by 36 *jāts* he symbolically signified a multitude of groups within these four *varna* groups (Hofer, 1979; Kansakar, 1977). To maintain Hindu “purity” P. N. Shah did not hesitate to expel Capuchin missionaries from Patan as soon as he conquered the Kathmandu Valley in 1769 (Gurung, 2003, 2005). He and his descendants also resolutely upheld the tradition of appointing a *Dharmadhikari* (authority on *dharma*)<sup>27</sup>, a Bahun priest well-versed in *Vedas* and other Hindu texts, to provide advice on jurisprudence (Hodgson, 1836; Michaels, 2004, 2005; Pradhan, 1991; Thapa, 2010).

In such a governance system, the monarch or his regent, as the source of all power, would sit at the top of the hierarchy and have power over representatives spread throughout the country in a pyramidal fashion (Burghart, 1978; Dahal, 2014; Regmi, 1999; Stiller, 1976). Clearly the French political philosopher Baron de Montesquieu’s (1689 – 1755) suggestion that in order to check the state from being tyrannical its power should be divided into three different institutions - the legislative, the executive and the judiciary (De Montesquieu, 2004) - had not reached the Nepalese masses who were coaxed by the ruling elite into believing that in accordance with Hindu ideology they had the legitimate authority to rule over them in absolute terms (Hachhethu, 2007).

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<sup>26</sup> A collection of Prithvi Narayan Shah’s political advice to his loyalists are said to be preserved in *Divya Upadesh* (Divine Counsels of Prithvi Narayan Shah).

<sup>27</sup> Axel Michaels has discussed some of the duties of such a religious authority in his “The Price of Purity: the Religious Judge in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Nepal” (Michaels, 2005).

Right below the monarch was a council of *bhardars* (comparable to a cabinet of ministers) led by a *Mukhtiyar* (equivalent to the post of a Prime Minister) who was invariably one of king's close kin relatives such as a younger brother or a nephew. The *Mukhtiyar* was in turn assisted by *Kajis* (ministers) and *Sardars* (administrative chiefs). For maintenance of absolute power, and the preservation of dictatorial rule "*hukumi raj*" (rule by order), the king assured that the *kajis*, *bhardars* and *sardars* were men of Thakuri and Chhetri castes loyal to him, and whose performance and loyalty he would be able to directly monitor and supervise (Regmi, 1995).

Administratively Nepal was divided into four territorial divisions which were further divided into several districts that oversaw numerous villages. Men from royalist Bahun, Thakuri and Chhetri castes would head the division and district administrations. Peasants in the villages would pay taxes to the local chiefs and tax collectors (*subbas*) who were either non-Hindu ethnic village elites (Gurung, Limbu, Magar, Tamang, etc.) who had colluded with the imperial centre, or were royalist Bahun, Chhetris, and Thakuris who had slowly but surely taken over the territorial authority by receiving large tracts of tax-free "land gifts" from the state in the form of *Birta* lands (Caplan, 1970; Pradhan, 1991).

In the largely agrarian economy of the time, the Shah Kings used land as a political tool for state-building and sustenance. The political economy was geared towards extracting tax from the peasants in the form of grains, free labour or even coins, which were collected by royals, *bhardars*, *kajis*, *sardars*, village headmen, and the army, who did little to provide any services in return (Burghart, 1978; M. Joshi & Mason, 2011; Maskey & Deschene, 2008; Regmi, 1976, 1978; Sever, 1996; Shakya, 2012; Stiller, 1976). It is not that the gifting of *Birta* lands as a political tool was a political invention of the Shahs, it had existed under previous dynasties like the Mallas, but such a practice had been intensified under

Shah Rule (Pradhan, 1991). And, since the monarch could also unconditionally nullify *Birta* land grants contingent upon the results of the annual *pajani* (performance revision), the landowning elite never felt obliged to protect and defend the peasants working their lands but were rather concerned solely with appropriating maximum benefit (Stiller, 1976). The peasants, however, had no sphere in which to voice their complaints about unjust taxes, and hence expressed a “silent cry” (Stiller, 1976). Under such repressive circumstances the peasants and people of various ethnic groups occasionally came together to organise local small-scale resistances and revolts against this oppressive feudalistic system. Yet the more powerful state actors could effectively and easily suppress these efforts (Lawoti, 2007; Muni, 2010; Pradhan, 1991; Regmi, 1999).

### **Autocratic Rana Rule (1846 – 1951): Hinduisation and Official Hierarchisation of Nepalese Society**

An unexpected bloody coup in 1846, through which Jung Bahadur Kunwar (1816 – 1877), a man from an “insignificant” Chhetri group (Kunwar) achieved the status of *Mukhtiyar* (Prime Minister) marked the end of direct Shah monarchical rule. Reducing the Shah monarch to a titular figure head only, Jung Bahadur began to rule with an iron fist. His ambition to be the king of Nepal was halted only by the disapproval of the influential British in India, his closest ally at the time. Because Jung Bahadur was a Chhetri he sought to raise his caste status from that of a Chhetri (warrior caste) to that of Thakuri (ruling and warrior caste). In order to gain acceptance from the masses he produced fake documents linking his lineage to a Rajput (royal) family in Jaipur, India (Kumar, 1967). Although Jung Bahadur fell short of becoming the king himself he nonetheless abandoned his meagre Chhetri Kunwar surname to adopt the Rajput-royal title of “Rana”, and began calling himself Jung Bahadur Rana. With Jung Bahadur Rana, the Rana dictatorship effectively supplanted the Shah dictatorship. Instituting a



hereditary system for the post of all-powerful Prime Minister, which deemed that such a position was to be passed from one male Rana to another in accordance with a roll of succession decided by the Ranas themselves.

It is vital to note there that adventurous Jung Bahadur also happened to be the first high-ranking Nepalese official to have ever crossed the *kala pani*<sup>28</sup> to reach Europe in 1850. Upon his return in 1851, thoroughly impressed with French and English systems of governance, Jung Bahadur sought to emulate these systems and establish some kind of “written and modern” administrative and judiciary system in Nepal. To bring about political and social unification of the diverse populations of Nepal of the time, Jung Bahadur and his assistants had to assimilate three social groups into one “homogeneous” order: (a) the Newars of Kathmandu Valley who had their own modified and elaborate version of caste system, (b) the various, largely non-Hindu, ethnic groups residing in hills and mountains, and (c) the Hindu and non-Hindu groups of Madhesh (Gurung, 2003, 2005). To do this Jung hired a number of consultants, the *bhattas* (academic experts on Hindu religious texts) from India<sup>29</sup> who helped to draft the comprehensive and totalising *Muluki Ain* (National Code 1854) that imposed “uniformity,” and in the name of “unity” organised all of the Nepalese society under one Hindu ideology (Pradhan, 2002) (Figure 3).

The design of the *Muluki Ain* was inspired by the Vedic Varna system but was not an exact replica because the *Vaisya Varna* (business community), a vital part of Hindu caste system, is conspicuously absent. Nonetheless, it was still based around the notion of ritual purity and impurity (Dumont, 1980). Therefore, all the five categories of castes and sub-castes first fell into two broad categories:

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<sup>28</sup> Seas were referred to as *Kala pani* (black waters) as there was a belief that crossing them would make one come in contact with other non-Hindu “impure” castes to lose one’s caste and consequently become “impure.”

<sup>29</sup> Personal communication with Aahuti, Dalit intellectual and activist in Nepal.

“pure” and “impure”. The “pure” castes were further divided into two: “wearers of holy cord”<sup>30</sup> (Bahun, Thakuri, Chhetris and Sanyasis in the order of rank) ranked above the “pure” *matwali* (alcohol drinking).

The *Muluki Ain* 1854 also privileged Bahuns, Thakuri and Chhetris coming from hill areas (*parbat* or *pahad*) placing them above the Bahuns originating in Madhesh, although in a strict Vedic sense any Bahun is always ritually ranked above Chhetri and Thakuri. This came about because Gorkha and later the whole of Nepal had for a long time been ruled by “high-caste” men originating in the hills. Additionally, *Terai* (plains) Bahun were said to have entered Nepal from Northern Indian relatively recently and were considered “inferior” and thus not “originally Nepali” by hill residents. It is also interesting to note that the *matwali* were further sub-divided into two: “non-enslaveable” and “enslaveable.” Those *matwali* caste groups who were subjugated by the Gorkhai Empire (Regmi, 1999) in the early phase of its expansion and who had been fairly thoroughly Hinduised and given semi-important posts in the governance system were labelled as “non-enslaveable”, while those who were not, were tagged “enslaveable”, and used to provide free labour and services to the state and its managers (Pradhan, 2002).

The group “impure castes” was also divided into two: (i) impure but touchable, and (ii) impure and untouchable. The first category consisted of some occupational Newar caste groups, Muslims and Europeans with whom commensality was forbidden but bodily touch did not require any religious

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<sup>30</sup> According to Hindu belief system one has to be first born into a certain *jat* (caste). That is the first birth. But to enter into the so called “higher casts” (Bahun, Thakuri, Chhetri, Sanyasi), the male children have to perform a particular ritual (*bratabandha*) by which they are made eligible to wear a specific *janai* (“holy cord”) which signifies their second birth into the “upper castes”. Only after this ritual do they become full legitimate members of “high Hindu upper castes” able to perform rituals reserved for them only. Because of this, they are also called “twice-born” and “*tagadhari*” (wearer of holy cord).

purification. Below this group at the very bottom were the “impure and untouchable” caste groups from whose hands any food or water was unacceptable and bodily contact with whom required ritual purification (elaborate processes led by a Bahun priest in the past but “cleansing” with water “purified” by sprinkling with gold and silver in more recent times) to restore “lost” caste status.

The *Muluki Ain* 1854 also legislated caste-based and discriminatory punishment rules to different castes for the breach of its provisions in matters of private and public affairs such as marriage, sexual relationships, dress and commensality. In all these matters “high-castes” faced the least penalties and the “untouchables” endured the toughest punishments (Gellner, 2009; Pradhan, 2002). It is true that caste-based discriminatory practices were already socially accepted and practiced in Nepal prior to the proclamation of *Muluki Ain* 1854. Yet, it is essential to note that *Muluki Ain* 1854 gave such practices legal “teeth”, as it was the first written official document that legalised caste status and legitimised the caste-based discriminatory practices. This in turn cemented such practices in society, eventually laying the foundation for institutionalised “high-caste” privilege (Bahun, Thakuri, Chhetri and Sanyansi), with people of hill origins at the top of social hierarchy. (Gellner, 2001; Gurung, 2003; Whelpton, 1983, 2005).

**Figure 3 Ranking of castes according to *Muluki Ain* 1854  
[Source: (Hofer, 1979; Figure 3)]**

<p>Pure castes (<i>Cokho jat</i>) or “water-acceptable castes” (<i>pani chalnya jat</i>)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Wearers of the hold cord (<i>Tagadhari</i>)             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) Upadhyaya Bahun (“pure blood”)</li> <li>(ii) Thakuri (Rajput) (“royal warrior” caste higher than “warrior Chhetri”, no. vi) e.g. Malla, Shaha, Bom,</li> <li>(iii) Jaisi Bahun (“impure blood” – children from the union of an Upadhyaya man with (i) Bahun woman married without following necessary religious rituals or (ii) Bahun widow or (iii) a divorced Bahun woman</li> <li>(iv) Newar Bahuns</li> <li>(v) Terai Bahuns (Bahuns of Indian origin)</li> <li>(vi) Chhetri (“warrior”), etc.</li> </ol> </li> <li>2) Non-enslaveable Alcohol-Drinkers:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) Magar</li> <li>(ii) Gurung, etc.</li> </ol> </li> <li>3) Enslaveable Alcohol-Drinkers:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) Tamang</li> <li>(ii) Chepang, etc.</li> </ol> </li> </ol>
<p>Impure castes (water-unacceptable <i>jat</i>) (<i>pani nachalnya jat</i>)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4) Impure but touchable castes             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) Kasai (butchers)</li> <li>(ii) Kusle (Newar musicians)</li> <li>(iii) Muslim</li> <li>(iv) European, etc.</li> </ol> </li> <li>5) Impure and untouchable castes:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) Kami (blacksmiths)</li> <li>(ii) Sarki (cobblers, shoemakers, tanners, leatherworkers)</li> <li>(iii) Damai (tailors and musicians), etc.</li> </ol> </li> </ol>

To strengthen and deepen the processes of Hinduisation of Nepalese society, the *Muluki Ain* 1854 also proscribed the death penalty for cow-killing and beef-eating, practices that were not taboo among many non-Hindu ethnic groups (now named “*Matwali*”) (Michaels, 1997; R. Pradhan, 2002). These state-sponsored acts of Hinduisation, were also enabled by the elites of some non-

Hindu ethnic groups who began celebrating Hindu festivals, used Bahun priests and began speaking Nepali language. Nepali language which until early 20<sup>th</sup> century was called *Khas kura* (“Khas speak” signifying Khas region which is now in Western Nepal where the language originated) or *Gorkhali bhasa* (“Gorkhali” language – the language spoken in the Gorkha kingdom) was declared an official language only in 1930 (Pradhan, 2002).

The Ranas wanted to consolidate caste-based hierarchies and structures of discrimination, yet they also needed to continue to legitimise this authoritarian position. To accomplish this a certain reformist Rana Prime Minister by the name Dev Shumsher Jung Bahadur Rana in a bid to gain widespread popularity in 1901 allowed members of the so called “lower castes” to attend his residence to participate in *Bhardari Sabha* (Counsellors Meeting) in the name of social inclusion (Rana, 1978). Attempted at a time when the *achhyuts* (“untouchables” as they were called in those times) did not even dare to enter the house of any “higher” caste this “unpopular populist” practice was severely criticised by most high-caste elites. Consequently, the subsequent Rana rulers after Dev Shumsher Rana’s short 144-day rule quickly abandoned this practice, solidifying caste-based discriminatory practices at the top levels, in the process setting precedents for others to follow.

The oppressive Ranas regime started to falter in the late 1940s, unsteadied by a wave of movements for independence from colonial states that spread around the world after the Second World War. The departure of their ally, the British, from India, and the desire for Nepal’s democratisation by the new Indian government further undermined the Rana regime. In order to secure their position, one of the last Rana Prime Ministers announced a reformist Constitution of Nepal in 1948 which bestowed the Nepalese citizens with civil rights and liberties to exercise freedom of speech, expression and religion for the

first time (Joshi & Rose, 1966). As a symbolic gesture towards terminating the top-down central approach to governance wherein all major positions even at the lower levels of governance were appointed by the Prime Minister or his delegates, the Constitution (1948) prescribed that the members of the grassroots-level *gram panchayat* (village council)<sup>31</sup> and *nagar panchayat* (town council) were to be elected. These *gram* and *nagar panchayats* in turn were to elect a *jilla panchayat* (district council). The constitution also stipulated that the Legislature was to be constituted of two houses: the *Bhardari Sabha* (Council of Nobles), consisting of twenty to thirty nominated members, functioning as an Upper House and a *Rastra Sabha* (National Council) as the Lower House with forty-two elected and twenty-eight nominated members. For legal purposes, a judicial committee was to act as the Supreme Court with branches spread out to the district levels.

Nevertheless, true to the despotic nature of the Rana rule, the constitution provisioned that the Prime Minister was to chair all branches of government. In any case, none of the provisions of this Constitution (1948) ever got implemented as it was nullified almost as soon as it was promulgated. Such a conservative move by the Ranas only further encouraged the Nepalese masses of all castes and regions to unite and organise massive political movements against them. At the time, the three major oppositional forces - the social democrats led by the Nepalese Congress, the communists led by the United Marxist Leninist, and the Shah King himself who had been self-exiled in India – started to mobilise against the Ranas, drawing together dissatisfied Nepalese people as well as the hundreds of thousands of Europe-returnee Nepalese soldiers who had seen “other forms of government” while fighting for the British in Second World War. This violent opposition against the Ranas was referred to as *Jana Kranti* (People’s Revolution).

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<sup>31</sup> Village councils were to have five to fifteen elected members representing at least one village and town councils were to have ten to fifty elected members and district council were to have fifteen to twenty members (Joshi & Rose, 1966).

Unable to forcefully subdue the *Jana Kranti*, the Ranas finally submitted and were conclusively removed from power in 1951.<sup>32</sup>

### **First Experiments with Parliamentary Democracy (1951- 1962): Trialling Social Inclusion at the Center**

With the autocratic Ranas securely out of the political way, the Shah King of the time, Tribhuvan Shah, the Nepali Congress and the United Marxist Leninist Party secretly agreed in 1950 in India to the “Delhi compromise.” This agreement bound them to holding elections for a Constituent Assembly that was to draft a new constitution with the hope of administering the Nepalese state in more democratic terms (Kumar, 1967; Rana, 1978). Yet, at least in part because the king and the social democrats were paranoid that the Nepalese communists wanted to establish a “secular republic” in the “only Hindu Kingdom of the world” of the time, they colluded to convince the communists to have both the Interim Nepal Constitution 1951 and the Nepal Constitution 1959 be written by a team of “experts.” As a result both these Constitutions, however democratic, still reserved a privileged position for the King enabling him to dissolve both the parliament and the executive government if he judged that certain acts were “unconstitutional” (Maskey & Deschene, 2008).

The “democratic” government headed by Nepalese Congress that was formed right after the expulsion of the Ranas in 1951 also was the site of the first practices of “inclusionary politics”, with representatives from ethnic groups such as Gurung, Thulung, and a representative from Madhesh included in the Ministerial Cabinet (Sever, 1996). Yet, no woman or member of the Dalit community were given any position. This phase also saw intra-party personality

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<sup>32</sup> Many authors have written profusely on the Ranas but Andrian Sever’s “Nepal under the Ranas” (1993), Pramod S. J. B. Rana’s “Rana Nepal: an insider’s view” (1978) and E. E. Jaina’s “The emergence of a new aristocracy in Nepal” (1973) provide analytical perspectives on the rise and fall of the Ranas (Jaina, 1972; Rana, 1978; Sever, 1993).

clashes between political leaders and inter-party ideological clashes (communism versus social democracies) between political parties, at time reminiscent of previous family feuds amongst the Ranas. These squabbles meant that the governments formed during this period had very short lives. The masses who believed that “democratic” governments should show greater responsibility towards them than the dictatorial Ranas, became constantly disillusioned with the lack of services and *bikase* programmes intended for their welfare (Whelpton, 2005). Even the implementation of the first land reform programme in 1950/1951 that aimed at providing “land to the tillers” by abolishing *Birta* (gift) land grants was firmly resisted by powerful landed elite who sided with the ambitious monarch, Mahendra Shah. Utilising a clause provided by the Constitution of Nepal 1959 and with the support of the army that was still led by royalist men of Chhetri and Thakuri caste groups, and the landed elite composed largely of “high-caste” men, Mahendra was able to direct a bloodless coup to firmly suspend the democratically elected parliament. He then rejected the parliamentary democracy as a “foreign practice unsuited to Nepalese soils” that had provided zero *bikas* (Adhikary, 1995; Onta, 1996). With the intent of running the whole nation in a dictatorial fashion camouflaged under the rhetoric of the swift deliverance of *bikas*, many political leaders were locked up in jails or exiled to India, and Mahendra “gifted” a new type of “home grown democracy” *Panchayati prajatantra* (Panchayat democracy) in 1962 (Adhikary, 1995; Onta, 1996).

### **Return of the Absolute Monarchy in Panchayat Democracy (1962 – 1990): Suppression of Multi-culturalism**

Another phase of powerful cultural politics in Nepal begins with Mahendra. For Mahendra democracy simply meant that the masses could enjoy the right to vote. This right to vote, however, according to Mahendra, could not



be employed with the idea of self-rule to elect political parties<sup>33</sup> guided by ideologies like liberalism, socialism or communism but could only be utilised for electing politicians who showed their complete allegiance to the idea of the Panchayat system. The Panchayat system of governance differed little from the previous despotic Rana and Shah rulers, as Mahendra placed himself at the helm of the Executive, the Legislative and the Judiciary. Mahendra achieved this not through the interpretation of Hindu texts as his ancestors had, but by invoking the more modern tool of a Constitution – the Nepal Constitution of 1962.

With most powers firmly in his hand Mahendra then began a state-led project of assimilation that sought to homogenise the otherwise heterogeneous Nepalese populations and provide it with a “common” identity by declaring that Nepal was a “Hindu State.” Hidden under this agenda of “national integration” he denied cultural and religious pluralism and imposed a monolithic concept of one nation (Nepal), one language (Nepali – mainly spoken by Hindus of the hills), one culture (the Hindu-based caste system), one religion (Hindu) and one national identity (hill-based Hindu identity). Consequently, Nepali language became the primary mode of communication for formal education and government correspondences at the expense of hundreds of other languages locally spoken (Onta, 1996, 1997). Similarly, the dress worn by the hill-based Hindu group was defined as the national dress, ignoring many other local forms of dress. Other Hindu symbols were also used to essentialise a Nepalese national identity: *simrik* (deep red)<sup>34</sup> became the national colour and the cow became the national animal. To influence the psyche of young children “standardised” national school textbooks used to glorify hill-originated Hindu culture and “brave” Hindu men who “united” Nepal (Onta, 1996, 1997). Assessing the

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<sup>33</sup> Political parties as well as associations of many kinds were banned during the period of Panchayat democracy.

<sup>34</sup> Hindu colour for victory and prosperity.

Panchayat period to be one of hegemonic dominance (Gramsci, 1992) by the Hindu elite, it is clear that under the leadership of Mahendra power and knowledge-production were intimately intertwined (Foucault, 1980), Om Gurung writes:

... cultural elements of unity were proclaimed by suppressing the differences. Any claim to ethnic identity was reduced to political rebellion ... because it was considered to be a threat to nationalism (O. Gurung, 2012, p. 195).

The panchayat democracy had four tiers of governance - village, district, zonal and national – whose executive posts were taken mostly by the royalist hill Hindu elites. The villages and towns were administered by *gau panchayat* (village council) and *nagar panchayat* (town council) respectively. The *Rastriya Panchayat* (national council or “parliament”) that served as the unicameral national legislature sat at the top. Despite the fact that the executives of both the district level and village level bodies were elected, the king still exercised a massive amount of power at the local levels through the middle-level Zonal Chiefs, fourteen in total, who were directly appointed by him.

But the Panchayati era did not last forever. Yet during this period the monarch, his family members, and many of his loyalist allies amassed immense wealth by running big businesses such as five-star hotels, major manufacturing companies and by rent-seeking from state-owned enterprises (which produced a range of commodities from agricultural products to cigarettes) (Shakya, 2012). The general public, unfortunately, largely stayed poor and hungry. Since many Nepalese people felt disappointed and frustrated with the continuation of “*Gareeb desh ko dhani raja* (Rich king of a poor nation)” under the Panchayat administration they began to think that perhaps the multi-party parliamentary system of the 1950s was not given adequate opportunity. Hence peoples of all

castes and creed united together to initiate a popular People's Movement I (*Jana Andolan I*) against the Panchayat regime. The global movements for liberal democracies around the world, especially in the communist states, only helped the *Jana Andolan I* to topple the Panchayat system for the restoration of multiparty democracy under constitutional monarchy in 1990.

### **Revival of the Multi-party Parliamentary Democracy (1990 - 2005): Assertion for Multi-Culturalism**

With the reinstatement of multi-party parliamentary democracy in 1990, Nepalese people started enjoying unprecedented political freedoms, including freedom of expression and freedom of formation of social and political organisations. The Constitution of Nepal 1990 itself, although retaining a Hindu identity for the nation, for the first time recognised Nepalese peoples' cultural heterogeneity by acknowledging that Nepal was a "multi-ethnic" and "multi-lingual" nation (GON, 1990).

Post-1990 there was an upsurge of the politics of recognition (Taylor, 1994) and the politics of difference (Young, 1990), as various cultural groups started asserting their self-created identities and discarding categories imposed on them by the erstwhile Hindu elite. The so called *matawaali* (alcohol drinking) peoples rejected this state-given derogatory identity which had placed them in second and third positions in traditional Hindu hierarchical ranking. The activists and intellectuals amongst them began giving themselves a new identity: the Janajati (nationalities) (Gellner, 2001; Gurung, 2005; Onta, 2006; Wimmer, 2008). The word Janajati itself is not a recent invention as it customarily meant "peoples of different kinds" (Sharma, 1975) but Nepal Janajati Mahasangh (Nepal Federation of Nationalities)<sup>35</sup> founded in 1990 gave it a new meaning using it to signify the

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<sup>35</sup> Presently called Nepal Adhivashi Janajati Mahasangh (Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NFIN)).

non-Hindu nationalities who were outside of the Hindu caste system and had their own distinct languages (other than Nepali), traditions, religions (other than Hinduism such as Buddhism, Kirant, Bon, etc.) and cultures (other than hill-based Hindu culture). This group identity excluded all Hindu groups (both from the hills and from Terai) including the former “untouchables.” Members of this group even began to boycott Dasain, the largest Hindu festival, to assert their non-Hinduness and distinct ethnic identity (Hangen, 2009). Some even publicly burnt pieces of literature in which they felt they had been portrayed in negative light by Bahun authors (Hutt, 2003).

The former “untouchables” started to use the identity marker Dalit (the oppressed)<sup>36</sup> more profusely than ever before, and in the process abandoned forever the derogatory *achhyut* (impure, untouchable) identity. This was in part because of a feeling that Dalit was a political identity which could be corrected democratically while *achhyut* was an identity so deeply tied to religion and culture that change would be too slow to occur. Seeking equality Dalits also began asserting their right to be free from caste-based discrimination, through hundreds of government and non-government agencies (Vasily, 2009). People from *Madhesh* also proudly started identifying themselves as *Madheshi* rejecting the derogatory and insulting *Madhise* used by the hill-based Nepalese populations.

However, the democracy of 1990, increasingly started looking more like the democracy of 1951. Political instability and corruption became rampant compelling many political observers to use the term “democracy.” While the 1990 parliamentary democracy had limited the power of the monarch and had

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<sup>36</sup> A term introduced to them in 1956 by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar of India. Ambedkar was one of the main architects of Constitution of India and founder of the Republican Party of India (later named *Bahujan Samaj Party*).

separated the powers of the state, it had made only minor cosmetic alterations to the political administration. The fourteen zones were dissolved but the seventy-five districts retained the same size, shape and name. *Gram Panchayat*, *Nagar Panchayat* and *District Panchayat* were renamed *Gau Bikas Samitee* (Village Development Committee), *Nagar Bikas Samitee* (Municipal Development Committee) and *Jilla Bikas Sameetee* (District Development Committee) with responsibility for the same administrative territories (Joshi & Rose, 1966). Just like the failure of earlier experiments with democracy in the 1950s and the project of Panchayat democracy, post 1990 practices of democracy saw high levels of corruption, political instability, and growing economic inequalities (Lawoti, 2010a, 2010b; Panday, 1999; Panday & Tamang, 2011).

Traditionally marginalised groups such as the *matwalis*, (now Janajātis), *achhyut* (now Dalits), women, Madhesis, and peoples residing in rural and remote areas continued feeling excluded politically and economically. They thought that the fruits of *bikas*, if there were any, were not being equitably distributed. The rich and powerful of the Panchayat regime both at the centre and in rural areas were no longer *Panches* (defenders of Panchayat system) but took new avatars as allies of the mainstream political parties, most with the Nepalese Congress and some with United Marxist Leninist parties (Nepal, 2003). These elites thus continued enjoying profit and power disproportionately, mostly through illegal means. The great aspirations of the general masses for parliamentary democracy soon turned into huge disappointments (Joshi, 2009; Lawoti, 2010a; Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009a; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2004; D. Thapa, 2004, 2012).

In the mid-1990s, these disappointed people were quickly and convincingly romanticised by the Maoist ideology propagated by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists) which promised a society devoid of

exploitation and assured “land to the tiller.” This attracted massive numbers of the poor, the landless, and the marginalised, especially in the rural areas where poverty was widespread, who believed that perhaps an alternative future where things were more prosperous, more egalitarian, and more inclusive was possible (Pattanaik, 2002). The Maoists claimed that in order to dismantle Nepal’s (semi)feudal social relations and build a more egalitarian society, the country needed a people-centred constitutional framework drafted by people’s representatives elected to the Constituent Assembly rather than by a group of so called “experts” as had been the case thus far (Thapa, 2004). But the parliamentary governments’ persistent rejection of these Maoist demands<sup>37</sup> and the denial by the Election Commission to allow this party to contest the 1994 parliamentary elections only further incited them to rebel against the state. Surprisingly, this was also at a time when communism had collapsed globally and was being replaced by Western liberal democracies, in a stage Fukuyama referred to as “end of history” (Fukuyama, 1989). The Nepalese Maoist revolution was thus indeed a rare phenomenon (Nickson, 1992). Yet it has to be understood that the 1990 revolution had mostly been an urban event led by urban elites with support from the urban masses (Nepal, 2003). It remained disconnected from the 80% of Nepalese that lived in rural areas (Shneiderman & Turin, 2004). However, the Maoists understood this, and speaking directly to the frustrations and grievances of these marginalised social groups, assured them social, political and economic inclusion, in return for joining them in an armed uprising against the state (Lawoti, 2012; Mishra, 2004; Shakya, 2012; Thapa, 2012). The Maoists promised autonomous “states” to various Janajati and Madhesi groups and

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<sup>37</sup> Of their 40 point demands the following were the most significant: a new Constitution to be drafted by the people’s elected representatives; declaration of Nepal as a secular state; all languages in Nepal to receive equal treatment; the establishment of ethnic and regional-based autonomous regions; all forms of caste, ethnic, regional and gender based discrimination to be ended; and special policies to be formulated for the promotion of the interests of Dalits and women.

initiated the discourse of creating a “New Nepal” free from caste, in order to persuade Dalits to fight for their cause (Hachhethu, 2009; Lawoti, 2010a; Muni, 2010; Nayak, 2008; Thapa, 2004, 2012). Although a few Bahun men with the support of some Janajati men held the Maoist leadership positions, the bodies who were ready to kill and be killed were composed mostly of women and members of Janajati and Dalit groups (Pettigrew, 2012). Thinking they could win against the state, the Maoists in 1996 declared a *Jana Yudha* (People’s War) with arms and ammunition against the state.

The Maoists strategically chose a district in mid-west Nepal geographically far from Kathmandu as their headquarters and utilised the emotions and bodies of the marginalised ethnic group (Magar) residing in this region as inputs for their army. The ruthless but unsuccessful state terror to contain initial Maoist struggles not only encouraged other similarly marginalised communities to support the Maoists, but triggered efforts by Nepalese diaspora sympathetic to them to start pouring in financial aid (Nayak, 2008; Pattanaik, 2002; Thapa, 2004). In no time what the state thought to be an ordinary “law and order” problem in a remote village became a nation-wide revolutionary war. Supported by ideological and programmatic contacts with the Indian Naxalites<sup>38</sup>, the Peruvian communist Shining Path (Nayak, 2008) and the Revolutionary International Movement (RIM)<sup>39</sup> (Pattanaik, 2002) the Maoists created a roadmap that shaped Nepalese nationalism based not on hill Hindu values and mores but on an ideology that sought to stand up against global (typically American), regional (typically Indian) imperialism, as well as local feudalism in Nepal (Hachhethu, 2009; Muni, 2010; Nickson, 1992; Pattanaik, 2002; Thapa, 2002). This

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<sup>38</sup> The members of the Communist Party of India (Maoists) who were able to mobilise peasants and economically poor tribal groups against the local landlords in an armed struggle in Naxalbari, West Bengal, India since the 1960s are called Naxalites.

<sup>39</sup> Founded in 1984, The RIM is an international Communist (Maoist) organisation.

ideology successfully touched hearts of many who were ready to endanger their bodies in the hope of crafting a more egalitarian society (Gellner, 2003; Muni, 2010; Nickson, 1992). The Maoists' violent methods of executing exploitative moneylenders and landlords—their “class enemies”—in some villages (Joshi, 2009; Lawoti, 2010a; Thapa, 2004, 2012) and the ruthless retaliation by the state meant that by the end of the war more than 13 thousand lives were lost (Lawoti & Pahari, 2010; OHCHR, 2012). At the height of the insurgency, the Maoist People's Liberation Army (PLA) boasted 35,000 armed soldiers against the Nepalese state's 100,000 military personnel (Hachhethu, 2009). During this time, the Maoists had succeeded in pushing the state back to the extent that they were running parallel governance structures such as *jana sarkar* (people's government) and *jana adalat* (people's court) in most rural areas. The state's police and administrative units could only fully function in the capital city and town centres. This absence of functional government which was increasingly failing to “deliver positive political goods” to its peoples (Rotberg, 2010; p. 1) had provoked some to label Nepal a “failing/failed state” (Economist, 2004; Riaz & Basu, 2007).

In the midst of the “People's War” something terrible happened in the royal palace on June 1, 2001. The incumbent king, queen, crown prince and nine other immediate royal family members were killed in a massacre that was “officially” reported to be the deed of the crown prince. This meant that the younger brother Gyanendra Shah of the King Birendra Shah had to be crowned as the new king. The ambitious new king Gyanendra Shah, in less than a year on the throne, following the tactics employed by his father Mahendra's in the late 1950s, dismissed the popularly elected government and suspended multiparty democracy in October 2002. He did this by claiming that the democratically elected parties were unable to contain the violent acts committed by the Maoist “terrorists” (a label given by the Nepalese state). Encouraged by international



partners to fight terrorism in a post 9/11 era, Gyanendra insisted on the use of brutal state force to suppress the Maoist revolution. Unfortunately for him, his confrontational approach proved to be fatal to the monarchy. The mainstream political parties, who he had thrown out of office, teamed up with the Maoists to incite the *Jana Andolan II* (People's Revolution II) that effectively forced the monarch to reinstate the democratically elected parliament in April 2006.

### **Inclusive Social Democracy (2006 – date): Rhetoric of a More Egalitarian Federated 'New Nepal'**

The year 2006 is thus another milestone in Nepal's political history. It was the year that democratically elected parties and the Maoists were successful in joining forces to strip the monarch of his major executive powers and re-instate the parliament that the king had suspended. The Maoists also signed a peace treaty with the Government of Nepal giving up their arms to participate in competitive parliamentary democracy, an occurrence happening only once in every three civil wars since 1940 (Walter, 2002). The end of this decade-long domestic war also paved the way for holding elections for the Constituent Assembly, an event which had been hoped for more than sixty years. Many describe this point in time as the dawn of "New Nepal", an idea that was politically constructed by the Maoists during the People's War to justify their armed struggle against the state (Greenland & Skuse, 2015; Hangen, 2007). The politically conscious also started calling this new found political condition without a monarchy *ganatantra* or *loktantra* rather than *prajatantra*. "*Praja*" of "*prajatantra*" meant subjects to a king and not peoples of a nation (Hangen, 2009; p. 164). The English translation remained the same: democracy (or democrazy, however one preferred).

Constructing a new Nepal also necessitated the abandonment of the old constitution of 1990, which was inconsistent with new ideas and ideals. Hence

the Interim Constitution of secular of Nepal, promulgated in 15 January 2007 stated in its Preamble:

We, the sovereignty and state authority inherent people of Nepal ... pledging to accomplish the progressive restructuring of the State in order to solve the problems existing in the country relating to class, ethnicity, region and gender (UNDP-Nepal, 2009).

It further went on to acknowledge that Nepal is a "... sovereign, secular, inclusive and fully democratic State" having a character that is "multiethnic, multilingual, multi-religious and multicultural." It included provisions that the Nepalese state's existing unitary structure would be changed to a "federal democratic republic state." Accordingly, the previous state actors' attempt to maintain Nepal as the "only Hindu kingdom" in the world were shattered as Nepal became "the last Hindu kingdom" in 2007. Additionally, many other state-level symbolic and structural changes were also made. Since the previous national anthem was fundamentally a tribute to the monarchy, it was replaced by a new one that celebrated "diversity" of the Nepalese peoples. Acknowledging Nepal's multi-religiosity new public holidays were added to recognise the festivals of Janajatis, Madheshis, Buddhists, Christians and Muslims, although public holidays still overwhelmingly favoured hill-based Hindu festivities. Even the roster of national heroes and martyrs who were generally Hindu men from the hills now included a few Janajati men and women. To provide a social space where caste-based discrimination was absent and caste groups could relate to each other equally, the government even declared Nepal an "untouchability and caste-based discrimination free" nation and made any acts of caste-based discrimination a legal offence for the first time.

The latest Constitution of Nepal promulgated on September 20, 2015 has replaced the interim constitution of 2007 while retaining many of the progressive

and inclusive provisions already present in the interim one. However, various social and political groups are still arguing over the boundaries of delineated states/provinces and other citizenship-related issues. The politics of difference and recognition that arose with the 1990 democracy only intensified with the secular republicanism of 2006. And so as various Janajati and Madheshi groups began asserting their different social identities and claims of indigeneity (to be Adivasi) after the re-establishment of parliamentary democracy in 1990 to access various resources from the policies and programmes of affirmative action, the traditional high castes usually referred to as “Bahun-Chhetri” or “Chhetri-Bahun” also adopted, through the latest Constitution of 2015, the new social identity “Khas Arya” (Gellner, 2016). Khas-Arya identity maintains both claims to indigeneity and “superior” Aryan civilisation. Some historians have claimed that Chhetris were previously Khasans who had been living in Khas region (Mid and Far Western regions of Nepal) almost as long as other Janajati groups (Adhikari, 1988; Bista, 1991) Alternatively, Arya culture signifies the millennia-old Hindu culture.

Although everyday lives in Nepal can be affected by the notions of caste-based ranking, post 1990 with the reinstatement of multi-party parliamentary democracy recognising the multiplicity and heterogeneity of Nepalese peoples’ castes, ethnicities, cultures and languages (GON, 1990) and with the discourse of equality, egalitarianism and social justice during the Maoist Revolution (1996-2006) Nepalese have entered new socio-cultural and political environments. Working in these environments members of previously “medium” to “low” ranked social groups are now busy re-writing and re-creating histories and their own identities. (Des Chene, 1996; Gellner, 2001; Gurung, 2005; Hangen, 2007, 2009; Onta, 2006; Schlemmer, 2004; Wimmer, 2008) Likewise, the dominant

groups have also forged a new identity in a bid to stress their claims to indigeneity and access to political resources.

Nepal has come a long way since the time when it was ruled by one person on absolute terms, to now embracing inclusive multi-culturalism with more democratic egalitarian values (Hachhethu & Gellner, 2010). The discourses of a new Nepal have provided the traditionally marginalised groups with unprecedented political spaces to overcome marginality of all sorts.

## **Conclusion**

Ever since the formation of the nation-state called Nepal, social identities such as caste have been constructed and reconstructed by state-actors to relegate “the other” to subjugated positions, in order to legitimise their authority to rule. The rulers and politically most dominant social groups namely the so called high Hindu castes of the hills in Nepal have often used the rhetoric of Hindu ideology and Nepalese nationalism to ethnocentrically build pan-Nepal values, customs and culture. They successfully did so until the end of the autocratic monarchical Panchayat rule. However, as soon as the marginalised were able to attain some form of expanded civil and political liberties, they challenged and rejected these elite social, cultural and political constructions. Both through the largely urban-based revolution of 1990 and through the rural-based Maoist revolution, the marginalised have fought against the state and its mechanisms with the hope of creating a Nepalese society and governance structures which are progressively more equal. Towards that end, they have rejected the social identities given by the state and have striven to give themselves new names and identities which they feel are more dignified. Many caste or ethnic groups now carry these newly created identities not with shame but with pride and dignity. Hence, the former *Matwalis* are now (Adivasi) Janajatis, the former *achhyut* (untouchables) are the

Dalits and former Madhises<sup>40</sup> are now Madheshi. But the former “high castes” Bahun-Chhetri group have also retaliated by forging themselves the new identity of Khas-Arya, thereby preserving their distinction while simultaneously laying claim to indigeneity (Gellner, 2016).

This modulation of creation and re-creation of social identities and the related efforts at undoing marginalisation by some social groups and the retention of distinction by others have occurred on various scales and in various fields. At the constitutional level, the character of the country is no longer homogenously Hindu but is secular, multicultural and multilingual. Although the state still retains a few national symbols that represent Hinduism, many such symbols have also been dismantled. The macro-political governance system itself has metamorphosed from an absolute monarchy, to a parliamentary democracy, to a federated inclusive democracy. Even the electorate system has now been modified to let various social groups (caste, ethnic groups, women and people living in remote districts) be proportionally represented in the parliament and government. But equality attained on paper and in the discourses of egalitarianism does not necessarily translate easily and readily into equal social relations and practices. In their everyday lives peoples can draw from tradition, customs, generally accepted ways of doing and being rather from legal frameworks. And in the coming chapters I unravel exactly the everyday tensions between the status quo and these purported changes.

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<sup>40</sup> Madhise is a perceived as a derogatory term to refer to Madheshi.

### Chapter 3

## Investigating Development: *Bikas* Discourses and Their Discontents

The discourse of *bikas* (development) permeates every walk of life in Nepal. Although the word *bikas* means “improvement”, “growth” it is not simply a neologism of modern times. Nanda R. Shrestha contends that its meaning as a “status” and as a “goal” to be achieved, gained “currency” only after the overthrow of the Ranas in the 1950s (Hachhethu, 2007; N. R. Shrestha, 1997). As the nation-state of Nepal undertook the project of “modernisation”, *bikas* emerged as so ubiquitous that it quickly became “one of the most commonly used terms in the Nepali vocabulary” (Shrestha, 1993, p. 9). Therefore, it is no wonder that even everyday Nepali colloquialisms are replete with *bikas*. *Bikashe mal*<sup>41</sup> (developed fertiliser) refers to chemical fertilisers first introduced in the early 1950s by USAID; *bikashe biu* (developed seed) signifies hybrid seeds which unlike local indigenous seeds are more productive for one generation but cannot reproduce because of their inherent sterility; *bikashe karyakarta* (development worker/practitioner); *bikashe sanstha* (development organisations) and *bikaseh adda* (development office) are some of the *bikase* terms routinely heard in formal and informal conversations.

Houses deep in villages or in the heart of town centres stand side by side with offices displaying signs like Women’s Development Co-operative, Farmer Development NGO, Agriculture Development Office, Livestock Development Office, Local Development Office, and the like. Even the capital city of the

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<sup>41</sup> These chemical fertilizers were termed *bikase mal* (development-inducing fertilizer) as the discourses around development equated them with things more modern and more efficient than the local and the indigenous, in this case the organic farmyard manure. *Bikase mal* is also colloquially referred to as *Desi Mal* as they were imported from India through the Madhesh/Terai of Nepal.

country, Kathmandu, is full of government, non-government, bilateral and multi-lateral offices dedicated to the “development” Nepal. *Bikas* is present in the rhetoric of the Government of Nepal and its development partners both in written and spoken words. *Bikas* not only regularly appears in development plans, policies, strategies, and project agreements, but is also a topic of discussion in newspapers, television and radio.

*Bikas* is prominent not only in normal times but even in times of disaster. So even in the ruins of the disastrous earthquakes of 25 April and 12 May 2015 which claimed nearly 9,000 lives and injured and displaced many more, Pitamber Sharma, former Vice-Chair of the National Planning Commission of Nepal, saw opportunities for *bikas*, when he said, “*Bipatko jug ma tekere bikasma fadko marau!* (Let us leap forward in development on the foundation of distress!).”<sup>42</sup> Agreeing with Sharma many leaders and masses alike from all walks of life— from political parties to civil society to non-resident Nepalese community— voiced the desperate need to achieve *bikas*.

Yet in its ubiquity, *bikas* is also elusive. Even after more than sixty years, many think that *bikas* has not been attained. Dr. Baburam Bhattarai, former Prime Minister and former Second in Command of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre), established a new political party with a perennially fresh sounding name *Naya Shakti Nepal* (New Force Nepal) in June 2016 promising that the party will make Nepal the most “prosperous and developed” country in twenty-five years’ time. Dr. Bhattarai claims that Nepalese people have had democratic revolutions through the *Jana Yudha* (People’s War), *Jana Andolan* (People’s Movement), *Madhesh Andolan*, *Tharu-hut Andolan*, *Janajati Andolan* and

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<sup>42</sup> Full interview published on May 24, 2015 and accessed on 25 May 2015 from <http://www.ekantipur.com/np/2072/2/10/full-story/409552.html>

other *andolans*, and now it is time for an economic revolution through which Nepal will transform into a *bikashit* (developed) country.<sup>43</sup>

Reflecting on the above narrative it is only logical to ask why, despite decades of *bikas*, do many think that *bikas* has failed in Nepal? Since *bikas*'s presence has been felt in this country for so long, what is it about its nature that makes many feel that it has not been realised? And, despite this why do national leaders keep promising to deliver it? These questions, full of contradictions, are what I seek to answer in this chapter.

In order to answer these questions, I first engage critically with the scholarship on *bikas* and its international counterpart "development". Depending on the context I alternately use *bikas* or development to mean nearly the same thing. While "development" shall refer to a particular concept that global economic and political institutions have forwarded, *bikas* shall refer to its local Nepalese interpretations. I argued in the previous chapter that Nepalese state-managers' hegemonic efforts at organising and constructing Nepalese society and Nepalese identity in ways that favoured and privileged high-caste Hindus, particularly of the hills, have consistently been challenged and resisted by marginalised groups through various *andolans*. In this chapter, I argue how the Nepalese state's efforts at implementing the seemingly high-sounding *bikas* have failed to meet the aspirations and expectations of many, especially the marginalised.

The concept of *bikas*, while reflecting much of the global discourse of "development", has its own "genealogy", a term explained by Foucault:

... combination of erudite knowledge and what people know ...  
coupling together of scholarly erudition and local memories, which

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<sup>43</sup> <http://nayashaktinepal.org>



allows us to constitute a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of that knowledge in contemporary tactics (Foucault, 2003, p. 8).

It is outside the scope of this chapter to extensively survey theories of development and their critiques (Greig, Hulme, & Turner, 2007; Larraín, 1989; Peet & Hartwick, 1999; Preston, 1982; Ziai, 2007) but I hope to locate *bikas* discourses within these theories while attempting to theorise *bikas* itself.

### ***Bikas: The Rhetoric***

Most academics agree that *bikas* entered Nepal in the 1950s following the downfall of the Ranas. Although late compared to other countries, the Ranas did abolish the practice of *sati*<sup>44</sup> in 1920 and slavery<sup>45</sup> in 1924. It could perhaps be said that *bikas* began during this period, if *bikas* is understood as progress not only in economic and material terms but in the social as well (Whyte, 1998). On the material front the Ranas had also constructed some all-weather road-networks, laid a few telephone pipe-lines, supplied clean drinking water to the Kathmandu Valley and established circular granaries at strategic locations for food security purposes. Additionally, they drew up a development plan and initiated the negotiation of the Point Four<sup>46</sup> Agreement with the United States of America

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<sup>44</sup> The practice of *Sati*, wherein widows immolate themselves on their husbands' pyres, had already been terminated in 1829 in India, more than 90 years before its termination in Nepal.

<sup>45</sup> Of the total 5.6 million Nepalese people in 1924, only 51,419 (0.01%) were slaves and Chandra Shumsher, the then Rana Prime Minister had paid 15% of the kingdom's annual revenue to 15,719 slave owners for compensation (Sever, 1993; p. 275-76) p 275, 276). Comparatively Britain and the USA had already been abolished slavery about hundred years before Nepal did: Britain in 1833 in Britain and USA in 1865.

<sup>46</sup> Point Four Programme was so named because it was the fourth point of US President Harry S. Truman's 1949 inaugural address explicating U.S. policy of technical assistance and economic aid to underdeveloped countries, which many argue was the first historic point in time for the creation of "underdeveloped" and "developed" nations (Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica at <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/466343/Point-Four-Program>).

(USA) (Mihaly, 1965). But this remained at the level of rhetoric and was never implemented.

Whatever small socio-economic reforms the Ranas made were overwhelmingly overshadowed by their political atrocities and the material excesses of their lifestyles. While their children attended the *Darbar* (Palace) School, the general masses were largely denied education. When they were not busy scheming against each other to access and preserve their political power, they were either enjoying themselves in the harems of their magnificent European-style palaces, or were riding around in Rolls Royce cars which had been carried into Kathmandu valley on the back of porters (mainly of “enslavable” Tamang ethnic group) (Raj, 1979; Whelpton, 2005). Consequently, when the Nepalese people got tired of paying taxes to fund the Rana’s overindulgences and permanently removed them from power, Nepal was left with little physical infrastructure, education or health facilities, and almost non-existent “educated” human resources. About 98 percent of Nepal’s eight million people at the time were illiterate, the entire country had only 300 college graduates (Isaacson, Skerry, Moran, & Kalavan, 2001, p. 6) and could thus provide only one doctor per half million of its population (Raj, 1979, p. 8).

After the feudalistic Ranas— who were never really interested in the welfare of the masses— were toppled the Nepalese people assumed that the new democratic government would build roads, distribute land to the tillers, bring drinking water to their homes, light their houses, provide modern medical facilities, and create opportunities for their children to be educated (Shaha, 1990). But the political parties forming the democratically elected governments that assumed power after the Ranas were so busy squabbling with each other that little *bikas* was happening. King Mahendra rode on the “frustrated sentiments” of the masses to sack the “foreign” parliamentarian democracy and introduced

his “Nepali soil suited” Panchayat democracy for delivering *bikas* (Adhikary, 1995; Onta, 1996).<sup>47</sup>

Since Nepal had virtually no modern systems of governance and structures of physical infrastructure until the end of the Rana rule, the Panchayat regime had an opportunity to develop these. Such a situation, Tatsuro Fujikura argues, provided a “textbook case” of a “pristine primitive society” suitable for “the hand of development planning” (Fujikura, 2001, p. 285). And so Mahendra utilised the Planning Board (now National Planning Commission) set up in 1955 to manage *bikas* (Pant, 1965). Guided by liberal political philosophy and heavily influenced by the modernisation principles of W. W. Rostow (Rostow, 1990) and W. Arthur Lewis (Lewis, 1954) Mahendra had the support of many Western countries who pledged aid (technological, financial, and advisory) to improve Nepal’s “underdeveloped” status.<sup>48</sup> Mahendra believed that Nepal could

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<sup>47</sup> Mahendra had launched his party-less authoritarian Panchayat system of governance after having the most influential political leaders arrested and put behind bars, or exiled in India. Except for India, the global and regional powers were happy to consider Mahendra’s coup to be an “internal matter” since both the democratic and communist aspirations of certain segments of the Nepali society had been successfully suppressed (Khadka, 1991, 1997; Mihaly, 1965; Mojumdar, 1973).

<sup>48</sup> Nepal, like many other former colonies, were for the first time collectively referred to as “underdeveloped countries” by the President of the USA, Harry Truman in his inaugural speech in 1949. World War II had ended and an ideological Cold War had begun between a group of capitalistic nations (differently named as the First World, Western World, Developed Countries or the Global North) led by the USA and the communist bloc (variously named as the Second World or the Eastern Bloc) led by the then United Soviet Republic of Russia (USSR). The Nepalese political elite opted not to join the Cold War and remained “neutral” by joining the Non-Aligned Movement led by India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (Baral, 2012). But Nepal’s strategic location between two regional powers, democratic India and communist China, meant that it received continuous attention from the global powers, the USA and the USSR. These powers hastened to utilise various forms of aid to “modernise” and “develop” Nepal, projects that concealed the real motive of undermining each other’s influence in the region. The US made the first move by launching the “Village Development Program” in 1952 (Fujikura, 2013; Mihaly, 1965; N. R. Shrestha, 1993). India quickly became second providing assistance for road construction, and was followed by China, which in 1956 granted Nepal US\$ 4.2 million cash (plus US\$ 8.4 million worth commodities) which Nepal could utilise entirely according to its own discretion (Mihaly, 1965, p. 96). As a matter of fact, India, China, and USA (in descending order of financial contribution) actually financed 56% of the total budget of the

develop according to an evolutionary paradigm and attain a higher status of development if capital, technology and the right values were transferred to it from “developed countries”(Escobar, 1995, 2007). Consequently, with support from other countries and using this techno-rational approach Mahendra claimed he was going to make Nepal *bikashit* (developed). To supply *bikas*, Mahendra also infused *bikase* discourses with discourses of nationalism. The national songs, school textbooks, and political rhetoric tried to condition Nepalese people to see “true” Nepalese citizenship as obediently working with the government to unleash the “fountain” of development (*bikasko mul phutaau*) (Adhikary, 1995).

With the intent of modernising land-tenure systems he converted remaining systems of tax-free land tenure such as *Rakam/Bekh* and *Kipat* into the *Raikar* system in 1963 and 1964. This meant that only the state could directly collect revenues from such lands (Karan, Ishii, Kobayashi, & Pauer, 1994; Regmi, 1963, 1976; Wily, Chapagain, & Sharma, 2008).<sup>49</sup> Accompanying these land-reform programmes and pre-occupied with the discourse of *bikas* as economic growth, Mahendra also re-distributed populations from the hills, which then had high human-land ratios and less productive lands, to the southern plains (Madhesh, Terai). The plains had been made hospitable after the “eradication” of malaria and had a relatively low human-land ratio with more productive fertile lands, which he hoped would increase agricultural production and feed the growing Nepalese population (Kansakar, 1985). Thousands of state-aided families resettled from the hills to Madhesh during this time, while thousands more voluntarily migrated clearing tracts of forests for residential and farming

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first five-year development plan (1956 – 1961) (Pant, 1965, p. 78). The Soviets also did not delay completing the construction of a fully equipped fifty-bed hospital in Kathmandu. The geopolitics of foreign aid in Nepal is dealt in much greater detail in works of other scholars (Jha, 2014; Khadka, 1991, 1997; Mihaly, 1965; Panday & Tamang, 2011; Sharma, 2014).

<sup>49</sup> The Nepalese state had already abolished *Jagir*, *Birta*, and *Rajya*, land tenure systems in 1952, 1959, and 1961 respectively (Zaman, 1973).

purposes (N. R. Shrestha, 1990). The agrarian sector equipped with new fertile lands and human resources also introduced for the first time modern farming techniques like farm mechanisation, chemical fertilisers (*bikase mal*), high-yielding improved seeds (*bikase biu*) and livestock breeds, which drastically improved agricultural production and productivity (Isaacson, et al., 2001).

With so much aid flowing into Nepal and so many areas for intervention, some *bikas* was felt during Mahendra's and later Birendra's (Mahendra's son) Panchayat democracy (1962-1990). The literacy level of five% in 1950s improved to 40% by 1991, infant mortality rate dropped from 20 to 10% in the same period due to the extension of health services and improved knowledge of basic sanitation (Whelpton, 2005, p. 137). A road network of only 276 kilometres at the end of the Rana rule was expanded to 7330 kilometres by the end of 1990 connecting many previously unconnected districts (Whelpton, 2005, p. 137). Nepal had no airport until 1949 ( Raj, 1979, p. 99) but by 1990 it boasted tens of them (Isaacson, et al., 2001).

Yet such *bikase* (*bikas*-related) statistics were overshadowed by the lack of *bikas* in other fields: unequal economic growth and retribution, and widespread political and social repression. King, royals, political and bureaucratic elite were looting the country by seeking rents from state-managed companies (five-star hotels, production factories, airlines companies, etc.) and lands such as forests, using corrupt and nepotistic strategies (Bista, 1991). Consequently, green forests perceived to be Nepal's wealth (*Hariyo ban, Nepalko dhan*) speedily depleted. But poverty persisted and in general Nepalese felt that they were not catching up with the rest of the world as promised (Shakya, 2002, 2012). This underachievement by *bikas* was even made worse when surrounded by poor masses the Nepalese monarchs were known as *gareeb desh ko dhani raja* (rich king of poor country) (Shakya, 2002, 2012). Nepal had not made much progress in the

30 years of Panchayat's promise of delivering *bikas* as noted by the Eight Plan, the first plan of the democratic government post 1990:

... the average annual growth in GDP was 3.4 percent whereas the growth in per capita income was a mere 0.8 percent. In absolute terms, the per capita income reached Rs. 1,605 in 1989/90 as against Rs. 1,304 in 1964/65. Thus, in a period of 26 years, the increase in per capita income was merely Rs. 301 at 1974/75 prices. As a result of the low growth rate in per capita income, Nepal happened to stand low even among the poorest nations of the world (GON, 1992, p. 1)

Even this poor economic growth showed geographic and regional inequalities. In 1989 the poverty rate in rural areas at 40% was much higher than in urban areas where it stood at only 15% (Panday, 1999, p. 73). Similarly, Far Western Nepal had a much higher poverty rate of 65% compared to Central Nepal at 34% (Panday, 1999, p. 74). Rishikesh Shaha also notes poor economic performances between 1960 and 1982 in which Nepal was the only the country in South Asia to record an average negative growth rate, that of -0.1% (Shaha, 1990, p. 47).

Theodore Riccardi Jnr, Emeritus Professor of Indology at Columbia University and a keen observer of Nepal's politics and *bikas* says similar things, in a more direct and dramatic fashion, to Thomas Bell in their conversation about *bikas* in Nepal:

The Panchayat did nothing for this country. The Panchayat was a fraud. The programme was so ... so ... what shall we say? *Inelegant*. So clearly meant to keep power in the hands of those who already had it, and the most outrageous thing is that from the time of the victory of Prithvi Narayan Shah over this country to King Mahendra the government did nothing, nothing, to change the lives of these people. Nothing! (Bell, 2014, p. 278 - original emphasis)

These poor economic performances are not the only reason why many think that *bikas* failed in Nepal during the *Panchayat* democracy. Politically a lot of

Nepalese thought that to enjoy political freedom and civic liberties, including the right to free speech were also part of *bikas*, and thus became highly frustrated. Mahendra's rhetoric of *bikas* was so tied to nationalism, that anyone challenging the ideas and practices of *bikas* was thought to be not only *bikas-virodhi* (anti-development) but also a *desh-virodhi* (anti-national). This effectively controlled people's freedom while projecting an image of the Panchayat governance system as a great benefactor (Adhikary, 1995). Any political dissenter could easily be imprisoned during the Panchayat regime (Adhikary, 1995). It was as if Panchayat democracy was trying to deliver *bikas* in an environment of "cowardice" (Bell, 2014, p. 277).

Panchayat democracy also alienated many marginalised communities such as Dalits, Janajatis and Madheshis. The Panchayat regime's intention to "homogenise" and "assimilate" Nepalese populations by propagating a discourse of an "ethnicity-less" mono-cultural Hindu Nepalese society was ultimately not a rhetoric intended to deliver *bikas* but to legitimise the Hindu monarch's "divine" status to rule (Hachhethu, 2007). During this period, the state did not allow the collection of ethnicity-based or caste-based statistics (Bista, 1991). An attempt to record such statistics by Gopal Gurung, a Janajati man, in his book "Hidden Facts in Nepali Politics" (Gurung, 1985) resulted in the government imprisoning him in 1988 (Gellner, 2007a).

Nepalese people increasingly imagined *bikas* not only in terms of its materiality (with which they were also totally dissatisfied with as Panchayat government had delivered little infrastructure) but also in terms of social and political freedoms. In light of these considerations they saw Panchayat democracy as a failure of *bikas*. Riccardi Jnr assessed Panchayat's *bikas* as a fraud, a fake (Bell, 2014). Overall, the Panchayat period (1962-1990) was not a period for

delivering *bikas*, it was a project of ethnocentric monolithic hill-based Hindu nationalism aimed at consolidating the power of the already powerful.

### ***Bikas: The Divisive, the Biased***

The democratic governments newly formed after the downfall of the Panchayat system in 1990 promised to deliver *bikas* not led by the big hands of the state, but by the invisible hand of the market, through what David Harvey would call “neo-liberalism” (Harvey, 2005). So, while the government provided all sorts of political and civil freedoms, it started de-regulating the economy by privatising many previously government-owned companies and corporations and loosening barriers to trade and commerce (Shakya, 2002, 2012). Although Nepal had already participated in a structural adjustment programme in 1985/86, the pursuance of neo-liberal policies was accelerated and intensified in Nepal after 1990 (Shakya, 2002, 2012). Obediently taking the advice of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Nepalese state aggressively began cutting back on its own bureaucratic reach and retracted its patronising stance to let the free market do more to realise economic growth in the name of *bikas* (Rankin, 2001, 2004).

This neo-liberal discourse of *bikas*, which sought to let the “efficient” private sector lead the way, resulted in the privatisation or complete dissolution of many state-owned companies. Subsidies to provide fertiliser and natural fuels were removed, however some were later restored. State-owned companies such as Agriculture Input Co-operation which supplied subsidised agriculture inputs such as chemical fertilisers, seeds and equipment were dismantled, and given over to private ownership with the belief that the “free” markets and the private sectors would efficiently deliver *bikas*. Sectors such as airlines, finance companies, banking, insurance and hydro-power were partially or fully privatised, and a



number of private companies began to compete in these economic sectors like never before (Shakya, 2002). The first plan of the Nepalese government after regaining parliamentary democracy, the Eight Plan (1992-97) accepted the private sector, community and non-government organisations (NGOs) as the powerful agents of *bikas* capable of transforming rural areas in Nepal and increase economic growth:

It is evident that the private and non-government organisations are more effective in carrying out development programmes from the view point of flexibility, cost-effectiveness and initiative. In the present democratic context, His Majesty's Government will seek to encourage the participation of private, community or other non-government organisations in rural development works. The government will formulate appropriate rules and regulations and create a conducive environment in order to increase the participation of private, community and non-government organisations (GON, 1992, p. 390).

This adoption of neo-liberal policies whereby the state takes a back seat operating only as a regulator and law-enforcer, meant that rural areas— where the private sector was not well developed or did not identify any opportunities for profit-making—were *not* supported by the state but were supposed to be aided by the “third” sector: co-operatives and non-government organisations (NGOs) (Sugden, 2009). Master Plans and guiding documents such as The Eight Plan (1992-97) and the Agriculture Perspective Plan (1995-2015) stated that the role of state was to provide only a conducive environment, with minimal interference so that the private sector, co-ops and NGOs could “freely” function to commercialise the agriculture sector and transform the rural economy from a site of impoverishment to one of wealth (GON, 1992, 1995; Sugden, 2009).

Consequently, in addition to *bikashe sarkari adda* (development-oriented government bodies) massive numbers of co-ops and NGOs became the new

agents, translators and brokers of *bikas* all over Nepal (D. Lewis & Mosse, 2006). These organisations tried to and implement development projects, applying the buzzword-like concepts “participatory”, “bottom-up” and the like (Cornwall & Brock, 2005). Consequently, the number of NGOs rapidly increased from 144 in 1990 to about 25,000 in 2010 sprawling all over the country, although many of them ceased to exist after a few years of operation. These NGOs were not only implementing development programmes such as helping the rural (poor) to construct pit latrines, kitchen gardens, but were also sometimes being used as *bharti kendra* (employment centres) by political parties to provide employment opportunities to their party supporters (Mishra, 1997).

Like the Panchayat period the neo-liberal era after 1990 did see some progress in *bikas*. In a country where motorable road was virtually non-existent before 1950, by 2014 70,000 kms of road network sprawled throughout the country and only two districts remained to be linked by road (GoN, 2016a). To provide better health services, the number of hospitals jumped from 111 in 1990 to more than 500 in 2012, including private hospitals, with more than 800 health posts (GoN, 2016a). These extended health facilities, coupled with better services reduced the infant mortality rate, per 1,000 live births, from 108 in 1990 to 46 in 2013, and the under-five mortality rate, per 1,000 live births, from 162 to 61 in same period (GON, 2013a, p. 39). Due to increased formal and informal education facilities the literacy level itself rose from 40% in 1990 to 65.9% in 2011 (GON, 1992, 2016a). There was some progress also in the state’s efforts at alleviating poverty, the percentage of population below the national poverty line decreased from 42 in 1990 to 23.82 in 2013 (GON & UNCTN, 2013, p. 9). The productivity measured in tonnes per hectare increased from 0.9 in 1990 to 1.14 in 2013 for agronomic crops, and from 0.794 to 1.07 for pulse crops in the same period (GON, 2013c).

Despite such achievements in *bikas*, massive inequalities were registered across caste, ethnicity, gender and geographic lines. The traditional “high-castes” were still over-represented in political and social leadership roles (Lawoti, 2007, 2010c). They still enjoyed the longest life, highest income, highest human development index (HDI) highest literacy rates and so on compared to Janajati and Dalits (Figure 4). In terms of gender, men did much better than women in most development indicators (Figure 5) as women continued to suffer from marginalisation (Tamang, 2009, 2011).

**Figure 4 Human Development by caste and ethnicity in 1996**  
Source: [UNDP-Nepal, 1998, Annex 3.7]

Caste/Ethnicity	Life expectancy	Adult literacy rate (%)	Per Capita Income (NRs.)	HDI
Nepal	55.0	36.72	7,673	0.325
Bahun	60.8	58.00	9,921	0.441
Janajati	53.0	35.20	6,607	0.299
Dalit	50.3	23.80	4,940	0.239

**Figure 5 Human Development by gender in 1996**  
Source: [UNDP-Nepal, 1998, Annexes 3.10 & 3.12]

Human development indicator	Men	Women
Life expectancy	55.00	52.40
Adult literacy (%)	54.32	21.33
Seats held in parliament	96.59	3.41
Professional and technical workers	90.70	9.30

Yet people in the rural areas (ridiculed as *pakhe, gaule*)<sup>50</sup> were never given much agency and largely remained “objects” that needed to be “developed” (Pigg, 1992, 1993; N. Shrestha, 1995; N. R. Shrestha, 1997). Cities and urban areas

<sup>50</sup> Around 80% of the Nepalese people live in rural areas (Dahal, 2014).

such as Kathmandu, Pokhara, Biratnagar, Nepalgunj, and Bhairahawa which had been receiving “disproportionately higher measures of public utility and services such as electricity, piped water” (Shaha, 1990, p. 48) and the like since the Panchayat era continued receiving disproportionate assistance. This further deprived the peoples of the rural and more remote areas from receiving facilities and services, resulting in increasingly inequality in *bikas* outcomes for rural and urban areas (Figure 6).

**Figure 6 Human Development by geography in 1996**  
**Source: [UNDP-Nepal, 1998, Annex 3.5]**

<b>Region</b>	<b>Life expectancy</b>	<b>Adult literacy rate (%)</b>	<b>Per Capita Income (NRs.)</b>	<b>HDI</b>
Nepal	55.00	36.72	7,673	0.325
Urban	63.20	63.50	15,900	0.518
Rural	53.70	34.50	7,072	0.306

Due to ineffective and inequitable food distribution systems, about 35% of the population was undernourished in late 1990s (GON, 2011/12, 2014). This was worsened by the fact that about 6% of population did not own enough land to even construct a shelter and around 20% of the population did not own any land to cultivate (Deuja, 2008; p. 245). Caste and ethnicity based inequalities were stark as Dalits and Janajatis overwhelmingly comprised both groups of landless and near-landless. But the issue of providing a decent means of living to these landless and land-poor groups by redistributing lands, a major *bikase* issue since the 1950s, was never resolved as democracy post 1990 failed to deliver any successful land reform programmes. This frustrated many landless and near landless peoples.

Many populations, especially the members of indigenous (*Adivasi*) and Janajati groups, actually had their livelihoods threatened in the name of *bikas*.

Instead of benefiting through employment opportunities and better living conditions in *bikase* projects, they found themselves the “victims” of *bikas*. Displaced from their native villages to make space for the construction of mega-hydrodams or bio-diversity and wildlife conservation national parks, these groups were not adequately and properly compensated for their unique social, cultural, and economic needs (Lord, 2014; McLean & Straede, 2003; Tauli-Corpuz, 2010). For them *bikas* was not *bikas*, *bikas* was in fact *binas* (destruction).

Neo-liberal *bikas* post 1990 led by the democratically elected governments with advice from the global and regional financial institutions like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank disregarded many traditionally marginalised social groups such as Janajatis, Madheshis, Dalits, rural populations and women, all of whom were excluded from the political, cultural, and economic processes of *bikas*. *Bikas* post 1990 just like post 1951 not only created political instability but also increased unemployment, poverty and rural-urban inequality (Gellner, 2003, 2007a; Lawoti, 2010c; Muni, 2010; Shakya, 2002; Sharma, 2006a, 2006b; Thapa, 2002, 2004, 2012). This unequal sharing of *bikase* fruits across caste, ethnicity, gender and geography was one of the major reasons marginalised and disgruntled groups joined the Maoist Revolution, believing their alternative strategies would produce equalities.

Post 2006 when Nepal entered a politically and socially new space and time, as a secular, federal and republic, political leaders, parties, governments of Nepal, and multitudes of aid partners continued to remain in the business of developing a new Nepal that would one day be *bikashit*.

### ***Bikas*: Locating the Proximate Causes of its Failure**

Numerous scholars have tried to theorise the failure of *bikas* in the Nepalese case. They, however, have not proposed a Nepal-specific solution but

have rather followed the lead of the international scholars to apply their models to the Nepalese case. For instance, Piers Blaikie, John Cameron and David Seddon have applied the Core-Periphery Theory advocated by Hans Singer, Raul Prebisch, Andre Gunder Frank, Immanuel Wallerstein and Samir Amin.<sup>51</sup> Accordingly, they treat India as the centre and Nepal as the periphery, and West Nepal as the periphery and Kathmandu the centre to argue that Nepal's (economic) dependency on India since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and the similar dependency by West Nepal on Kathmandu is the cause of underdevelopment in Nepal (Blaikie, Cameron, & Seddon, 1980). Jagannath Adhikari has used the same approach to explain the failure of *bikas* in the form of food insecurity in Karnali area (J. Adhikari, 2008).

Yet Dor Bahadur Bista rejects such economic arguments and following the approach taken by Max Weber<sup>52</sup>, Bista suggests that the rigid hierarchical Hindu caste system has been detrimental to attaining *bikas*. According to this system people believed in fatalism, where "one has no personal control over one's life circumstances, which are determined through a divine or powerful

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<sup>51</sup>According to core-periphery theory, modernisation theory is tainted with ethnocentrism which accords an unwarranted higher position to Western values and undermines the unequal international power-relations while neglecting the pervasive inequalities between and within countries (Black, 1991; Greig, et al., 2007; Isbister, 1991). It further proposes that the failure of "development" is not due to insufficient capital, technological transfer or misplaced cultural values as modernisation theorists suggested, but rather is due to the continuation of unequal power relationship between developed and underdeveloped countries (Amin, 1978; Frank, 1967; Wallerstein, 1979). Therefore, even after the collapse of colonisation, the underdevelopment of the former colonies continues because the terms of trade between "former colonial powers (developed)" and "former colonies (underdeveloped)" are biased towards the former: the less developed (periphery) are selling cheap primary products to the more developed nations (core/centre) which sell them back the more expensive processed or products (Escobar, 2007). This, according to core-periphery theory meant that developed countries continue to get richer and the poor ones even poorer. The solution out of this quagmire is to sever this unequal trade relation, and pursue economic relations only between less developed countries.

<sup>52</sup> In 1905 Max Weber linked religion to capitalism to suggest that Protestant work ethic led to the development of the spirit of capitalism (Weber, 1992).

external agency” (Bista, 1991, p. 4). These beliefs justified practices such as *chakari* (sycophancy): pleasing powerful people (like worshipping gods) in order to receive rewards without hard work. Practicing work ethics that value hard work and reject the fatalistic sycophantic mind-set, Bista argues, would make Nepal *bikashit* (developed).

A nationally well-known development economist and a diplomat, Devendra Raj Panday has his own views on the subject. In his aptly titled book, “Nepal’s Failed Development: Reflections on the mission and the maladies” he suggests that it was not the core-dependency theory, nor was it cultural values like fatalism and *chakari* (sycophancy) as Bista suggested, but rather the poor governance practices of rampant corruption and the donor community’s excessive pre-occupation with “aid conditionality” that are the real causes of Nepal’s failed development (Panday, 1999). Providing different arguments using different theoretical approaches, Blackie, Bista, and Panday all yearn for *bikas*, and are only debating the causes and means to achieve it.

However, Nanda R. Shrestha for one dislikes *bikas*, especially the kind that has been aided by international partners. In doing so he closely aligns his views with “post-development”, “beyond development” or “anti-development” theories (Escobar, 2007). Collectively these theories propose that the rise of global poverty, inequality and environmental damage are attributable to development which in fact is merely another form of the cultural hegemony of the West imposing “homogenising materialist values”, idealising “rational-scientific power” to create “unprecedented levels of environmental destruction” (D. Lewis, 2005, p. 475, 476)<sup>53</sup>. Nanda R. Shrestha, therefore, sees *bikas* as the continuation of

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<sup>53</sup> Limited by space I mention only the most eminent academics with similar voices (in no specific order) being Wolfgang Sachs, Ivan Illich, Gustavo Esteva, Gilbert Rist, Arturo Escobar, Ashis Nandy, Majid Rahnema and Vandana Shiva.

the ethnocentric projection of European colonialism, which only increased inequalities and created rigid dichotomies such as rural/urban, illiterate/educated, manual labour/non-manual labour, domestic/import wherein the former is to be “developed (*bikashit*)” into the latter (Shrestha, 1993, 1997). Shrestha does not argue that the past feudal-religious tyrannical heritages (such as the Rana regime or Panchayat system) be restored but seeks to “free ourselves from the trappings of Westernised development fetishism” for more self-reliant indigenous economic systems (Shrestha, 1995, p. 277):

Everywhere there is social and moral disintegration ... I still firmly believe that the best path for Nepal, under these circumstances, is a Gandhian vision of non-violent change and pursuit of simple and self-reliant development ... But none of this will be possible unless foreign aid is removed first. It has to go, for it is not designed to serve Nepal and its masses irrespective of its claims ... As much as I believe in simple and self-reliant development and in a non-violent path to societal change, I do not foresee much hope for them to materialise under the Westernised development ideology that grips Nepal, that its ruling elites have adopted as their new religion (Shrestha, 1997, pp. 212-213).

Theodore Riccardi Jnr., also suggests the same thing when he says the following to Thomas Bell in a conversation between them on *bikas* in Nepal:

Where were these aid givers coming from? What the hell did they know about this place when they got here? Nothing. They could not speak *one word of the language*. They thought they were right on everything ... But all the [*bikas*] stuff - [King] Mahendra was reading this, Mahendra reading that. And all these blueprints [of *bikas*] for the future being handed to him, or handed to somebody. This was all a way of making the West think that Nepal, or countries like Nepal, would do what they wanted them to do (Bell, 2014, pp. 277-278 - original emphasis).

Yet, Jan Nederveen Pieterse argues that such “post-development/anti-development” theorising while it may articulate meaningful sensibilities, often



lacks concrete future plan (Pieterse, 1998). And so, to Shrestha's and Riccardi's dislike, foreign aid did not stop flowing into Nepal nor did the Nepalese people choose a non-violent path to societal change. The Maoists actually capitalised on the frustrations and resentment of the traditionally marginalised—who continued feeling excluded from the processes of *bikas* even after the 1990 democracy— to launch a bloody war against the state (Thapa, 2012).

Yet even during the Maoist Revolution, people were longing for *bikas*. They desired the war to stop as soon as it could, and once *shanti* (peace) prevailed, to get on with the job of acquiring *bikas*. In her ethnography of women in the Gorkha district – a Maoist stronghold of the time - during the Maoist Revolution, Lauren Leve writes:

When I asked women what they hoped to see happen in their communities in upcoming years, the number two answer—after "peace"—was development [*bikas*] ... almost everyone expressed the desire to see roads, bridges, electricity, schools, and hospitals and more income-generating activities come to their area. At least in the language game that we played together, no one challenged the modernisation ideal. On some level, all of this is simply obvious. Just as one doesn't need elaborate social theory to explain why women who work twelve-hour days might wish to lead an easier life, it doesn't take much imagination to understand why farmers in an inaccessible rural district might want their children to have access to a modern hospital. Who wouldn't? (Leve, 2007, pp. 158-159)

And so, after the peaceful ending of the bloody Maoist revolution and the placement of inclusive political framework through Constitutions of 2006 and 2015, the government of Nepal and its major development partners did not give up pursuing *bikas* and its “modernisation ideals” (Leve, 2007, p. 159).

## ***Bikas: Still an Unfinished Agenda***

Perhaps it is because of the failures of development the world over that Wolfgang Sachs wrote more than twenty years ago: “The last forty years can be called the age of development. This epoch is coming to an end. The time is ripe to write its obituary” (Sachs, 1992, p. 16). However, development (*bikas*) is very much alive in Nepal; it “continues to survive” (Rist, 2008, p. 257). Even after more than sixty years of pursuing it, the constant failure to attain *bikas* has only made it more palpable in its absence. The “obsession with *bikas*” in Nepal that Timothy Whyte (Whyte, 1998, p. 320) observed in the 1990s, endures.

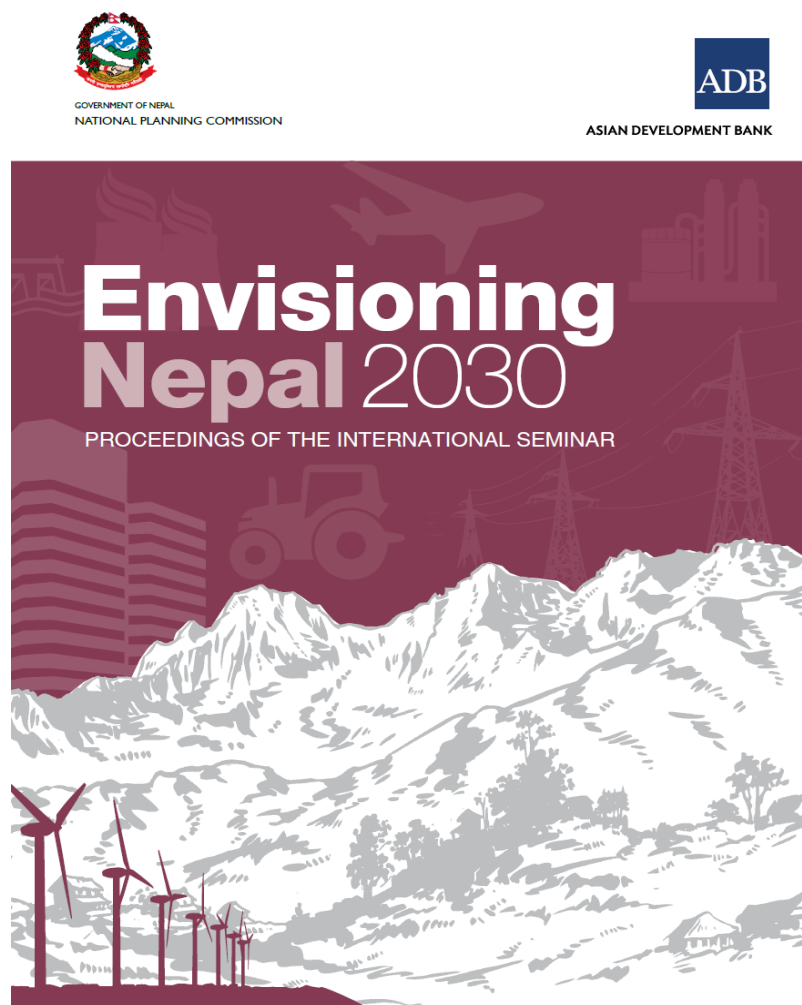
The lure of the ideal of modernisation remains in the minds of Nepal’s national planners. Despite all the criticisms of Maoists and post-structuralists (Escobar, 2007; Ziai, 2007), the Nepalese planning elite still embraces the modernisation ideal. The National Planning Commission, the top national government body, which co-ordinates all the agencies and efforts at “developing” Nepal floods its website with slogans such as “policy reforms for growth take-off”, “connecting communities with markets”, “entrepreneurial farmers, productive farms”, “building infrastructure, creating jobs”, and “gender equality with conscious, empowered women” (GON, 2016c). The planning elite dreams of graduating from the least developed status to middle-income country by 2030. *Envisioning Nepal 2030* states:

*Nepal also aims to graduate from the LDC status by 2022, achieve the SDGs, and become a middle-income country by 2030. This is, therefore, an opportune moment to embark on formulating a long-term development vision and an implementable strategy aimed at achieving socio-economic transformation of the country (GON, 2016b, p. xi - my emphasis)*

However, this “envisioning” strangely juxtaposes the pristine-looking village located in the serene mountains untouched by “*bikas*” with the symbols

of modernity such tall modern buildings, mechanised agriculture, and industrial factories supplied with power generated by eco-friendly wind-mills and electric grids (Figure 7). This juxtaposition symbolises the unintentionally confused but continued obsession with *bikas* in Nepal.

Figure 7 Cover of Government of Nepal's "Envisioning Nepal 2030"



In order to address the criticism that *bikas* was urban-biased, poor-neglecting, non-inclusive (of caste, ethnicity and gender) and sometimes anti-democratic as in the case of Panchayat regime, *bikas* has now taken a discursive twist to accommodate these criticisms by inserting buzz-words like “participation”, “empowerment”, “inclusion”, “sustainability”, “equitable” and

so on in its discourses (Cornwall & Brock, 2005). While there were some “targeted programmes” to link traditionally marginalised groups to markets for increased income-generating opportunities as per the government plans published between 1990 and 2006, after 2006 in the new political and social environment the inclusion of such communities was explicitly spelt out in the preface of the Government of Nepal’s Three Year Interim Plan (2007/08 – 2009/10):

Special attention has been given to women, Dalit, Adivasi, Janajati, the Madheshi community, low-income groups, and extremely remote areas including Karnali, which so far have been excluded from the economic, social and regional development processes of the country (GON, 2007, p. 5 ) ... lay a foundation for a *Prosperous, Modern and Just Nepal* (GON, 2007, p. 6 - original emphasis).

Unlike previous plans, the national development plans since 2006 have included expanded chapters on “Inclusive Development” and pioneer programmes for affirmative action in different spheres of the economy and governance.<sup>54</sup>

Accordingly, *Envisioning Nepal 2030* also asserts:

Nepal has adopted a new Constitution that enshrines the democratic and fundamental rights of its people. The focus is now on *empowering* the people and ensuring higher, *sustainable* and *equitable* growth (GON, 2016b, p. xi - my emphasis).

While the sectoral Agricultural Development Strategy (ADS) (2015-2035) of the Government of Nepal for developing agriculture in Nepal regards markets as the supreme mechanism, in accordance with the discourses of neo-liberal *bikas*, to encourage competition for agricultural commercialisation and growth, it

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<sup>54</sup> In order not to deprive totally deprive the members of “high-caste” Bahun Chhetri communities from opportunities created by affirmative action, the Fourteenth Plan (2016/17 – 2019/20) also included economically poor members of Khas Arya (neologism for Bahun Chhetri) group in the list of the marginalised excluded groups.

strives to accommodate the aspirations of the poor, the marginalised and the neglected by utilising words like “inclusiveness” and “sustainability”:

In order to achieve the vision the ADS will accelerate agricultural sector growth through four strategic components including governance, *productivity*, profitable *commercialisation*, and *competitiveness* while promoting *inclusiveness* (both social and geographic), *sustainability* (both natural resources and economic), development of private sector and cooperative sector, and connectivity to market infrastructure (e.g. agricultural roads, collection centres, packing houses, market centres), information infrastructure and ICT, and power infrastructure (e.g. rural electrification, renewable and alternative energy sources). The acceleration of inclusive, sustainable, multi-sector, and connectivity-based growth is expected to result in increased food and nutrition security, poverty reduction, agricultural trade competitiveness, higher and more equitable income of rural households, and strengthened farmers’ rights (GON, 2014, p. 57 - my emphasis)

The pursuit of *bikas* is still ongoing in Nepal. In its essence, the discourses of *bikas* strives to achieve the elusive ideal of modernisation through neo-liberal mechanisms, yet in order to to accommodate strong criticisms it has also attempted to reform itself with concepts of participation, inclusion, sustainability, equity, empowerment and so on. Only time will tell if *bikas* is realised in this manner.

## **Conclusion**

Almost three quarters of a century have elapsed since the first discourses of *bikas* were disseminated. In whatever fashion academics, politicians, bureaucrats and laypersons try to create discourses around *bikas*, the subject is now dealt with much sophistication and disagreement, although all can seem to agree that it “means different things to different people” (Greig, et al., 2007, p. 251). It is the guiding light at the heart of national periodic plans, a misleading “illusion” for those who fail to share in its fruits (Greig, et al., 2007, pp. 252-53),

and even *binas* (destruction) when it threatens environments and livelihoods. Nonetheless, its legacy remains as strong as it was more than half a century ago. It entered Nepal in the 1950s, and it is not going away anytime soon. Projects like the Millennium Development Goals, and the Sustainable Development Goals generated by international players such as the United Nations (UN, 2016) in which Nepal willingly and happily participates, only add more impetus to the discourse *bikas*.

Most, however, agree that *bikas* thus far has not been delivered, at least not in a fashion satisfying to the masses. Mahendra's Panchayat used it only as a rhetoric to conceal his ulterior motive of authoritatively ruling Nepal. And while the royals, political and bureaucratic elites got richer through *bikas*, the conditions for the masses did not improve and the culturally and politically marginalised caste, ethnic and gender groups became increasingly disillusioned with *bikas*. The actions of state managers taken in the name of the discourses of *bikas* ironically did not deliver. They did not alleviate poverty, reduce inequalities of all sorts, or secure food to the most vulnerable.

Even with the democratic focus since 1990, *bikas* still somehow went missing. Some physical infrastructure was built but even these were not equitably distributed. As different kinds of inequalities increased as measured by HDI, per capita income, literacy rate, provision of public services and so on, marginalised groups, rural communities and those living far from Kathmandu felt that they could neither participate fully in the processes and mechanisms guiding *bikas* nor share in its benefits. And so, after more than sixty years of pursuing *bikas*, Nepal still remains one of the poorest countries of the world with GDP per capita at \$479 (GON & UNCTN, 2013). An attention to poverty itself reveals massive inequalities within the country across ethnic and caste groups with the Dalits suffering the severest and most intense forms of poverty, food

insecurity and landlessness compared to other social groups (Gellner, 2007a; GON, 2013a, 2013b; Lawoti, 2010b, 2012; Pradhan, 2002).

It is difficult to locate the exact cause of failure of *bikas* in Nepal. Whether it is due to the adoption of incorrect values and practices by Nepalese leaders and international aid players as proposed by Bista (Bista, 1991) and Panday (Panday, 1999); or whether it is the unequal “core-periphery” power-relations between India and Nepal, and between Kathmandu and remote districts as Blaikie et al. and Adhikari argue (J. Adhikari, 2008; Blaikie, et al., 1980); or whether it is the project of *bikas* itself that Nepalese find so slippery (N. R. Shrestha, 1997) is debatable. But what is *not* debatable is that most academics, intellectuals, national leaders, and political elite in Nepal still want the Nepalese masses to believe that *bikas*, however elusive, is still achievable. They continue arguing that the idea of *bikas* is still a worthwhile goal. It is conditional only on the right mechanisms in the form of inclusion, sustainability, democratic participation, empowerment, equity being in place.

So *bikas* continues to dominate policies in Nepal, as Stacy Leigh Pigg rightly puts it, “Development is now a historical fact in Nepal. It will not be dismantled by wishing it away” (Pigg, 1993, p. 45). Rather than focusing on “unmaking of development (*bikas*)” (Fujikura, 2013, p. 14) and treating it only as a “depoliticising” or “anti-politics” machine (Ferguson, 1994) as James Ferguson suggests, we should instead, argues Fujikura, treat *bikas* like “freedom”, “justice”, and “solidarity” as a signifier with no necessary attachment to any precise content while rejecting it as an evolutionary process (Fujikura, 2013). Drawing inspiration from the successful efforts by a local NGO Backward Society Education (BASE) to emancipate “bonded labourers” in Nepal, Fujikura urges us to explore:

... the limits and possibilities of individual and collective actions for personal and societal transformations within a terrain *already reconfigured* by the activities of development [*bikas*] (Fujikura, 2013, p. 14 - original emphasis).

... and to describe:

... individual and collective actions in Nepal ... made possible by some of the cognitive and institutional resources made available through the project of development [*bikas*] (Fujikura, 2013, pp. 13 - 14).

Since *bikas* is already written in the souls of the Nepalese government, state-managers, non-state actors and general public, instead of arguing for and against it, we should, according to Pigg:

... understand the complexities of its effects, the magnitude of its influences, and the significance of its directions (Pigg, 1993, p. 45).

It is within these theoretical debates and the complex discursive webs around *bikas* that I intend to discuss the practices of two of the most common contemporary *bikas* discourses: access to productive resources (e.g. land) for food security, commercial agriculture production and status; and (micro)-finance (for poverty alleviation and rural commercialisation). In beginning to unravel the practices of *bikas* in Patle Gau, the site of my ethnography, within the larger discourse of egalitarian, democratic, secular, new Nepal, my analysis remains fully cognisant of the embeddedness of social actors from Bahun, Dalit and Tamang groups in national as well as local histories, cultural politics and power-relationships.



## Chapter 4

### The Socio-cultural Politics of Patle Gau

Patle Gau (Patle village), my field site, is in the middle of Kavre district (Figure 8). It is about two hours drive east from Kathmandu. Although Patle Gau is well-connected to near-by towns like Dhulikhel and Nepalthok by the east-west Arniko Highway, that was fully completed only several few years ago, it mostly exhibits rural characteristics. Situated in Nepal's mid-hills Patle Gau's slopes are used for terraced farming. Due to absence of irrigation facilities, rice, the most popular agronomic crop, is not grown here. Instead farmers cultivate wheat, maize, barley, mustard and vegetables.

Arniko Highway is the only all-weather motorable road in the village. Only the houses built alongside this highway and some other houses close to the one or two half-built fair-weather roads are the only houses accessible by road. The rest can be accessed using walking trails only. Families living alongside Arniko Highway run small rural-businesses like dairies, *kirana pasal* (shops)<sup>55</sup>, *cheeyapasal* (teashops), *bhattees* (local pubs), poultries (selling live chickens mostly in urban areas) and the like. Yet even these families are involved in farming, either fully or partially as land-holders or as agricultural labourers. Administratively, at the time of my research the territory of Patle Gau, although understood to be one social entity, fell under two VDCs – Fulbari and Bela – for state administrative purposes.

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<sup>55</sup> *Kirana pasals* are small shops by the side of a road where essential food items (rice, lentils, oil, salt, sugar, etc.) and household items (toothpaste, soaps, etc.) needed for daily consumption are sold. The *kirana pasals*, often but not always, can also provide tea and snacks and do can double as a teashop.

**Figure 8 A view of Patle Gau from the North West (Photo by author)**



Two weeks into my fieldwork after a few transect walks I could only describe the basic physical features of Patle Gau. My vague sense of the social residential pattern in the village was not fully developed. I understood that the main resident social groups in Patle Gau were Bahun, Dalit and Tamang.<sup>56</sup> I also had an imprecise sense of which groups lived in which cluster of the village. And so, in the third week I asked Siromani Sapkota, a local elite and a frequent interlocutor, to provide me with a guided tour of the village, to which he readily agreed. Before walking me directly into the village, Siromani took me to a vantage point by the side of the Arniko highway, saying:

Listen Rai *jee* (Mr Rai), people identifying with different *jat, jati* live in and around Patle Gau. You see here? This is a Damai<sup>57</sup> *tole* (cluster), that one is Meejar<sup>58</sup>. You may be aware that they are now

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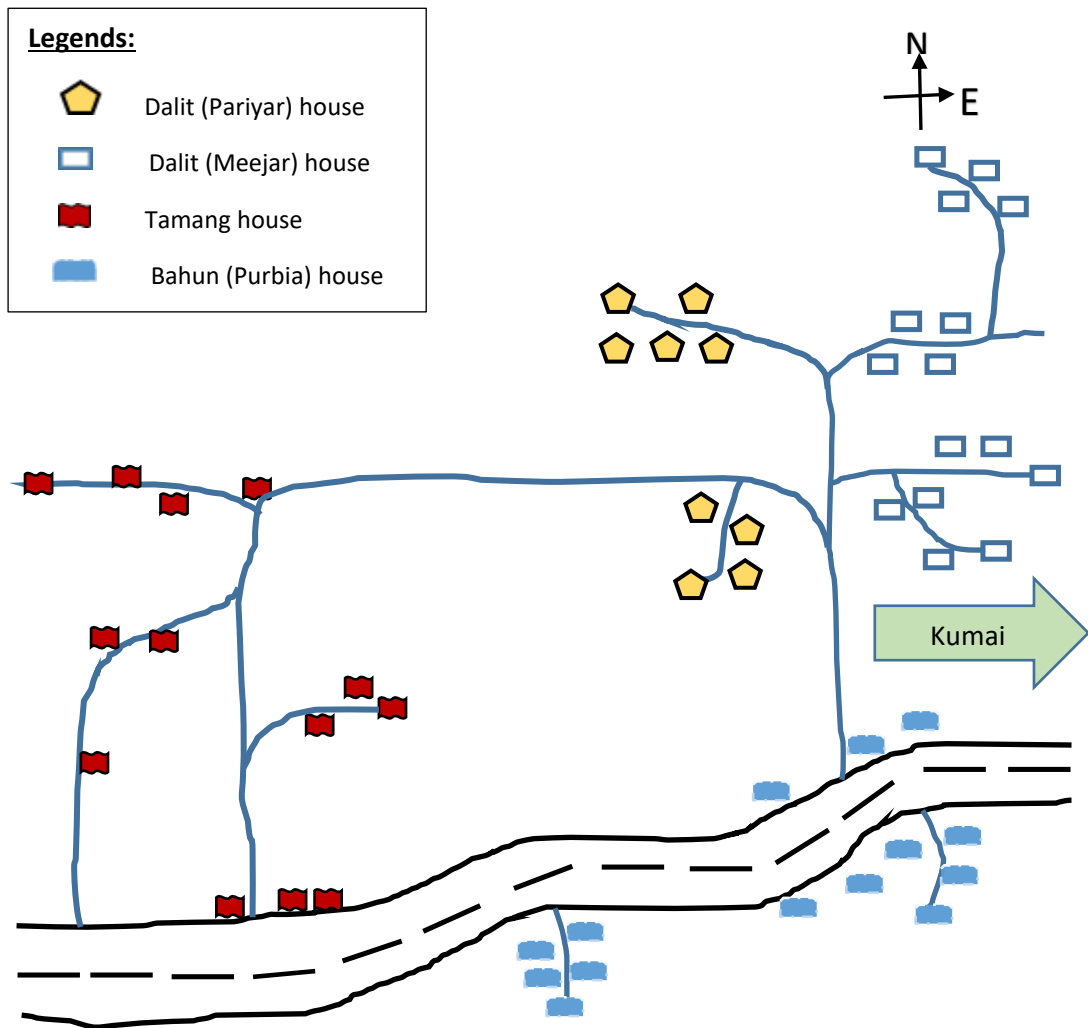
<sup>56</sup> I have used this sequence with no particular order in mind except for the alphabetical one.

<sup>57</sup> Damai, a Dalit sub-group is also referred to as Darjee. They have traditionally been tailors and perform music in various social rituals like marriage. In Patle Gau this group mostly has Pariyar as their surname. Some, I later learnt, also had Katuwal as their surname. Since some people find the name Damai derogatory I have chosen the surname Pariyar to denote this group.

<sup>58</sup> Meejar, a sub-group within the Dalit community is also widely called Sarkee. Traditionally they have worked to remove carcass and make items such as shoes using the leather from the

collectively referred to as Dalits. Over there towards the west, you see a Tamang *bastee* (a village settlement). They are now one of the Janajatis, aren't they? And right over there towards the east, are the Pathaks. They are Bahuns but they are Kumai Bahuns. And half a kilometre west from the Pathaks, you can see my house in the Sapkota *bastee*. We are also Bahuns but Purbia Bahuns. Other Purbia Bahuns like Dhakal, Timilsina, and Acharya reside by the side of this main road along with a few other Tamang families (Figure 9).

**Figure 9 Patle Gau residential segregation according to caste and ethnicity**



carcass. Most of this group in Patle Gau have Purkoti as their surname; some have Dhalkoti. As with the case of the term "Damai", I prefer to use the term Meejar to refer to this group rather than the more derogatorily perceived termed "Sarkee". I use the phrase "the Dalits" to refer to both these groups.

I understood from Siromani's description that like most other human settlements in the hills of Nepal, Patle Gau too is spatially segregated into various *bastees* and *toles* along the lines of caste and ethnicity which Siromani referred to as *jat, jati* (Figures 8 and 9). Given the vastness, complexities, and fluidity of caste and ethnicity (Fisher, 2012; Gellner, 2012) the complexity and dynamics of which have only intensified after the re-instatement of democracy in 1990, I do not intend to theorise what caste and ethnicity actually mean, but rather I intend to show how these ideas are practiced in everyday lives. I propose to explore these concepts as a "cultural core" affecting social relations, particularly the practice of "untouchability" which is profoundly associated with notions of caste purity, impurity and pollution. Even though critical assessment of theories related to caste and ethnicity is not necessarily my objective, it is, however, important to briefly note the divergent views the scholars studying caste-conscious societies have proposed. As I shall demonstrate later, each of them has some bearing on caste-conscious societies like Patle Gau.

Louis Dumont proposes that such societies are mainly governed by the binary oppositions of purity and pollution – where Bahuns are the purest and Dalits the most impure (Dumont, 1980). Frederick G. Bailey proposes that like any other society these ideas are enmeshed within matrices of political and economic powers, such that political and economic power are directly correlated to caste status (Bailey, 1957). Other scholars, like Richard Burghart, suggest that caste-conscious societies are characterised by contextual hierarchical superiority: Bahuns, ritually the highest, Sanyasi (Bahuns who desire to renounce the world to attain Moksha), religiously the highest, and the Thakuris (the rulers among the Chhetris), administratively the highest (Burghart, 1978). Rather than attempting to identify which of these relations fundamentally represents caste-conscious

rural society I rather investigate how caste and ethnicity is practiced, performed and altered, taking Patle Gau as my referent.

Although I do not treat Patle Gau as a solid point on a map but in terms of flexible social relations (Shneiderman, 2015), the 51 households (15 Bahun, 23 Dalit and 13 Tamang), who provided me with the bulk of the ethnographic, interview and survey data, can actually be plotted on a map representing Patle Gau (Figure 9). Likewise, although the central aim of this chapter is to recount the dynamic cultural practices in Patle Gau with particular reference to the cultural politics influencing practices of untouchability, I first want to focus on the residential patterns of Patle Gau, that provide the necessary context for this chapter.

Notions of purity, impurity and pollution (Dumont, 1980) combined with the cultural differences of language, religion, customs, traditions (Young, 1990), boundaries (Barth, 1998) and distinctions (Bourdieu, 1984) make the three social groups of Patle Gau reside in adjacent but separate locations. The houses built by the side of the Arniko Highway belong mostly to Bahuns and some to Tamangs. It is difficult to ascertain precisely whether the Arniko highway itself was planned to pass through these Bahun and Tamang settlements or whether these two groups later shifted their residences closer to it. Some Tamangs also live further away from the highway but no Dalit resides close to the highway, a subject I analyse in depth in the next chapter. Dalits, segregated into their sub-caste groups live in close but separate spaces. Meejar or Sarkee (cobblers) dwell tens of metres away from the Damai or Pariyar (tailors and musicians).

The practice of living in segregated spaces is so crucial that a formerly (Acharya) Bahun settlement has now turned into a Dalit *bastee* after Tikaram

Dhalkoti<sup>59</sup>, a Dalit, bought three houses and surrounding lands from Acharya Bahuns a few decades ago. These Acharya Bahuns sold Tikaram these properties in order to move to more commercially connected places. After Tikaram's occupation of the former Bahun houses, no other Bahun would move their residences closer to him. Rather other Dalit Meejars slowly started living closer to Tikaram, transforming the previous Acharya houses into part of a larger Dalit Meejar *tole*.

The spatial segregation of residences is also marked by material differences between the residences themselves. The residential houses display a pattern that shows different economic conditions (Figures 10 to 13). The Dalits possess less material prosperity in comparison to the other two groups. The houses belonging to Bahuns and Tamangs by the side of Arniko Highway are generally two or three-storeyed with cemented brick walls, concrete roofs or artfully sloped tiled roofs. These houses are far more expensive to build than the ones in which most Dalits reside and are suitable enough to be called *ghar* (houses). These *ghars* have proper doors and windows with a number of rooms allocated to different family members. Most houses in which Dalits reside are so poorly built that the richer amongst the Bahuns and Tamangs would call them *chaprass* (slum like dwellings). These *chaprass* are neither made up of cemented walls nor do they have concrete roofs or artfully angled tin sheets covered beautifully with tiles. Instead, a single layer of tin sheeting is placed on top of four walls and is held down by stones, wooden logs or by heavier things to keep

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<sup>59</sup> Tikaram Dhalkoti is the one of the very few Dalits who possess more wealth than the rest of his community. Tikaram had left his village when he was only fourteen to try his luck in India. Fortunately, he found a "technical" job with Indian Railways. When he returned to Nepal after working with the Indian Railways for twenty years, he was able to spend a considerable amount of money buying lands and houses in Patle Gau.

the tin sheet in place and protect it from being blown away by the wind especially during the windy months of April and May.

The insides of *ghars* and *chaprass* are also strikingly different from each other. The bigger houses of Bahuns and Tamangs have a number of rooms allocated for various purposes – rooms for cooking and eating, and rooms for sleeping. The inside of *chaprass* are typically just a single space used for cooking, eating and sleeping. If the Dalits keep livestock such as pigs, buffaloes, cows, goats or chickens, a portion of this singular space is also used to keep animals during the night as they lack the capital to build animal sheds. Bahuns and Tamangs normally have a low-cost shed for keeping livestock, especially the larger animals.

**Figure 10 Bahun houses (Photos by author)**



**Figure 11 Tamang houses (Photo by author)**





**Figure 12 Dalit (Pariyar) houses (Photo by author)**



**Figure 13 Dalit (Meejar) house (Photo by author)**



## **The System of Caste**

Since residential segregation as well as housing types can be analysed using the lens of caste and ethnicity, it is important that I discuss the caste system and ethnicity as it is applicable to the Nepalese case. I have argued in the previous chapters that the past greatly influences the present. It is thus crucial to remind ourselves that in the past Nepalese state managers used caste as the primary unit of organising and governing the whole of Nepal. As previously discussed, this mode of governance in Nepal was prevalent from the eighteenth century<sup>60</sup> until

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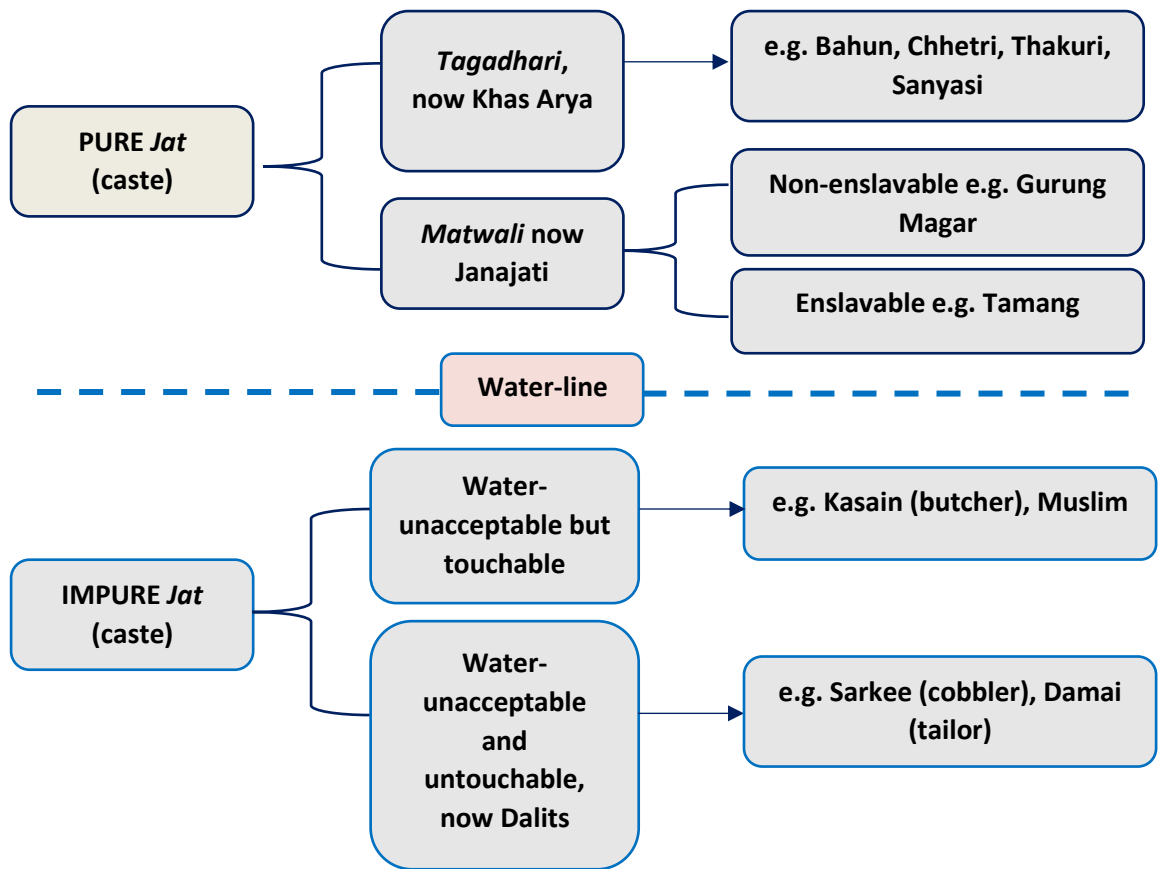
<sup>60</sup> Although caste-based societal organisation and governance is much older than the time period I have chosen, this particular time period is applicable to the “modern” nation-state of Nepal.



about the middle of twentieth century and was first legally instituted by *Muluki Ain* 1854 (national code 1954).

The national code of 1854 categorised the whole of Nepalese society into two basic groups, the “pure” and the “impure” (Figure 14). The segregation between these two groups was so vital that “pure” castes were not only supposed not to accept water and food from the “impure” castes, but were required to undertake necessary ritual cleansing to “restore” lost caste status if they had been in bodily contact with “impure” groups. The *Tagadhari*s, wearers of the holy cord (*Janai*) - which symbolised their “higher caste” status and was thus denied to the other caste groups— sat at the top of this caste hierarchy. Social groups such as Bahun, Chhetri, Thakuri and Sanyasi (Bahun-Chhetri or Chhetri-Bahun in colloquialism and Khas-Arya in present formal political lingua) made up the *Tagadhari* caste group. Just below them were the “pure” *Matwalis* (alcohol-drinking) caste groups who were again internally divided into two: enslavable (e.g. Tamang, Chepang, etc.) and non-enslavable (e.g. Gurung, Magar, Rai, Limbu, etc.). At the very bottom sat the most “impure”, bodily contact with whom required ritual cleansing.

Figure 14 Caste hierarchy according to *Muluki Ain* 1854, [source: (Hofer, 1979, p. 22)]

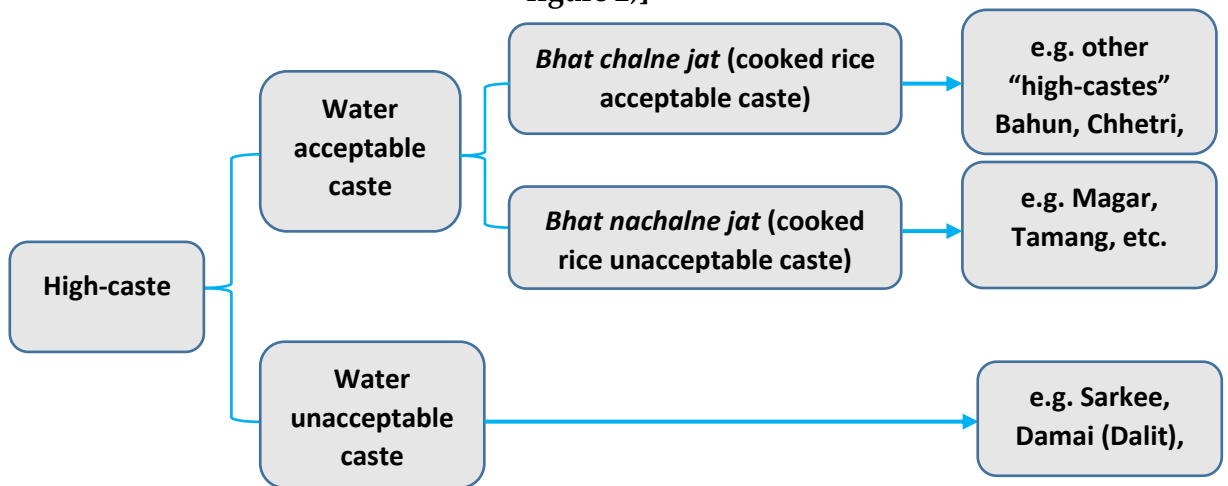


Such a hierarchical caste system can also be understood in terms of distinctions, as John Gray puts it:

Each caste's existence and characteristics are defined by a series of distinctions that differentiate it simultaneously from all other castes. So, a Brahman [Bahun] is defined by a series of distinctions that result in being simultaneously a wearer of the sacred thread (*tagadhari*), non-enslavable, water-acceptable and non-untouchable and differentiated from all castes that are non-Brahmin [non-Bahun], alcohol drinker, enslavable, water-unacceptable and untouchable. This same series of distinctions – water acceptable vs. water unacceptable, wearer of sacred thread vs. alcohol drinker; enslavable vs. unenslavable; touchable vs. untouchable – is used to define and characterise all other caste and caste groups (Gray, 2012, p.127).

The rules pertaining to the acceptance of cooked rice to mark the caste distinction is another dimension through which a caste system operates at a village level (Gray, 2012; Hofer, 1979). From a perspective of a high-caste person such as a Bahun or a Chhetri, the world can be viewed as composed of caste groups from which not only water but also cooked rice can or cannot be accepted. Those from whom cooked rice can be accepted are considered to be “equals”, and those from whom it cannot be accepted are “inferior” (Figure 15).

Figure 15 Caste hierarchy as seen by a high-caste in a village, [source: (Gray, 2012; figure 2)]



So according to Figure 15, a Bahun or Chhetri would accept “cooked rice” from another Bahun or Chhetri but not from *Matwaalis* like a Magar or a Tamang. Although *Matwaalis* were considered “pure,” people from whom water could be accepted and bodily contact with whom was not taken to be “polluting” it was not acceptable to take cooked rice from them. Yet, both Bahun-Chhetri and *Matwaalis* would not accept either water, cooked rice or anything for direct consumption from the “water unacceptable castes”, who in Nepal are the Dalits.

To fully appreciate how and why distinctions— often taking the form of caste-based discrimination practices, especially in relation to “untouchability”— are enacted, modified and resisted in Patle Gau in particular, and in Nepal in

general, we first need to closely study the three social groups - Bahuns, Dalits and Tamangs. These three social groups need to be studied not in isolation but embedded within broader national politics of difference and social identity. Let us first start with Bahuns.

### **Bahuns in Patle Gau**

The Bahuns in Patle Gau, just like elsewhere else in Nepal, have a notion of birth-ascribed “purity.”<sup>61</sup> Among the Bahun group, Upadhyaya Bahuns are considered to be the purest. Generally, Upadhyaya Bahuns are deemed “pure enough” to perform priestly works, conducting rituals marking social events like marriage, birth and death, and invoking and worshipping the gods. Some also specialise in astrology. Their “purity” is based upon their lineage and is polluted by any breach of prescribed marital relations. Only a legitimate marriage between an Upadhyaya Bahun man and Upadhyaya Bahun woman produces descendants who are also Upadhyaya Bahun. The union between an Upadhyaya Bahun man and (i) an illegitimately married Upadhyaya Bahun woman (for instance, due to elopement or the marriage not taking place according to the required rituals), or (ii) a Bahun widow or (iii) another Bahun man’s wife produces descendants who “lose” the highest status of ritual purity. These descendants are not considered Upadhyaya Bahuns but are named Jaisi Bahun ranking just below Upadhyaya Bahuns. Jaisi Bahuns can study astrology, an occupation traditionally reserved for the Bahuns, but are disallowed from functioning as priests. Similarly, any descendant from the union of an Upadhyaya or a Jaisi Bahun man and any other “lower caste” woman entirely “loses” Bahunhood and is demoted to the status of Khatri Chhetri. Khatri here referring to “*Khaseko*” or degraded. But the degradation is not too polluting and

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<sup>61</sup> Demographically, Bahuns altogether comprise 12.2% of the current Nepalese population (Dahal, 2014).

as such all these different groups of Bahuns do not necessarily live in segregated spaces. Since the lineage is also defined by patriarchy whereby descendants carry father's surnames<sup>62</sup>, both the Jaisi and Upadhaya Bahuns possess the same surnames making it difficult to distinguish one from the other purely by taking note of surnames.

Unlike the Bahuns in India who are referred to as Brahmins, Bahuns in Nepal are not only ranked in terms of ritual purity but also differentiated in terms of the geographic origins of their entry point into Nepal. Historians contend that the Bahuns entered Nepal from India through two routes [the East (*Purba*) and the West (*Paschim*)] to escape Muslim invaders. Those coming from East have been labelled "Purbia (Eastern) Bahun" (Bista, 1973)<sup>63</sup> and those from the West, specifically from Kumau and Garwal regions of the present day India, are labelled as "Kumai Bahun".<sup>64</sup> In and around Patle village, Bahuns carrying surnames such as Acharya, Dhakal, Sapkota and Timilsina are thought to be Purbia Bahun. Pathaks, however, are Kumai Bahuns (Figure 16).

In the game of maintaining distinction and self-acclaimed superior caste status the Purbia and Kumai Bahuns in Patle Gau used to engage in the politics

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<sup>62</sup> In Nepal, typically caste and ethnicity is easily identifiable by the surname. Besides the Bahuns, Chhetris and Newars, who use their sub-caste group as their surnames, the rest of the caste and ethnic groups generally use a common caste or ethnicity surname signifying their social identity.

<sup>63</sup> Those carrying the following surnames representing the *thar* (sub-caste) are Purbia Bahuns: Acharya, Adhikari, Baral, Banskota, Banstola, Bhandari, Bhattarai, Chaulagai, Chapagain, Dahal, Dhakal, Devkota, Dhugel, Ghimire, Guragain, Humagain, Khanal, Koirala, Lamsal, Nepal, Pokharel, Poudel, Sapkota, Rijal, Sigdel, Sanjel and Timilsina.

<sup>64</sup> Awasthi, Bhatta, Bhetwal, Gyawali, Joshi, Kandel, Kharel, Lohani, Mainali, Oli, Pandey, Paneru, Panta, Pathak, Prasai, Regmi, Sangraula, Sedhai, Shiwakoti, Simkhada, Situaula, Thapaliya, and Upreti are surnames of Kumai Bahun. Pathak, in particular, is one such Kumai Bahun living close to Patle Gau.

of difference. Bhoj Raj Sapkota, an eighty-year old Purbia Bahun, recalls those days:

In the old days, we, the Purbia, would not associate with these Pathaks, the *Kumais*, so much. Of course, they were not “untouchable” or anything. For sure. But we avoided accepting cooked rice (*bhat*) from them. They also did not accept cooked rice from us. We also did not inter-marry between us. But for quite some decades now, things have changed. We don’t feel we are too different from each other. Both Bahun Bahun (chuckles).

Besides Bhoj Raj Sapkota other Bahuns I talked with also felt that the claims of superiority and difference between the two have long vanished. However, as I demonstrate in the coming pages, together as a Bahun group, the Bahuns in Patle Gau continue performing distinctive practices in order to retain their Bahun standing. Other groups such as the Dalits and Tamangs in Patle Gau do not always acknowledge the difference between the Purbia and Kumai Bahuns although on a few occasions I have heard Tamangs refer to Pathak Bahuns as Kumai.

It is important to note that post 1990 there was an unprecedented rise in identity politics specifically in relation to caste, ethnicity and indigeneity. This primarily resulted from new forms of competition for political power and access to government institutions because of new quota systems under programmes of affirmative action. Consequently, the (formerly) “high-caste” groups felt the threat of being gradually destabilised from their traditional dominant position (Adhikari & Gellner, 2016; Pariyar, 2016). They countered these anxieties by shedding their previous “cultural” *Tagadhari* identity to re-name themselves “Khas Arya”, an identity legally recognised by the 2015 Constitution of Nepal. This fulfilled two purposes. It provided them with legitimate “first settler” claims to the Khas region (currently Mid and Far Western Regions of Nepal) and it also

maintained the “superiority distinction” through claims to the “great” Aryan (later Hindu) culture (Adhikari, 1988; Bista, 1991).

However, such engagements with naming and renaming caste identities solidify rather than dilute caste differences. Patle Gau is so close to Kathmandu yet so far it seems, Bahuns in this village have not taken up this new caste-less identity created at the power-centre. Perhaps “trickling-down” takes time, or perhaps the Bahuns in Patle Gau do not feel the need to don this new identity. Whatever the reason, none of them, educated or illiterate, old or young, man or woman, have started calling themselves Khas-Arya. So while the new Bahun identity (Khas-Arya) has not yet been adopted by locals in Patle Gau, it is also worth noting that perhaps due current discourses of egalitarianism which peaked during and after the Maoist Revolution, most locals do not refer to Bahuns as “*Thulo jat*” (Upper/Bigger/Higher caste), a term routinely used even in academic literature until a few decades ago. This is possibly an indication that vertical caste hierarchy is not only politically rejected but also socially rejected, nonetheless a horizontal identity of difference continues.

### **Dalits in Patle Gau**

The Sanskrit linguistic roots of the term Dalit is *dalan* which means oppression. A Dalit is thus anyone feeling oppressed. Although quite commonly used in India since its independence, Dalit as a linguistic marker is relatively new to Nepal. It was first introduced to Nepal in 1956 by Dr B. R. Ambedkar, a famous Indian “untouchable”/Dalit himself and one of the chief writers of the Indian Constitution. The term was officially recognised in Nepal with the establishment of the *Rastriya Nepal Dalit Jana Vikash Parishad* (Nepal National Dalit Development Council) in 1967. Nepalese Dalit leaders and intellectuals accepted Dalit identity because it denoted their political powerlessness and economic marginalisation.

Additionally, by engaging with the language of citizenship, rather than a primordial outcast status burdened by religious connotations of bodily impurity, it contained the possibility change (Aahuti, 2010). Although it is still debated as to which social groups can be considered to be Dalits, it is generally understood to be those groups from whom water and food were previously not accepted and physical contact with whom required ritual cleansing (*Pani nachalnya choya chito halnu parne*) according to the *Muluki Ain* 1854 (Cameron, 2010; Folmar, 2007; Kharel, 2010).

Established in 2002 the National Dalit Commission is a state body which draws on the Marxist idea of class in defining Dalit to include all social groups who have been marginalised on the basis of socio-economic status, state politics, education, and religion<sup>65</sup> not just the former “untouchables.” However, the final list of 33 groups<sup>66</sup> produced by this organisation contains groups largely taken from the previous “*Pani nachalnya choya chito halnu parne*” (water from whom cannot be accepted and bodily contact with whom requires ritual cleansing) group.<sup>67</sup> The term Dalit, therefore, is now understood to refer to those previously called *achhut* (untouchable), *pani nachalne* (from whom water cannot be accepted) and *sano jat* (small-caste/low-caste) (A. P. Caplan, 1972). In Patle Gau, Dalits are people whose surnames are Purkoti and Dhalkoti representing the Sarkee/Meejar and Pariyar representing the Damai. Interestingly, Dalits also happen to share

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<sup>65</sup> These are the objectives stated by the National Dalit Commission on their website (<http://ndc.gov.np>): (a) To increase the active participation of socially, economically, politically, educationally most backward Dalit Community in the mainstream of national development by preserving and augmenting their fundamental rights provisioned in the prevalent law and constitution, and (b) To create an environment favourable to Dalit community to enjoy the equal rights, self-esteem, services and privileges as equal as other social groups in the Nepal’s Human Development Index.

<sup>66</sup> Seven from the hills and 26 from the Terai.

<sup>67</sup> Nation-wide in 2011 Terai and hill Dalits comprised about 4.5% and 8.1% of Nepalese population respectively.



many surnames such as Acharya, Adhikary, Karki, and Ghimire with Bahuns and Chhetris making it difficult to distinguish the social groups from surnames only. The surname Katuwal used by some Pariyar Dalits, who otherwise carry Pariyar as a surname, is one such commonly shared surname.

In Patle Gau, the politically conscious or more literate Dalits, Bahuns and Tamangs use the term Dalit. Dalit women such as Meena Purkoti and Durga B. K. who engage actively in *bikas* activities in Patle Gau and more educated Dalit men and women describe themselves as “*haamee Dalit*” (we Dalits). Older, illiterate and not so politically conscious Dalits do not call themselves Dalits but use Sarkee or Damai labels frequently in sentences like, “*Damai ho, damai ko kaam garne*” (We are Damai so we do Damai’s work – tailoring). Similarly, politically sensitised Bahuns and Tamangs refer to these groups as Dalits, but the less sensitised refer to them just by their surnames: Dhalkoti, Purkoti or Pariyar; or by categorical names such as Damai and Sarkee. These days in Patle Gau hardly anyone uses identifiers such as *achhut* (untouchable), *pani nachalne* (from whom water cannot be accepted) or *sano jat* (small caste).

### **Tamangs in Patle Gau**

Slightly older than the marker Dalit but not as old as the identifier Bahun, Tamang is a social identity marker coined in 1932 by a Rana Prime Minister to refer to social groups who until then had been known as Bhote, Lama, Murmi, Sain, Yolmo, Kagate, Ishang and so on (M Tamang, 2009). Along with ethnic groups like Magar, Tharu and Newar, the Tamangs are one of the most numerous groups in Nepal comprising 5.8% of Nepal’s total population (Dahal, 2014, p. 11). Mostly populating districts around the Kathmandu city, Tamangs have their own language and perform rituals based on their religion which is predominantly Buddhism. Although quite numerous in Kavre and politically quite active

judging by their participation and leadership positions in political parties in present times, the Tamangs are nonetheless one of Nepal's marginalised groups (Tamang, 1992). Categorised as "enslavable" by the Ranas, Tamangs were the porters who carried the Rolls Royce cars for several days into Kathmandu valley. Unlike the four "martial" ethnic groups - Rai, Limbu, Magar and Gurung - the Tamangs were not recruited by the British, Indian or even Nepalese Army. The only post they were given in the Nepalese army was that of Peepa (one of the lowest ranks). Incidentally, Autar Singh Lama, an eighty-one-year-old Tamang man from Patle Gau, had served the Nepal Army as a Peepa for a few years during the Rana administration.

Narrating the processes of "othering" and "exclusion" by the state, Tamang intellectuals and activists like Mukta Singh Tamang contend that the official discourse of the state, which sometimes referred to Tamangs as Bhotya failed to recognise their roots in Nepal by associating them with Tibetans (Tibet is called Bhot and Tibetans are called Bhotes or Bhotya in Nepali language). Tibetans on the other hand excluded Tamangs by referring to them as rong-pa, mon-pa, or se-mon (M Tamang, 2009). Recently, however, gaining motivation from new-found political freedom in 1990, Tamang intellectuals are re-writing Nepalese history to evoke a sense of territoriality and historical consciousness by asserting themselves as indigenous Himalayan peoples, who had their own kings and chiefs before the "political unification" of Nepal by the Shah Kings (Tamang, 2009).

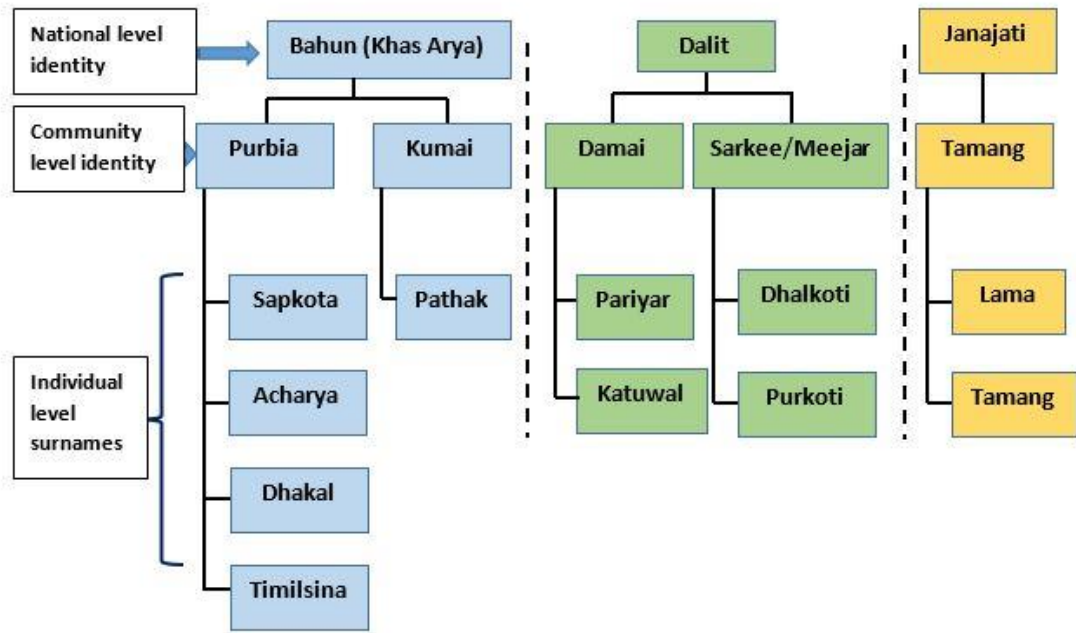
In the most recent social and political Nepali lexicon, Tamangs identify themselves as one of the Janajatis. The social identity Janajāti itself is not a neologism since it customarily meant "peoples of different kinds" (Sharma, 1975). However, Janajati is an identity adopted by the ethnic groups who want to rid themselves of the label *Matwali* (alcohol drinkers). This label was given by the

state and indexes forms of caste hierarchy. Therefore, the Nepal Janajati Mahasangh (Nepal Federation of Nationalities)<sup>68</sup> founded in 1990, defines Janajati as referring to all non-Hindu nationalities who are outside the Hindu caste system and have their own distinct languages, traditions, religions and cultures. Thus, this identity excludes both the Hindu “upper” (Bahun/Chhetri) and “lower” castes (the Dalits). Like the marker Dalit, the identifier Janajati although gaining increasing acceptance particularly in official and academic usages, is not so widely used by the commoners in Patle Gau. No confusion is generated when Tamangs in Patle Gau are referred to by the surname Tamang or occasionally by the surname Lama (although Lama itself is an honorific title given to Buddhist priests). While the Tamangs in Patle Gau assert themselves to be Dhong Tamang, different from other “kinds” of Tamang elsewhere, not everyone uses the term Janajati as an identifier. Yet the more educated and politically conscious amongst them have begun to use Janajati to stress their belonging to the larger indigenous Janajati group, and in turn emphasise their ethnicity rather than their hierarchised status (Figure 16).

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<sup>68</sup> Presently called *Nepal Adhivashi Janajati Mahasangh* (Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NFIN)).

Figure 16 Three caste and ethnic groups in Patle Gau



Having given a brief general introduction to the three social groups in Patle Gau, I now present their main socio-cultural practices including language, religion, marriage rules, specific rituals, occupations and the like in configurations that demonstrate concurrent overlaps and distinctions which in turn are undergoing constant modifications within the shifting discourse of politics and economy.

### Dynamism of Socio-cultural Practices in Patle Gau

Of more than 100 languages spoken in Nepal, only two are spoken in *Patle Gau*: Nepali and Tamang (Yadava, 2014).<sup>69</sup> Nepali, a Sanskrit-derived Indo-Aryan language has little in common with Tamang a member of Tibeto-Burman language family (Yadava, 2014). Bahuns and the Dalits speak Nepali in Patle Gau and most of them, if not all, do not speak Tamang. However, almost all Tamangs in Patle Gau are bi-lingual and thus are able to speak both Nepali and Tamang.

<sup>69</sup> Nepali language (previously known as Khas, Parbatiya or Gorkhali based on their geographic origins) is now the *lingua franca* after its status was raised to that of a national language in 1930.

Nepali is used for everyday conversations and is the medium of official instruction in schools, but the Tamang language is preserved by the Tamang community through inter-generational transmission.<sup>70</sup> I also noticed that the more educated and better travelled amongst the Tamangs, especially the younger generation, are more fluent in the use of Nepali language than their older counterparts who tend to struggle with both fluency and the vocabulary of the Nepali language.

Nepalese follow a number of religions. Hinduism has the largest following (81%), followed by Buddhism (9%), Islam (4.3%), Kirant (3%), Christianity (1.4%) and so on (Dahal, 2014). Patle Gau, because of the substantial presence of Tamangs and Dalits exhibits a different configuration: Hindu 63%, Buddhists 25% and Christians 12%.<sup>71</sup> Although I was told that a few Bahuns in adjacent villages have recently converted to Christianity, almost all the Bahuns in and around Patle Gau are Hindus. It is interesting to note that although sections of many ethnic communities such as Gurung, Magar, Sunuwar, and Danuwar have been completely Hinduised and perform rituals using Bahun priests, Tamangs have somehow managed to retain their own religion, Buddhism. Tamangs, using Buddhist Lamas (priests) from nearby monasteries perform life cycle rituals such as “child name giving”, “first rice feeding”, and other rituals related to marriage and death (Michaels, 1997). Tamangs, therefore, in Patle Gau are exclusively Buddhists. It is the Dalits who show the most diversity in religious affiliation. None of them are Buddhists since they were traditionally Hindus, but in recent years, especially after the restoration of democracy in 1990, and even more so

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<sup>70</sup> Once Nepal gets fully federated education policy may be amended to accommodate many local languages as languages for official correspondences and formal education at province levels.

<sup>71</sup> Based on my own survey data.

after the declaration of Nepal as a secular state in 2006, a number of them have converted to Christianity.

More than any other life cycle ritual the *bratabandha* (coming of age) ritual is the single most distinctive ritual practice performed by “high-caste” Hindus<sup>72</sup> ( Parish, 1996; Toffin, 1978; von Fürer-Haimendorf, 1956). Signifying a second birth, only the *bratabandha* makes a male member eligible to wear a *janai* (holy cord) providing him with full legitimate “high-caste” status, and enabling him to perform rituals including marriage (Pyakuryal & Suvedi, 2000). In Patle Gau, the Bahuns religiously wear *janai* everyday, this contrasts with urban “high-caste” Hindu men who no longer observe such a strict practice. This is not to suggest that they have given up wearing it altogether but their attitude towards it is much more relaxed. They go about their daily businesses without donning it, putting it back on when it becomes religiously “mandatory.”

Endogamy is taken to be one of the practices which reproduces and conserves caste status (Shah, 2002), yet inter-caste or mixed marriages, especially between non-Dalit castes, are no longer as rare as they used to be (Kohn, 1998). However, a marriage between a Dalit and a non-Dalit is still not a common phenomenon (Biswakarma, 2013). Only as recently as March 2015, a national daily newspaper reported that a Dalit boy had splashed acid onto the face of a non-Dalit girl he loved, who also seemed to have loved him back, but had rejected him having “discovered” his caste status. He had committed this heinous vengeful act after he was almost beaten to death by the girl’s male defenders for having “dared” to have thought of marrying a girl from a “high-caste”. Perhaps in an effort to unite Nepalese society and reduce the stigma attached to marriage between a Dalit and a non-Dalit, the state of Nepal provides

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<sup>72</sup> As an exception Newar, an ethnic group, also performs *Bratabandha* wherein a boy child becomes a Buddhist monk for four days.

a cash incentive of NRs 100,000 (Australian Dollar 1300) for any marriage between a Dalit and a non-Dalit within 30 days of the date of marriage registration. This policy follows on from an earlier policy instituted by the formerly revolutionary, and later reformist Maoist-led, Government in 2009. The results of this social policy have not yet been published, and at least in Patle Gau the three social groups predominantly follow endogamous marital practices. Even the Dalits who are internally divided into two (Meejar and Pariyar) do not inter-marry: members of Pariyars and Meejars marry members from their own respective caste communities from nearby villages or districts. Once when I was sipping tea in a local *cheeyapasal* (teashop), I overheard a woman passing judgement to other women about a recent elopement between Dalit woman and a Tamang man in nearby village:

What times have come? How could this be? Should not marriage be only between similar castes? ... This world is full of surprises.

But when she felt that I, an outsider, could have overheard the conversation, she quickly added:

But then again, the Maoist say there are only two castes: man and woman ... What to say?

Despite the predominant endogamous practices in Patle Gau, a historical “first” occurred in 2014. The younger second wife of an elderly Bahun man eloped with a Tamang man who already had a Tamang wife.<sup>73</sup> Due to social pressure the Tamang man was “made” to keep his second (Bahun) wife in Kathmandu and was told never to bring her back to the village. Besides such an

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<sup>73</sup> Although polygamy is not a usual practice, it is also not totally absent either. Two generations ago, Shyam Hari Pathak, an elite Bahun, raised his family from four wives. Presently, a Dalit man lives with two wives: his first wife was “arranged” for him by his parents and he wedded his second wife while working in the Indian Railways in Calcutta.

anomaly my ethnography and survey results suggest that endogamy still is the norm in Patle Gau.

Since Patle Gau is predominantly a rural economy, all the residents in Patle Gau have some relationship with farming, either by directly producing crops and vegetables, as labourers in farms or by running agro-enterprises. Crop and vegetable farming, as it is, does not seem to be affected by the notion of purity and hence can be thought of as a caste-less practice. But the same cannot be said for livestock-keeping and meat consumption, especially for Bahuns. For them, these practices are very much guided by the principal Hindu notions of “purity” and “impurity”. Although livestock plays an important role in providing nutrition (milk/meat/eggs), fertiliser (manure) and draft power (for ploughing fields), these animals are labelled as either “clean” or “unclean” labels, that affect husbandry and consumption practices. Therefore, according to a Bahun in Patle Gau, cows symbolise the goddess Laxmi (goddess of wealth) and are thought to be “pure” and “respectable” with the consequence that the Bahuns neither slaughter them nor consume their meat.<sup>74</sup> Buffaloes are “clean enough” for keeping and producing milk products, but their meat is unfit for consumption. Goats which feed on fresh leaves are thought to be “clean” both for keeping and consumption.<sup>75</sup> Therefore, Bahuns keep cows and buffaloes for milk and manure, and goats for meat. Since the state in Nepal prohibits cow slaughtering, the Bahuns sell unproductive cattle to traders who resell them in India for slaughtering and consumption. Buffaloes can be sold directly to locals such as Tamangs, Dalits or other buffalo eating ethnic communities. Chickens which scavenge and eat anything including human and animal excreta used to be

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<sup>74</sup> Cow-slaughter is prohibited by the state in Nepal. The hide from the same cattle, however, may later get imported in the form of shoes, belts, wallet, bags, purses and other leather products.

<sup>75</sup> The high-castes sometimes freely consume buffalo meat but mostly avoid beef. I have personally witnessed some of them eating beef, not only in diasporic conditions but also in some selective restaurants and hotels in Kathmandu. As a norm, though, they do not.



considered “filthy” by Bahuns and thus unsuitable for raising and eating. Yet now that chickens get raised largely in confinement and are provided with supervised feed, they have lost their “filth” status. Bahuns now have poultry farms and do consume chicken. A middle-aged Bahun man reflected on the changing attitudes towards chicken:

When we were kids, we did not even “touch” chicken. Slowly we started eating them elsewhere but not in or near our homes. Then we began cooking them just outside our homes. These days with the onset of commercial poultry where the chickens are raised in captivity and fed on feed, I guess it has lost its “dirty” status for us. We freely cook it at home and eat it.

If Bahuns have slowly changed their attitude towards raising and consuming chicken, similar changes in attitude have not occurred in regard to pigs and pork. Pig is still considered so “filthy” that it is fit neither for keeping nor for consumption. No Bahun in Patle Gau raises pigs or eats pork.<sup>76</sup> Tamangs and Dalits do not organise their livestock keeping and dietary practices according to the principles of “purity” or “pollution”. Therefore, contingent upon capital, space and interest they are quite free to keep whichever livestock in whatever number (Figure 17).

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<sup>76</sup> Again, I emphasise that large sections of urban and “modern high-caste” Hindus *do* consume pork elsewhere in Nepal and in the diaspora. Interestingly, wild boar, biologically related to pig, is a status symbol to be eaten with pride in public.

**Figure 17 Soci-economic practices of three social groups in Patle Gau**

<b>Socio economic field</b>	<b>Bahun</b>	<b>Dalit</b>	<b>Tamang</b>
Language (mother- tongue)	Nepali (Indo-Arya)	Nepali (Indo-arya)	Tamang (Sino-Tibetan)
Religion	Hindu	Hindu and Christian	Buddhist
<i>Bratabandha</i>	Performed	Not performed	Not performed
Matrimonial practice	Endogamy	Endogamy	Endogamy
Livestock keeping	Cattle, Buffalo, Goat	Cattle, buffalo, goat, chicken, pig	Cattle, buffalo, goat, chicken, pig

If language (Nepali) and religion (originally Hindu) are things that bind Bahuns and Dalits together in some cultural sense, then it is caste-status, the line of “untouchability” that binds Bahun and Tamangs together and separates them from Dalits. Even attitudes and practices of untouchability—which when “breached” were legally punishable before Nepal started to modernise—are undergoing changes in Nepal. Patle Gau is no exception. Since the practice of untouchability influences almost every relationship that exists in Patle Gau, I dedicate the rest of the chapter to analysing it.

### **Practices of Untouchability**

The many social groups divided along caste and ethnic identities in Nepal may differ from each other in terms of language, religion, ritual, customs and tradition but it is the hundreds of years of state-enforced untouchability that drastically separates Dalits from non-Dalits. Any non-Dalit group whether Bahun or Chhetri, Tamang or Gurung, no matter how low or how high, ranked above the Dalits and therefore irrespective their status practiced the discriminatory practice of untouchability. To this day, the practice of

untouchability, therefore, continues to confound many, particularly those alien to such a culture. Therefore, it was fairly predictable that a British expatriate would make the following remark in a national seminar on *bikas* which I attended in Kathmandu during my fieldwork period:

I find Nepal to be such an interesting country full of amazing contradictions. On one hand, it is on its way to issuing citizenship certificates and passports that legally recognises the status of third gender<sup>77</sup>. How many progressive countries around the world are doing that? And on the other, women in mid and far western regions spend the time of their menstruation period living with animals in sheds as they are considered to be “impure” and “untouchable” during that period.

The issue of untouchability that this expat found nearly unfathomable is so persistent in present-day Nepal that I am reminded of two remarks made in an annual conference organised by Social Science Baha<sup>78</sup> in July 2014. In the first case, rejecting the argument of one of the presenters who had argued that Nepal’s political elite (high-caste hill men) are to be blamed for the constitutional instability in Nepal, a young man in his mid-twenties claimed that social identities such as caste and ethnicity actually do not exist at all since all humans are just “*homo sapiens*”. But later the in the same day in a question-answer session of a paper presented on the dynamics of caste-based discrimination in Nepal, a participant, a Bahun man, judging by his full name and physical appearances, confronted the whole audience by asking if any one of them had ever let a Dalit into his/her kitchen. This Bahun man made this disparaging remark probably thinking that no Dalit was attending such a “high academic” conference, as

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<sup>77</sup> In September 2015 as one of the firsts, Kailash Shrestha (man), who prefers to be known as Bhumika Shrestha (woman), received a citizenship certificate under the “other” category instead of male or female. <http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/news/2015-09-07/bhumika-receives-citizenship-under-o-category.html> (Downloaded in 10 December 2015).

<sup>78</sup> “The Social Science Baha is an independent, non-profit organisation set up with the objective of promoting and enhancing the study of and research in the social sciences in Nepal” from <http://www.soscbaha.org/>.

national statistics suggest that Dalits are the least represented group in higher education and academic circles. Or perhaps he assumed that practices of “untouchability” are a fact of life in Nepal. So strong is the stigma attached to the Dalit identity and associated “untouchability” that Aahuti, a Marxist Dalit intellectual and an activist, once told me:

When I was a kid they used to lie to us about why Dalits could not “improve” by themselves since Karl Marx’s father himself was a Dalit, a cobbler. Even if he were, he was probably a cobbler by profession. He was surely not a sarkee by birth.

It therefore is not surprising that even scholars admit:

When I discuss Nepal’s caste system and untouchability with a variety of people, I usually come away with one of two impressions. Either they find the practice so incomprehensible that they are compelled to dismiss it. Or, they regard it as an archaic tradition which has yet to be corrected by South Asian democracies, but soon will be. (Cameron, 2002, pp. 308, 309)

Yet the idea of “untouchability” remains a central core of Hinduism. Hinduism is a way of life and a religion that dominates most spheres of life in Nepal. Everyone is *jutho* (impure, polluted) and hence “untouchable” at least once in a lifetime. For instance, members of a mourning family of a deceased person are considered to be impure normally for thirteen days during which time they do not visit temples, eat certain kinds of food, and remain “untouched” by others.<sup>79</sup> Likewise, a menstruating woman, a woman who has just delivered a child, and even widows are thought to be “impure” and hence become “untouchable” for varying periods of time. Except for the status of widows, the attitude towards which is also changing for the better in recent times, most

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<sup>79</sup> The mourning period spent in white dress by the male descendants can last up to a year. But in modern times many accommodations have been made to greatly shorten this strict adherence to *dharmic* principles.

conditions of “impurity” and “untouchability” are temporary lasting for a a period ranging from a few days to few weeks. However, for Dalits this condition is permanent.

It is helpful at this point to note that Nepal’s experiments with modernity since 1950s have sought to make Nepal modern and progressive by discouraging the practice of untouchability. Article 10 of the Constitution of Nepal 1962 under the Right of Equality reads: “No discrimination shall be made against any citizen in the application of general laws on the grounds of religion, race, sex, caste, tribe or any of them” (HMGN, 1962). But since the same constitution also declares Nepal to be a “Hindu” state, dominance of Hindu values and culture including the practices of untouchability persisted (Bennett, 2005; Krishna B Bhattachan, et al., 2009; Khanal, et al., 2012). A country like India which is similar to Nepal in cultural make-up had already abolished— at least in legal terms— the practice of “untouchability” in its founding Constitution of 1949 (Article 17 under Fundamental Rights) (GOI, 2007):

The practice of untouchability will now onwards be considered as a social crime and the government will enact laws in such a way that the inhuman and discriminatory practice is more punishable.

Yet it took more than half a century after India had made such an announcement and more than 152 years since the *Muluki Ain* had legalised the caste system in Nepal before the Interim Parliament — formed immediately after the peaceful ending of the Maoist Revolution — declared Nepal an “untouchability and caste-based discrimination free” nation on June 4, 2006. This government also criminalised the act and practices of caste-based discrimination in private and public spaces through the Caste-based Discrimination and Untouchability Act of 2011 which stipulated punishments and penalties against specific offences. However, political declarations and the institution of law is one

thing, and everyday practices are something else (Cameron, 2010; Vasily, 2009). In the remainder of this chapter, I seek to analyse this contradiction relying mostly on evidence drawn from experiences in Patle Gau, but also where appropriate supplemented by my lived experiences elsewhere.

Any in-depth exploration of the practice of untouchability is best done through the observation of everyday lives, in everyday spaces. Normally spaces are categorized into public and private where social actions are performed in the former and intimate actions performed in the latter. However, spaces are not always neatly divided into such categories. Hence, I have chosen four spaces - commercial spaces, public spaces, quasi-private spaces and private spaces (explained more in the related sections below) for the examination of practices of untouchability.

### **Commercial Spaces: Least Contested but Covert Operation**

In Patle Gau grocery shops, local *cheeyapasal* (tea shops) and *bhattees* (pubs) are the local commercial spaces. I have shown earlier that “untouchability” is largely associated not only with bodily contact but also with exchanges of food, and thus *cheeyapasals* and *bhattees* where direct consumption of food and drink take place provide excellent ethnographic sites to observe caste practices. As I observed during my fieldwork these spaces seem to be the least contested. Here the logic of commerce takes over from the logic of religion or tradition. Here the language of money is spoken and understood more than any other language. As long as a customer is “willing and able to buy”, to borrow a phrase from the field of economics, she is treated like any other customer.

During most of my field work I was assisted by a local young Dalit man, Sujan Purkoti. There were several places where we regularly went together. During breaks we used to drink tea and snacks in the local *cheeyapasals*. In these

instances, never did I feel that Sujjan, a Dalit, was treated in any differently than I, a non-Dalit. I also noticed that other Dalits easily came and drank tea like any other non-Dalit. The Dalits could also drink *jānd* (beer) and *rakshi* (alcohol) in *bhattees*. I detected no tension regarding the practice of “untouchability” in such commercial places. The Dalit customers easily entered shops, ate and drank from the same glasses, cups and utensils like any other customer. And they did not have to wash their dishes after eating and drinking, a practice which according to some Dalits was something that they, unlike any other non-Dalit, had to perform in the past.

It is not only physical commercial space like tea-shops and *bhattees* which looked mostly “casteless” and “untouchability free”, the local dairy industry seemed to be the same. Each morning Bahuns, Dalits and Tamangs who raised cattle or buffalo and wanted to sell their milk came to milk collection centres run by “Dairy Masters.”<sup>80</sup> The Dairy Master did not discriminate according to the caste of the seller, and the milk was all mixed together, to be sold in town centres like Dhulikhel and even Kathmandu where the customers would not know or care about the origins of the milk.

The commercial spaces that I have described seem caste-free at the surface but a little bit of scratching reveals that they are not entirely free from caste-consciousness. The notion of purity is still in play here, covertly. Although Dalits are treated as equals as customers, all the *cheeyapasals* in Patle Gau are either run by Bahun or by Tamangs. None of them are run by a Dalit. It seems that Dalits cannot sell tea or food-items because a non-Dalit tacitly refuses to accept food from them. The arena of the *cheeyapasal* does not seem to have changed much since April M. Putman observed it in 1975:

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<sup>80</sup> Anyone running a milk collection centre is called a “dairy master” as it were in English. There is no Nepali translation to this.

Since tea shop is virtually neutral in terms of ritual purity, all caste/ethnic groups will drink tea prepared by any “touchable caste” (Nepali: *pani chalne jat*) (Putnam, 1975, p. 11)

Similarly, since Bahuns in Patle Gau do not openly consume alcohol, they keep a safe distance from it. None of them is involved in *bhatee* businesses<sup>81</sup>. It is a choice they have made for maintenance of distinction. Tamangs and the Dalits freely consume alcohol, but only Tamangs produce and sell it, either from their homes or in *bhattees*. No *bhatee* is operated by a Dalit. The same principle of purity is in operation here too. Similarly, even though Dalits sell milk to Dairy Masters, none of them sell directly to the Bahuns or Tamangs in Patle Gau. Since most of the Bahuns and Tamangs keep one or more cows or buffaloes, their demand is already met from within their respective communities. All the Dairy Masters who mix milk and work as “sellers” are either from the Bahun or Tamang community, none are Dalits. In this way, it seems that a whole segment of the food-based rural economy is still blocked to the Dalits by an “invisible wall,” here they can participate equally as customers, as spenders but not as entrepreneurs or money-makers.

Perhaps this “invisible wall” is “visible” to Tikaram Dhalkoti, a Dalit man who possesses considerably more wealth than his fellow Dalits. He has two houses. While he lives in the house amongst the other Dalits, he has rented out the second one by the side of the highway to a Tamang family. That Tamang family runs a “hotel”<sup>82</sup> there. If it were not for the “invisible wall” perhaps Tikaram Dhalkoti would have run this lucrative “hotel” himself.

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<sup>81</sup> I was told that Bahuns and Chhetris of nearby villages freely consume alcohol in *bhattees*. And, in cities and in diaspora alcohol consumption amongst “high-caste” peoples is widely accepted.

<sup>82</sup> “Hotel”, a western word and concept, in rural Nepal is not a hotel in the sense imagined by a more urban-centred person. “Hotel” in Patle Gau is not at all like a hotel in Kathmandu or



## **Public spaces: Increasingly More Egalitarian**

Public spaces such as schools, meeting halls, co-operative buildings, government and non-government office premises are also purportedly discrimination-free areas (Figure 18). Dalit children sit alongside the non-Dalit ones to learn, play and eat together (Figure 19). Adult Dalits participate without any physical discrimination in meeting halls of co-operative buildings and in the premises of government and non-government offices.

**Figure 18 Women of different caste and ethnic groups sit together to conduct the monthly meeting of a women's co-operative (Photo by author)**



**Figure 19 Children of different caste and ethnic groups learn together in a local pre-primary school (Photo by author)**



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Western cities. Instead it is similar to a restaurant where alcoholic, non-alcoholic drinks, breakfast, lunch, snacks and dinner can be served with or without room accommodations.

But it was not always like this. Dalits have suffered from discrimination in accessing common resources such as forests and drinking water. A glimpse of such a past was narrated to me by Durga Bishwakarma (B. K.), a Dalit woman in her late 30s.

After acquiring Durga's contact details from my field assistant Sujan Purkoti, I first met Durga B.K. in Kathmandu in April 2014. In late 1990s, she was married into the village, just next to Patle Gau, from a town called Banepa, a one-hour drive from Patle Gau. Ever since her husband found a job as a *murtikar* (sculptor of small metal statues) in Kathmandu some years back, Durga divides her time almost equally between Kathmandu, where her husband lives and Patle Gau, where her children and in-laws continue to stay. Formally educated only up to eighth standard, Durga is gifted with *needar* (brave) qualities. She is not any *aimai* (a colloquial and almost disrespectful reference to woman) or even a *mahila* (a more respectful reference to woman). For me she most closely resembles a *naree* (an honorific reference to a woman who is empowered with leadership qualities). These qualities are largely the reason she is now an advisor to a woman's co-operative group which was established through her pivotal efforts. One day, talking about caste relations in Patle Gau, Durga said:

As Dalits we have had our share of struggle here. A few days after my marriage I collected some fuelwood and fodder from the forest close to my home. But in the evening a *ban heralu* (forest overseer) came to my house to warn me not to do it anymore. He even took away the tools and equipment I had used to make the collection. I asked my family members why that was happening. They told me that they had been told that the forest belonged to a group of Humagain Bahuns. I then asked where our own community forest was. They said they had none. So, they had been "stealing" fuelwood and fodder from the same forest during night or early dawn. Since they happened to collect only a little, the "stealing" was never exposed.

Curious to learn more about the forest, I started to investigate by consulting Shyam Kuikel and Narayan Kuikel, both Bahun men who were associated with Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist), and Narayan Sharma, another Bahun man and the Principal of a local public school. All three told me that the forest had grown not on private but on public land. In my inquiry, I found that Shasheedhar Humagain, a Bahun man who also happened to be a former *Pradhan Pancha*<sup>83</sup> had actually mobilised the thirty Dalit families<sup>84</sup> to donate their labour to plant trees there in exchange for the use of water coming from a natural spring in the forest. Shasheedhar Humagain along with other Bahun *thula bada* (big men) however, did not let the Dalits harvest the forest, especially for fuelwood purposes. This occurred around the mid-1980s during the Panchayat era. Shasheedhar and the gang knew that the forest was created in a public place but had somehow managed to keep the Dalits in dark. But then in those times even if the Dalits knew, what could they do? After the end of authoritative Panchayat regime in 1990, Shasheedhar quickly shifted his loyalty from the king to the new political power of the time, the Nepali Congress. But since it was a time of competitive parliamentary democracy I began consulting with other local (Bahun) leaders but associated with the communist thoughts and were opposing Sasheedhar Humagain. All of them confirmed that the forest was built on a public land and those residing closest to it had the right to manage it and benefit from it if it could be registered as a community forest.

With this knowledge I sought help from a *bolna sakne Tamangni didi* (a Tamang sister who can stand up and speak up for herself). Fulmaya Tamang is her name. She and I went to a local forest office where we were briefed on how to register the forest as a community forest. After about three or four months of bureaucratic procedures, we were able to do that with us (the thirty Dalit Households) as the primary Users and Management Group. Of course, the Humagains protested and threatened us by saying, "You will get access to this forest only if we allow you" to which I retorted by saying, "This is not your *baau's jagga* (father's land). This is public land. Tomorrow all the thirty Dalit families shall go to the forest with our tools and

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<sup>83</sup> Equivalent to the post of Chair of a Village Development Committee during the Panchayat regime.

<sup>84</sup> Two Bishwokarma and twenty-eight Pariyar families.

equipment to collect fuelwood. Whatever happens shall happen in the forest.” They never came.

To my question of how she was able to summon so much courage, Durga responded:

Necessity. All of us needed fuelwood and fodder and we had no other option. When people are starving terribly they might start sucking tree saps to survive, no? Also, I knew from radio and television that public lands and community forests can be accessed by anyone. Equality is the basis. *Jat pat ya thulo sano ko kura hunna tyaha* (no influence of caste and status is applicable there). But then again, I also got help of other people like Fulmaya Tamang and the full support of all the thirty Dalit families.

Talking about accessing drinking water, Durga B. K. went on:

We did not have separate taps for drinking water. When the Bahuns came to fill their pots, we had to keep a distance and let them get the water first. But after 1990 adherence to such strict practices got much laxer. Now we have piped waters coming to houses in each cluster so it is not a contested issue any more.

Most villages in more remote districts of the Mid and Far Western Regions like Accham still have two separate taps with a wall in between to provide drinking water to Dalit and non-Dalit. But Patle Gau now has piped water. The piped water reaches every house near the Arniko highway, and there are water sprouts near each settlement where water can be accessed. Since the three groups are spatially segregated each living in its own *bastee*, each *bastee* has its own source of drinking water. Hence it is not a source of inter-caste contentions. Besides this incident narrated to me by Durga B. K., I did not see or hear anything contentious regarding drinking water during my fieldwork.

## Quasi-private Space: Where Dalits Want *ijjāt*

*Ijjat* is close to dignity, self-respect. Therefore, ideally any one in Patle Gau has *ijjat* as long as she has lost it through acts of immorality or criminality. So even an economically poor person has *ijjat* if she is earning her living through legal and socially accepted means. Contrarily, a rich powerful person may lose his *ijjat* in a society if has committed a crime or socially unaccepted act such as stealing, murdering, etc. I use this concept of *ijjat* to illustrate below how every Dalit seeks to live her life with *ijjat* in her “quasi-private spaces” as well. But first I want to elaborate a little on what I mean by “quasi-private space.”

It is easy to identify private farms and even forests in western countries because boards like “Private property. Do not trespass.” emphatically warn any potential trespassers. But not so in Nepal. Private houses in cities may be protected by walls but private farms are not marked in this way. Sometimes it is difficult to know where a public road ends and where private land begins. And, walking in someone’s lands, especially if fallow, and sitting in the open spaces of a private house is not considered serious trespassing. I refer to these spaces, including courtyards, as quasi-private spaces. It is these quasi-private spaces that set the scene for the practice of untouchability. While Dalits are the ones who these practices target, the “discriminator” is a non-Dalit, Bahun or Tamang.

During a casual conversation, a couple of Dalit women confided in me that when they had visited a Tamang household to pay respects to the soul of a dead Tamang person laid on the ground in front of a Tamang house, they were told not to “touch” the body and maintain some distance, a request to which they acquiesced. But such demure compliance does not occur everywhere all the time. Acts of resistance and revolt have occurred. Recalling a socially charged event Meena Purkoti, a Dalit woman in her early 30s who also doubles as an active “development agent”, once narrated such an act to me:

... since we don't own much land one of the ways of earning income is to work as farm labourers. We normally labour on Bahuns' lands. They have much land and when the labour from their own family members or kinship relations is not sufficient— usually at the times of seeding, planting, weeding, and harvesting— they seek our labour. As a rule when we work in these farms it is the landowners who provide *khaja* (snacks) during the day at around three o'clock and cash for the work at the end of the day. *Chiura* (beaten rice) with some kind of vegetables usually make up a typical *khaja*. We do eat together maintaining some distance in the farm. We then later wash the plates with which *khaja* is served and place the plates by the side of the fields. The Bahuns later collect the plates.

It was one of these events in the month of September in 2007, when Gopal Purkoti, a thirteen-year-old Dalit boy went to pick up his plate of *khaja* but also happened to touch another plate by the side of his. The other plate was meant for a Bahun woman working in the same field. The Bahun woman considered the food touched by a Dalit boy "impure" and in a fit of rage verbally and physically abused the boy for "polluting" the food. The boy told his parents in the evening and I came to know about it only the next day. I immediately called a meeting between the adult Dalits and we decided to confront the Bahun woman ... We were so angry that we wanted to do the same to her. So about twenty or so of us stormed to the area where the Bahun woman lived to find her and teach her a "lesson." But the Bahun patriarchs protected her and she did not come out of the house. The patriarchs apologised on her behalf and promised that such an incident would not be repeated in the future.

When I asked Meena if they did, or did not seek the help of local police or Chief District Officer (CDO) office, she simply said:

No, we did not. The office is that far, about 30 minutes bus ride. And you know how the local administration is. They would either ignore such a case or delay it without taking any concrete action.

I then asked what prompted them to take the action that they did. Meena replied:

The radio and other media sources plus some *bujhne* (understanding) people keep informing us that such caste-based discriminatory behaviour was banned in Nepal. We are equal citizens like any other Nepali. How can we tolerate this? We also have *ijjat* (respect/dignity).

Bahun, Dalits and Tamangs continue to meet in quasi-private spaces. But overt assertions of caste superiority are receding. Bahuns still require Dalit labour in their farms when collective Bahun labour is inadequate at times such as harvesting, weeding and planting. Likewise, the predominantly poor Dalits also need the money available through these casual farm labouring opportunities. This economic mutual inter-dependence makes the two work together in agricultural farms where they still continue to eat and drink separately alongside each other typically without any physical and verbal abuse. In a similar manner, they live in close but separate *bastees*, such that while caste distinctions are maintained, *ijjat* is also retained.

### **Private Spaces: The Most Dynamically Negotiated Space**

One afternoon as I was observing the details of making *jānd* (local beer) in a Tamang house we heard a cry from outside, "*Didi, didi* (sister, sister)." Recognising the voice, the Tamang woman making *jānd* said to me, "Oh. That is Gopal *Bhai* (brother) from *Sarkee tole*. He probably wants to buy some *jānd*." So, she poured some *jānd* into an empty beer bottle and sealed the bottle's mouth with a cap made out of corn cob and went out. I followed her. Standing outside the veranda of the house was a man who I inferred to be Gopal *Bhai*, a young Dalit local resident in *Patle Gau*. After exchanging niceties, the Tamang woman exchanged the *jānd* with some money from Gopal.

A few weeks later I was in the same house where I had observed the *jānd* making, to talk with the household head Autar Singh Lama, an 80-year-old Tamang man. As we were talking about his life in *Patle Gau* and about his own

particular life history, I managed to lead the conversation towards the issue of untouchability. He emphatically said that the Tamangs in Patle Gau not only do *not* accept any food or water from the Dalits but Dalits also do not enter their houses. When I asked him why it was so, he simply said, "It is just the way it has been. It is our *challan* (tradition)."

The conversation with Autar Singh Lama also reminded me of a casual conversation I had with Siromani Sapkota, in which I had the opportunity to ask him about issues around untouchability in Patle Gau. Siromani had emphatically said, "I have not let any Dalit enter my house yet. My *dharma* does not allow that." I feel Siromani used *Dharma* in all its three senses – religion (he is a Hindu), duty (it is his duty to follow the rules of Hindu religion) and the natural order of things (it is "natural" for a Hindu to act according to one's caste). I felt too awkward to carry the conversation any further, and I reminded myself that Siromani's family is a priestly family. Although Siromani does not provide priestly services, but is instead more engaged in works of "development" and local "politics", his father had been a priest. Now two of his four brothers living in close quarters are practicing priests. Maintaining Bahun purity must have been important for the sustenance of priestly practice and livelihoods. This is perhaps the reason why during the entire period of my fieldwork I did not see any Dalit in the premises of the Sapkota *tole*. Although I did not see any Dalit come into the residences of the Sapkotas, the Dalits did come to Bahuns' farms as hired labourers working alongside the Bahuns. They worked together but ate separately during the breaks.

The adherence to caste-based practices is not strictly and exclusively a rural phenomenon. Although in the diaspora, say in Australia, UK or USA, non-Dalits are found to eat foods touched and prepared by the Dalits without hesitation, I witnessed two instances in Kathmandu city during my fieldwork



period that contradicts this. Once after I had finished interviewing a Bahun government employee in his quarter in Kathmandu about government policies related to poverty and social inclusion, he made a remark about another Dalit employee who had just left. He had not liked the free movement of this Dalit colleague into the dining and kitchen area. He had this to say to me:

*Ke garne* (what to do)?<sup>85</sup> If this were my house in the village, he would not have been moving so easily in and out of the kitchen and dining area. But you know this is a government quarter so I cannot say anything. But deep inside I am not very comfortable with it.

A few weeks later I found myself in a *Newar*<sup>86</sup> friend's house to attend his daughter's birthday party in Kathmandu. Well-travelled in Nepal and around the world for a Nepalese man, this friend had gained a PhD from a well-known university in Japan which helped him gain a good job with an International Non-Government Organisation (INGO). I considered him to be quite a "modern" man. But when I did not see at the party a mutual Dalit friend of ours who lived about fifty metres away I asked the host why this Dalit friend was not at the party. He replied in a soft voice, as if he were feeling guilty:

I don't have any problem with this thing of *jat* (caste). But you know my elder sisters come from rural background and they do mind such things. And I choose not to offend them. *Ke garne* (what to do)?

While a modern educated urban man working with donor-funded INGOs attributes his adherence to caste-rules and commensality practices to "compelling" conditions, back in *Patle Gau* a few Bahun families, especially the ones engaged in commercial businesses, do not feel the pressure of such compulsion. While the Dalits eat separately during social rituals like marriage

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<sup>85</sup> Most Nepalese people commonly and often use "*ke garne*" when they feel that they have succumbed to situations where they feel they have been stripped of any agency to act, when they feel helpless, powerless or even clueless.

<sup>86</sup> An ethnic group.

ceremonies and keep their used plates separately which the Bahuns eventually “repurify” by sprinkling with “*soon pani*” (water containing gold in any form or shape like a finger-ring or earring or necklace is believed to have the ritually purifying effect), Rajkumar Purkoti’s case provides an exception to this.

I met Rajkumar Purkoti, a Dalit, not in Patle Gau itself but in Banepa where he was studying at a local college in standard eleven. He had been the top performer of a local school in Patle Gau while studying there and had obtained the highest score in School Leaving Certificate Examinations (SLC, level ten). It was because he was such a brilliant student that Laxman Timilsina asked him to stay over at his place for three months prior to the SLC examinations to help Laxman’s son prepare for the exams. Laxman Timilsina, an entrepreneurial Bahun, runs a shop that provides tea, snacks, soft drinks and other food items in addition to managing a vegetable collection centre. So Rajkumar Purkoti lived in Bahun Laxman’s house for three months. Recalling his experiences living in Laxman’s place Rajkumar told me:

I lived as their own. We ate together, slept together. Like their son I also did not have to wash my dishes after eating. At least, our village is *bikashit* (developed) to that extent.

Unlike Siromani Sapkota, Laxman Timilsina’s family does not engage in priestly works, but as I said is engaged in commercial enterprises. For him a good performance by his son at school to secure a better future is more important than maintaining ritual purity. In an economy where school-based education has higher chances of providing good employment opportunities than anything else, Laxman Timilsina follows the logic of utilitarian rationale over the logic of religious *dharma*. In any case, even if a few members, mainly the older ones, of the Bahun community lament, “what times have come?!” to refer to this incident, Laxman Timilsina does “not lose Bahun caste” by doing what he did. While this

hypo-caste behaviour does not “raise” Rajkumar’s caste status neither is the caste-status of Laxman necessarily “degraded.” Gone are the days in Patle Gau when such acts would have been totally unacceptable, requiring Laxman’s entire family and his whole abode to undergo “cleansing” rituals. Referring to the same incident Siromani Sapkota said to me, “Mandip jee, this is *ganatantra* (democracy). People are ‘free’ to act in whatever ways they want.”

Maybe it is *ganatantra* or maybe *Patle Gau* has indeed got “*bikashit* (developed)” as Rajkumar Purkoti claims. Whatever happened, times surely have changed drastically in *Patle Gau* as Autar Singh Lama once put it:

The Bahuns used to eat only the food that we prepared in oil and butter<sup>87</sup>. I don’t know why, but they did not accept *bhāt* (cooked rice) from us in the past. Now they eat anything we give them ... I also remember them changing clothes before eating. But now they don’t do anything like that. In fact, they eat everything ... *jānd* (liquor) too (laughs) ...

The ethnographic details that I have narrated above indicate that private spaces are the site of more extreme caste-based experiences. It is an arena where different actors negotiate “untouchability” using logics of varying kinds. Private spaces are thus an arena where not only rural men but also educated “modern” urban men choose to stick to logics dictated by *dharma*, *challan* and emotions to perpetuate the practice of untouchability. And yet this very arena also accommodates actions performed using other (utilitarian) logics whereby even the members of “high-castes” opt to “gamble” and break cultural “boundaries.” Perhaps the modern capitalist economy and the discourses of progressive state act are the source from which these “boundary breaking” actors find their agency

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<sup>87</sup> In strict Hindu terms, food prepared in ghee, butter and oil is considered *choko* (pure) but food prepared in water for instance rice is considered *jutho* (impure/polluted).

to act in untraditional terms. But in breaking these boundaries it is also important to them that they do not lose their “high-caste” status.

## **Conclusion**

Starting with a general introduction to Patle Gau itself I have introduced in this chapter its three social groups – Bahun, Dalit, Tamang – and their socio-cultural practices not in isolation and rigidity but in relationality and fluidity. I then critically analysed the dynamic cultural politics of “untouchability”, a practice that sets the Dalits apart from any non-Dalit, be it Bahun or be it Tamang.

Governed for more than two centuries under Hindu-based rules and customs, caste-conscious societies like Patle Gau are the site of everyday practices that preserve distinction and difference. These distinctions and differences are sometimes maintained by state-given identities and sometimes abandoned by self-chosen identities. While I did not exhaust all the socio-cultural practices which define “belongingness” to any of the three social groups in Patle Gau, I provided sufficient evidence to argue that however caste and ethnic identities are formed— through self-claimed and validated mythologies, political statements or state-sponsored documents— once formed, they tend to be continually reproduced through distinctive cultural, religious, linguistic and even economic practices. For instance, unlike the past, Bahuns and Dalits sit alongside each other in commercial spaces to drink and eat together but like in the past, they do not still intermingle so much in the private spaces. Inter-caste marriages are not absolutely absent as in the past but the general norm still follows endogamy. Consequently, these socio-economic practices create and maintain boundaries, though they do not remain totally impervious. Likewise, they cannot be so diluted as to become invisible or meaningless (Gellner, 2012). Top-down approaches like forming National Dalit Commission at state-centre do not necessarily immediately transform caste-relations in everyday lives. Therefore,

differentiated by language, religion, rituals, tradition, and influenced by caste-consciousness and notions of purity and impurity, but governed by the same state that preaches equality and inter-dependence for economic reasons, Bahuns, Dalits and Tamangs choose to reside in adjacent yet separate geographical spaces.

Caste-based hierarchical identity is constantly being negotiated by both dominant groups seeking to retain “distinction,” and by non-dominant groups seeking to dismantle it. Acting within the premises provided by this dialectic and provoked by egalitarian values propounded by modern governments as opposed to religion-based hierarchy, these social groups themselves regularly negotiate their identities. Over time, *Achyuts* became Dalits, *Matwalis* became Janajatis and even *Tagadharis* became Khas-Arya. But such changing national identities get transmitted to the local level not directly nor immediately and not with the same effect on all social groups. The politically-conscious and literate villagers are the first ones to take up these identities while the not-so politically conscious and the illiterate continue with traditional identities and roles. But the changing social and political milieu does provide the marginalised and traditionally lowest ranked among the social groups, the Dalits, with some agency, otherwise inconceivable, to increasingly assert their claim as equal citizens, and not as lesser caste group.

Assertions for equality by marginalised social groups, particularly against all forms of caste-based discrimination, including the practices of untouchability, in all social spaces is a social field that has shown considerable dynamism and contradictions. The progressive and modern state-managers including proponents of the Maoist Revolution keen on seeing Nepal as a modern, *bikashit*, progressive and egalitarian nation have attempted to annihilate caste-based discrimination practices. These practices have prevented the economically poor

Dalits from accessing public resources, living dignified lives (*ijjatdar*) and from fully participating in food-based enterprises. But these discriminatory practices continue to show up in various spaces, particularly rural Nepal, although in decreasing frequency and intensity. I have shown in this chapter how these practices are now less and less overt in public places but continue to persist covertly in commercial and private spaces while being fiercely contested in quasi-private spaces. Only time will tell when and if such discrimination will either dissipate totally or reach minimal levels even in private spaces.

Having described the cultural core which influences almost all spheres of life in Patle Gau in this chapter, I now move into the remaining chapters to see how practices of *bikas* and concrete aspects of materiality are embedded within such cultural norms.

## Chapter 5 Practice of *Bikas*, Land and Labour in Patle Gau

*Ram Prasad Sharma*  
*Aammai Ammai*  
*Unko bauko theeyo saath gauma lekhopakho birta ...*  
*Kati tyaagi manche!*  
*Chaadee diye lekhopakho aruko lagee*  
*Amar hune bho unko katha,*  
*Ma ta Ram Prasad hoina*  
*Ma banna sakdeena mahaan! ....*  
*Ma sanga gumanune bajeko birta chaina ...*  
*Ma kadapee banna sakdina mahaan!*

(Ram Prasad Sharma  
Oh my, my  
His Grandfather had *Birta* lands in seven villages ...  
How sacrificing is he!  
He gave away some lands to others  
His story will be remembered forever  
I am not Ram Prasad Sharma  
I cannot be great! ...  
I do not have grandfather's *Birta* lands to give away ...  
I can never be great!)

(Aahuti, 2010, pp. LIII, LIV - my translation)

When Nepal began the process of modernisation in the 1950s, it started undergoing unprecedented changes in all spheres of life. Along with these changes three ideologies concurrently entered Nepalese soils and minds: the ideologies of nationalism, democracy, and development (*bikas*). The ideology of nationalism was strategically utilised during the Panchayat democracy to assimilate all Nepalese social groups into one culture dominated by hill-based Hindu populations. While this ideology slowly faded, it briefly made a re-appearance (mainly expressed in terms of an anti-India sentiments) when India informally blockaded Nepal right after Nepal promulgated its new Constitution in 2015. This, many people believed, was in support of the resistance posed by

the Madheshi groups. As I have shown in previous chapters the ideology of democracy was born and re-born in several different avatars, its current form is secular federal parliamentary democracy. The ideology of *bikas* has seen neither slumps nor booms like the ideology of nationalism, nor demise and revitalisation like the ideology of democracy. It has not only continued to exist since its birth but has actually been the darling of all forms of government. *Bikas* has continuously found a prominent place in social and political discourses under divergent systems of political governance.

The discourse of *bikas* thrived during Panchayat democracy (1962 – 1990), blossomed during the constitutional monarchical democracy (1990-2006) and continues to flourish in the present day federal republic democracy (2006 – date). Despite this, many debate whether *bikas* has actually occurred. The pursuit of *bikas* through higher economic growth has been constant, first via the heavy-hand of the state, and later in the 1990s through the “free market”. Ever since then the Nepalese state has committed to neoliberalism, advised by Bretton Wood institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), they are committed to the idea that “free markets” should lead the practice of *bikas*, monitored only by occasional regulatory state mechanisms. The Nepalese state’s adherence to such principles is clearly evidenced by its most recent ambition to “graduate” from least-developed status to middle-income country status by 2030, a feat that is to be achieved through “higher growth-promoting public investment” by efficiently maximising productive capacities and “mobilising private savings” (GON, 2016b, p. xiii).

When such state policies get translated into everyday practices, thousands of NGOs start pouring into rural villages to deliver *bikas*<sup>88</sup> by conducting training

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<sup>88</sup> The NGO Federation of Nepal claims that there are about 5,643 NGOs currently operational in Nepal (<http://www.ngofederation.org/> accessed on 9/12/2015) with tens of them in Kavre.



with local communities on commercial vegetable production, to distribute hybrid seeds and exotic breeds, to deliver adult literacy programmes, and to construct pit-latrines and small bio-gas plants and so on.

I critically reflected upon the discourses of *bikas* in my previous chapters and in the present one I want to analytically explore how *bikas* is practiced in Patle Gau. Then by focusing on one particular practice of *bikas*, I propose to analyse the failure of land reform in Patle Gau— like elsewhere in Nepal— a failure which continues to have major repercussions to this day. Throughout my analysis, I also seek to provide structural explanations for why certain social groups attained access to land, and how this effected the economic base of each social group. Highlighting the importance of land in an agrarian economy I then examine how the labour of various social groups itself is organised around land-ownership.

### **Practices of *Bikas* in Patle Gau**

It is no wonder that Siromani Sapkota sees *bikas* in the NGO-sponsored construction of pit-latrines and bio-gas plants. This *bikas* activity neatly falls within the Ministry of Health's assertion that the improved health of Nepalese citizens is both a pre-requisite and an outcome of *bikas*:

The Ministry of Health plays a leading role in improving the health of the people including mental, physical and social well-being, for overall national development with the increased participation of the private sector and non-government institutions in the implementation of programmes.<sup>89</sup>

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Interested readers can read (Bhattachan, Dahal, & Rana, 2001; Bongartz & Dahal, 1996) for critical examination of the *bikase* roles played by NGOs in Nepal.

<sup>89</sup> From <http://www.mohp.gov.np> (GON, 2017).

Thoroughly persuaded by such discourses, when Siromani Sapkota talks about *bikas* in Patle Gau, he has this to say to me:

This village used to be quite dirty some years back since not every house had a latrine. Thanks to the efforts by an NGO it is much cleaner. Almost all families were assisted to build pit-latrines. And some homes were even helped with the construction of small bio-gas plants which they use to cook food. In that sense, this village is quite *bikashit* (“developed”) now.

Siromani’s *kaka* (uncle), Murali Sapkota finds *bikas* in the mechanisation of agricultural farms. He is one of the Bahun families who have recently started using small hand-held tractors for ploughing the fields to prepare them for planting various crops. When I asked him about the tractor, Murali said this to me:

You know in the past, we Bahuns, were not supposed to labour physically, not in the farms. We were just meant to do priestly and scholarly works. And it was enough. But now times have changed. There is not a plentiful supply of labour. So, we work in our fields too. But this tractor has reduced so much of the drudgery involved in farming. And this also means that we don’t need to ask for labour or hire labour for certain kinds of works. Using manual labour those tasks would have taken so many days. Now this tractor does the same things in a matter of few hours. That is *bikas*, no?

For Meena Purkoti, a Dalit woman, and an Executive Member of the aptly named *Namuna Naree Chetana Bachat tatha Hrin Sahakari Santha* (Model Conscious Women Savings and Credit Co-operative) *bikas* happens when the level of *chetana* (consciousness) is “raised” (Fujikura, 2001, 2013). Therefore, she suggests that Dalits are more *bikashit* (developed) now than before because now they have “learnt” to eat healthy and nutritious foods grown fresh in their own kitchen gardens (Figure 20):

Previously almost no Dalit family cultivated vegetables like this. But because of programmes by the District Agriculture Development Office and District Public Health Office some of them now *know* how to be healthy by eating vegetables cultivated in their own kitchen gardens. They are now more *bikashit* than before.

**Figure 20 Meena Purkoti stands by the side of a vegetable garden of a Dalit family  
(Photo by author)**



It is not only the materiality of pit-latrines and vegetable gardens, or the abstract notion of raised consciousness that invoke a sense of *bikas* in Patle Gau residents. A young Dalit man Rajkumar Purkoti finds *bikas* in the changing inter-caste social relations, which he sees to be increasingly less discriminatory (Chapter Four):

Maybe in our village, (*jat paat ko bhed bhaav*) caste-based discrimination is lot less than it used to be. It was not like this before. I therefore, think our village is more *bikashit* now.

For many *bikas* is an illusion, a mystery, a puzzle which everybody else seems to understand (Greig, et al., 2007). They remain sceptical of *bikas's* meaning and intent. A Dalit man in his late 50s, Jit Bahadur Pariyar ekes out his living by following his traditional caste-based occupation of tailoring, through which he

earns barely enough to feed his family. In a response to my casual conversation with him about life in general in Patle Gau, he said:

*Bikas bikas bhanchan sabai. Khoi k ho bikas thaha chaina. Afusanga na pugdo jagga cha, na kamai. Afulai ta bharai bholee k khaaun bhanne cha.*

(Everybody says “development”, “development”. What is development? I don’t know. I have neither enough land nor sufficient income. My immediate concerns are how to eat tonight and tomorrow).

Contrary to Siromani, Murali, Meena, and Rajkumar, Jit denies any understanding of *bikas*, whatsoever. It may be because although these people live in the same small space of Patle Gau, Jit is so different from Siromani, Meena, and Rajkumar. Siromani Sapkota is a former VDC chair and currently chairs the local School Management Committee and a local co-op. Meena Purkoti is an “active” member of a local woman’s co-operative. Rajkumar Purkoti is an educated young man. Jit Bahadur does not have any form of such capital. He has never been to school and hence cannot read and write. No one has asked him to directly manage or help manage any development projects in Patle Gau. Jit is mostly engrossed in labouring to ensure his family’s economic subsistence. His disconnection with practices of *bikas* perhaps explains his naivety. Despite the ignorance of people like Jit about *bikas*, *bikas* gets practiced in Patle Gau anyhow.

*Bikas* today in Patle Gau is primarily regarded as taking the form of pit-latrines, kitchen gardens, raised consciousness and lessening social discrimination. But in the past *bikas* was something else. *Bikas* was understood quite differently in the 1950s and 1960s when it first entered Patle Gau as part of Nepal’s nation-wide pioneering experiments with modernity. *Bikas* was introduced to Nepalese in many different forms simultaneously, but chemical

fertiliser and land reform were its earliest avatars. As Bhoj Raj Sapkota, a Bahun man aged 87, remembers:

I got to see *bikase mal* (“developed” fertiliser) for the first time as the government began distributing it in our village at that time. Until then we only used *gobar mal* (cow-dung) in the farms. Most of us could barely eat enough because of low farm yield but I have to admit using *bikase mal* we substantially increased farm production.

Along with *bikase mal*, *bikas*’s presence was also almost concurrently felt in Patle Gau, with the arrival of officials and technicians, who acting on behalf of the state, wanted to modernise land tenure administration systems in Nepal. The state at this time desired to abolish some of the previously held tax-free land tenure systems and in their place apply modern state-centric land tenure systems for easing the processes of collecting taxes. To achieve this, the state also wanted to distribute land deeds to the designated owners for the first time. Many viciously competed for land deeds in Patle Gau. This competition eventually led to some social groups having much more land than the others, resulting in the present-day unequal distribution of land in Patle Gau. But since land reform is itself a practice embedded within the larger national discourse of *bikas* in Nepal, it is important first to understand how *bikas* is managed in Patle Gau and in Kavre district in which Patle Gau is situated. I complement this understanding by analysing which groups and individuals have greater access to leading and managing *bikas*, and what mechanisms have allowed them to gain this control.

### **Management of *Bikas* in Patle Gau**

Presently many actors manage *bikas* in Kavre district, the biggest actors being state representatives and institutions, NGOs, co-operatives and the villagers themselves, who in *bikase* jargon, are described as the “recipients” or “target group.” Although the Office of the Kavre Chief District Officer (CDO)

under the Ministry of Home Affairs is responsible for the general administration of Kavre district including the mobilisation of security forces, the Office of the District Development Committee (DDC) under the Ministry of Local Development<sup>90</sup> is responsible for the overall co-ordination of *bikase* activities in the district.

While the CDO can directly mobilise security forces such as the armed police forces, the DDC co-ordinates a number of *bikase* offices such as District Agriculture Development Office, District Livestock Development Office, District Forestry Office, District Land-Conservation Office, Drinking Water Division, Division Road Office, District Education Office and the like which are all staffed by the state's civil personnel. The *bikase* offices report to three different institutions: (i) CDO's office for general administration, (ii) respective line ministries and departments for technical advices and bureaucratic procedures, and (iii) DDC for overall programme planning and implementation. The DDC has several committees such as the Infrastructure Development Committee, the Agriculture Forest and Environment Committee, and the Water Resource and Land Committee to co-ordinate the activities of these *bikase* offices. The *bikase* offices then deliver their programmes such as drinking-water connections, community training, small-irrigation programmes, literacy programmes and so on through VDC level service centres and sub-centres.

Following the principle of "local participation" for implementing local needs-based programmes, the offices of DDC and VDCs are supposed to be led by locally elected people's representatives. However, during the time of my research all these DDC and VDC offices were "temporarily" filled by government officials since local elections for DDCs, municipalities, and VDCs had not

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<sup>90</sup> The Ministry of Local Development has recently been converted to the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development.

occurred since 2002. The insecurity during the Maoist conflict, king Gyanendra’s illegitimate power take-over, and the uncertainty of the formulation of the new constitution were normally the reasons cited for the non-occurrence of local elections. So instead of committees formed by elected members of local peoples, Kavre had a *sarbadaliya* (“all-party”) co-ordinating mechanism body both at the district level and the grass-roots VDC levels. The, DDC-level co-ordinating body was led by a Local Development Officer (LDO), a government employee, rather than by an elected District Chair. Political parties “active” in local politics would nominate their local resident representatives to fill these positions, which would normally have been filled by elected members. Likewise, instead of an elected member chairing the VDC, a government employee: the VDC secretary, served as the chair of VDC “all-party” co-ordinating committee. As in the case of the DDC, the local political parties nominated their local representatives to the VDC-level “all-party” co-ordinating body to fill the positions left vacant due to the lack of elections. Kavre District at the time of my field visit had five municipalities and 76 Village Development Committee (VDC) offices. Figure 21 provides the complete list of the members of “all-party” Kavre DDC working committee in 2014. And, Figures 22 and 23 list the members of all-party VDC working committees for two VDCs governing Patle Gau.

**Figure 21 All-Party Kavre DDC Working Committee in 2014**

SN	Name	Caste or ethnicity (gender)	Post	Organisation
1	Mr. Dilip Kumar Chapagain	Bahun (man)	Chair and LDO	Ministry of Local Development
2	Mr. Shankha Buddha Lama	Tamang/Janajati (man)	Member	Representative – Nepali Congress
3	Mr. Gokhul Baskota	Bahun (man)	Member	Representative – United Marxist-Leninist Party

SN	Name	Caste or ethnicity (gender)	Post	Organisation
4	Mr. Dinanath Gautam	Bahun (man)	Member	Representative – United Nepal Communist Party (Maoist)
5	Mr. Dil Kumar Lama	Tamang/Janajati (man)	Member	Representative – Nepal Prajatantric Party
6	Mr. KabiRaj Timilsina	Bahun (man)	Member	Representative – Nepali Janata Dal
7	Mr. Ran Bahadur Bohora	Chhetri (man)	Member	Representative – Nepal Communist Party – Maxist-Leninist

**Figure 22 All-party Working Committee in Bela VDC in 2014  
(governing one part of Patle Gau)**

SN	Name	Caste or ethnicity (gender)	Post	Organisation
1	Sanjeev Dahal	Bahun (man)	Chair and VDC Secretary	Ministry of Local Development
2	Kedar Sapkota	Bahun (man)	Member	Representative – Nepali Congress
3	Buddhi Man Tamang	Tamang/Janajati (man)	Member	Representative – United Marxist-Leninist Party
4	Sanjay Lama	Tamang/Janajati (man)	Member	Representative – Nepal Prajatantric Party
5	Ram Prasad Chaulagain	Bahun (man)	Member	Representative – Nepali Janata Dal



**Figure 23 All-party Working Committee in Foolbari VDC in 2014  
(governing another part of Patle Gau)**

SN	Name	Caste or ethnicity (gender)	Post	Organisation
1	Umesh Shivakoti	Bahun (man)	Chair and VDC Secretary	Ministry of Local Development
2	Bikarm Hari Pathak	Bahun (man)	Member	Representative – Nepali Congress
3	Maan Bahadur Tamang	Tamang/Janajati (man)	Member	Representative – United Marxist-Leninist Party
4	Harihar Humagain	Bahun (man)	Member	Representative – Nepal Prajatantric Party
5	Tirtha Parjauli	Bahun (man)	Member	Representative – Nepali Janata Dal

These bodies were not vacant from 1962 to 2002 when Panchayat democracy and constitutional monarchy under multi-party democracy were fully functional. I provide the lists of people’s representatives heading the District Panchayat and DDC and village level development panchayat and committees during those times under respective governance systems in Figures 24 and 25.

**Figure 24 Village Heads in Fulbari VDC (governing one part of Patle Gau)**

Time period	Person	Caste or ethnicity (gender)	Title	Political party
1962 - 1975	Sarkee Man Tamang	Tamang (man)	<i>Pradhan Pancha</i> (Village Head)	Not applicable
1976 - 1981	Devi Prasad Pyakurel	Bahun (man)	<i>Pradhan Pancha</i> (Village Head)	Not applicable
1982 - 1990	Shashidhar Sharma	Bahun (man)	<i>Pradhan Pancha</i> (Village Head)	Not applicable
1991 - 2002	Govind Satyal	Bahun (man)	Chair, Village Development Committee	Nepali Congress

**Figure 25 Village Heads in Bela VDC (governing another part of Patle Gau)**

<b>Time period</b>	<b>Person</b>	<b>Caste or ethnicity (gender)</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Political party</b>
1962 - 1975	Ghana Nath Kharel	Bahun (man)	<i>Pradhan Pancha</i> (Village Head)	Not applicable
1976 - 1981	Shiv Lal Danuwar	Danuwar/Janajati (man)	<i>Pradhan Pancha</i> (Village Head)	Not applicable
1982 - 1985	Ghana Nath Kharel	Bahun (man)	<i>Pradhan Pancha</i> (Village Head)	Not applicable
1986 - 1990	Ghriba Nath Kharel	Bahun (man)	<i>Pradhan Pancha</i> (Village Head)	Not applicable
1991 - 1995	Jagat Prasad Neupane	Bahun (man)	Chair, Village Development Committee	Nepali Congress
1996 - 2002	Ghribhanath Kharel	Bahun (man)	Chair, Village Development Committee	United Marxist Leninist

I have elaborately presented the names, caste, ethnicity, gender and political parties in the above lists for a reason. A cursory social and gender analysis of these lists show a pattern and trend that is quite striking from 1962 to 2014, from the Panchayat democracy to parliamentary democracy and to the present secular “soon to be fully federated” democracy. Mostly “high-caste” Bahun men and occasionally Janajati men have occupied these politically powerful posts. It is extremely important to note this because this signifies that it is mostly Bahun men and occasionally Janajati men who have taken up leadership positions powerful enough to lead, plan, manage, influence and manoeuvre mechanisms and processes of local *bikase* and related resource allocation in Kavre district and in Patle Gau. There has never been a Dalit, and never a woman in any of these positions. I shall connect these local power configurations to current unequal land holding patterns in Patle Gau to argue that the low social capital (Bourdieu, 2011) amongst the Dalits has also been a

major cause of their landlessness which the discourse of *bikas* in the form of land reform has failed to address.

Before I begin to unravel land-access in detail I now take up two illustrations from the present to illustrate how local political powers held by Bahuns are used to manipulate the allocation of resources such that fruits of *bikas* reach them first. Although my one-year field-stay in Palte Gau in 2014 was too short for me to actually witness any construction of an agri-road, I still want to take up this as a *bikase* activity to support my argument. Let me discuss a particular case. The Kavre DDC allocates a certain amount of the budget every year for a number of agricultural fair-weather roads through the district with the aim of eventually connecting every village to the main Arniko Highway. An agricultural road the construction of which began a few years ago and may resume in a few years' time reaches Patle Gau from the Arniko Highway via a *bastee* where Bahuns reside exclusively (Figure 26). Using this agri-road some Bahun farmers have already started mechanising their farms by using small hand-held tractors and bringing their farm produce in other tractors to markets. However, the agri-road still remains far from the Dalit *bastee*. The locals including Siromani Sapkota tell me that eventually this road will pass through the Dalit settlements, providing them with connections to markets, but for the time being the Dalits have to do with small walking trails (Figure 27).

**Figure 26 Agricultural road passing through Bahun settlements in larger Patle Gau (Photo by author)**



**Figure 27 A walking trail to a Dalit house (Photo by author)**



### **Land, a Supreme Asset in Patle Gau**

Since all the residents of Patle Gau are directly or indirectly involved in farming, land is an extremely important resource for all residents in Patle Gau. Some work their lands as farmers producing cereals and vegetables for consumption and sale; some depend on other's lands where they work as seasonal agricultural labourers; and still others run enterprises like vegetable collection centres or dairies which in turn depend on land as a primary resource. Location of residential land can also hugely influence an individual's economic welfare, social prestige and power (Regmi, 1976; S. R. Sharma, Upreti, & Müller-Böker, 2013; Wicker, 2010).

Compared to lands further away from the Highway, lands closer to the Highway vastly improve market connectivity and hence increase land value. More accessible lands are thus priced higher than less accessible ones, with a considerable price difference between them. For example, the lands by the side of Arniko Highway are priced at around NRs 400,000 per *ropani*<sup>91</sup> which is about 20 times more than the marginal lands much further away from the highway that are priced only at around NRs 20,000 per *ropani*. In the simple economic terms of the market prices of these lands, the social groups (mostly Bahuns and Tamangs) living by the side of the highway are richer than the Dalits who live in comparatively more remote locations. The commercial advantages provided by locations are also greatly exploited by Bahuns and Tamangs. They make the most out of such locations by converting parts of their residential houses into milk collection centres, vegetable collection centres, teashops, grocery-shops, pubs, and other spaces where commercial transactions can occur.

Besides benefitting economically from lands well-connected to the outside world through roads, people living close to roads, like Sironmani Sapkota and Jayjeev Dhakal—local elite Bahun men— also enjoy greater access to outsiders. Such proximity to roads allows them to be the first point of contact for outsiders. Outsiders not only come as customers wanting to buy food and drinks but can also come as *bikas* agents and practitioners, representatives of government and non-government “development agents” or even researchers such as me. For outsiders, people like Siromani and Jayjeev generally are the first and often the only “link” to the village. Almost by default adopting the position of “key local informants” in *bikase* jargon, they may in fact end up being the only “local” voices

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<sup>91</sup> A unit of land measurement used primarily in the hills and Kathmandu Valley. It is approximately 5,476 square feet or 509 square meters.

ever heard by state development agents. A position which they are often able to leverage to shape the image of the village and articulate its *bikase* needs to outside development agents, with the effect that they become the *bikase* brokers and translators in Patle Gau (Lewis & Mosse, 2006). Listening only to these voices, the *bikase* agents may never hear the voices of the Dalits who live in comparatively “remote” places within Patle Gau, and thus may plan *bikase* activities on the basis of profoundly distorted and self-interested representations of reality.

As a natural primary resource land can also influence access to another secondary human-made resource: education. A state-run public secondary school (*Pancheswor Madhyamik Bidhyalaya*)—managed mostly by men of Bahun origins— providing formal education up to level ten is the school which most children from Patle Gau attend. Although the Dalits themselves can walk to the school in about 30 minutes, the school is located in Pathak (Bahun) *tole*. This was explained to me because administratively the school administration (mostly led and managed by Bahun men – Figures 28 and 29) found it easy to buy about twenty *ropanies* of land from one single owner, a Pathak man – Bikram Hari Pathak. And because Bikram Hari Pathak donated a few *ropanies* of land to the school this made the decision to build the school there even easier. As Aahuti has said in a beautiful poem at the start of this chapter, the Dalits traditionally did not possess vast lands like this either to sell or donate.

**Figure 28 Panchewor School Management Committee**

SN	Name	Caste or ethnicity	Gender	Position
1	Siromani Sapkota	Bahun	Man	Chairperson
2	Tilak Bahadur Lama	Tamang/Janajati	Man	Member
3	Dhruba Regmi	Bahun	Man	Member
4	Basudev Pyakurel	Bahun	Man	Member
5	Basodha Ghimire	Bahun	Woman	Female Member

SN	Name	Caste or ethnicity	Gender	Position
6	Shiv Prasad Tripathee	Bahun	Man	Member
7	Harisharan Acharya	Bahun	Man	Member
8	Govind Prasad Timilsina	Bahun	Man	Member
9	Ramesh Raj Pathak	Bahun	Man	Teacher Representative
10	Kedar Nath Ghimire	Bahun	Man	Member-Secretary (School Principal)

**Figure 29 Panchewor School Parent-Teacher Association**

SN	Name	Caste or ethnicity	Gender	Position
1	Neel Prasad Parajuli	Bahun	Man	Chairperson
2	Prahlad Sapkota	Bahun	Man	Member
3	Astman Tamang	Tamang/Janajati	Man	Member
4	Kalpana Purkoti	Dalit	Woman	Member
5	Jamuna Adhikary	Bahun	Woman	Member
6	Badri Prasad Adhikary	Bahun	Man	Member
7	Hari Prasad Humagain	Bahun	Man	Member
8	Ratna Prasad Sapkota	Bahun	Man	Member
9	Puspa Prasad Pathak	Bahun	Man	Member
10	Nar Prasad Humagain	Bahun	Man	Member
11	Kedar Nath Ghimire	Bahun	Man	Member-Secretary (School Principal)

Land, an important resource for not only for economic reasons but also for social prestige is, however, held in disproportionate proportions by three social groups in Patle Gau because of differential access to social and political powers by the three social groups which I shall present in the coming pages.

### **Unequal Land-holding in Patle Gau**

My land related data is based on the survey results that I conducted in the third month of the field-work in 2014. The 51 households which I represented in Figure 9 in Chapter Four provided me with the data used in this chapter. I regularly revised and updated the data as my understanding of Patle Gau

deepened with the passing of time, and after I could validate some of the survey results with whatever access that I could arrange at the District Land Revenue Office, Kavre.

I want to stress here that before carrying out the survey I had taken a number of formal and informal interviews to comprehend the significance of land in terms of agricultural production. Most interlocutors agreed that due to the lack of year-round irrigation facilities a household with about six family members needed at least ten *ropanies* of land to produce enough food (mostly maize, wheat, and barley) for a year.<sup>92</sup> I therefore used the landholding size of ten *ropanies* as a cut-off point for self-sufficiency and have described families holding ten *ropanies* or more as “landed”. “Landed”, however, should not be confused with “landlord” (*zamindar*) to denote someone who owns very large tracts of land. In current times at least in principle one can only hold lands in accordance to the ceiling imposed by the government. Many individuals thought to hold lands in excess of this ceiling were targets of violence during the Maoists Revolution, and thus the term *zamindar* is today quite unpopular and little used. However, when a man like Bikram Hari Pathak—long dead now, who owned more than hundreds of *ropanis* prior to the 1964 land reform—is remembered in Patle Gau, he is usually remembered as a *zamindar* or *saujee* (rich business-like man).

Various government and non-government development agencies use their own classificatory schemes to categorise farmers based on their land-size holding. For instance, the Agriculture Development Strategy (ADS) (2015 – 2035) the latest agriculture development policy of the Government of Nepal suggests

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<sup>92</sup> No land in Nepal can actually be “owned” by any individual since all lands within the territory of state of Nepal belong solely to Government of Nepal. Yet under *Raikar* system, individuals are provided with “land deeds” through which land tenure is granted to them, enabling them to perform any market transaction after paying necessary taxes and fees.



four such categories: (i) landless or near-landless (holding less than 4.75 *ropanies*), (ii) subsistence farmer (holding more than 4.75 to less than 19 *ropanies*), (iii) small commercial farmer (holding more than 19 to less than 95 *ropanies*), and (iv) commercial farmer (holding 95 or more *ropanies*). Such a blanket national policy is however often blind to location specificities, and can yield distorted pictures. Most families who engage in commercial vegetable production, with lands more than say ten *ropanies* in Patle Gau, would be, according to the ADS document subsistence farmers. But such “subsistence farmers” resemble commercial farmers in the sense that they can successfully make profits from commercial vegetable production. Therefore, to avoid such misrepresentations, I rather use the local vernacular terms such as *jagga chaina* (no land), *tho-thorai* (little), *ali ali* (some) and *ramrai* (good) to categorise land-size holdings in Patle Gau into four different groups.

According to local perspectives the first category of families who virtually have no land (*jagga chaina*) are landless. This is not to suggest that the families belonging to this category have started to squat on others’ lands or have been evicted from their dwellings. Rather it means that whatever negligible landholding they may have around their slum-like houses is “economically useless” and thus these lands produce virtually no crop either for consumption or for sale. The second category of families are said to have *tho-thorai* (little) land if they possess *dui char* (two, four) *ropanies* which typically yield crops that last between three to four months. Those who have *ali ali* (some) land possess seven or eight *ropanies* with produce lasting for seven to eight months. Finally, any family holding ten or more *ropanies* is considered to hold *ramrai* (good) amount of land, and is effectively food self-sufficient (able to produce food from their own land for a year). Using this logic which relates land-size holding with yearly food production in this local context, I have classified the families in the village

into four categories: (a) *jagga chaina* (“no land” or landless), (b) *tho-thorai* (little holding or near landless: holding less than five *ropanis*), (c) *ali ali* (“some” or small holding: holding between five and less than ten *ropanis*), and (d) *ramrai* (“good” or landed: holding ten or more *ropanis*). The result of my survey using these categories is presented in Figure 30.

**Figure 30 Landholding distribution between the three social groups in Patle Gau**

Landholding (in <i>ropanis</i> )	No. of Dalit Family (% of the total)		Bahun Family (%)	Tamang Family (%)
	Meejar (%)	Pariyar (%)		
Landless (none to less than 1)	0 (0.00)	3 (33)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Near landless (1 to less than 5)	10 (71.4)	6 (67)	3 (21)	2 (15.38)
Small-holder (5 to less than 10)	3 (21.4)	0 (0)	2 (14)	3 (23.08)
Landed (10 or more)	1 (7.2)	0(0)	9 (65)	8 (61.54)
<b>Total</b>	<b>14 (100)</b>	<b>9 (100)</b>	<b>14 (100)</b>	<b>13 (100)</b>

The survey results show significant inequalities across ethnic and caste groups. While none of the Bahun and Tamang families are landless, three Dalit (Pariyaar) families are. Most Dalits do not possess enough land required to feed a family for a year, i.e. 10 *ropanis*. Most Dalit families, around 70%, are concentrated in the first two categories (landless and near landless. Most Bahun and Tamang families, about 80%, cluster in the latter two categories (small-holder or landed). Likewise, the average landholding per family for Brahmins, Dalits and Tamangs is 9.92, 1.59 and 10.60 *ropanis* respectively.<sup>93</sup> My results are not particularly surprising. They, in fact, reflect other the results of other reports presenting similar caste and ethnicity based patterns of disparities in landholding: “high castes” own more, “low castes” own less (UNDP-Nepal, 2004). I have, however, treated one Dalit person as an outlier since he has much more land than other Dalit families, as such I have not included him in my calculations.

<sup>93</sup> The calculation does not include values given by Tikaram who I have considered to be an outlier.

But even if his landholding of 29 *ropanies*, which many Bahuns and Tamangs already hold, is included in the calculation, the results that I have just discussed would not be changed significantly. This Dalit man is Tikaram Dhalkoti – whom I have already discussed when describing the residential pattern in Patle Gau. Tikaram, now 68, left his village a few kilometres away from Patle Gau when he was only eleven. Remembering parts of his life, Tikaram said:

I had nothing to lose at that time. We were very poor and so it did not matter where we went. So, a few of us got together and headed to India to try our luck. We came to a city which now I know as Calcutta and stayed there. For a couple of years, I worked as a domestic help to a Bengali family. Later, the *Sau* (house-owner) helped me get a labouring job at the Indian Railways. In time, I became a mechanic and worked for 20 years after which I took voluntary retirement and returned to Nepal. I liked this place here and had enough money from my job to buy 30 *ropanis* of land from the Acharya Bahuns in the early 1970s. The Acharyas sold and migrated to *besi* (flat lands).

Besides Tikaram, no **other** Dalit possesses ten or more *ropanies* of land. To understand this caste and ethnicity based disparity in landholding in Patle Gau, it is imperative to understand the local history. But since the local history itself is embedded in the larger national history of the Nepalese efforts at land reform, I now briefly narrate the latter.

### **History of Land and Land Reform in Nepal**

For a long time the Nepalese monarch was thought to be the only *Malik* (property owner) or *Bhupati* (lord of the land) of all the lands falling within the jurisdiction of the nation-state of Nepal (Forbes, 1999; Wily, et al., 2008). The Nepalese monarchs and the ruling elite had fully understood that total and strategic control over and manipulation of the tenure of land falling within the territory of the state was a major source of political power, particularly given that

almost all Nepalese relied on land for their well-being (Joshi & Mason, 2011; Regmi, 1976, 1978; Stiller & Yadav, 1979). Therefore, the state retained its ultimate authority over lands under *Raikar* system in which the individual landowners could utilise and “own” lands only after paying due taxes to the state (Regmi, 1976). Until the 1950s when the economy was minimally monetised, the ruling elite used land as a tool both to pay for the services of people serving the state and also to reward and please the members of the governing elite (*bhardars*), priests and village headmen, important allies in the consolidation power (Caplan, 1970, 1971; Regmi, 1963, 1972, 1976, 1978; Sever, 1993, 1996; Shakya, 2012) The state paid “white collar” government employees with *Jagir* land, manual workers such as carpenters, masons, and bricklayers with *Rakam* land, and royal concubines with *Bekh* land (Regmi, 1963, 1976). Similarly, it let religious or philanthropic institutions such as temples, monasteries and schools keep *Guthi* land. It allowed some of the former rulers of many kingdoms who had accepted Gorkha suzerainty to utilise lands under the *Rajya* land tenure system. Similarly, it permitted some ethnic groups such as the *Kirant* (Rai and Limbu) and Tamang who practiced some forms of communal land ownership to enjoy the lands under the *Kipat* land tenure system (Regmi, 1963, 1976). As described earlier the state elite also “gifted” tax-free lands to members of *bhardari*, local village headmen and priests. These lands were called *Birta* lands. This practice of “gifting” *Birta* lands was actually hundreds of years old, but it was greatly manipulated and intensified after the Shahs started ruling Nepal, and even more so during the Rana rule, which some argue eventually led to the extreme inequalities that characterise contemporary of land ownership (Pradhan, 1991; Regmi, 1976, 1978; Rose, 1983; Sever, 1996; Sugden & Gurung, 2012; UNDP-Nepal, 2004). For instance, Leo E. Rose reports that in 1971, 6% of farmers owned almost 44% of the land while 56% owned only about 12% (Rose, 1983). More recently the 2004 UNDP Nepal report suggests that while the top 5% owns nearly 37% of the

land around 29% of rural households do not own any farmland at all (UNDP-Nepal, 2004).

When the Rana regime was finally toppled, a new Government of Nepal was formed in 1951 that was led by the socialist Nepali Congress. The socialist government, therefore, desired to dismantle the prevailing land-tenure system that it felt had mostly benefited the elite. With the intent of eliminating the remnants of feudalistic Rana rule and to ameliorate the conditions of the peasants following principles of social justice, the state immediately pursued more modern state-centric land tenure system, abandoning some forms of tax-free tenure and allowing the direct collection of land revenues (Karan, et al., 1994; Regmi, 1976; Wily, et al., 2008). The state aspired to govern all lands, except the ones under the *Guthi* and *Raikar* systems, to facilitate systematic tax collection. Additionally, to provide some sort of justice to tenants, the Tenancy Rights Security Act 1951 stipulated that tenants could not be evicted from the lands they tilled at the whims of the landowners. It also intended to regulate the rents paid by tillers to landowners, forbidding any obligatory contributions of money or labour by the tillers.

Cognisant of the extent of these reforms, the government granted some time to all landholders holding lands under the *Birta*, *Jagir*, *Rajya*, *Rakam* and *Bekh* systems to convert their lands to the *Raikar* tenure system (Zaman, 1973). It was also determined to re-distribute lands held in excess of the land-ceilings imposed on respective tillers (Zaman, 1973). But as the state began to assemble relevant data, it soon realised that *Birta* lands posed the most difficulty for data management. First, these lands were just too numerous in number (Figure 31). Second, since *Birta* grants had been provided at the whims of the rulers, they had not been systematically recorded in any land offices. Third, since almost all government employees administering land reform programmes held some *Birta*

lands themselves, they along with other land-owning elites were reluctant to sincerely implement this land reform programmes. They did not want to be effectively alienated from their own most highly prized possession: their land (Stiller & Yadav, 1979).

**Figure 31 Principal forms of land tenure before 1950 [source (Zaman, 1973; table II)]**

<b>Form of tenure</b>	<b>Percentage of total area</b>
<i>Raikar</i> (state-owned, taxable)	50.0
<i>Birta</i> (private-owned, non-taxable)	36.3
<i>Guthi</i> (religious, philanthropic institutions-owned)	2.0
<i>Kipat</i> (community owned, non-taxable)	4.0
<i>Rakam, Jagir, Rajya</i> , (assignment of <i>Raikar</i> lands to government employees as salaries), etc.	7.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Fully aware of the contentions around this land reform programme and the powerful resistance to it King Mahendra dismissed the Nepali Congress government in December 1960. Claiming that previous governance systems and governments had failed to provide *bikas*, he proposed another attempt at land reform, not in the light of social justice but in the name of overall economic *bikas* through industrial growth by diverting inactive capital and human resources from land to other economic sectors in order to benefit everyone (Zaman, 1973). So as *Birta, Rajya, Jagir, Rakam/Bekh* and *Kipat* land tenures were abolished in 1959, 1961, 1952, 1963 and 1964 respectively, Mahendra proclaimed another Land Reform Act in 1964 which would legally register tenants, impose ceilings not only on both owned and tenanted land but also on rent which was fixed at a maximum of 50% of the main crop (Zaman, 1973 ).

According to Mahendra's plan, the Government of Nepal was to acquire excess lands after duly compensating the landowners, and to re-distribute these excess lands to tenants, landless and land-poor farmers in phased projects. His project had estimated that 600,000 hectares of land would be available for redistribution but unfortunately for the tenants, landless and the land-poor farmers by the end of the programme only 3% of this estimate had been made available for redistribution (Karan, et al., 1994). To make matters worse less than 1% was actually redistributed (Karan, et al., 1994). In the absence of authentic record keeping systems and with the help of corrupt government officials, big landowners were able to register their excess lands under the names of their children, relatives and even fake names (Karan, et al., 1994; Ludwig F Stiller & Yadav, 1979). As Pradyumna P. Karan and Hiroshi Ishii observe:

The ceilings under the land reforms of 1964 were fixed at arbitrarily high level, nearly ten to 12 times the average size of a family's cultivated land holding. Also, every son over the age of 16 and every unmarried daughter above the age of 35, even when living with parents as a single family, were counted as separate families. Many landlords transferred their land above the ceiling to other relatives to avoid the confiscation of surplus land, thus effectively defeating the purpose of land reform (Karan, et al., 1994, p. 72)

Thus, the land reform programmes aimed at dismantling the landowning elite and redistributing lands largely remained unsuccessful in Nepal. It is with this in mind that we can now fully comprehend the land ownership pattern in Patle Gau.

### **His Story of Land in Patle Gau: Legacies of *Birta* and *Kipat* and Dalit Marginalisation**

In Patle Gau, in recent years some lands have been registered under women's names, perhaps as a result of tax exemption of 25 percent on registration when land is owned by a woman, but men still overwhelmingly

register the lands in their own names.<sup>94</sup> Women are not totally deprived of accessing the lands they cultivate, and can benefit from the families' lands whether registered under their own names or their husbands'. However, when most land-related oral histories are told or written histories are read, only men are remembered. This is the reason for the title of this section ("His story" instead of "history" of land in Patle Gau).

Patle Gau is a patriarchal society. Daughters are married out of it and daughters-in-law are married into it. The surname of the father is passed on to the next generation. Men are expected to perform tasks outside of the house and women inside the house, including cooking food and washing clothes. Both men and women work in the fields. Except for tasks requiring muscle such as ploughing fields, most other agricultural activities such as planting, hoeing, weeding, and harvesting are done by women with occasional support from boys and girls. Women are expected to stay home and not move out of the home very much. I was amazed when a few Bahun women told me that they had never been to the Dalit *bastee* only a couple of hundreds of metres away. Whenever the need for farm labour arises, it is the Bahun men who walk to the Dalit *bastees* to seek their services. Bahun women told me, "*k kaam cha ra thyaha jana* (what is the need to go there?)." Yet because the Dalit women have to make their ends meet by labouring in the farms of the Bahuns and in brick kilns in Bhatapur, they are more mobile than their Bahun counterparts.

If oral histories are to be believed, then most of the land where Patle Gau now stands used to be either the *Birta* land of the Sapkotas or the *Kipat* land of the Tamangs. I was told that a certain Malla king had gifted land to Chudaamani Sapkota a couple of hundreds of years ago while the Tamangs held communal

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<sup>94</sup> Personal communication with Mr Sanjeev Dahal, VDC Secretary (Bela VDC).



*Kipat* land nearby for an equal or even longer period of time. Maintaining his forefathers' claim to *Birta* land, Siromani Sapkota one day showing me a piece of paper, declared:

Here, look at this Sapkota family genealogy. My brother has the original but this is a photocopy. I shall show you the original some other time. You see here at the top? This is Chudaamani Sapkota, our great great grandfather. Hundreds of years ago, a Malla king gifted him a piece of land extending from ... [mentions four landmarks in four directions] ... as *Birta* for his services in the royal kitchen as a cook.

Other members of the Bahun community also support this claim and state that until a few decades ago whenever they heard the news of death of a Sapkota they used to hold a minute of silence and observe bodily non-movement in honour of the dead. This practice started to fade away after 1990 and is now completely absent.

The Tamangs have their own history. While they do not directly reject the claims of *Birta* by the Sapkotas, they also claim that the Tamang are the first settlers in Patle Gau. Navin Lama, a man in his mid-40s and a returnee from Malaysia now helping his wife run a *cheeyapasal* (teashop) does not think that any Tamang maintains a written family genealogy as the Sapkotas do. Nonetheless he still had this to say to me:

Bahuns may have their own stories. But Patle Gau is our *Kipat* too. Other Tamangs may be here for only two or three generations but we are *Dhong* Tamang. We are probably now the tenth generation living here. Elders tell me before that we may have migrated from Sindhu-palchowck.<sup>95</sup> But when we did come here, there was only forests which we cleared to farm and settle. We did not take this land from anyone else. It is our *Kipat*.

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<sup>95</sup> Sindhu-palchowck is an adjoining district northeast of Kavre.

In support of the Tamangs' claim to *Kipat* land, some elderly Bahun men also acknowledged that they had heard stories of Tamang *Kipat* landholding in Patle Gau. My intention here is not to scrutinise these claims and establish their truth. Rather I want to stress that while Bahuns and Tamangs have ownership claim over the lands in Patle Gau, the Dalits do not have any grand narrative around which to stake a claim, despite the fact that everyone agrees that they most likely have been living in the same lands possibly for the same amount of time. In the history of land-ownership in Nepal, the kings and other state elite neither presented land-gifts to Dalits, nor were Dalits able to make collective claims to communal land ownership such as *Kipat*. Therefore, when I inquired about land ownership amongst some elderly Dalits in Patle Gau, they typically had this to say to me:

We can remember that even our grandparents lived here but we don't know where we came from originally. They never told us. We never asked. As children, we just followed our fathers wherever they went carrying our sewing machines to serve the *bistas* (clients).

As Purna Nepali, a Dalit professional working with an international non-government organisation and whose PhD thesis explores landlessness amongst Dalits in the Far Western Region of Nepal, said to me:

If you read the Nepalese history carefully you will see that the Dalits have always been dissociated from productive resources such as land. They were always made to be economically dependent on the "high-castes." They were made to serve them with agricultural and non-agricultural labour, leather-making, tailoring and other artisan services for economic patronage but never allowed to directly own productive resources.

It is against this background that we can appreciate how Bahuns and Tamangs in Patle Gau use the legacies of *Birta* and *Kipat* to make claims to indigeneity and land-ownership in the village, while Dalits lack a legacy of such claims.

Differences in claims to indigeneity and first land-holdership, combined with the land reform programmes of the 1960s, are the origins of differentiated land ownership patterns in Patle Gau.

Along with *bikase mal*, *bikas* entered Patle Gau when a few representatives of the Government of Nepal arrived in early 1960s and informed villagers that the government wanted to keep land records and register their lands with the government of Nepal. Through these records, the land-owners would get proper land-deeds with their names, exact location and sizes of the lands they owned that would allow them to sell, rent, lease, and even transfer ownership through inheritance after paying due taxes to the state. At this time, mainly three clans of Bahun – Acharya, Pathak and Sapkota<sup>96</sup> – along with the Dalits and Tamangs were already living in and around Patle Gau. Consequently, the *tatha batha* (clever) amongst them were quick to establish formal relations with the visiting government official who was also typically from the Bahun-Chhetri group. To gain legal ownership of land all Bahun groups competed with each other following the *Chanakya Neeti* (Chanakya policy)<sup>97</sup> of *saam, daam, danda, bhed* (appease, bribe, coerce, divide) to basically get ahead of each other to “grab” and register as much as land as possible under their names. Therefore, while the Acharyas, Pathaks and Sapkotas possessed literacy in Sanskrit required to practice priestly works, the Pathaks, some of whom had been formally educated in schools in Kathmandu, possessed the advantage in terms of cultural capital

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<sup>96</sup> While Acharyas have now already migrated elsewhere, the in-migrants like Dhakal, Dahal and Timilsina are relatively newcomers in Patle Gau and had bought lands from Acharyas, Sapkotas, and Pathaks.

<sup>97</sup> Chanakya, also called as Kautilya and Vishnugupta, is believed to be an ancient Indian political figure and the author of the *Arthashastra* (science of wealth and governance), an early Indian treatise on statecraft.

(Bourdieu, 2011): the ability to read and write in Nepali. Elderly Bhoj Raj Sapkota remembers this time of competition with the Pathaks for gaining land deeds:

Educated in formal schools in Kathmandu, some of the sons of the Pathaks knew how to read Nepali and fill up forms with Nepali writing and numbers. We knew Sanskrit. But education in Nepali was much better for these administrative works.

Bhoj's nephew Siromani Sapkota adds:

Pathaks are cunning too. You know *Kumai ko ghumai* (cunning of Kumai). They registered the lands under each family member's name. They could have even created false names for this purpose. Anything is possible, you know.

Allegation of corruption and unethical practices like those that Siromani suggests, is not entirely far-fetched as many have commented on the rampant practices of bribery and corruption<sup>98</sup> in those times (Caplan, 1971; Karan, et al., 1994; Kondos, 1987a; Zaman, 1973). Contrary to the assertions made by the Sapkotas, however, Sudarshan Pathak, the 51-year-old youngest son of Bikram Hari Pathak who was supposed to have been involved in the immense land grabbing effort at the time, told me later that these lands originally belonged to the Sapkotas and the Pathaks bought them from them. Establishing the truth of such narratives is not my aim but I only want to tease them out to trace probably origins of land distribution in Patle Gau.

Close by to the lands of the Sapkotas, Pathaks and Acharyas, the Tamangs were also benefitting from their *Kipat* claim over land. In addition to this they also benefit from the added social capital (Bourdieu, 2011) of their kinship relationship *natabad kripabad* with Sarkee Man Tamang who happened to be the

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<sup>98</sup> Of course, each group blames the other group to have been involved in acts of bribery with state representatives.

*Gau Pradhan Pancha* (Chief Village *Pancha* similar to the contemporary post of the Chair of the Village Development Committee) at the time (Figure 24). According to Alex Kondos, *natabad – crypabad* literally translates to familism-favouritism to mean “favouring relatives and friends” (Kondos, 1987b, p. 16).

However, as I have already clarified before, it was the Dalits who had no related kin *afno manche* (one’s own people) (Bista, 1991, p. 97 - 98) in any powerful political and administrative positions either at the village level or district level such that they could not profit from *natabad-crypabad*. Nor did they have the leverage of political associations, thus they could not equally participate in the land-grabs. They had been labouring on the lands of Bahuns under their economic patronage and had thus effectively been excluded from owning their own productive resources (Aahuti, 2010). As poor uneducated Dalits labouring the lands of Bahuns, they had neither claims of *Birta* or *Kipat*, they lacked the education or cunningness of Pathaks, nor could they establish ties with visiting government officials to make them their *afno manche*. Further, unlike the Tamangs they were not related to the Village Chief of the time Sarkee Man Tamang to utilise *natabad-crypabad* strategically.

The failed national land reform programme of 1964 was not able to collect much land in excess of the land-ceiling and hence the re-distribution of lands to the landless or near-landless rarely occurred. This statement holds true for Patle Gau. Yet the failures of land reform programmes have not prevented Nepalese politicians and state managers from continuing to promise land reform programmes. This is particularly true after the re-attainment of parliamentary democracy in 1990. However, land reform programmes are so difficult to implement that no government has managed to fully implement them. The recommendations put forward by the 1994 High Level Land Reform Commission (Badal Commission Report) never got implemented. To address the issue of

equitable access to land, the 1994 report had mainly proposed various ceilings to land ownership in various geographical areas. Similarly, another land reform programme with a revolutionary tag got announced in 2001 and was quickly shelved. However, the governments of Nepal at least on paper are insistent upon implementing populist land reform programmes. Not dejected by the failure to implement the recommendation of the Badal Commission, one government formed the High Level Commission for Scientific Land Reform in 2010 and another formed the High Level Land Reform Commission in 2011. But no recommendations from either of these commissions were implemented.

Even though none of these recommendations have actually been effectively implemented, the Commission for Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA), a constitutional body under the Government of Nepal, only recently issued directives to the Ministry of Land Reform and Management to seize land owned by individuals who have breached the land ceiling (Report, 2016). Citing that the Nepal Land Reform Act 1964 had imposed land ceilings of 10 *bighas*, 25 *ropanis* in Terai and Kathmandu Valley respectively and 70 *ropanis* elsewhere in the hills, the CIAA reported that a total of 5,223 *bighas* in Tarai and 6,265 *ropanis* in the hills were possessed illegally requiring seizure by the government. But like past efforts almost everyone is sceptical as to whether the government can or will follow this directive. In fact Section 5 of Article 40 on the Rights of Dalits under part 3 of the Fundamental Rights and Duties of the Constitution of Nepal 2015 declares: "The State shall have to make legal provision to provide land to landless Dalits for one time" (GON, 2015a). However, until the recommendations by the CIAA and the provision of the new Constitution get fully enacted, the landless and near-landless in Patle Gau have to adopt livelihood styles to cope with this situation. The possession of land

critically affects how the residents in Patle Gau organise their labour and manage their social relations.

### **Organisation of Labour-Relations in Patle Gau**

Organisation of labour revolves around landownership in Patle Gau. As a general rule the landed farm their own lands, and do not labour on other's land. The landless and the near landless labour on landed people's farms. Since I have already established the relationship between landownership and caste and ethnicity, my above argument translates to stating that Bahuns and Tamangs cultivate their own lands while Dalits labour in other's fields as hired labourers (Figure 32).

One late morning I met Kalpana Purkoti a Dalit woman in her early thirties for a brief conversation as arranged with her a couple of days before. When we met she politely asked me if I could see her maybe later in the evening or the next day in the early morning, as she had just been called to work in a farm of a local Bahun. She said:

I am sorry that I cannot talk to you now. I thought I would be free but I did not know this morning. I was sitting in the tea-shop near market and a Bahun woman asked if I was free today to work in their fields. I said I was. What to do? This is how we get labouring opportunities to make some money.

A couple of months later when I asked a Tamang man why the Tamangs in Patle Gau did not go to the nearby districts to work in brick kilns, he explained:

Working in these brick kilns is very hard. I don't think I could do it. And in any case, if we go there then who is going to take care of our farms and livestock?

Yam Kumari Dhakal, a Bahun widow who earns her living by selling vegetables, buffalo milk and goats, also implied the importance of tending her farm when I asked if she had ever been to the Meejar or Pariyar settlements:

Never. Where is the need? Everyone has to do one's own business. If I have some clothes to sew, then my sons take them to Damais. I don't go. My time is usually taken up in cultivating vegetables and looking after the livestock.

When asked if she labours in others' farms, she responded:

No. Not in others' farms for money. But we rotate our labour among our own Dhakal clan. We are about ten Dhakal families here and so labour rotation amongst us is usually enough to tend the farms. We call it *perma*. You must know about it. But in any case, when need be, we usually call the Meejars or Damais for farm labour.

Like any other informal voluntary reciprocal exchange of labour elsewhere in the world (Geertz, 1962), *perma* is an informal voluntary kin-based reciprocal and co-operative exchange of labour. Especially during labour intensive periods such as planting, weeding, and harvesting, family members of each clan help other in turn, day-by-day to jointly work each family's farm. No money is exchanged but the "host" family provides the other family members with food. In Patle Gau, each clan (sub-caste) of Bahun such as Dhakal, Timilsina, Dahal and Sapkota helps out respective clan members through *perma*. Generally practiced within the families of each sub-caste, *perma* between Bahun clans may also occur. However, none of the Bahuns in Patle Gau labour in Tamangs' or Dalits' farms either for free or for money.

Tamangs also exchange their labour in a similar fashion but Dalits do not, simply because of their limited land holding which can be easily attended to by their family members. Therefore, although virtually all of the families in Patle Gau, irrespective of caste and ethnicity, do farming of one kind or the other and



may be agricultural labourers themselves on their own farms, it is only the Dalits who are “professional” agricultural labourers working in others’ farms for money. The labouring usually starts at noon with a break at about 3 pm. During the break of about 20 minutes, the farm owner provides the labourer with food (*khaja*) generally composed of *chiura* (beaten rice) and vegetable. The work is finished generally by 6 pm. But as I stressed earlier, agricultural labouring is not an all-year round occupation on which the Dalits can rely as their only livelihood option. Usually the Bahuns and Tamangs can provide sufficient labour themselves or from within their clans to work their farms and Dalits are called in only at times when such self-generated labour does not suffice. Landlessness and near-landlessness is also the main reason why the Dalits do not cultivate vegetables for commercial purposes while some of the Bahuns and Tamangs do so profitably.

**Figure 32 Dalits boys and women labour in Bahun lands along with Bahun women  
(Photo by author)**



### **Coping with Landlessness**

It is interesting to note that some of the Bahuns who do not hold as much land as other Bahuns also rely on their relatives who have more land to produce crops. Indra Acharya, a local “dairy master” and a successful businessman, has

an expanding dairy as well as other businesses that fully engage him and his family members. They do not have time to attend to the more than 30 *ropanies* of land they own. But rather than let his lands become “unproductive”, he contracts out his land to his Bahun kin relations and to some Dalits. Talking of his lands he said:

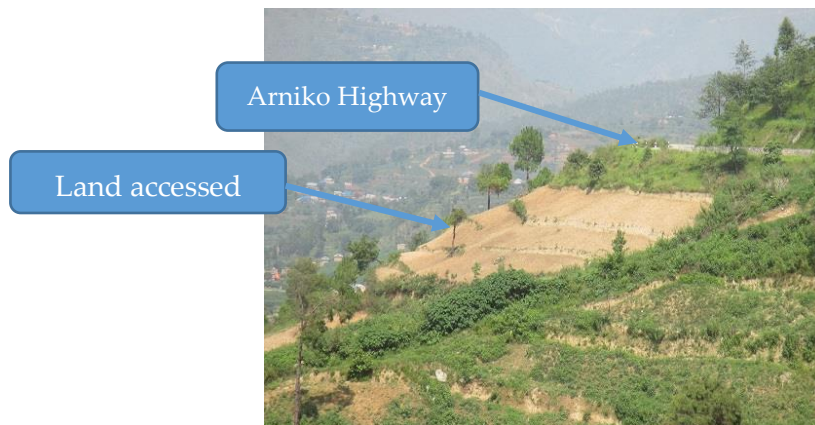
I use something like two or three *ropanies* of land to raise vegetables for our own consumption. The rest I have contracted to four Dalit families. I charge each of them about NRs 6,000 a year flat. I think each of them has about four *ropanies* ... oh ... I also have a couple of *nata-gota* (relatives, cousins) to whom I have let out 3 or 4 *ropanis* also. But I don't have a fixed rate for them. They give me whatever money they can, whenever they want. I just let them.

The landless and near landless Dalits do not have such landed kin relations (*nata-gota*) or *afno manche* (one's own) to benefit from *natabad-kripabad* (familism-favouritism) for access to land. The only Dalit who owns a considerable amount of land is Tikaram Dhalkoti. But Tikaram does not have any entrepreneurial business or a salaried job and hence while his 29 *ropanies* of land is tended by his two wives and their children, it means that he virtually has none left to share with other Dalits as Indra Acharya can.

But people have to survive. People have to eat. One of the ways that the landless and near landless Dalits access land is to find some un-tended public lands (Figure 33). About six or seven landless and near-landless Dalit families in Patle Gau have used marginal public lands by the side of the Arniko highway about three kilometres east of their homes over the last four years to grow maize, a crop requiring the least managerial attention. They sow the maize seeds there, let it grow, weed when time permits and harvest when ready. But the precariousness of the land was explained to me by Koplia Pariyar, a Dalit woman:

We just “discovered” that land. It had normally been fallow for some time, so we decided to grow maize there. Since it is not any one’s personal land but public land no one has disagreed so far. But the locals want it converted to community forestry. For the time being, six families here grow maize there. We at least have some to eat for a couple of months from that production. After the land is taken by a community forest, we shall give up using it. Let us see ...

**Figure 33 Marginal public lands precariously accessed by the Dalits  
(Photo by author)**



No one can exactly estimate when the locals will register these public lands as a community forest. But when that does happen, some of the Dalits in Patle Gau are sure to lose their access to it and the associated maize produce, that will increase their vulnerability to food insecurity.

I talked about this and related issues with Ganesh Bhatta, a senior government officer at the Ministry of Land Reform and Management. He had this to say to me:

Our government will not be able to distribute land that produces enough for each family. It is not possible. They might, at the most, provide one or two *ropanies* of land to the landless or add that much to the lands of the near landless. But that will never be sufficient to feed one family for a year. Even if you were to double agricultural and land productivity, it is not enough to feed one family for a year. So instead of providing lands to each family for self-sufficiency, we

need to move away from land-based economy to other bases for the economy.

Ganesh Bhatta is only repeating the language of the mainstream discourse of Agriculture Development Strategy (ADS) (2015 – 2035)<sup>99</sup> when he asserts:

The ADS promotes a decentralised approach to science and technology and empowers communities to reorient the extension, research, and education system to meet their needs. The services covering the small commercial farmer will be generally inappropriate to the subsistence farmer, and in the context of institutions targeted to the small commercial farmer (e.g. value chains) the subsistence farmer *will be left out* except for those few who can respond to the approaches suitable for the small commercial farmer ... The landless rural households will be benefiting from the ADS indirectly, ... the employment opportunities expanded in the rural non-farm sector, and the growth of agriculture-based enterprises ... The ADS will accelerate the process of commercialisation, while improving both the income of the small commercial farmers and the livelihoods of the subsistence farmers, and generating growth and employment in the non-farm sector to absorb the increasing number of landless/marginally landless (GON, 2014, pp.7-8 - my emphasis)

The ADS acknowledges that transforming Nepalese agriculture from its not so commercial status to a fully commercialised form requires that the state focus only on small commercial farmers, i.e. those who have land holdings of more than 19 *ropanies* of land. This means the landless and subsistence farmers like most Dalits in Patle Gau will be excluded from participating in agricultural value chains, from production through to final consumption. Instead, these landless and near-landless subsistence farmers can only benefit from employment opportunities in the rural non-farm sector and agriculture-based enterprises (such as dairy, poultry, etc.). Such a view means that landless and near landless

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<sup>99</sup> The ADS is the main policy document of the government of Nepal which proposes to transform the current subsistence agricultural sector into a fully viable commercial one using mostly market based approaches.

subsistence farmers, who are the poorest and most vulnerable to food insecurity happen to be precisely the ones who will not benefit from the transformation of the Nepalese agricultural sector.

Amartya Sen argued that the individual or family who cannot produce their own food from adequate land will have to receive food gifts from others, work for food or be able to buy food (Sen, 1981). But in Patle Gau, the state and non-state actors such as the World Food Programme (WFP) do not gift food in subsidised forms as they do in more remote districts. Similarly, since the Dalits do not labour in the houses and farms of Bahuns for food as they did in the past, they necessarily do not “work for food.” They presently access marginal public lands to supplement their food production. But in the present-day capitalist market-led economy of Nepal, the Dalits can only sell their labour for money to buy food. In the next chapters I will explore how they do this.

## **Conclusion**

In the previous chapter I concentrated on the cultural politics of caste-based discriminatory practices, which despite the national discourse of equality, continue to occur in everyday practices. Caste-based distinctions, privileges and discrimination may have ceased to be overtly practiced but they continue to be practiced more covertly and more subtly. In this chapter, I show how land reform itself is tainted with caste-based privileges which advantages some and disadvantages others. I traced this unequal sharing of land not only to the historical legacies of *Birta*, *Kipat*, but also to the configurations of social capital in the forms of *afno-manche* and *natabad-kripabad*.

I argued that access to land in an agrarian economy like that of Patle Gau has tremendous impact on how labour is organised. Lack of access to land might force an individual or even a whole family to labour on others’ farms, while

access to land can open up avenues for economic opportunities such as commercial farming or investing in rural enterprises. I argued that the social capital of *natabad-kripabad* and *afno-manche* continues to remain relevant as near landless Bahuns and Tamangs can rely on their landed *afno-manche* to access lands. Dalits, however who do not enjoy the same “kinship” advantages can precariously access only “marginal” public lands to temporarily improve their food security. Even a “landed” Dalit such as Tikaram Dhalkoti has only enough lands only for his family and cannot provide any of it to his own Dalit *afno-manche*.

Market-led neo-liberal policies postulate that possession of land is not absolutely necessary for sustaining livelihoods or to escape poverty. If the landless and near landless can profitably engage in other sectors of the economy, then the targets of food security and poverty alleviation are achieved. For this the poor may only have to achieve access to any form of productive resource, not necessarily land. They may engage in agricultural enterprises run by the landed. The productive resource could be money, or finance to start a rural enterprise. In the next chapter, I investigate these possibilities.

## Chapter 6

### *Bikas, Saujee and Financial Institutions*

One of the English words commonly used by Nepalese people when speaking Nepali language is the English word “bore” (boredom). In the process of becoming part of the Nepali language the word “bore” has however taken on a life of its own. In addition to signifying what it generally means in English, i.e. “uninteresting”; “bore” in Nepali carries many meanings depending on the context. Bore is never used just to signify “boredom.” “Bore” is associated with almost any negative feeling such as disgust, disappointment, sadness, distress, and so on. So, when a Nepalese fails an exam or meets with an accident, she usually exclaims, “*Kya bore bhayo!*” (It was such a bore!). Something similar but not quite as dramatic can be said about the term *Saujee*.

Although the dictionary defines *Saujee* as “an honorific word used for shopkeepers; merchants, money-lenders, pawnbrokers or creditors” (Lohani & Adhikary, 2011, p. 862), a closer analysis shows that it means far more than that. *Saujee* is normally used to refer to a male property holder. Its corresponding term for a woman is *Saunee*. For a tenant, the landlord is either a *Saujee* or a *Saunee*. And since *Saujee/Saunee* also means a shopkeeper, any customer buying an item from a shopkeeper calls the shopkeeper either *Saujee* or *Saunee*. Reflecting the unequal social and power-relations in which the Madheshis (people from Madhesh) are projected as “less Nepali” and “inferior” to Pahade (hill peoples) (Gellner, 2016) and in a classic case of “reverse of the norm” a Masheshi street vendor selling vegetables and fruits actually calls a Pahade customer a *Saujee* or a *Saunee*. Another general meaning that *Saujee* often takes is a rich person, generally a business person, who may at times lend money to others. As Nepal is generally a patriarchal society, rich people are generally men. Therefore, *Sajuee* is more often heard and seen than *Saunee*. Just like the term pundit (expert,

academic) may sometimes be sarcastically used for “fake pundits” or “pundits getting it wrong”, *Saujees* can also be projected at times as miserly, cunning, heart-less and selfish. Usually, however, this term is not an insult. Rather it is a status, which not all can achieve in their lives. In the past *Saujee* was a status that only Bahuns enjoyed. Presently Tamangs and even co-operatives have attained this status, but Dalits have never attained it, despite some individuals gaining sufficiently large material wealth to deserve it.

As discussed above since *Saujee* is part of the language of crediting, financing and money-lending, in this chapter I closely scrutinise the mechanisms, processes, effects, impacts and directions of another widespread practice of *bikas*, the provision of rural finances through savings, credit co-operatives and micro-finance groups in Patle Gau. My central argument in this Chapter is that the mobilisation of the social economy (Carpi & Juan, 1997) of groups, co-operatives and NGOs have provided some financial assistance to poor Dalits for daily sustenance, yet this has not been transformative (contrary to the claims by the state). It has not rescued these poor Dalits families from being perpetually indebted to the local Bahun *Saujees*, occasionally Tamang *Saujees* and now even to co-op *Saujees*. To provide evidence for my argument I engage with the language of *Saujee* - how it is used and understood, who can embody it and how, and who cannot.

Social economy, labelled the third sector of the economy in addition to the public sector and the capitalist (private) sector, is that arena of the economy in which profit is not the primary motivation and the where the state does not have any direct undertaking (Carpi & Juan, 1997; Starr, 2006). Social economy includes cooperatives, mutual societies, non-profit organisations, non-governmental organisations, voluntary associations which provide productive goods and



services; political parties, pressure groups, lobby groups and unions are excluded since their aims are not primarily for productive purposes (Carpi & Juan, 1997).

Using the concept of social economy as defined above, the national planning elite of Nepal have sought to develop Nepal through all three sectors of the economy – state, private and co-operative/non-government sector. The Nepalese state appreciates co-operatives and NGOs as powerful agents of *bikas* capable of transforming rural areas, including places like Patle Gau from areas of slow economic growth to being more progressive. The Eighth Plan (1992-97) of the Government of Nepal, thus, forcefully emphasises the significant role of the third sector in promoting *bikas*:

It is evident that the private and non-government organisations are more effective in carrying out development programmes from the view point of flexibility, cost-effectiveness and initiative ... The government will formulate appropriate rules and regulations and create a conducive environment in order to increase the participation of private, community and non-government organisations (GON, 1992, p. 390).

In the past, cooperatives could not develop in accordance with cooperative principles because they were dependent on government direction and control. Therefore, co-operatives will be promoted by reorganising them on democratic management principles. Cooperatives will play an important role in the delivery of technical services, production inputs, credit and market services in their areas through the mobilisation of the savings scattered in the rural sector. They will thus assist in achieving stability in economic activities (GON, 1992, p. 161).

Since 2006, the state has provided an extra impetus to the co-operative sector as the third pillar of economy for *bikas*:

As envisioned by the Interim Constitution, the cooperative sector has been recognised as one of the three pillars of development [*bikas*] along with the public and private sectors (GON, 2007, p. 165)

In the light of this neo-liberal stance in which the state is seen to play only the minimal role of creating and maintaining conducive environments, the private sector, non-government organisations and co-operatives are encouraged to “freely” conduct development activities. Given that the state expects community-based organisations and co-operatives to mobilise credit services in the rural sector, it is perhaps unsurprising that there have been massive increases in the number of co-operatives and NGOs throughout Nepal, Patle Gau being no exception. In the process, they have become the new *Saujees*.

### **Old and New *Saujees* in Patle Gau**

*Kinara pasal* (shops), *cheeyapasal* (teashops), *bhattees* (pubs) and dairies inhabit the small market of Patle Gau. But in all of Patle Gau, savings and credit co-operatives are no less widespread. They are, for some like Nima Tamang (an Executive Member of a local women’s savings and credit co-operative), a symbol of *bikas*:

Because we now have different savings and credit co-operatives and groups, people can now access finances relatively easily and at cheaper rates than in the past. The women actually have their own co-operative exclusively serving them with financing facilities. We must admit that some *bikas* has already happened in Patle Gau.

For someone in a privileged position like Nima Tamang, co-operatives and their money-lending services signify *bikas* but for others, not so privileged, they may not. I will therefore begin by discussing how *Saujees* operated and operate in Patle Gau. Siromani Sapkota, the Chair of a savings and credit co-operative, already calls the savings and credit co-ops new *Saujees* since for him they provide new ways of financing the enterprises aimed at turning Patle Gau into a “*bikashit*” village. Before my research I thought that only humans: rich patrons, could be *Saujees*. I never thought that non-humans could be *Saujees*. But Siromani asserted

that they could. I wanted to know how that was possible from Siromani, a Bahun man who never passed level ten but reads the Gita<sup>100</sup> every morning and asks his son to do so whenever his is home and not in Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu where he is pursuing a Masters of Arts in Sociology. Siromani exclaimed:

Why can't they be *Saujees*? People come to these co-operatives for loans. Some use loans to expand business. Some for foreign employment. Some just to finance social needs. Usually if they have made some matching savings or can deposit some collateral, they do not return empty-handed from these co-ops. People used to go to local money lenders, the *Saujees*, just for that in the past. So, these co-operatives have replaced the old *Saujees* to be new *Saujees*, no?

For Siromani, co-ops are a good thing. They perform the important role of providing financial services to the needy, like rich *Saujees* did in the past but in a more equal and less exploitative relationship. Where in the past the relationship was between a rich (literate) *Saujee* and a poorer (illiterate) debtor, in co-ops it is between a formal "democratic" institution and a debtor. As I will demonstrate later Siromani also likes these new money-lending co-op *Saujees* because they have also helped him become a *Saujee*, not necessarily a businessman or a money-lender but a rich man himself.

In the period, just after the Nepalese economy became massively monetised in the 1950s and 1960s, there was only one *Saujee* (rich, landed, money-lender) in Patle Gau. There were others in other villages to whom Patle Gau residents would go to for loans but the only one in Patle Gau was Shyam Hari Pathak, a Kumai Bahun. Shyam was one of the products of Nepal's first experiments with *bikas* and modernisation in the 1950s. At this time of rapid monetisation, a vast majority of the villagers needed money for financial

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<sup>100</sup> A part of an ancient Hindu text called Mahabharat.

transactions while only a few rich villages had money to spare (Demetriades & Luintel, 1996; Y. Raj, 2010). Before that commodities and labour were exchanged to fuel the economy (Y. Raj, 2010). The state even used to pay its employees and loyalists in land-grants (*Jageer, Birta*, etc.) (Chapter Five) and citizens paid tax to the state not in cash but in grains.

In a fascinating life memoir of Krishnabhakta Caguthi (1928-2011), a Bhaktapur peasant leader, Yogesh Raj in “History as Mindscapes: A Memory of Peasants’ Movement of Nepal” recalls Caguthi’s memories of the 1950s/60s:

Money was still considered the latest innovation in those days. It was quite scarce. In our lives at least. We would barter meat with rice grains. We used to pay paddy to the land revenue office as well. Money rose to its prominence only after [King] Tribhuvan declared monetary salaries to the government ... we did not used to pay wages for labour. We did not receive that either. We used to pay labour by labour, especially among ourselves, in activities such as mining the clay soil, tilling the land, or carpentering and bricklaying works (Y. Raj, 2010, pp. 51-52).<sup>101</sup>

Caguthi’s memory coincides with the memories of some of the elder respondents (more than 80 years of age) in my field site who also remember paying taxes to the government with paddy and only later with coins. This was during the 1950s and 1960s when Nirman Tamang, aged 83, of Patle Gau used to receive *suka* (25 cents) or *mohar* (50 cents) for two days’ labour. As the state monetised, the economy grew both extensively and rapidly, it even allowed the Indian currency to circulate widely since the “underdeveloped” Nepalese currency was short in supply. But the Nepalese people needed money to pay for

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<sup>101</sup> Tribhuvan had returned to Nepal from a year-long refuge in India to become an all-powerful monarch on 15 February 1951 until which time the government of Nepal had been assigning parcels of land to its employees instead of cash as a form of payment. This practice was named *Jageer* and was terminated the same year.

commodities such as chemical fertilisers and other commodities imported from India and China that started flooding the Nepalese market on an unprecedented scale (Demetriades & Luintel, 1996). As the demands for money shot up and cash was in short supply, wealthy landed people like Shyam Hari Pathak emerged as powerful and exploitative local money lenders. Shyam Hari Pathak had been able to acquire large tracts of land using the strategies of *saam*, *daam*, *danda*, *bhed* (appease, bribe, coerce, divide) during the implementation of the first land reform programme to consolidate his position as *thulo manche* (big man) and *Saujee* (Chapter Five).

In those days Shyam Hari Pathak in addition to having much land always had some money to spare. He used to charge interest rates as high as 40% per annum with a deduction of 10% at the very first point of transaction through a system called *Dus Rupe Theki* (roughly translated as “deduction of 10 per each 100”). This meant that he provided only NRs 90 for a loan of NRs 100 although he charged an interest of 40% on the full amount (NRs 100) and would ask for the whole NRs 100 to be paid back. Since there were not many local money-lenders around Patle Gau, Shyam Hari Pathak virtually monopolised the credit market. Shyam’s children from his four wives were sent for formal education in Kathmandu and acquired the necessary cultural capital to migrate to cities like Kathmandu. Some of his descendants have even settled in foreign countries like the US. As a result after Shyam’s death none of his descendants continued his role as money-lender. The few who stayed behind in Patle Gau were happy with their *jageers* (salaried jobs) or with the sales of the agricultural produce from their plentiful land. As such the Pathaks are no longer the local money-lenders.

Despite the fact that state-sponsored media<sup>102</sup> and folktales project local money lenders as exploitative scoundrels (perhaps like Shyam Hari Pathak) who cheat simple-minded illiterate folks by charging exorbitant interest rates or blatantly lying about the credit amount, the institution of local money lending persists: only the faces and personalities have changed. The Pathaks are no more the money-lending *Saujees*. Instead, a few men engaged in commercial businesses are the new *Saujees*. The Pathaks' legacy of money-lending *Saujee* has been taken over by Indra Acharya and Laxman Timilsina, two Bahun businessmen, and Chandra Bahadur Tamang, a *janajati* businessman. Residing close to other residents in Patle Gau, these *Saujees* are easily accessible for urgent matters. They typically provide small to medium sized loans not exceeding NRs 25,000 with no need for collateral. They usually do not even charge interest on such loans. However, for larger sums they require collateral with land usually functioning as that collateral. On such loans, they charge interest ranging between 15% and 20%.

The *Saujees* possess large parcels of land, have extra cash and also operate *kirana* shops where the Patle Gau residents buy essential household goods such as oil, salt, sugar, soaps, toothpaste and the like. Additionally Indra Acharya and Chandra Bahadur Tamang run dairies to which the cow or buffalo keepers in Patle Gau can sell their milk, while Laxman Timilsina owns a vegetable collection centre for those who may want to sell their surplus vegetables.<sup>103</sup> Having a combination of money, land, shops, dairies and vegetable collection centres

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<sup>102</sup> In a campaign to "educate" the rural masses to send girl children to schools, the Ministry of Education with support by UNICEF used to air an advert through televisions wherein a "literate girl" detects an old money-lending man deliberately inserting extra zeroes after the loaned amount in his transaction-register. The girl then makes her "illiterate" father aware of the money-lender's misdeed thus saving the family from being a victim to an unethical act.

<sup>103</sup> The collected milk and vegetables are in turn sold to markets at Dhulikhel, a town centre about 20 kms west or even to Kathmandu, 50 kms away.

enables the *Saujees* to develop and maintain multiple economic ties with debtors who have the option to pay back the loan using various means: cash, labour or commodities, as explained by Laxmi Purkoti, a middle-aged Dalit woman:

We always go to Indra Acharya whenever extra cash is required, especially for urgent matters. A few months ago, I fell sick and had to be taken to a hospital. To pay for my treatment, my husband went to him for cash. As his house and shop are close-by, it is easy to reach him. He always seems to have some cash to spare. Besides, we also buy *noon tel*<sup>104</sup> from his shop and we sell our cattle milk to his dairy. He even gave us half the money to buy the cow that we own now. Not only that, he also hires us to work in his farms every now and then.

Explaining the ease of taking credit from Indra Acharya, Jit Bahadur Pariyar, another Dalit man, also had this to say to me:

I actually owe some money to Indra Acharya, something like six or seven thousand. I should have paid it months ago but I could not. But I shall return the money when I start making more money from this tailoring business. Anyway, we always buy foodstuff from his shop and we are not going anywhere. He also has not been asking for it. Maybe he has forgotten it altogether.

But Indra Acharya does not forget (Figure 34). He actually maintains an up-to-date register and knows exactly who owes how much. He claims that he has about NRs 2,000,000 (AuD 27,000) “circulating” in and around Patle Gau in the form of loans for cow or buffalo purchases, for subsistence purposes or for any other reason. But he is not complaining as he is still profiting. He also does not hassle the creditors because they not only sell their milk to him, but also buy necessary feed and food items from him. In fact, his business is growing so much that his eldest son gave up his university education to help him further expand his business. There are some poorer Dalits whose cattle or buffaloes (priced

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<sup>104</sup> Literally *noon tel* means “salt and oil” but it actually symbolises basic food stuffs.

around NRs 60,000 which is a significant amount to poor people) Indra has bought for them but in the form of credit with a tacit understanding that they will sell the milk to his dairy. The cattle/buffalo holders not only sell milk to his dairy but also buy needed feed and other household foodstuff from his shop. The Dalits think that they will make profit in the long run but many others do not think that this ever will happen since the costs of feeding the cows/buffaloes far exceed the profit received from the milk sold, added to the fact that the animals tire (*tharo*) quickly and stop giving milk. If this occurs, some of the money received by re-selling the tired animals is returned to Indra Acharya. Yet, people say there is always an amount outstanding because of the way the livestock and dairy economics operate in favour of Indra Acharya and other *Saujees*. But this does not deter the Dalits from letting Indra re-buy them new livestock since their economic sustenance is maintained while Indra Acharya expands his business.

**Figure 34 Indra Acharya and his house with a shop and dairy collection centre  
(Photos by author)**



Seeking money from local *Saujees* may be easy, but it is not always without dire consequences, especially when the transactions happen to be quite large. Dhan Bahadur Pariyar, an 80-year-old illiterate Dalit who lives off his small landholding and meagre income from sewing at home, received a loan of NRs 100,000 from Chandra Bahadur Tamang (Figure 35). Dhan had deposited two



*ropanis* of land as a collateral for the credit. Dhan wanted to use the money to finance his son Tek Bahadur Pariyar's plans for foreign employment in Malaysia. But, because Tek happened to be dealing with corrupt *dalal* (brokers) in Kathmandu, he got cheated and lost all the money in the process.<sup>105</sup> Subsequently when Dhan Bahadur Pariyar was unable to return the loan to Chandra Bahadur Tamang, Chandra was insistent on claiming all the deposited land. Dhan Bahadur Pariyar somehow understood that the monetary value of the lands deposited was double the amount of the loan. So, he sought the help of the Secretary of Village Development Committee, Sanjeev Dahal, who along with a few Maoist cadres of the time intervened and saved Dhan Bahadur Pariyar from losing all his land. The three parties involved – Dhan Bahadur Pariyar, Chandra Bahadur Tamang and the intermediaries - finally agreed to settle the dispute by transferring the ownership of half the land deposited (one *ropani*) to Chandra Bahadur Tamang. In chasing money with the hope of achieving some kind of upward economic mobility, the near landless Dhan Bahadur Pariyar lost even more of his lands.

**Figure 35 Dhan Bahadur Pariyar stands dejected in front of his house  
(Photo by author)**



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<sup>105</sup> Others have also documented such cases of cheating elsewhere in Nepal (Adhikari & Hobley, 2011; Sunam & McCarthy, 2016).

Incidents like this are a cruel reminder to many that whenever possible one should always avoid *Saujees* for loans, especially when it involves depositing land as collateral.

### **Managing without *Saujees***

Five months into my fieldwork and after many casual conversations Jit Bahadur Pariyar— who I have already introduced above— and I had bonded to the extent that we could talk of almost anything quite easily. I normally met him at his home about fifteen minutes' walk north of the Arniko Highway. I usually found him sewing with his old machine. The local villagers, almost always men, who needed their clothes made or mended would come down to his house to use his services. But one day as I was walking around in a local bazar I spotted him in what looked like a tailoring shop (Figure 36). After greeting him with a *Namaste*, I sat down on the floor asking, “So you started a business, Jit *Dai* (elder brother) (Turin, 2001)<sup>106</sup>?

JBP: *Ke garne* (what to do?). Sewing is all I know. I don't own much land; its produce cannot feed my family for the whole year. These days everything is commercialised and things are really expensive, no? It is difficult to earn enough to feed ourselves. I don't know how to read and write and hence do not qualify for *jageer* (salaried jobs)<sup>107</sup>. I think my body is also too weak to labour in farms and brick kilns which require hard physical work. So, I thought maybe if I set up a tailoring shop here I may make some money.

MR: But the money to set up this business ...?

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<sup>106</sup> In Nepal it is customary to use kinship terms such as *dai* (elder brother), *bhai* (younger brother), *dididi* (elder sister), *bahini* (younger sister), etc. even to perfect strangers. Turin, 2001 discusses the subtleties of the application of Nepali kinship system to non-Nepalese.

<sup>107</sup> *Jageer* originally meant the land grant made by the king to feudal lords for their administrative or military services (Raj, 2010; Regmi, 1963, 1976). After the extensive monetisation of Nepalese economy when government employees started getting paid in money, *jageer* took a new meaning to refer to the government jobs. In its newest meaning these days, it refers to any salaried job.

JBP: My first daughter loaned me NRs 5,000 (AuD 66). My second daughter gifted me with this new sewing machine worth a couple of thousand rupees. A nephew bought me these clothes. The loans that I got from other relatives and close friends amount to about NRs 10,000, I think. I now have sufficient money and equipment to start this business. I shall return them the money when I can.

At that time, Jit's younger daughter, Geeta<sup>108</sup>, interjected, "Don't worry about the sewing machine, though" as if to mean that she was not expecting her father to translate her gift into money and repay the favour. Nearby, Jit's wife Makhamalee was stitching buttons to the shirts that Jit had tailored.

Jit leaves home, after having tea and titbits at around 10 in the morning to open this tailoring shop. He then later shuts it at around four or five depending on how long the day is. Makhamalee brings lunch (*dal-bhat* - cooked rice and lentil) to Jit some time during the mid-day. After eating the food, Jit continues with his sewing whereas Makhamalee washes the dishes and then stays a little longer at the shop to help her husband finish some tailoring tasks. While Jit does most of the "core" tasks related to tailoring such as measuring, cutting and sewing, Makhamalee helps with "finishing" touches, such as stitching the buttons and removing the pieces of thread or other clothes that may have stuck to the "finished products." Makhamalee only spends a couple of hours doing these tasks and leaves Jit to run the shop so that she can take care of the other household chores.

After a pause when I asked Jit if he had gone to Indra Acharya for assistance, Jit continued:

No, I did not borrow any money from him. I also did not go to the co-operatives. I already owe Indra *Sau* [short for *Saujee*] some money

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<sup>108</sup> Geeta lives in Kathmandu with her own small family and had come to visit her parents in Patle Gau.

that I have not been able to return for quite some time now, so how can I ask for more? We could have asked for some money at the local co-operative where my wife has savings of a few thousand rupees. But they charge, what, like 15% interest rate, no? We would rather let my wife's savings earn its interest there.

**Figure 36 Jit Bahadur Pariyar gets some help from his wife Mukhamalee in their newly opened tailoring shop (Photo by author)**



Jit is using his own rationale to justify why the co-ops were not the first place he went to when he was in need of economic capital. Co-ops lend money at one of the cheapest rates (at around 15%) unlike some individual *Saujees* who may still charge 20% or more on larger loans. But Jit can still avoid paying that interest if he can collect his loans through his close friends and kinship relations. Although the kin-based voluntary practices for labour exchange called *perma* are very active in Patle Gau as in many other places, I was not aware of any kind of informal voluntary kin-based credit associations there. This is not to suggest that they do not exist or did not exist elsewhere in Nepal. As in other parts of the world (Geertz, 1962), caste, kin and region based voluntary native associations like *Dhikur*, *Guthi* and *Kipat* exist(ed) in other parts of Nepal to manage money, goods, labour and even land on rotational basis (Caplan, 1970; Forbes, 1999;

Messerschmidt, 1978).<sup>109</sup> But such associations were not found in Patle Gau. So as Jit Bahadur Pariyar does not depend on these informal voluntary associations for monetary requirements, he also demonstrates that *Saujees* are not always the first port of call if financial requirements can be managed through families, friends and kin relations, particularly if the needed sum is not large, say only a few thousand Nepalese Rupees.

Supports from friends and families can take the form of cash or commodities provided as gifts like sewing machines, cloth pieces, thread rolls, etc. as in Jit's example. No collateral or third-party guarantee is required when borrowing money like this. Normally no interest is charged and both the payment method and pay-back time are flexible. The debtor may return the cash-equivalent sum all at once or in small allotments whenever possible. When the creditor is an immediate family relation like a daughter, the compulsory obligation to return the cash or commodity gift may be entirely absent. This kind of financial support extended by family members, families, kinship relations and close friends not only assists a person like Jit to initiate a small business but also helps youth gain foreign employment. One Tamang lady once told me that she and a number of her close cousins had collected enough money to send off a young person for employment opportunities to Malaysia (Chapter Seven). But when money is not arranged through friends, families and local *Saujees*, it is often arranged through savings and credit groups and co-operatives.

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<sup>109</sup>Donald A. Messerschmidt analyses *Dhikur*, a non-kin rotating credit association of around 30 members, amongst *Gurungs*, *Thakalis* and *Bhotias* (various Nepali ethnic groups) living in the upper hills and mountains (Messerschmidt, 1978) Similarly, *Guthi*, kin-based voluntary association, continues its centuries-long existence amongst the *Newars* of Kathmandu for the management of the land and water of and around community buildings and temples through rotational contributions of money, goods and labour to perform various religious and social rituals. Although abolished by the state in 1968, *Kipat*, was a form of indigenous communal land management system practiced by the *Kirantis* in the eastern Nepal (Caplan, 1970; Forbes, 1999).

## ***Saujees Reproduce Saujees***

A couple of weeks after the conversation I had with Jit Bahadur Pariyar I was sipping tea at Hari Acharya's *kirana pasal* cum *cheeyapasal*. A Bahun man in his mid-thirties, Hari, also collects milk from locals to transport to Dhulikhel, about 30 minutes bus ride from Patle Gau, at a profit. As Hari and I were chatting about the on-coming monsoon, a woman entered the shop with a small booklet in her hand. Without exchanging any word with the woman but fully comprehending the meaning of her entrance Hari handed over NRs 500 (about AusD 7) to her. The woman recorded this transaction in the booklet which I now understand was a passbook of a savings for a credit co-operative based in Dhulikhel. After the woman left Hari looked at me with a wry smile saying, "You never know when and where you will be needing money, no? So, I make monthly savings here and there, you know."

The savings and credit co-op in Dhulikhel in which Hari Acharya keeps savings is one of the new "*Saujees*" which Siromani Sapkota was referring to earlier. The mushrooming of NGOs and co-ops in Patle Gau as in other places in Nepal after 1990 was a remarkable phenomenon, yet the idea and practices of non-government co-operatives are not entirely novel. As I have suggested before, although *Kipat*, an indigenous voluntary association, was forced into extinction by the state in 1964 other similar associations for rotational credit and labour such as *Perma*, *Dhikur*, and *Guthi*, had existed for a long time in Nepal. But the provision of rural credit through "formal" government-owned co-operatives began to occur only from 1956.<sup>110</sup> In an effort to "develop" and "modernise" Nepal in a planned fashion, the Government of Nepal in 1956 created and

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<sup>110</sup> Back then rural credit (*grameen hrin*) was the term used instead of microfinance (*Laghubitta*). Microfinance got its popularity only during 1970s when Mohammad Yunus of Bangladesh successfully designed mechanisms of functional financing services to the Bangladeshi rural poor people, a concept which until then was thought to be financially unviable.

managed thirteen co-operatives to provide rural credit, among other things, to thousands of families who had come to resettle in the Chitwan valley (with high agricultural productivity, low population density) from various hilly areas (with low agricultural productivity, high population density) (S. M. Shrestha, 2009).

The Nepalese government then established a Co-operative Bank in 1963 with the chief aim of delivering agricultural inputs and credit while monitoring the thirteen original co-operatives. The Co-operative Bank later renamed the Agriculture Development Bank Nepal (ADBN) in 1968 provided its services through cooperatives created under its guidance and management. Most of these co-operatives were however, mismanaged,<sup>111</sup> and as critics accused them of failing to contribute towards reducing rampant poverty. In 1975 the ADBN piloted the Small Farmers' Development Programme in two districts (Dhanusha and Nuwakot) imitating the Bangladeshi Grameen Bank's model of micro-finance. It aimed to provide loans to the rural poor such as landless labourers, tenants and small farmers on a "group guarantee" basis. But while a few such state-led cooperatives continued at a small scale in selected "targeted districts", it was only after the re-establishment of democracy and the adoption of more neo-liberal policies in 1990 that the Nepalese government ensured that NGOs and co-operatives could play a significant role in transforming rural areas by mobilising the savings and remittances of villagers.

As a result, the Co-operatives Act 1992 decisively "freed" the management of co-operatives from the hands of the government. Accordingly, any willing and co-operating twenty-five individuals could effectively create and register a co-operative under the Ministry of Agriculture through local District Agriculture

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<sup>111</sup> A survey in 1983/84 suggested that the majority of these co-operatives were incurring losses (S. M. Shrestha, 2009)

Development Offices.<sup>112</sup> With guiding policy documents such as the Agriculture Perspective Plan (1995 – 2015) and the Agriculture Development Strategy (2016/17 – 2036/37)<sup>113</sup> both of which recommend the commercialisation of agriculture for higher economic growth, the Nepalese government continues to stress the importance of the collaboration between government, non-government, co-operative and private enterprise to create wider “inclusion”(GON, 1995, 2014). Consequently, the number of co-operatives and NGOs continues to grow. It is against this backdrop that various savings and credit co-operatives and smaller groups have emerged in Patle Gau. Many NGOs and some government offices have formed savings and credit groups and co-operatives in Patle Gau for one purpose or the other. Savings and credit groups are more informally established without being registered at any government offices while savings and credit co-operatives are more formal and are registered at local District Agriculture Development Offices. However, most of these have disappeared as quickly as they appeared, particularly once their objective, say to run an adult literacy class, has been met. But four, in particular, have persisted: Bela Co-op, Namuna Women Co-op, Phoolbari Co-op and the Bright Future Women’s Group.<sup>114</sup>

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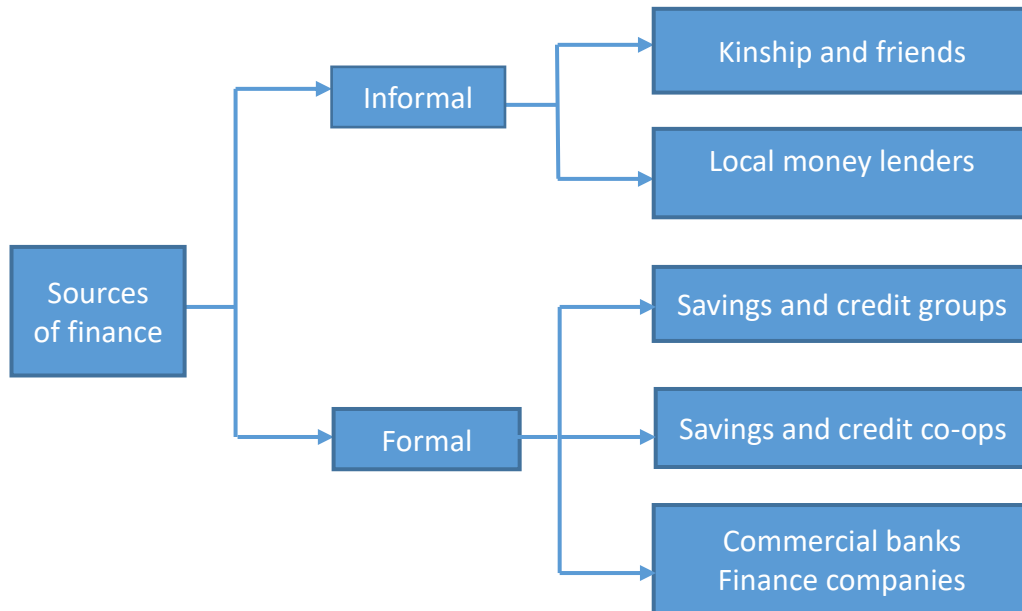
<sup>112</sup> Since 2012, co-operatives are registered with the Ministry of Co-operatives and Poverty Alleviation. NGOs, however, continue to be registered with the Social Welfare Council.

<sup>113</sup> These documents are prepared with financial support from international financial institutions such as the Asian Development Bank.

<sup>114</sup> These are short forms for Bela Self-reliant Vegetable Producers Co-operative Ltd., Model Women Awareness Savings and Credit Co-operative, Phoolbaari Savings and Credit Co-operative and *Ujjawal Bhawishya* (Bright Future) Women’s Group respectively.



**Figure 37 Sources of finances in and around Patle Gau**



Although the government of Nepal administers state-supported development banks targeting poverty alleviation amongst the poor with names such as *Nirdhan Utthan* (Uplifting the Poor) and *Swabhalamban* (Self-reliant), these only cover some “selected” districts, and do not extend to the Kavre district (Figure 37). Since the state likes to call Kavre a “commercial” or “advanced” district, where the market is able to operate more fully than in remote districts, and where the proportion of poor is lower than in other districts, these development banks do not extend their services to Patle Gau residents. However, the more educated and economically better-off and *Saujees* use credit and savings facilities of commercial banks, located in nearby town centres such as Dhulikhel or Nepalthok.

Given this context many co-ops in Patle Gau started out as informal farmer's groups. When such a group decides to become a co-op, they are required to register with the District Office of Agriculture Development, in accordance with the Co-operative Act 1992. Post 2012 when the Department of Co-operatives was removed from the Ministry of Agriculture and merged into the new Ministry of Co-operatives and Poverty Alleviation, prospective co-ops were required to register at the District Co-operative Office which functions under the Registrar's Office of the new Ministry.

According to the Co-operative Act 1992 at least 25 persons, who have elected an Executive Committee led by a Chair, can apply for formal registration as a co-op. These members are to be local residents of the area in which the co-op is allowed to function. Once a co-op is formally registered, the Co-operative Act 1992 specifies that it retain records of every meeting of its General Assembly and committees and sub-committees. The co-op is also required to maintain up-to-date accounts of all economic transactions which are to be examined every fiscal year by any registered auditor recognised by the Registrar. Every co-op is also legally bound to submit an annual report of its transactions and audit report to the Registrar through Registrar's representative office at the district headquarters.

The deregulation of the fertiliser sector in Nepal, in accordance with neo-liberal principles in 1990, helped fortify co-ops present in largely agrarian and rural Nepal. When the offices and depots of state-owned Agriculture Input Corporation were completely dismantled in 1997, and subsequently when the private sector showed its reluctance to be involved in this sector, the government allowed local co-ops with a Permanent Account Number (PAN) to buy and sell chemical fertilisers (Shrestha, 2010). Any co-op desiring to trade chemical fertilisers only had to obtain a Permanent Account Number (PAN) from the

Inland Revenue Department, Ministry of Finance, Kathmandu, (Shrestha, 2010).<sup>115</sup>

Founded in August, 2000, Bela Co-op is the oldest amongst the co-ops in Patle Gau. Led by Siromani Sapkota<sup>116</sup>, Bela Co-op used to be a farmers group exclusively dedicated to providing extension services for agricultural techniques and inputs. It used to work with the District Agriculture Development Office to run farmers' trainings and various workshops. But as Siromani and others wanted to expand its scope to include financial services, they held a meeting amongst the members and decided to convert it from a farmers' group into a savings and credit co-op in 2000. Following the provisions laid in the Co-operative Act 1992, they registered the Bela Co-op at the Registrar's Office through District Agriculture Development Office based at district headquarters, about a 30 minutes bus ride away. Initially operating with a modest membership and funding, Bela co-op has now grown to over three hundred members and manages more than NRs. 10,000,000 making it the largest and richest co-op in and around Patle Gau.

Siromani Sapkota has rented a room from one of his cousins near the Arniko Highway to function as the Bela co-op's office. On Saturdays it remains closed, but on week-days usually Nilkantha Parajulee, another Bahun man and the Secretary General and an Office Manager, remains in the office from roughly

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<sup>115</sup> Chemical fertilisers have been sold under various policies in Nepal. Before 1970, they were sold at full market price. Price subsidy and a selective transport subsidy were provided during the 1970s through to 1997 after which the subsidies were removed to let the market fully take over. However, after complains about quality, delays, and rising prices, beginning in 2009 the government has again begun to directly procure and distribute the chemical fertilisers with price and transport subsidies. Since 1997 when the offices and depots of government-owned Agriculture Input Co-corporation have been dismantled, local co-operatives have been given the authority to buy and sell these chemical fertilisers.

<sup>116</sup> Siroman Sapkota still remains Bela Co-op's chair by winning the last three consecutive elections.

ten in the morning till five in the evening. Prospective members come to the office to buy membership in the co-op or to apply for loans. Membership in Bela Co-op is obtained with a purchase of 10 shares, each valued at NRs 100. The new members also commit to a compulsory saving of NRs 100 each month, although this requirement is not strictly enforced. Bela co-op pays 10% interest on the savings and charges 14.5% interest on loans. There may be a very small variation from one co-op to another but such interest rates are almost standard in Patle Gau. A certain percentage of whatever profits (called "surplus" in the cooperative term) the co-op makes is compulsorily invested in providing trainings and workshops (mostly agriculture-related) to the co-ops' members and local residents. The rest of the surplus is to be distributed, however according to Siromani (and decided by the General Assembly) as the co-op is renting a room and does not have its own land and building, presently much of its "surplus" is being spent on this office space. Like other co-ops Bela holds a mandatory General Assembly Meeting every year where major policy and operational decisions are made and which every three years elects a new Executive Committee. Most operative and day-to-day financial decisions are made by the elected 11-member Executive Committee, three-member Account Committee and three-member Loan Sub-Committee.

Members are allowed to draw loans which more or less match their level of savings. When applying for a loan, the member-applicant has to have her application supported by another member, yet this member is not a guarantor and so if the debtor defaults, the supporter is not in any way held responsible. A defaulting member does not necessarily come under heavy group pressure as in the Grameen Bank model but is refused other loans until she clears any outstanding loans. Since the loan provided does not normally exceed the savings made, a member actually draws from his own savings. In the case of small or

medium sized loans (upto NRs 25,000), when the sum of the loan requested exceeds the amount saved, no collateral is needed, and as long as two one or two other co-op members support the loan application (a support which as described above does not make the supporter liable to pay in the event of the creditor defaulting). However, when the requested money exceeds the savings made and is larger than NRs 25,000, collateral of some kind is necessary. Jewellery or the like is accepted but in most cases land is usually the most common form of collateral provided. There are a few cases where some co-op members have delayed in paying back the principal loan while repaying only the interest. There are other cases where the members have stopped paying both principal loan amount and interest for some months. But no one reported to me a single case where a member had to lose lands to the co-op because of a failure to repay the loan.

As recent decades have witnessed various government bodies and NGOs attempt to apply buzzword-like concepts of “participatory”, “inclusive” and the like (Cornwall & Brock, 2005) to development projects, Bela Co-op has readily acted as the “local development partner” to the government and non-government agencies. These development partners together have tried new seeds of maize, constructed pit latrines and domestic biogas plants and have conducted trainings for adult education, commercial vegetable cultivation and livestock raising in Patle Gau. Additionally, equipped with a PAN, Bela also trades in chemical fertilisers. These partnerships with government and non-government bodies for implementing *bikase* activities and trading in chemical fertilisers provide Bela Co-op with opportunities to further strengthen its financial position.

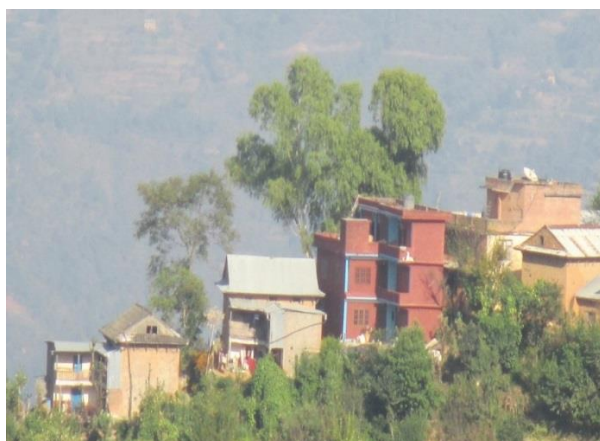
Some of the trainings such as a week-long Integrated Pest Management Training that Bela Co-op facilitated with a local NGO, have not had the desired

effect, as the trainees have returned to their old habits of using chemical pesticides. However, the pit latrines and biogas plants have till the time of my field work, which was around two years after their installation, remained functional. Overall, Siromani Sapkota is happy with the performance of Bela Co-op.

“He has a reason to be,” says Jayjeev Dhakal, a Bahun man in his mid-30s, and presently the Chair of Phoolbari Co-op and former Treasurer of Bela Co-op, hinting at Siromani’s possible “elite capturing” and misappropriation of funds obtained from NGOs and others (Arnall, Thomas, Twyman, & Liverman, 2013; Dasgupta & Beard, 2007; Platteau, 2004), Jayjeev said:

*Sahakari faphya cha Siromani lai* (Co-op has been good for Siromani). Otherwise without a well-paying *jageer* (salaried job), no inheritance, no commercial enterprises, how can he build a three-storeyed modern house with concrete foundation, roofs, cemented walls, and tiled bathrooms? His three other brothers, with similar background, education and capabilities, still live in modest old houses with tinned roofs. I am sure his two local buffaloes cannot give him the kind of money to afford a lifestyle that he seems to be enjoying now ...

**Figure 38 Siromani Sapkota's modern new house (in ruby red) (Photo by author)**



Siromani is right that the co-ops are the new *Saujees*: *Saujees* which loan out money almost always with ease. But this new *Saujee* helped Siromani become

a *Saujee* himself, not necessarily a money-lender or shopkeeper but a rich man (Figure 38). This was possible for Siromani because he is a Bahun member of the local landed elite. He claims one of his ancestors owned the lands (*birta* lands) on which Patle Gau is situated. He is also a former VDC chair, a “politically active” local member of Nepali Congress, a chair of the Bela co-op, and a chair of the school management committee. While most members of his generation from the Dalit and Tamang and even Bahun community remained either illiterate, or had only a few years of schooling, Siromani had about ten years of schooling. Because of this combination of different forms of social capital, Siromani was already a *thulo manche* (big man), but his new *Saujee* institution with “profitable” connections to *bikase* offices and activities (including fertilizer trade) have now made Siromani a rich man: a *Saujee*.

However, in 2008 villagers residing in and around Patle Gau started gossiping that Bela Co-had mismanaged the distribution of chemical fertilizer. These critics particularly accused the management team of Bela Co-op, led by Siromani Sapkota, of *natabad-crypabad* (familism-favouritism) (Kondos, 1987a) for providing fertilisers to *afno manche* (one’s own/close aids) only (Bista, 1991). The management committee of Bela Co-op, Siromani himself in particular, was accused of showing favouritism to kin, friends and families living closer to where Bela Co-op is located, by providing them with disproportionately larger amounts of fertilizer, while depriving others of sufficient amounts or by providing them with hardly any at all.

Experiencing such bitterness Jayjeev Dhakal who had served the Bela Co-op as an important member of the executive committee for one term before the incident occurred, was able to mobilise other villagers to establish another co-op, called the Phoobari Co-op, in September, 2010. A university graduate, secondary school teacher in a nearby school, and a motorcycle owner, Jayjeev Dhakal swiftly

obtained a PAN from Kathmandu for the Phoolbari Co-op, and convinced others to not only to elect him as the chair but also employ him as the salaried Co-op Manager<sup>117</sup>. As many as 30 people living closer to where the Phoolbari Co-op is physically located and who were convinced by Jayjeev, left the Bela Co-op to join the Phoolbari Co-op. Therefore, although the Bela Co-op— who has more than 300 members— was not massively affected by this transfer of members, Phoolbari Co-op funds around NRs 300,000 and has a membership of about 80 and is rapidly growing in membership numbers and size.

However, unlike Bela Co-op, it has not yet had any opportunities to “partner” with any development agencies, but Jayjeev hopes this will change soon. Working in the dual role of paid manager and the co-op Chair, perhaps Jayjeev, by leveraging the power of the Phoolbari Co-op, will one day become a *Saujee* like Siromani. I suggest this because although Jayjeev criticises Siromani for Siromani’s unethical behaviour, he himself is a man of contradictions. One Dalit woman praised Jayjeev for his “goodness” and the help he provides to some Dalits to write application letters for things like applying for a citizenship certificate and so on. Two other stories circulating in Patle Gau, however tarnish his image, at least amongst the Tamang community. The first story describes how when Jayjeev was the Chair of the Management Committee of a primary school in Patle Gau he played a crucial role in removing a Tamang teacher (on the basis of alleged unapproved absences) to recruit his own nephew to that post. The second story details how Jayjeev had replaced a Tamang woman with his Bahun sister-in-law to work as a cleaner in the same school, alleging underperformance which the Tamang woman contests. In a society mostly dominated by Bahuns in

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<sup>117</sup> Jayjeev draws about NRs 1500/month for managing the Phoolbari Co-op, including its accounts.



all spheres of life, both the Tamang man and the Tamang woman did not have a forum in which to make their voices heard.

If these allegations are true then Jayjeev, just like Siromani, is engrossed in the game of *Natabad-kripabad*. Jayjeev perhaps like Siromani— whom he criticises— may inevitably commit unethical acts during his tenure as the Chair and Manager of Phoolbari Co-op. He may get away with these acts and become another new *Saujee*, because his society as it is in Patle Ga accepts actions motivated by *natabad-kripabad* and *afno-manche*, and does not necessarily deem them unethical.

If the Bela co-op and Phoolbari Co-op serve members of both genders, then Namuna Co-op established in June, 2005, serves women only. A group of women, led by Durga B. K. and Nigma Tamang, felt the need for cheap and readily available credit that only women could access. To create such a group they converted a women's group initially registered under the District Forestry Office as a forest users group into the Namuna Co-op, which had the capacity to provide its members with financial services. These women felt that since men generally had more control than them over financial resources—not only by making decisions for the whole family about how the money should be used, but also by directly holding the money— women should have a separate source of income or access to loans which they could use independent of men's decisions. Since in many cases it was the men (normally husbands) who were members of the Bela Co-op or even Phool-bari Co-op, the men were the only ones who were legally recognised by the co-ops as potential debtors. This normally excluded women from accessing loans in the very first place. Having a co-op solely dedicated to women only, would mean that women did not have to depend their male-counterparts to access loans from co-ops.

However, making a modest start and adopting a *modus operandi* similar to Bela Co-op's, Namuna Co-op, while not as big an operation as Bela Co-op, has managed somehow to survive. Unlike Bela Co-op its funds do not exceed NRs 50,000 and due to the high "transaction costs" involved in obtaining and maintaining a PAN<sup>118</sup>, it has no PAN and cannot perform any transactions related to chemical fertilisers: a commodity of crucial importance in the agrarian economy of Patle Gau. Its office remains mostly closed unlike Bela Co-op which employs staff to keep it open for economic transactions during the day. Namuna Coop has frustrated a number of its members who have left it to either join Bela Co-op or Phoolbari Co-op. Still Namuna Co-op does represent another source of finance for women who can either rely on it for their financial needs, or combine Namuna loans with funds available from other co-ops and local *Saujees*.

Besides the Bela, Namuna and Phoolbari Co-ops, the least institutionally developed of the formal institutions is Ujjwal Bhawishya (Bright Future) Women's Group. Yet this co-op is a crucial source of small loans. Unlike other Co-ops, it neither has a formal office space nor any paid staff to manage it. The members are fewer in number compared to the other co-ops and usually find some public space like a field or a schoolroom where they once every few months conduct their meetings. It handles a total fund of only a few thousand Rupees which is kept by its Member-Secretary at her home. But this meagre group fund comes in handy to the poor, generally Dalit women, who may save and take a loan as little as NRs 500 (AuD 7). A lot of these poor Dalit women have sometimes defaulted or sometimes have not been able to fully pay back the loan such that their scope for requesting more loans from Namuna Co-op has decreased. Hence while they re-pay the loan to Namuna co-op little by little, they can still access

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<sup>118</sup> Frequent travels have to be made to Kathmandu to obtain a PAN, in which an individual has to go through lengthy bureaucratic processes which only increase the transaction costs.

very small loans from Ujjwal Bawishya for urgent necessities like buying foodstuffs. Ujjwal Bhawishya’s existence seems to be justified by its virtue of being a faithful friend to the poorest in Patle Gau.

### **Use of Credit: Stuck with *Saujees***

Even when money is available through different avenues, it is interesting to note that the three different social groups – Bahuns, Dalits and Tamang - in Patle Gau access loans from formal sources of co-ops and groups differentially. Of the total 51 households whom I surveyed in Patle Gau, 78% have at least one household member who has obtained membership to at least one of the savings, credit groups or co-operatives in the past few years. Group-wise Bahuns have the highest rate of participation in these formal institutions at 86% followed by Dalits at 78% and Tamangs at 69% (Figure 39).

**Figure 39 Percentage of families participating in the savings and credit groups and co-ops**

Caste or ethnicity	Participating families	Total families	Percentage
Bahun	13	15	86
Dalit	18	23	78
Tamang	9	13	69

Although the size of savings and credit per household varies from one family to the next, a general pattern based on caste and ethnicity is detected. Dalits engage in the smallest transactions while Bahuns and Tamangs deal in much larger transactions. There are a number of Dalits who, when they have saved, have been able to save as little as NRs 1,000 (AuD 13) per family. On average, Dalits are able to save about NRs 5,000 per family, excepting the Dalkotis (families of Tikaram

Dhalkoti) who save much more. This average saving of NRs 5,000 by the Dalits sharply contrasts with the average saving of Bahun families at NRs 28,000 (about six times more) and of Tamang families at NRs. 19,000 (about four times more).<sup>119</sup>

The amount of savings a family can make is quite important since credit is provided based on the savings made. As I have shown earlier, Dalits are considerably less able to save than Bahuns or Tamangs, but they need credit the most for subsistence purposes.<sup>120</sup> Hence, the average loan credit for Bahuns is NRs 13,000, for Dalits NRs 26,000 and for Tamangs NRs 44,000 (Figure 40). The reason for why the Dalits are still taking out loans, on average, which exceed their savings, is that often the co-ops and group management do not necessarily apply strict rules. Poorer Dalits not only take loans from one co-op, but from different co-ops and groups whose management committee members also feel morally obligated to loan out the money. When these poorer Dalits default, they cannot apply for any further loans. In such instances they usually resort to local money-lenders (*Saujees*) or are obligated to migrate to work in brick-kilns, where despite the tough conditions, they are guaranteed to generate some money (Chapter 7). The co-ops usually do not take any legal actions against them, but constantly place social pressure (like reminding them to repay the money each time they meet) to repay the loan. However, no physical coercion is applied.

**Figure 40 Average saving, credit and balance per family (NRs)**

Caste or ethnicity	Savings	Credit	Balance
Bahun	28,000	13,000	15,000
Dalit	5,000	26,000	-21,000
Tamang	19,000	44,000	-25,000

<sup>119</sup> For Tamangs too I have considered one case as an outlier since he had saved NRs 700,000 in Bela co-operative only to take out all of it to construct a house.

<sup>120</sup> I was unable to analyse financial transactions with finance companies and commercial banks which some better off and educated Bahuns and Tamangs have access to.

Although I have said that that Ujjwal Women Group manages the smallest fund, it is still the most important source of credit for Dalit women as it caters to their most pressing needs. Although no one from the Bahun or the Tamang community has taken credit as meagre in size as NRs 500 (around seven AuD), five Dalit women have done so. While these transactions get recorded as “for buying hybrid seeds”, “for buying fertilizer” and so on, Dalit women draw this measly amount of money just to buy foodstuffs, to survive and to live.

The neoclassical economic (neo-liberal) discourse of *bikas* in Nepal presupposes that an individual is a “free” agent capable of making decisions centred on self-interest and guided by aspirations to create maximum utility in every economic transaction. But this is not entirely true since an individual is essentially a social being in “chains” (Rousseau, 2001). All actions, including economic ones, by an individual are performed under constraints imposed by social relations and social context (Granovetter, 1985; Polanyi, 1957). Hence although government and non-government agencies in Nepal assume that the savings and credit groups and co-ops provide loans only for “productive” purposes so that the economy grows and not for non-productive “consumption” purposes, the villagers in Patle Gau know better. They know that not all rural people are able to be enterprising (Karnani, 2011). They know that people are deeply embedded in social relations and obligations, such that they need credit to supplement their own savings, and to meet certain needs such as buying foods, marrying off children, or repairing leaking roofs. As Nima Tamang, an executive member of the Namuna Co-op put it:

We know that such and such’s daughter is marrying and she will need money for this. When asking for the loan she does confess this as our rules don’t allow us to loan out money for such purposes. Only recently two of our members have taken about NRs 20,000 each to support another member to marry off their daughter. But in the

document we write something like “commercial vegetable cultivation” or “goat keeping” so that auditors do not complain later. We live in a society. If we don’t provide credit from here, where will they go? It is just that if they are unable to repay the loan, our door for them in the future will be closed. So, normally some continue paying only the interest just to maintain the group membership so that they don’t end up accumulating a large sum to repay.

Economic transactions made for social consumptive purposes thus get “recorded” as entrepreneurial commercial purposes, such as chicken-raising or commercial vegetable cultivation, to fulfil the state expectation that rural people are enterprising and that the mobilisation of rural economy will generate greater economic growth.

The three social groups – Bahun, Dalit and Tamang - possessing different levels of economic bases also utilise loans for different purposes. As I argued earlier while the poorest and the most cash-deficit Dalit families take credit for sustenance purposes, a few of them also utilize these loans to buy livestock or cultivate vegetables. One or two exceptional Dalits have even utilised such loans to buy small pieces of land, expand carpentry business or even finance foreign-employment. But these are only a few Dalits in Patle Gau. Contrarily, of the thirteen (out of fifteen) Bahun families who have savings, only three had the need for credit from Phoobari, as one Bahun woman said,

Let the savings grow and keep earning its interest. No hurry. I shall take it out when I want to do something substantial ...

Something substantial roughly translates to Jayjeev Dhakal, the same person I have been discussing earlier, taking out NRs 50,000 for commercial goat keeping. While a family normally keeps five or six goats, Jayjeev now has twenty goats. Similarly, another Bahun man, Achyut Dhakal, used credit of NRs 30,000 to expand his vegetable collection centre, while Harisharan Acharya upgraded

his *kirana* shop with NRs 50,000 credit. The rest of the Bahun community has only savings which explains why as a community they have an average positive balance of NRs 15,000 per family. The Tamangs are similar to the Bahuns in terms of the size of their savings, and like Bahuns they are not reported to have taken many small loans. Rather they use larger amounts of credit (around NRs 50,000) to upgrade and upscale business, buy buffaloes, and finance foreign employment.

All my above analysis shows that the *bikase* discourse of co-ops providing loans to transform rural economy while alleviating poverty is not true. The richer Bahuns and Tamangs because of their higher economic standing and landedness (Chapter 5) can use credit productively to increase their wealth status. But credit does not necessarily help poor Dalits get out of poverty. Poor Dalits who start from a very low economic base mostly use credit facilities provided by the co-ops and groups for sustenance purposes, and thus do not escape the “chains” of debt. Sometimes they remained chained to local *Saujees* and sometimes to savings and credit co-op/group *Saujees*. And so, to survive a lot of depend on brick-kiln *Saujees*.

The brick-kiln *Saujees* are the owners of the brick-kilns in Bhaktapur, a district about one-hour drive from Patle Gau, where many Dalit individuals and families seasonally migrate to work in brick-kilns. The brick-kiln *Saujees* make contracts with a number of *Naikes* (leaders) who in turn contract a number of labourers in Patle Gau to make about NRs 45,000 (about AuD 500) to produce 250,000 bricks. Essentially the money is given as a full-payment in advance but it also acts like credit since the money is normally provided against a land collateral or by depositing ones’ citizenship certificates. Prospective workers receive the money in September before the *Dasain* and *Tihar* festivities, and use the money to celebrate them. Because Bahuns and Tamangs in Patle Gau have sufficient

economic opportunities from the cultivation of their own lands, raising livestock or running rural enterprises, they are not attracted to work in the sub-human conditions that prevail in the brick-kilns (Chapter Seven). Nonetheless, for the Dalits who continue to work in these brick-kilns under harsh physical conditions, the brick-kiln *Saujees* still provide much needed cash which otherwise is hard to come by.

### **The *Saujee* Who Isn't**

A *Saujee* can mean many different things. *Sajuee* is a rich man, a property-holder, a money-lender, or a shop-keeper depending upon the context. Although savings and credit co-ops have recently attained *Saujee* status, I argue that *Saujee* is a status attained only by some, not by all. Shyam Hari Pathak was a *Saujee* for previous generations. Indra Acharya, Laxman Timilsina, and Chandra Bahadur Tamang are *Saujees* for today's generation. While they were Bahun men who attained that status in the past, now it is both Bahun and Tamang/Janajati men who have achieved that status. No Dalit, man or woman, has accomplished that status. Even *Saujees* running brick-kilns in Bhaktapur are not Dalit but are from the Newar ethnic group.

If a *Saujee* referred solely to a rich person or a property holder, then Tikaram Dhalkoti, a Dalit man, should also have been categorised as one. But no one in Patle Gau calls or considers him a *Saujee*. Similar to the *Saujees*, Tikaram owns 29 *ropanis* of land where a typical Dalit owns only two *ropanis*. Tikaram also possesses two houses, both bought from migrating Bahun families. This is a rare feat not only for a Dalit, but also for Bahuns and Tamangs. However, the relatively high level of material wealth that Tikaram Dhalkoti possesses does not allow him to establish multiple economic ties with others. His lands are just enough for him and families from two wives to cultivate crops and vegetables.



While he lives in one of his two houses amongst the Dalits, he has rented out his second home to a Tamang family to profitably operate a *cheeya plus bhattee pasal* (a shop that sells tea, liquor and snacks). As I have argued in Chapter Four, since the notion of caste-based ritual purity and impurity is deeply held by many in Patle Gau, Tikaram or any other Dalit cannot fully participate in food-based economic enterprises. Therefore, Tikaram does not run a *kirana pasal*, *cheeyapasal* or a *bhattee* or a dairy. Tikaram himself is not rich enough to invest in brick-kilns like the Newar *Saujees* in Bhaktapur who provide employment opportunities to many in Patle Gau. Unlike other Bahun and Tamang *Saujees* in Patle Gau, Tikaram cannot run a shop or provide credit, or seasonally employ others in his farm such that they could re-pay their debts in labour. Since he also does not possess any dairy or vegetable collection centres, his prospective debtors (if he were to have any) cannot pay back their debt in the form of commodities like milk and vegetables. Hence, despite his fairly good economic status he is unable to forge multiple economic ties. Burdened by his Dalit status, Tikaram cannot achieve the *Saujee* status which even the co-ops (as money-lenders) and Siromani Sapkota (as newly rich) have acquired recently. Tikaram is just another Dalit, who despite his good economic life, will never be a *Saujee*.

## **Conclusion**

The discourse of *bikas* in Nepal wants us to believe that the third sector (the social economy composed of community-based non-profit co-ops and NGOs) supported by the state and the market will mobilise the social economy including the provision of finances in a way that will eventually transform the rural economy from stagnancy to high growth. But this is not entirely true. Further the assumptions behind such policies— that the poor, landless and near landless do not necessarily have to depend on their lands for adequate income generation, but can simply rely on the market mechanisms by participating in

employment opportunities provided by expanding rural enterprises, to raise incomes and reduce their rates of poverty— are also without substance.

These assertions and assumptions are challenged by the reality that in caste-conscious rural societies, like that of Patle Gau, where the notion of purity and pollution still heavily influence many spheres of life, the legacies of Bahun *Saujees* of the past are inherited by landed Bahun *Saujees* and even Tamang *Saujees* of the present. These individuals can fully exploit current market opportunities, whereas Dalits simply cannot. The poor landless Dalits cannot fully and profitably participate in expanding rural enterprises and hence remain forever indebted to *Saujees*, even when the *Saujee* happen to be co-ops, which themselves are inevitably run by Bahuns. Sometimes when large debts to *Saujees* do not get repaid the already near landless Dalits can lose their lands and become even more destitute.

The concept of caste and its principles of purity and pollution is so deeply held in rural places like Patle Gau that long outlawed caste-based discriminatory practices still manifest in subtle ways that effectively bar Dalits from fully and profitably participating in the food-based rural economy (Chapter Four). Hence, they cannot own *kirana pasal*, *cheeyapasal*, *bhattees* or dairies, the very rural enterprises that the Nepalese state would like to think are pro-poor. Restrained by such social expectations, even the wealthy Dalit, Tikaram Dhalkoti, cannot establish the multiple economic ties required for exchanging commodities, labour and money in different forms and modes with others, which effectively prevents him from acquiring the status of a *Saujee*.

Although savings and credit groups and co-ops have eased access to credit, the Dalits typically utilise credit facilities either for subsistence purposes like buying food, repairing leaking tinned roofs, treating illness, or for

performing social rituals such as marriage. They cannot normally utilise credit for economic upscaling. Therefore, the credit they borrow generally gets used up in consumption purposes losing its supposedly regenerating and reproducing capacity. On the contrary, landed Bahuns and Tamangs can make money and utilise credit by commercially growing vegetables in addition to running various farm-based enterprises such as milk and vegetable collection centres and non-farm based enterprises such as *kirana pasal*, *cheeyapasals* and *bhatees* to maintain the multiple ties with others required to become a *Saujee*. They use the same credit facilities that Dalits do, but by borrowing much larger amounts, they generate more economic capital through re-investment in their small to medium rural enterprises.

Bahuns like Siromani Sapkota are even able to “shape” and “capture” the *bikas* activities provided by the third sector (co-ops) to become rich *Saujees*, while most poor Dalits continue to remain poor. The provision of credit through social economy has lessened Dalit’s total dependence on local money-lending *Saujees* for economic sustenance. Nonetheless, unlike the landed and non-poor Bahuns and Tamangs the Dalits do not possess sufficient lands, farm or non-farm full-time employment, and remain perpetually indebted to *Saujees*, individual or collective, local or outsider (Bhaktapur), for economic subsistence.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how the non-economic structure of caste and ethnicity plays a significant role in one practice of *bikas*, i.e. the provision of financial services through the mobilisation of the social economy. I have argued how Bahuns and Tamangs leverage their landed and non-Dalit status to make the most of present market-based economies to become *Saujees*. Benefitting the least by the discourse and practices of *bikas* in a rural village, in the next chapter, I argue that Dalits opt for migration, a field which again is differentially appropriated by the three different social groups of Patle Gau.

## Chapter 7

### Moving Places: Differential Migratory Strategies and Patterns

I have relied, in this thesis, on the life-histories of certain key individuals to illustrate the social dynamics of life in Patle Gau. Siromani Sapkota—part of a local elite, socially and politically powerful— was one of those upon whom I focused. Siromani, as I detailed in the last chapter, is now facing competition from Jayjeev Dhakal, another of my interlocutors, both of whom were capable of articulating Patle Gau’s “image” and “needs” to both insiders and outsiders of Patle Gau. These two men hope to influence *bikase* agents and stir *bikase* practices in Patle Gau. Other key individuals such as Indra Acharya, Laxman Timilsina and Chandra Bahadur Tamang are the local *Saujees*: financially powerful men upon whose business success many depend for economic sustenance. Of the women I discussed, Meena BK and Durga Purkoti are more empowered than most other Dalit, or even Bahun and Tamang women. They act as change and *bikas* agents, and remain strong enough, to time and time again challenge the caste-based practices of the status quo. Jit Bahadur Pariyar and Dhan Bahadur Pariyar have also appeared repeatedly in this thesis, for almost exactly the opposite reasons to those I have listed above. These Dalit men are some of the poorest and the least influential across all spheres of the village life in Patle Gau. Their primary concern is typically how to get their next meal.

My analysis of the Dalit landowner Tikaram Dhalkoti, has demonstrated how he has surpassed all of his Dalit peers. While he is far richer than most other Dalits, his material wealth has not entitled him the status of a *Saujee*. Any non-Dalit possessing the level of property that he has would easily have been referred to as a *Saujee*, but this label is not applied to Tikaram. Because Tikaram embodies many contradictions of contemporary Patle Gau, it is worthwhile to consider his life trajectory once again in somewhat more detail.

Tikaram Dhalkoti was born in 1951 in a village about 40 kms away from Patle Gau. Tikaram lost his father when he was quite young and lived his childhood in economic hardship. When he was about eleven, his parents and the parents of a Bahun boy, a few years older than him, made the two boys each other's *mit* (blood brother)<sup>121</sup> by a ritual of mixing their blood. It was with this Bahun *mit* that Tikaram ventured into India when he was only fourteen years old. These boys had no concrete destination, no particular dream, only a belief that they had a better chance in India of making a living and eventually returning to a better life in Nepal.

Their travel to India eventually led them to Calcutta where Tikaram started living in the streets picking up any day-labouring jobs he could find. After a few months Tikaram was hired by a Bengali family as a domestic help to clean their house, dishes and clothes. Meanwhile his Bahun *mit* worked as a guard in a sawmill. After a couple of years the Bengali family helped Tikaram find labouring work with Indian Railways. First he laboured casually and later in a permanent job as a rail mechanic. After twenty years with Indian Railways, Tikaram took voluntary retirement and benefited from a payout of a substantial amount of money. Although his Bahun *mit* was also able to save some money as a "guard" he did not make as much money as Tikaram did. When Tikaram finally returned to Nepal from India he purchased 29 *ropanis* of land and two established houses from the high caste Acharya Bahun in Patle Gau, a feat that no other Dalit in Patle Gau has ever been able to achieve. These high caste owners departed to farm better land elsewhere and their *bastee* settlement became occupied by Tikaram and other Dalit families. Rather than use his wealth to open up social standing equal to that of higher castes Tikaram built himself a place within his

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<sup>121</sup> *Mit* relationship is considered to be much stronger than mere friendship or even familial relationships

Dalit group. Despite his impressive wealth people don't consider him a *Saujee*. He is still a Dalit living as a Dalit with other Dalits. In Tika's own words,

I have never entered a Bahun's house ... not even my *mit's* house. Sure, we were *mit* but that did not alter the fact that he was a Bahun and I, a Dalit. Even now I don't enter any Bahun's house. Even during our wedding reception, they do not eat the food we cook. Instead we arrange for a Bahun cook who cooks the food for them on our behalf outside of our house. This way they do accept our invitation for attending the wedding reception but also are able to maintain their caste purity by eating the food prepared by another Bahun. I mostly interact with other Dalits for most social events such as birth, death and marriages.

The unusual circumstances of Tikaram's life trajectory illustrate both the possibilities and barriers that Dalits face in Patle Gau. Tikaram is at once both an anomaly: an extra-ordinary person, and a normality: an ordinary person. His economic standing sets him apart from most other Dalits but his social status as a Dalit in Patle Gau remains virtually unchanged. He is landed amongst the mostly landless and near landless Dalits. He owns two houses, both well-built. He has already sent two of his children to Malaysia for better income opportunities while most other Dalits and even some Bahun and Tamang families struggle to gather the initial administrative costs for such a move. He is successful in providing most of his children and grand-children with several years of formal education unlike most other Dalit parents whose children drop out of school in order to help their parents earn a living before completing six or seven years of schooling. Yet Tikaram remains in many ways just another Dalit in Patle Gau. In a process similar to "reverse of gentrification" what used to be Bahun *bastee* is now a Dalit *bastee*. After Tikaram bought houses from some Acharya Bahuns other Bahuns did not move their residences closer to him but only other Dalits did. This ritually "pure" land is now an "impure" one which most Bahuns avoid unless they are seeking occupational services like that of tailoring provided by Dalits.

The sizable amount of material wealth that Tikaram possesses does not “cleanses” him of the ritual impurity that the non-Dalits assume his body possesses. An equivalent amount of material wealth could have raised the status of any non-Dalit person to a *Saujee*, a rich man, a property-holder. Bikram Hari Pathak, a Bahun man, for example was a *Saujee* in the past. Indra Acharya and Laxman Timilsina are the two Bahun men who are present-day *Saujees*. Unlike in the past, even Tamangs can now be *Saujees* like Chandra Bahadur Tamang. Even institutions like local savings and credit co-operatives have attained the symbolic title of *Saujee*. But nobody in Patle Gau considers Tikaram to be a *Saujee*. Bahun and Tamang men who do not bear the brunt of “untouchability” keep shops, *bhattees*, and dairies where others “freely” consume food and related items, but Tikaram is socially and covertly barred from running such food-based enterprises. While Bahun and Tamang men use these enterprises plus lands and money-lending activities to maintain “multiple economic ties” with others and be treated like *Saujees* (Chapter Six) Tikaram cannot establish these multiple economic ties and cannot be a *Saujee* despite possessing relatively greater wealth. Tikaram is just another Dhalkoti, another Meejar, another Sarkee, another Dalit.

Yet Tikaram’s material wealth provides him the comfort that he and his family members do not have to physically labour in other’s farms or in brick kilns. Like most other Bahuns and Tamangs and unlike other Dalits, Tikaram and his family tend to their own farm. They also supplement their income from the money obtained through the rent from one house near the highway occupied by a Tamang family who run a *bhattee* there. Tikaram’s upward economic mobility would not have been possible if he had not migrated to India all those years ago (N. R. Shrestha, Velu, & Conway, 1993). If he had been stuck in Calcutta for a long time as a domestic help, or had he not had a lucky break with the Indian Railways, he probably would not have earned enough to enable him to have the

life that he lives now. His Bahun *mit* whom he has not met for many years now did not come back to Nepal with as much money as he did. His current possession of material wealth occurring through a fortunate event that permitted his upward economic mobility was brought about by the lucky incident of migration. For most Dalits being able to achieve the economic transformation which Tikaram has been able to achieve is only a *dream*. Only a few exceptional Dalits in Nepal, who were close to powerful (royal) elites and served them through their caste-based occupations, like making iron weapons, shields, utensils, clothes and jewellery were “gifted” wealth without ever having to migrate out of Nepal<sup>122</sup>. But dreams motivate people. Dreams drive people. And Dalits, as well as Bahuns and Tamangs, continue to look to migration as a way to improve their lives.

Internal circulatory migration performed by the Dalits and international migration to which young people, especially men, aspire is not a new phenomenon in Nepal. In fact, migration of any sort – internal, international, seasonal, circulatory, semi-permanent, and permanent – has been practiced in Nepal for a long time. The nation itself is composed of various ethnic and caste groups who migrated from the South and the North hundreds and thousands of years ago. Even the founders of the present-day nation-state of Nepal, the Shah royals, migrated from India during the sixteenth century to evade Muslim rule in India (Bista, 1991; Gurung, 2005). While internal migration has continued since the early phases of the formation of Nepalese nation-state in the 1860s, international migration, mostly trade-related, of Nepalese peoples to and from

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<sup>122</sup> Personal communication with Aahuti, a Dalit intellectual and Dr. Purna Nepali, a Dalit *bikase* professional.



India and Tibet (China) has a long history in Nepal, although the phenomenon lacks precise documentation.

Certain Nepalese hill peoples, most notably the “martial tribes” such as the Rai, Limbu, Gurung, Magar and Chhetri migrated to Lahore (in present day’s Pakistan) to join the army of the Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh who gave them and those employed abroad afterwards the nickname “Lahure” (Seddon, Adhikari, & Gurung, 2002; p. 19). After 1815 the same “tribes” served foreign (particularly British and later Indian) military services as “Gurkhas” following the signing the Sughauli Treaty which allowed the British Government to recruit Nepalese mercenaries (Khatiwada, 2014; Shrestha, 1985; Toffin, 1976).<sup>123</sup> In the second half of the nineteenth century, encouraged by liberal policies of land allotment, hundreds of thousands of Nepalese also permanently migrated to Assam and Darjeeling in India, and to Bhutan, buying lands there while also fulfilling the large demands for agricultural labour for tea and rice plantations (Toffin, 1976). In recent years thousands of Nepalese have migrated to the USA, UK and Australia under various visa schemes for permanent residency. After 1990 large numbers have increasingly migrated to Middle Eastern countries and Malaysia for non-military employment opportunities (Thieme & Wyss, 2005). Currently an estimated five million Nepalese are employed outside of Nepal, 40% of whom are in India (Khatiwada, 2014, p. 235).

Those who have not migrated outside of Nepal have moved within the country in three distinct waves (N. R. Shrestha, 1990; Suwal, 2014). In the first wave, during the early phases of nation-formation in the early eighteenth century, Nepalese populations from the west moved east into the Kathmandu

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<sup>123</sup> The estimated numbers of such Nepali soldiers, labelled “Gurkhas”, are 200,000 and 250,000 during first and second World Wars respectively (Toffin, 1976, p. 200).

Valley and further east to settle areas with greater annual rainfall conducive to farming. After the state was successful in controlling malaria in the Southern plains of the Terai, making it substantially more hospitable, a second wave of internal migration moved there from the hills in the 1950s. This internal migration was strongly supported by the state who used its techno-scientific rationale to re-distribute population internally. It achieved this by providing Nepalese people with finance and other facilities to migrate from the hills, which then had high human-land ratio with less productive lands, to the Terai, which had relatively low human-land ratio and more productive fertile lands (Kansakar, 1985). While thousands of state-aided families resettled during this project, thousands more migrated voluntarily clearing large tracts of forests for residential and agricultural land (Shrestha, 1990). The third wave of internal migration from rural to urban areas, primarily Kathmandu, took place after 1990 with the restoration of parliamentary democracy and the adoption of neo-liberal economic policies that gave rise to employment opportunities in the informal sector (Shakya, 2002).

### **Migration Patterns into and out of Patle Gau**

The migration pattern in Patle Gau mirrors this national pattern but with its own location-specific peculiarities. Through a detailed examination of migration patterns into and away from Patle Gau, I aim, in this chapter, to show that different social groups pursue migration to attain different dreams and different forms of livelihood.

In Chapter Five I narrated the origins and patterns of land-ownership in Patle Gau, to argue that Sapkota Bahuns use the legacy of *Birta* (land-gifts) to support their claims that they are the first owners of land and hence the first settlers in Patle Gau. A claim which other Bahun sub-groups do not dispute. Pathak interlocutors told me that until about twenty or thirty years ago, the *Birta*

land claims of the Sapkotas were symbolically recognised by maintaining a minute of silence and bodily non-movement upon hearing of the death of any Sapkota. Yet concurrently the Tamangs also leverage their claim of *Kipat* (“indigenous” communal land), to assert their claims to indigeneity and first-settler status. Some elderly Bahun and Tamang men told me that a few Dalit families must also have accompanied the first Sapkota families to settle in close but separate lands. According to them, the Sapkotas would have needed the Dalit families to provide them with farm labour and caste-based occupational services such as sewing and blacksmithing. But of course, as I have argued in previous chapters the Dalits, including the elderly among them, do not have grand and glorified tales of *Birta* or *Kipat* to assert original land ownership or first settler status. They also do not seem to care about such origins. I, therefore cannot argue for certain who among Bahun, Dalit and Tamang are the first settlers in and around Patle Gau.

Whatever is the ultimate truth regarding the first settlers in Patle Gau, the Kumai (originally from Kumaon, now in India) Pathak Bahuns from the West also migrated to Patle Gau possibly around time of the first wave of internal migrants in the eighteenth century which occurred as a result of the political unification of the country by the Shahs. Following the Pathaks, in due course of time other Purbia (Eastern) Bahuns like Acharya, Dhakal, and Timilsina from the East also started settling into Patle Gau. But not all continued staying in Patle Gau. As some started migrating into Patle Gau, some also started migrating out of it.

Some of the more adventurous and those seeking upward economic mobility, especially those from Pathak families have also permanently migrated out of Patle Gau. The Pathaks equipped themselves with formal education in the national language, Nepali, and found *jageers* (salaried jobs) with the Government

of Nepal. The cultural capital of formal education (Bourdieu, 2011), combined with the social capital of “good connections” (Bourdieu, 2011) and the economic capital of money and vast tracts of land “grabbed” during the land reform programmes of the 1960s, provided the basis for some Pathak families to eventually migrate to bigger cities like Kathmandu and even to overseas countries like the US. The Sapkotas, in contrast who stayed in Patle Gau and stuck with the hereditary transmission of Sanskrit-based priestly and astrological skills, were unqualified for government jobs and continue today practicing farming and *jusmani - puretai* [providing priestly and astrological services to *jusman* (client)]. The relatively late-coming Bahun sub-groups of Dhakal and Timilsina who migrated into the village after buying lands from the Pathaks and Sapkotas, drew on their pre-existing entrepreneurial skills to set up rural-enterprises like dairies, shops and so on, in addition to farming land in the village.

A few Acharya Bahuns who also migrated in with the Dhakals and Timilsinas, have also remained in Patle Gau. Like other Bahun sub-groups they are mostly engaged in farming, but some also earn a living from commercial enterprises. However, most have sold their lands to migrate to other parts of the Kavre district where lands are flatter, more fertile and easily irrigated to cultivate rice, the number one crop in Nepal. As I have narrated earlier Tikaram Dhalkoti bought the land and houses of one such migrating Acharya family. While most Dalits labour on others’ farms or in other economic sectors in the Kavre district, some Tamangs have also become as enterprising as the Bahuns. Yet they have largely chosen not to migrate elsewhere and continue farming.

A combination of these migratory patterns paired with the livelihood occupations chosen means that Acharyas, Dhakals, Pathaks, Sapkotas, and Timilsinas are the sub-caste groups residing in and around Patle Gau along with

members of Dalit and Tamang social groups. However, today there is considerable migration happening in Patle Gau, which takes three forms: temporary international migration, seasonal circulatory internal migration, and semi-permanent internal migration. These migration patterns, nonetheless, are very different for each caste and ethnic group.

There are centres outside Patle Gau which are more economically dynamic urban places which allow room for economic mobility and the possibility of more equal social relations. Therefore, while most persons of higher castes migrate for economic reasons, Dalits migrate from Patle Gau not only for economic reasons, but also to benefit from the “politics of anonymity” (Folmar, 2007; p. 45). In urban centres they are able to mask, hide or manipulate their Dalit identities so that they can interact with others in more equal ways. Such manipulation of caste-based identities is virtually impossible in rural places like Patle Gau where everybody knows everybody else, and where caste and ethnic identity is foregrounded over individual identity. Although Patle Gau is seeing a decline in overt caste-based practices, notions of caste system and associated caste hierarchy are so deeply embedded in the Nepalese society, specially in the rural areas that caste-based discrimination continues to be practiced in many covert forms (Chapter Four). This makes it very difficult for the Dalits to live socially dignified and economically fulfilling lives at home and so many of them choose to permanently migrate out of Patle Gau.

Bahunns undertake migration, but purely for economic and political reasons. Bahunns, as economically and politically powerful, do not migrate out of Patle Gau for labouring work. Rather they either go abroad to accumulate economic capital or go to urban places to accumulate cultural capital such as formal education or for white collar jobs that in turn consolidate higher social and political status at home in Patle Gau. Tamangs work in cities and abroad as

vehicle drivers and restaurant waiters with hopes of achieving upward economic mobility. Although Tamangs from other villages and districts also work in back-breaking brick-kilns, Tamangs in Patle Gau who are mostly landed, are not interested in doing this. Never stigmatised on the basis of caste to the extent that the Dalits have been, Tamangs tend to their farms and livestock in Patle Gau and even run other business enterprises. Both “high-caste” Bahuns and Janajati Tamangs feel no need to participate in the politics of anonymity like Dalits do. Young people, especially from the Bahun and Tamang communities, who do not want to labour in the tough conditions of brick kilns or elsewhere in Nepal, but desire economic opportunities, typically seek employment opportunities overseas in countries like Malaysia or the Gulf countries. Their typical argument is:

*Ke garne, dai* (brother)!? You don’t quite make the same amount of money working here in Nepal than you would working there. A few years of hard work there would probably provide us with considerable amount using which you could start a business or whatever.

### **Temporary International Migration**

I have already discussed above that the trade-related migration to India and Tibet even before the formation of the nation-state of Nepal was followed by the migration of certain ethnic groups (most specifically Rai, Limbu, Gurung and Magar),<sup>124</sup> to India for military services from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Since none of these ethnic groups reside in Patle Gau, there is no one from Patle Gau serving in these armies. Nonetheless, foreign destinations like Qatar and Malaysia attract a lot of youth from Patle Gau for non-military employment. These youths are typically young men between the age of 21 and 40 who do not have regular salaried jobs in Nepal. While a few Tamang men drive vehicles, most of these international

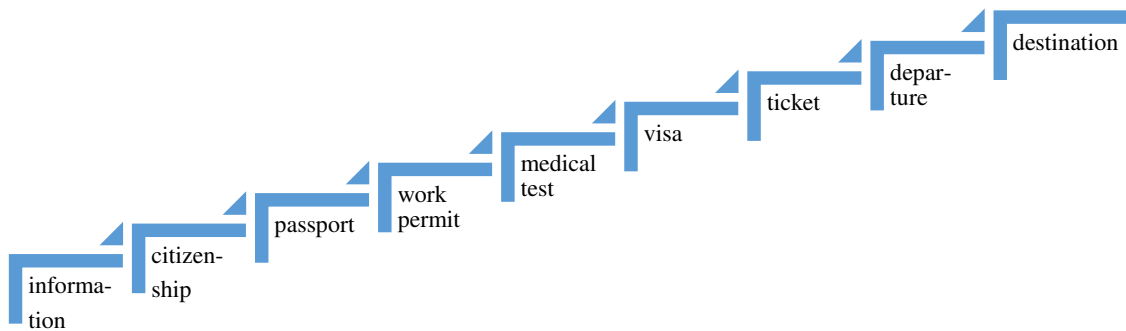
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<sup>124</sup> Before the Indian Mutiny in 1857, “Chhetri” (Hindu warrior group) was also recruited.

migrants labour in factories assembling parts of various consumer products such as refrigerators, fans, and the like or work as security guards. They usually spend a couple of years working in this way, after which their contract may or may not be extended. And while some of the returnees try to make money through rural enterprises such as shops, small furniture houses and the like, some just wait for forthcoming opportunities. Most do not seem to be interested in farming (Adhikari & Hobley, 2011; Seddon, et al., 2002).

However not all aspiring youth in Patle Gau can afford to make international trips of this kind, given that initial administrative costs per person range between NRs 100,000 and NRs 200,000 which is unaffordable for poorer families living in debt and applying for loans as little as NRs 500. In addition to these financial costs, social networks and connections are critical in order to reach the final foreign destinations (Chapagain, 2015; Sunam & McCarthy, 2016). The journey from home in a village to the final destination requires an aspiring migrant to collect necessary information, have a citizenship certificate and passport (which demands time and money), pass medical tests, acquire a visa and so on (Figure 41). For many the very first hurdle is to acquire the necessary information. They do not know who to contact or where and when to go to seek such information. The families who already have one family member abroad may not necessarily share the required information. Therefore, those lacking in such social capital (Bourdieu, 2011), especially poorer Dalits, often times are “blocked” at the very first hurdle since they fail to gain the right information.

**Figure 41 Recruitment steps for foreign employment**  
[source: (Sunam, 2016, Figure 3)]



Like, anywhere else in Nepal, any aspiring migrant in Patle Gau has to depend on an intermediary, a broker, a middle-man, typically called a *dalal*. These *dalals* benefit from rents by making contacts with a potential employer in destination foreign countries and guiding the aspirant through a work contract. The *dalals* also typically are involved in all other processes from obtaining the aspirant's citizenship certificate to buying air tickets, taking percentages whenever possible. Since it is the aspirants who have to perform all these necessary actions and bear the economic as well as transaction costs of living in an expensive place like Kathmandu, dealing with "inefficient" government bureaucracy and filling in all the necessary paperwork, a lot of illiterate poor people find these hurdles insurmountable.

In addition to leaving behind the comforts of home the salaries obtained through foreign employment, whether through labouring in factories or working as guards, are not drastically life-changing. While the company makes arrangements with *dalals*, who obtain a commission with each labour contract, the labourer typically is paid between NRs 8,000 to NRs 25,000 a month. The contract also may not necessarily go beyond a year or two. I had encounters with a couple of returnees from international migrations of this kind, and they claim that the remittances do not transform their economic lives in Patle Gau. They



have tales to tell of the travels in the plane (which almost are “the first and the only”), *jheeli meeli* (great lights) and night lives in big cities, but the fun almost always stops there. The money received is not life-changing. In one case, the Tamang man could re-invest the savings made from international migration into a small *cheeyapasal* which his wife mostly runs, whereas in the second case, the Dalit man was quite disappointed that his two years stint in Malaysia turned out to be *jasto ko tyastai* (“break even”) only. His father who was close-by when we were chatting was actually unhappy that his son only “lost” two years.

It is because of these circumstance that individuals coming from non-poor but at the same time not so rich families, but who desire better economic opportunities, seek foreign employment. Sons of wealthier Bahun families like that of Indra Acharya and Laxman Timilsina in Patle Gau are not attracted to such employment opportunities. They’d rather work to help their fathers expand their local businesses such as dairies or shops or get salaried white-collar jobs in Kathmandu which exceed the economic gains to be made in foreign countries. In fact, rumours had it that Indra Acharya made his older son quit his studies at university to give him a hand to enlarge his prospering business.

And for the political and social elite like Sironmani Sapkota and Jayjeev Dhakal migration of any kind comes with an opportunity cost that they don’t want to bear in Patle Gau. Migrating for (hard) labouring jobs that do not pay well is too high a cost to pay as they would rather enjoy the social and political status in Patle Gau. They are happy keeping themselves busy chairing co-operatives, maintaining links with district-level local political leaders and political parties and *bikase* offices such that they enjoy the “power” to guide *bikas* in Patle Gau and become *Saujees* in the process. Such aspirations, therefore, led Sironmani to build a new house in order to consolidate his social and political power, and demonstrate his “raised” economic status as one of the few men

around Patle Gau with a three-storeyed modern house. He arranged for his first son working in Kathmandu as an accountant to marry a couple of years ago a Bahun woman who was the principal of a local primary school. Siromani's second son was completing a Masters of Sociology degree from Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu which would allow him the cultural capital to get a job within the "aid industry" (Mosse, 2005). Happy with building all forms of capital and consolidating his powerful position in Patle Gau, Siromani and his sons have no need to seek labour employment opportunities abroad.

However, many in Patle Gau who are not as "settled" as Siromani Sapkota or as "economically prosperous" or considered, *Saujees*, such as Indra Acharya and Laxman Timilsina still wish for foreign employment. Yet not all surmount the hurdles I have described above. Two Bahun families have one family member and Tikaram's Dalit family has two members in Malaysia. But it is Tamangs who have the highest percentage of families with members abroad in Malaysia, Saudi Arabia or Qatar (Figure 42) where they typically drive vehicles or work as guards. The social capital of networks matters for making the right connections in order to successfully reach the desired destination, and the Tamang community in Patle Gau has cultivated much more of that capital in this regard than the other two communities.

**Figure 42 Patterns of international migration in Patle Gau**

<b>Caste or ethnic group</b>	<b>Families with at least one member abroad</b>	<b>Destinations</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
Bahun	2 (out of 14 families)	Malaysia	Factory labour
Dalit	1 (out of 24 families)	Malaysia	Factory labour
Tamang	5 (out of 13 families)	Malaysia, Qatar and Saudi Arabia	Factory labour, vehicle driving, guarding
<b>Total</b>	8 (out of 51 families)		

Amongst the Dalits in Patle Gau, it is only Tikaram Dhalkoti who has one son and one daughter working abroad<sup>125</sup>. No other Dalit family has been able to send its members abroad mostly because they cannot put together the initial costs involved. But the lure of foreign employment endures. Dhan Bahadur Pariyar's son insisted that he could earn better money if he worked in Malaysia. This is the reason why, as I have already discussed in my earlier chapters (Chapters Five and Six), Dhan Bahadur ended up depositing two *ropanis* of land to get a loan of NRs 100,000 from local money lender, Chandra Bahadur Tamang. But since Dhan's son got cheated by fraudulent *dalals* in Kathmandu, they not only lost all the money but also half the land deposited. Such a case of cheating of poorer villagers, especially of the Dalits, both by local money-lenders and by *dalals* in relation to foreign employment is neither new nor specific to Patle Gau. Many others have documented such cases of cheating elsewhere in Nepal (Adhikari & Holey, 2011; Sunam & McCarthy, 2016).

But such unfortunate incidences do not deter the ambitions of other young men who still want to try their luck in foreign countries. Shankar Dhakal, a young Bahun man, who repeatedly failed year ten examination (School Leaving Certificate) and does not have a secure salaried job, did not give up his ambition of making a trip to Malaysia. He hoped that he might be able to re-invigorate his current small-scale commercial vegetable farm with the savings made in Malaysia. But coming from an economically modest Bahun family, neither he nor his widowed mother had the financial ability to sponsor his adventure.

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<sup>125</sup> While it is usually young men between the age of 18 to 35 who have left Patle Gau for Malaysia and Qatar, Tikaram Dhalkoti's daughter is the only exception.

## Seasonal Circulatory Internal Migration

Those Dalits who do not own land to cultivate like the Bahuns and Tamangs, who do not have economic resources to finance international work opportunities and who only get meagre seasonal and occasional on-farm and off-farm labouring opportunities in Patle Gau, resort to working in the brick-kilns in Bhatkapur (a district about 45 minutes bus ride from Patle Gau) for their survival.

Immediately after Dasain and Tihar, the two biggest Hindu festivities in Nepal, I was struck by the strange quiet in the Dalit *bastee* of Patle Gau. The usual hustle bustle was totally absent. Many houses were locked, farms deserted and children playing in fields were fewer in numbers. When I asked why this was so, somebody told me:

Oh. It will be like this for at least six months now. They have left, some even with their whole families, to work in brick kilns near Kathmandu. They will come back before the monsoon starts sometime in June.

My survey data showed that more than half the Dalit families practice circulatory migration to labour in brick kilns in Bhaktapur to earn some cash for several years now. The construction sector is one of the largest economic sectors in Nepal (GON, 2015b) with a thriving brick industry:

Business is booming in Nepal's brick industry. "Demand is increasing because building is increasing," says Mahendra Chitrakar, president of the Federation of Nepal Brick Industries. "Each and every man wants to come to Kathmandu and build a house here." (Pattisson & Kelly, 2015)

To fulfil increasing demands for bricks there are around 800 brick kilns throughout the country, 112 of which are in Kathmandu Valley surrounding Kathmandu district itself (Report, 2015). And so, the Dalit *bastee* in Patle Gau is deserted from October immediately after celebration of Hindu festivals of Dasain

and Bihar because slightly more than half of the Dalit families who live there annually migrate to Bhaktapur to work in brick kilns for six months.

These brick kilns operate in open spaces. Since rain can significantly hamper brick production, particularly the “drying” and “firing” processes, the production period has to avoid the wet monsoon period from June to September. And except for chimneys used for “firing” the bricks, everything else from labourers’ quarters to places for drying bricks is temporary. The brick-kiln *Saujees* (owners) rent a number of adjoining plots of land from local land-owners in October for six months after which the respective land-owners re-assume the plots to produce rice, taking advantage of the monsoon. The brick-kiln operators provide the labourers with some space for sitting quarters, drilled water services, “raw bricks” for constructing their temporary houses and cash in advance, and the labourers themselves construct their own temporary *chaprās* (slum-like dwellings). These cramped *chaprās* are usually four-feet tall covering a few meters in area with just enough space to sleep and cook. The labourers pile up bricks which function as “walls”. They then lay a tin sheet on top of the walls, weigh it down with stones and other bricks, thus providing a “roof” to the house. A similar piece of small tin sheet works as a door to these slum-like houses. Labourers are responsible for bringing all these housing materials in tractors from their homes to these brick-kilns, the costs of which are borne by the *Naika*, another *Dalal* who mediates between the brick *Saujees* and the labourers. Since no toilets are provided the workers defecate in open spaces seriously threatening their health as well as the health of other surrounding residents. But no matter how dreadful the living conditions it is not only men who work in these brick kilns, in many instances even whole families including wives and children migrate here to work. While teenagers and adults labour in the brick kilns, the children may go to schools close-by.

Although various ethnic and caste groups such as Tamangs and Chhetris from other parts of Nepal particularly from remote districts like Humla and Doti work in the brick kilns it is only the Dalits from Patle Gau who opt for this livelihood option. Most Bahuns in Patle Gau are already well-off economically and even the poorer ones have sufficient land-holding or keep enough livestock to earn a living. The question of eking out a living by working in such harsh conditions is beyond their consideration. Similarly, for Tamangs, as one of the poorer Tamang men told me, “Why toil there? I have to take care of my farm and livestock here. *Thyahko paisa le posaudaina* (The money is not good either).” But for most landless or near landless Dalits in Patle Gau, massive drudgery and harsh living and working conditions are not a deterrent but rather an aspect of one of their only choices available for survival.

It was quite hard for me to locate the Dalit families working in brick kilns in Bhaktapur. Finding a *Naike* was the suggested first port of call. A *naike* is a *dalal*, intermediary of some kind, who usually is a man who has had some years of previous experience of working in brick kilns himself. Because of his previous experience he may have earned the trust both of the brick-kiln *Saujees* and the labourers. A brick-kiln *Saujuee* pays a number of *naikes* for arranging a number of labourers for producing an agreed number of bricks within a set period of time. To collect labourers the *Naike* normally visits *bastees* of potential labourers and verbally agrees with several individuals or families to arrange for their work in the brick kilns. He conducts his trips to the *bastee* typically in August before the start of Dasain so that he is able to make some advance payments so the labourers are able to celebrate the festivities. The *Naike* usually keeps the land deeds, if available, or even citizenship certificates of the workers as collateral, so that if the labourers fail to deliver as agreed, he retains the documents and thus prevents the labourers from making other transactions that require those documents.

After a few weeks of searching, I finally traced one Dalit family, led by Lok Purkoti, in a brick-kiln in Bhaktapur (Figure 43). Lok Purkoti had come there with his son and his son's wife who in turn had brought their small daughter. Lok Purkoti was a frail man in his late 50s. That day I was lucky to have met him in his *chakra* in the afternoon right after his lunch so he could spare some time to talk to me before resuming his work. After some niceties and formal introduction, I began the conversation by asking him why he chose to work in the brick kiln. Lok Purkoti opened up:

*Ani ke garne ta* (Then what else can be done)? We don't have much land to cultivate. We don't have other skills with which we can make money. *Lek pad ni chaina* (I cannot read or write). This body and its labour are the only things with which we can earn a living. *Khanai paryo ...* (We have to eat ...) *Bachnai paryo ...* (We have to survive), no?

I asked Lok Purkoti to describe his typical day at the kiln. Lok explained:

A typical day actually starts at night; at one. A cup of black tea or hot water is the "diet" for three or four hours during which time we mix clay with water to make it doughy. Since this task is to be done outside, we prefer working at night to avoid being exposed to the sun under which we would become sweaty and tired quickly. However, one thing that really hurts is the very cold water which we have to use with our bare hands to prepare the clay for brick. By seven in the morning, we have already made clay doughy enough to be moulded into bricks by putting them into *saacho* (wooden brick frame). At this time we have a few biscuits or whatever with water to get some energy. Then we spend the rest of the day constantly turning clay into "raw/uncooked" bricks and stacking them up by the side of the working site. In between these works, we also manage time to cook lunch which normally is *bhat* (rice) and *dal* (lentil soup). We normally retire by five in the evening. We again have a little bit of the same thing that we have during the lunch. By seven we try to sleep. Otherwise it would be difficult to get up at one next morning.

Answering my question regarding how many days a week they worked, Lok replied:

We work six days a week taking rest only on Saturdays. But then again if there are urgent things that we have to take care of, we attend to those things too. And if we want to visit our homes we do that too. It really does not matter, you know, since we don't get paid by the hour or week. It is a contract whereby we receive payment for the number of bricks we make.

**Figure 43 Lok Purkoti prepares the clay and stands in front of the chimney  
(Photos by author)**



A labourer like Lok Purkoti whether working alone or seeking the help of his entire family including wife, sons, daughters, and daughters-in-law, normally receives around NRs 40,000 (approximately AuD 500) for delivering 200,000 bricks during a six month stay at the brick kilns. This roughly converts to NRs 6,666/month. And for an average family size of 4.73<sup>126</sup>, this translates to NRs 1409 per month per person which would come to about NRs 16,908 per person per annum if the labourers worked throughout the year in brick kilns. This is only about 17% of the Minimum Wage Rate of NRs 96,000 per person per annum and

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<sup>126</sup> I have taken the average household size for Kavre district.



also falls short of the poverty line NRs. 19,261 per person per annum (ADB, 2012). This simple calculation shows that even if poor people like Lok Purkoti are to be employed throughout the year under such pay arrangements, it is difficult for them to escape poverty. And since this work is only seasonal, poor Dalits labouring in these brick kilns hunt for other labouring work in Patle Gau or elsewhere during the wet season when they are not employed in the brick-kilns to generate further income. However, they largely remain unemployed outside of the brick kilns since labouring job opportunities especially in the agricultural sector are infrequent and seasonal. To make ends meet some families use their under-age children to assist them to produce more bricks (Gurung, 2001; ILO, 2011; IREWOC, 2010; World-Education, 2009) (Figure 44).

**Figure 44 A young Dalit girl making bricks (Photo by author)**



The sub-human working and living conditions of the brick kilns and the use of child labour prompt some to label the bricks produced there “blood bricks” (Vries, 2012). Despite these horrible conditions this is still the only survival option for many Dalits who cannot rely on caste-based occupations like tailoring and cannot find regular labouring opportunities elsewhere and do not have enough land like Tikaram Dholkoti to grow food. Brick-kilns thus provide an opportunity where they can sell their bodily capital to earn income, no matter how little.

## Semi-permanent Internal Migration

My survey results as well as interviews with locals in Patle Gau showed that while many Dalits adopted seasonal circulatory migration to Bhaktapur to work in brick-kilns, some of the younger members of Dalit families also moved to Kathmandu. Finding Dalits who were in Kathmandu was an even more difficult task. They did not come to visit Patle Gau as much as their Bahun and Tamang counterparts. I was told by their families that they visited them only during the time of Hindu festivals, Dasain and Tihar. And the Dalit family themselves were quite reluctant to provide me with mobile phone numbers. But with perseverance I finally obtained the mobile phone number of a Dalit man. His name was Rajesh. Reaching Kathmandu, I called Rajesh and after some hesitancy he named a place where I could meet him for about half an hour. When I finally met Rajesh in a *cheeyapasal*, I provided him with my full introduction and appraised him of my research project.

MR: You are Rajesh ...?

Rajesh: Rajesh Katuwal.

MR: But I thought you were Rajesh Pariyar since you are from Patle Gau.

Rajesh: We are Pariyar but some of us have kept our surnames as Katuwal even in citizenship certificates. Everybody around here knows me as Katuwal.

MR: Oh, ok.

As indicated in earlier chapters most Nepalese ethnic and caste groups are identifiable by their surnames but Dalits share some surnames with Bahuns and Chhetris since they traditionally have the same Hindu origins. Due to caste-based discrimination Dalits find it particularly difficult to rent a room even in cities like Kathmandu if the home-owners (*Ghar patee/Saujees*), who are usually non-Dalits,

insist on caste distinctions (B K, 2011; Bhattachan, et al., 2009; Goyal, Dhawan, & Narula, 2005; ILO, 2005). This was confirmed by a Dalit friend who recently completed his PhD overseas and also by Purna Nepali<sup>127</sup>, another Dalit and a development practitioner in Nepal, who told me:

The Dalit identity is not only economically or politically disempowering but also psychologically depressing. That also makes the Dalits weak. I know some Dalit families who are well-to-do. Even I myself and my family are not doing that badly in economic terms. But my children tell me when there is a discussion on caste and ethnicity and they have to tell their surnames, they just get *rato peero* (red and blushed) and nervous. They prefer to say the first names only. Like I said, this psychologically depressing condition is so weakening, so disempowering.

Reflecting on Purna's words, I realised why Rajesh prefers to stick to the surname Katuwal. Since Dalits and the "high-castes" have similar phenotypic features which are typically different from Janajati features adoption of surnames common to both caste groups is a strategy to confuse caste-based identities and avoid associated stigma. Back in Patle Gau such negotiations with social identity through surnames is impossible since everyone knows everyone else. Steven Folmar refers to such political strategy of manipulating or even masking caste identities to deal with social and cultural degradation as the "politics of anonymity" (Folmar, 2007; p. 45). As Folmar suggests:

This type of action, the politics of anonymity, is an adjunct to identity politics. It entails cloaking one's identity so that it is either ambiguous or appropriates a higher status by suggesting membership in a caste to which one does not, in fact, belong. Identity politics operates most effectively at the group level, where the force of numbers makes it possible to contest one's low status. Individually, however, it is difficult to confront the social force behind discrimination successfully and the more effective strategy is

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<sup>127</sup> Like Pariyar, Nepali is another common surname to refer to *Damai* (tailor).

often to deny or obscure one's identity in favour of adopting another (Folmar, 2007, p. 50).

Clearly Rajesh Katuwal himself was engaged in such a political practice at the individual level. His reluctance to meet me in the first place, his choice of location to meet me, and his avoidance of telling me exactly where he lived in Kathmandu signify that he wanted his social identity to remain "discreet." But having the ability to manipulate his social identity in Kathmandu, Rajesh Katuwal also felt that Kathmandu provided him with employment opportunities not available in Patle Gau:

Rajesh: You have already lived in Patle Gau for so long, so you should know that we don't have much land and hence we cannot do much farming. I used to go to the brick factories too but it is really demanding. You have to get up at night at 1am to avoid the heat of the day. And then you have to "play" with the mud to turn it into clay with your bare hands using the coldest of waters and bending your back to its limits. So I stopped doing that. Instead one acquaintance introduced me to this construction sector. First I worked as a labourer on construction sites carrying sand, stone, gravel, bricks and iron rods. Slowly I started learning to plaster walls. Now I am mostly plastering. I don't have jobs throughout the year. I stay home a few months. But that is ok. I am still employed most of the year. And I earn more now than what I used to get working in brick kilns.

Living anonymously and letting others think that he is a Chhetri in Kathmandu, Rajesh Katuwal has also made some progress economically. This has been possible in Kathmandu, not in Patle Gau. Therefore, Rajesh does not like to visit Patle Gau often.

MR: How often do you go to Patle Gau then?

Rajesh: Rarely. Actually only once a year during Dasain. What is there in Patle Gau, anyway? What do you do there? Here at least most of the year I am making money. Here my kids go to a good

school compared to the one that we have there. There is nothing there.

Rajesh has a dejected look when he thinks of Patle Gau. Patle Gau does not excite him, does not attract him anymore. It seemed as if he was only bound to the village as the site of his birth and because his parents still live there. Only this parent-child tie binds him to Patle Gau. Even his sisters have been married off from Patle Gau: one to Kathmandu, the other to Dhulikhel. His material tie to Patle Gau is almost non-existent. Patle Gau reminds the likes of Rajesh Katuwal of a place where even a person as rich as Tikaram Dhalkoti lives a life of a Dalit. In Patle Gau they are the “lowly”, Damai, an inescapable identity.

An impersonal and alien space like Kathmandu provides Rajesh Katuwal and other Dalits like him a chance to escape their Dalit status. In Kathmandu, they do not have to continue caste-based jobs like their forefathers did - sewing and playing musical instruments in various social and religious ceremonies. Even if the opportunities for employment are limited to manual labouring, brick laying, plastering walls, or tailoring in garment houses to mass-produce apparel for domestic markets, it provides them with a chance to earn better wages and live on more equal social terms, avoiding discrimination as much as possible. Here, they can think of giving their children a better future through good education. So, they prefer to toil hard in Kathmandu. They do not want to go back to live in Patle Gau. Patle Gau is their past and bits of their present. But their future is somewhere else, perhaps in Kathmandu.

But if this is why Dalits leave Patle Gau, then Tamangs leave it for different reasons. While a small number of them are acquiring higher education in Kathmandu, most Tamangs go there for economic reasons. Having been classified traditionally as a “touchable” caste, Tamangs *can* find jobs in the food industry with no stigma attached. Some of them work as kitchen helpers or

waiters in restaurants to serve the expanding middle class in Kathmandu. But usually they drive taxis. They sometimes live there with their families or they leave them behind in Patle Gau and visit them from time to time. When I asked the sister of a Tamang man who was driving a taxi in Kathmandu why there was so many Tamangs driving taxis in Kathmandu, she responded:

*Afanta le afantalai tancha* (Relative pull relatives). But then again you need to learn the skill, no? It takes time and money to do that. With brothers and relatives offering to help with training as well as practicing, I guess it makes it easier for them to pass on the skill, no?"

An amalgamation of all sorts of capital - economic (the money needed to learn the skill), social (membership of related networks), and cultural (the embodiment of driving skills) has allowed Tamangs to work as taxi-drivers in Kathmandu more than any other ethnic or caste group from Patle Gau. It was not just Dalits and Tamangs who semi-permanently migrate to Kathmandu. Bahuns do too. But the motivations, sentiments, emotions and reasons are vastly different.

One day as I was going to Kathmandu from Patle Gau in a local bus to attend a conference on *bikas*, a young man sat next to me and smiled. I had seen him a few times before in the village and had known him to be a son of a Bahun man whose main occupation was to operate a poultry farm. As we talked with each other in the bus I came to know that like Sironmani Sapkota's son he mostly stayed in Kathmandu where he was pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Business Management. He was thus an example of someone who goes to Kathmandu not necessarily for economic capital but to accumulate cultural and social capital, which is re-invested in multiple forms of capital in the future. Thomas Bell has also made similar observations:

Young, mostly Brahmin [Bahun], men from the village elites came to Kathmandu to study. They lived as cheaply as they could, in rented

rooms at first, because everything about Kathmandu was expensive. Later they became journalists, lawyers, government officials, and aid industry middle managers. They hitched their wagons to one or other of the two main parties and became the rising class of democratic Nepal (Bell, 2014, p. 298).<sup>128</sup>

These young Bahuns who are typically men—women are mostly made to marry rather than pursue professional career — take up university degrees in Kathmandu in order they may end up getting “white collar” jobs in the future or may eventually fly abroad to the US to secure an even better future. Or as in the case of Bikash Acharya, his father’s expanding dairy business means he needed to give up his studies to help his father manage this flourishing business that he will one day inherit. Things are similar for Sandesh Timilsina, but he does not have to directly compete with Bikash since his father has a lucrative commercial poultry farm.

It is not only relatively well-off Bahun youth who have to take care of business in Patle Gau but even economically poor Bahun youth do not feel the pressure to leave it altogether. Shankar Dhakal is one such case. The son of a widow, Shankar Dhakal could not pursue a university degree because of financial constraints, so he stayed back in Patle Gau where he assisted his mother in cultivating vegetables commercially and selling buffalo milk to local dairies. They have more than ten *ropanis* of land and can easily access the services of the District Agriculture Development Office due to their social networks (Shankar is a nephew of Jayjeev Dhakal who frequents *bikase* offices in Dhulikhel). Shankar actually irrigates his farms using subsidised pipes and pumps received through public programmes. Similarly, his younger brother Subash Dhakal works as a temporary teacher in a local primary school because their uncle, Jayjeev Dhakal

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<sup>128</sup> The Figures 21 to 25 in Chapter Five also are testimonies that powerful political positions have mostly taken up by Bahun men in Kavre district and Patle Gau from 1960s till date.

happens to be the chair of the school management committee and was influential in hiring Subash.

In almost exact opposition to young Dalit men, for young Bahun men Patle Gau is a sweet home. A place to stay. And to come back to often even if they are studying in Kathmandu undertaking higher degrees. They maintain strong emotional as well material ties with Patle Gau. Patle Gau is still lucrative for them. There is still a lot of scope and hope for them in Patle Gau, where their status and distinction can still be maintained and different combinations of power and influence can still be consolidated.

## **Conclusion**

Migration of all sorts is not a new phenomenon in Nepal. Whether migrating within Nepal or outside of it Nepalese peoples have always been motivated to migrate for mostly economic reasons: in the past to seek better farming grounds for enhanced food production and in the present to search for greater incomes in the economically diversified capitalist economy of urban Nepal. This is also true of the three social groups residing in Patle Gau. By using the life trajectories of several of them such as Tikaram Dhalkoti, I have illustrated in this chapter how different caste groups engage with migration – whether international, circulatory or semi-permanent – and how they benefit from migration in quite distinct ways.

Citing a case in a hilly district of Khotang where three Dalit families were able to buy lands from thirteen Bahun families, Adhikari and Hogley draw attention to economic mobility to observe that “remittances are now driving social change in the hills, in ways that revolution and development [*bikas*] have really failed to deliver” (J. Adhikari & Hogley, 2011; p. 56). This is an exaggeration because even if migration allows room for upward economic



mobility and divergent ways of thinking and being, it does not necessarily change the worldviews of those left behind. Dalit women like Meena Purkoti and Durga B K, found agency to verbally and physically challenge the practices of caste-based discrimination (Chapter Four) not because they were international migrants but because they found “empowerment” in the Maoist discourse of only “two castes” (man and woman). Likewise, they learnt through the media, which broadcasts state development messages, that caste-based discriminatory practices were illegal and punishable. But Adhikary and Hobley are partly right to suggest that migration does open opportunities for unbelievable economic transformations. For instance, Tikaram Dhalkoti, was able to travel outside of Nepal in his youth, a move ironically made possible by his Bahun *mit* in an odd case of brother-like friendship between the ritually pure and the impure. Due to a kind employer Tikaram was able to work for the Indian Railways for twenty years and returned to Nepal with a considerable amount of wealth. His investment of that money makes him stand out from other Dalits: he is landed amongst the landless and near-landless Dalits. But even then, due to the deep-seated social consciousness of caste system his upward economic mobility did not allow him any upward social mobility. His buying of lands and houses from Acharya Bahuns yielded the reverse of gentrification through which a former Bahun *bastee* turned into Dalit *bastee* as Bahuns started residing further away from him. His elevated economic status—that enabled him to own two houses and send two of his children to Malaysia, a feat difficult even for Bahuns and Tamangs lacking in necessary economic and social capital—does not cleanse him of his ritual impurity.

Thus, he is as rich as the Bahuns and Tamangs who are deemed ritually clean to run food-based enterprises profitably and attain the status of *Saujees* - a rich man, a property holder, a money-lender. But Tikaram is not a *Saujee*.

Nobody looks upon him for social and political leadership. He does not head the village development committee and he does not chair any of community-based *bikase* bodies. His economic upward mobility does not translate into any social or political upward mobility. Living among other Dalits he is still just another Dalit, another Meejar, another Sarkee. Yet his higher economic base provides him with the luxury to avoid the back-breaking toil of working in brick-kilns, and nor does he need to depend on other landed groups for agricultural produce. His financial wealth has allowed him to send two of his children to Malaysia which many Dalits and some Bahuns and Tamangs can only dream of. In fact, Dhan Bahadur Pariyar and his son have only gotten deeper into poverty while pursuing such a dream.

Many Dalits therefore deposit their land deeds and citizenship certificates with a *dalal* in order to perform back-breaking activities in the sub-human working conditions of brick-kilns. Others choose to migrate to cities and urban centres to live more dignified lives. This is not to suggest that urban spaces like Kathmandu are totally discrimination free or that they harbour a society that is caste-conscious free. In fact, the concept of caste system permeates many walks of life not only in towns and urban spaces (B K, 2011; Gellner & Quigley, 1995; Parish, 1996) but also in the international diaspora (Pariyar, 2011, 2016). But what my ethnographic study shows is that unlike rural native villages where “anonymity” cannot be maintained or practiced, the “impersonal” nature and access to new environments in the urban spaces enables Dalits like Rajesh Katuwal to employ the strategic politics of anonymity to not only live dignified lives in equal social relations with other groups but also hope to carve out better future for their children through the attainment of added economic and educational resources.

Tamangs, who mostly have sufficient lands to cultivate food and raise livestock start with a higher economic base than Dalits and hence do not toil in the brick-kilns. Instead their social capital allows them to deal with hurdles associated with finding foreign employment and to gain jobs as vehicle drivers and guards in Malaysia and Gulf countries. Not suffering from the stigma of “untouchability” they can also participate either as taxi-drivers or as kitchen helpers and restaurant waiters in Kathmandu. Migration for Tamangs is about upward economic mobility, for their social identity allows them to relate with Bahuns more or less on equal social terms.

While for the non-poor but non-rich Bahuns labouring in brick-kilns is “unthinkable” labouring in foreign countries for increased incomes is attractive. For richer Bahuns even “mediocre” remittances from foreign employment are not an attractive option as they enjoy higher social, political as well as economic status in Patle Gau. *Saujees* like Indra Acharya and Laxman Timilsina concentrate on expanding their profitable businesses in Patle Gau rather than migrating. And for politically “active” Siromani Sapkota who leads the local co-operative, managing *bikase* activities in Patle Gau, migration is not even a consideration. He would rather stay back in the village and chair this co-operative, manage the school management committee, co-ordinate with local leaders and incoming *bikase* government and non-government agents and remain happy attaining more power and influence in Patle Gau.

All of the above shows that the concept of caste system is so influential in Patle Gau that its residents choose migratory paths dependent on it. Enjoying the least cultural capital associated with caste system, Dalits employ the politics of anonymity; and enjoying the maximum cultural capital Bahuns consolidate their top social position by choosing or not choosing migration depending on their current strategies for optimising economic mobility.

## Chapter 8 Conclusion

I met Rajkumar Purkoti, a seventeen year old Dalit youth, a few times during my fieldtrip to Patle Gau. Rajkumar had scored brilliantly in level ten exams (School Leaving Certificate) and had hoped that he would become a medical doctor one day. But once he found how difficult it was for his father to accumulate NRs 8,000 (AuD 94) for his admission to a college, he lost all his hopes. He now has no dreams, whatsoever. Aahuti, a Dalit Marxist activist and intellectual, told me that if only Rajkumar had not come from a poor Dalit family, he could easily have been a doctor with the kind of academic score he had. Rajkumar's younger sister, aged nine, who is also very good at her studies at school is totally unaware of the structural barrier that Rajkumar had to face and so she still harbours the same dream. It is nice to note that her thoughts have not yet been conditioned by the encounters with caste-based structural barriers. My entire research was driven by a desire to understand such structural barriers which prevent poor Dalits to escape poverty in a deeply unequal Nepalese society.

Scholars debate the precise nature of equality and generally agree that equal distribution of wealth and resources is an impractical ideal. But many still argue that equality of human worth and self-esteem is achievable (Anderson, 1999; Arneson, 1995; Young, 2001) (Chapter 1). Such a conception of equality demands that peoples identifying with different caste, gender, ethnicity, religion and geography relate to each other equally. In a society where equal social relations exist everyone may not be equally wealthy, strong, intelligent or hold equally powerful (political) positions (Runciman, 1967) but each will still "express respect or recognition" (Fourie, et al., 2015, p. 5) to another and "make

claims ... in virtue of their equality, not their inferiority [or superiority] to others” (Anderson, 1999, p. 289).

I sought in a caste-conscious society like Patle Gau to explore existing asymmetrical and unequal social relations as when a Dalit cannot enter a house of a non-Dalit or when a non-Dalit cannot accept food or water provided by a Dalit while the reverse is not true (Chapter 2 and 4). Gerard Toffin argues that the idea of egalitarianism and equality is not a totally foreign concept to Nepal because a Hindu reformist movement challenged caste rigidity in the seventeenth century and many Nepalese ethnic populations themselves were traditionally devoid of caste-based hierarchical system (Toffin, 2013a). For instance, an indigenous Nepalese ethnic group Gurung customarily had distinct clan groups among them but these in no way treated each other as superiors or inferiors (Macfarlane, 1997). Each clan was different but not ranked. Toffin has similar remarks about the Tamang community (cited in Holmberg, 2007, p. 126). It was only after the Nepalese state’s enforcement of caste laws to make Nepal a pure Hindu kingdom in the eighteenth century that the tendency emerged among the ethnic groups to slowly but surely cultivate a sense of caste hierarchy (Bhattachan, 2000; Gurung, 2003, 2005; Michaels, 1997; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 1997) (Chapter 2).

The previous rulers of Nepal the Shahs, Ranas and the Panchayat system managers did not “invent” or “discover” the caste system but adapted it to solidify their legitimacy to rule and to consolidate their privileged “high-caste” positions (Michaels, 1997) (Chapters 1 and 2). But even when multi-party democracy was reinstated in 1990 devoid of old rulers and their style of ruling, it adopted neo-liberal approaches to governance and economy which remained blind to the cultural distinctions between caste and ethnic groups and only deepened the economic, social and political inequalities across class, caste,

ethnicity, gender, and geographies Bennett, et al., 2006; Gellner, 2007a, 2016; Lawoti, 2010b) (Chapters 2 and 3). Even the discourses of new Nepal initiated during the Maoist Revolution and culminating in *Jana-andolan II* which embraced the values of equality and egalitarianism have only reformulated the political governance systems failing to dismantle caste privileges (Ogura, 2012; Toffin, 2013a, 2013b).

The constant hope throughout the numerous *andolans* including *Jana-andolan II* was to create political and social spaces within a legal frame in which each social group (based on caste, ethnicity, gender, etc.) could relate to all others in equal social relations and eventually enjoy deeper forms of equality. It was hoped that achieving equal social relations would provide equal opportunities for economic and social mobility. The rhetoric of *bikas* promulgated by the state was positioned in such ways that equal opportunities were to be given to all social groups to participate and benefit in the omnipresent practices of *bikas* (Fujikura, 2013; Pigg, 1992, 1993). *Bikas* rhetoric wanted everyone to believe that the new Nepal after 2006 would provide equal political and social spaces for every social group in a way the 1990 democratic governance had not. The discourse of new Nepal claimed that the country would be free from social inequality and that even if not everyone were to have equal wealth, wealth would still be re-distributed in such a way that no one would remain hungry, poor or landless (Frankfurt, 1987; Hachhethu & Gellner, 2010; Hangen, 2007; Mage & D'Mello, 2007; D. Thapa, 2012; Vasily, 2009).

Even if the latest political lexicon has started to include *unnatee* (improvement), *pragati* (progression), *sammunnatee* (higher progression), and even *sambridhi* (prosperity), for all practical purposes they all mean the same thing: *bikas* (development). The *andolans* for equality and of discourse *bikas* have almost always inter-locked. But all the grand political statements and dreams for

social equality and equality of opportunities through the rhetoric of *bikas* have been undermined by extensive and everyday practices of caste discrimination which function as “structural social relations that tend to privilege some [high caste] more than the others [Dalits]” to “reproduce social processes that reinforce one another” (Young, 2001, p. 2) enabling some but constraining others to fully enact their agencies.

It is against this backdrop of the dialectic between democratic values and caste structure which has made Nepal presently a “hybrid form of a formal republican political system superimposed on a durable caste base” (Toffin, 2013a, p. 123) that I aimed in this thesis to explore why it has been so difficult to achieve the equality of social relations as the very first step in this process. My central argument is that caste remains a major factor of discrimination that inhibits the attainment of equality of social relations and yields vast inequalities in economic wealth (landholding, rural enterprises and employment opportunities), cultural capital (including education) and even migration prospects (Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7). In contradiction to Mark Liechty’s (Liechty, 2003, 2010) argument that the rise of the middle class in modern times has displaced caste in Nepal, my ethnography has shown, in agreement with Cameron, Folmar, Gellner, and Toffin, that caste identities remain “primordial” in Nepalese social psyche, most specifically in rural areas (Cameron, 2005; Folmar, 2004, 2007; Gellner, 2016; Toffin, 2013a).

Unlike the arguments made by some scholars on similar topics in India that the modern economy has served to increasingly blur the caste-based boundaries diminishing occupational segregation and reducing inequalities (Kapur et al., 2010), my findings echo the arguments made by Corbridge et al.:

The notion that “caste does not matter any more” is endlessly repeated in the living rooms of India’s middle classes. But it has little meaning for Dalit labourers, whose lives continue to be shaped by discrimination (Corbridge, Harriss & Jeffrey, 2013, p. 257).

Following Steven Folmar’s suggestion that in order to understand how *bikas* affects the social structure in Nepalese villages we need to untangle the dualism of things: traditional (caste social order) and modern (secular democratic citizenship) (Folmar, 2004, pp. 56-57), I show that *bikas* in Patle Gau can operate only in the limited space defined by the caste system. Consequently, uneven playing grounds are constructed for the different caste groups (Chapters 4, 5 and 6). Such a caste-based cultural core means that in Nepalese society the conditions of material well-being in terms of land ownership, economic wealth, social and political powers in rural areas display almost one to one correspondence with the long-denounced caste hierarchical system – Bahuns at the top, Dalits at the bottom, and Tamangs (Janajatis) in between (GON & UNDP, 2014; UNDP-Nepal, 2001, 2004).

Throughout the thesis, I have shown that caste-based discrimination, although increasingly challenged and resisted in public places, continues to remain such a deeply held cultural core that it functions as “natural” and “primordial” distinction (birth-ascribed, God-given) in Patle Gau (Chapter 4). What Louis Dumont observed decades ago in arguing that caste societies are primarily organized around the notion of purity and pollution (Dumont, 1980) still holds true in Patle Gau, rural Nepal. I argue that Nepalese rural spaces still constitute a site where social relations are based not on equality of Nepalese citizenry but on unequal social relations of caste. Here, the distinction and purity of the Bahun is protected from the less pure Tamang and the impure and polluting Dalit. Caste system manifests in practices of segregated residential areas, asymmetrical entry into houses, unequal food sharing, differentiated



livestock keeping and endogamy. Residential segregation is such a strong marker for the maintenance of distinction that in an example of reverse gentrification, previously Bahun occupied land loses its purity when it becomes permanently occupied by the impure Dalit (e.g. Tikaram Dhalkoti, Chapter 4). A Dalit does not enter a non-Dalit's house. Food and water still get accepted and rejected in terms of purity and impurity so that a Dalit cannot keep teashops, pubs or dairies. Pig-keeping becomes a boundary-marker between purity and impurity such that the Bahuns continue not to raise or consume pig. And, marriage gets arranged within caste groups perpetuating caste segregation and distinction. All these therefore remain the most distinct denominators of social relationships.

The concept of caste system is so deeply held in rural minds and bodies that the Dalits stigmatized by such perceptions are forced to escape their "exposed" social identity, which precedes their individual identity, by migrating to urban spaces (Chapter 7). This is not to suggest that urban spaces are occupied with educated caste-less peoples who are less discriminatory in their practices. On the contrary, I present in the thesis several cases in which the educated urban dwellers, like their rural counter-parts, invoke *dharma* (religion, duty, natural order of things), *chalan* (tradition), and external structures such as family pressure as "excuses" to continue practicing discriminatory behaviours. Still, impersonal urban cities provide spaces for many Dalits enabling them to engage in the politics of anonymity (Folmar, 2007) to access employment opportunities and live more dignified lives than at their homes of origin.

My study therefore shows that unequal social relationships of everyday life embedded in the deeply held social belief system of "natural" caste hierarchy continue to represent a structural obstacle to equality of opportunity. My research has shown that the neo-liberal claim that *bikas* can equalize the opportunity to anyone irrespective of group identity in ways that even the most

marginalized can be economically uplifted and are able to gain cultural capital like anyone else under similar circumstances, is not true. The neo-liberal economic project accompanying the 1990 political democracy “that emphasized market deepening and capital access with little regard for the cultural politics of social change” (Rankin, 2004, p. 203) is blind to the structure of caste that privileges some and burdens others. Its claim that mobilization of the social economy (through NGOs, co-ops and community-based organizations) will provide credit facilities to all caste groups such that more economic growth will be achieved (GON, 1992) and poverty alleviated amongst the poor and landless (Dalits in the case of Patle Gau) fails to acknowledge that those dominating social relations channel these financial institutions and their services in ways that only consolidate the pre-existing unequal social and power relations and structural positions (Chapter 6). Therefore, the privileged continue performing the less labour demanding jobs while the most marginalized perform the most degraded and labour intensive roles. In 1972 A. Patricia Caplan wrote about a village in western Nepal:

Only in a few instances does development [*bikas*] appear to bring opportunities to low-caste people, and this usually when there is a demand for services which most others are unwilling to perform because they are regarded either as degrading or polluting. The untouchables [Dalits] of Duari [a village] earn money by portering heavy loads of stones from mountain quarries to the bazaar (Caplan, 1972, p. 87).

More than forty years since Caplan wrote this, the Dalits still perform work that others can afford to ignore, such as making bricks under inhumane conditions in Bhaktapur (Chapters 5, 6 and 7). This is so because the “high-caste” (Bahun) and occasionally the ethnic Tamang utilize their “higher” and “middle” caste status to assume leadership and powerful roles and utilize their kin networks (*afno-manche, natabad-kripabad*) (Bista, 1991; Kondos, 1987a) to distribute

resources for the economic mobility of their own group such as in the (re) distribution of land, credit, fertilizer, or employment opportunities (Chapters 5 and 6). The Dalits have no such cultural and social capital and so remain marginalized. Consequently, the unequal distribution of all kinds of capital within a weak Nepalese state without the resources to substantially expand the welfare programmes means that the respective structural positions of the social groups only become more consolidated. Thus, Indra Acharya does not mind his money (about NRs 25 lakh) being “stuck” in the village since his overall economic position is making him richer by the day, and Siromani Sapkota has become one of the new rich, while Jit Bahadur Pariyar and Dhan Bahadur Pariyar become more landless and remain in perpetual debt to the richer Bahuns, Tamangs and even co-ops (Chapters 5, 6 and 7).

The Dalits who cannot escape Dalitness by permanently migrating to cities and have to remain in the village live paradoxically in economic inter-dependence with the landed Bahuns as “friendly enemies” (Mouffe, 2000, p. 13):

... persons who are friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way (Mouffe, 2000, p. 13).

The pure Bahun use the same spaces in Patle Gau to maintain their religiously superior caste status in sharp contrast to the impure Dalit who want to get rid of their impure status by appealing to their common identity as “equal” Nepalese citizens of the secular Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal. Even though they are differentiated in caste status, they remain economically inter-dependent. The landed Bahuns need the labour of the landless to increase their economic wealth and the landless Dalit need the occasional labouring opportunities provided by the landed to subsist economically. Therefore, I do not suggest that their mutual economic inter-dependence be removed altogether

such that the poor and marginalized are liberated to act as resourceful agents with unrestrained agency to act as the liberal citizenship would like us believe (Robins, Cornwall, & Von Lieres, 2008, p. 1076). Totally dissolving such economic inter-dependence in an economy where the markets don't favour the Dalits and where the financially poor state cannot provide them with sufficient welfare, the Dalits would have more to lose than gain. Rather, I argue that the forms of mutual inter-dependence (which dictate the practices of *bikas* presently) be mobilized in ways that are socially progressive such that the poor do not perpetually remain poor because they are impure and the rich do not continue to become richer purely on the basis that they are pure and naturally deserve such privileges (Rank, 2004; Rawls, 1971; Sandel, 2012; Stiglitz, 2012; Young, 1990, 2001).

### **Dalit Marginalization: Structural Poverty**

Some attempts have been made previously to theorize Nepal's failed *bikas* and resulting inequalities. But my ethnographic evidence shows it is not the belief in fatalism in which "one has no personal control over one's life circumstances, which are determined through a divine or powerful external agent" (Bista, 1991, p. 4) that consigns the marginalized to their low status and allows the continuity of unequal social relations (Chapter 4). It is also not Nepal's loss of autonomy in accepting aid conditionality from its *bikase* partners, as Panday suggests, that is the cause of the distribution of unequal opportunities in *bikase* practices (Panday, 1999). The class-based argument of Adhikari, Blaikie, Cameron and Seddon that it is the unequal relationship between elite class of Kathmandu and the non-elite classes in remote districts that causes the failure of *bikas* is also not adequate to explain the continuity of Dalit poverty in many non-remote districts like Kavre (Adhikari, 2008; Blaikie, et al., 1980; Seddon, 1987). I argue that it is the sheer impregnability of the elite privileges of Bahun men maintained through inter-locking and mutually reinforcing nexus of caste status,

economic position (land-holding, wealth), leadership roles, education and social networks (*afno-manche, natabad-cripabad*) that continuously reproduce unequal social relations. This in turn has resulted in vast economic inequalities across caste groups which make it almost impossible for the Dalits to escape poverty.

Perpetuation of such unequal social relations means that the rich landed powerful elite get to channel all resources and the gap between the poor and the rich is unaffected. Unless these unequal social relations are neutralised, poverty will remain, and massive group inequalities will endure. The vast economic inequalities and rampant poverty (amongst the Dalits) that the discourse and practices of *bikas* are intended to correct, cannot be understood by simply referring to the tools of economics, liberal democracy or aid/*bikase* management manuals because it is first and foremost a structural poverty (Farmer, 2004). It is not the failure of an individual but of a defective politico-economic system that is heavily biased against the poor and the least powerful, the (Royce, 2015). Poverty among Dalits can be:

... traced back to structural factors that serve to favour certain groups over others, generally based on gender, class, or race [caste]. Of the various institutional environments that tend to sustain a multitude of economic barriers to different groups, it is *discrimination* based on race [caste] and gender that create most insidious obstructions (Jordan, 2004, p. 22 - my emphasis).

And such poverty is:

... "structured" by historically given (and often economically driven) processes and forces that conspire—whether through routine, ritual, or, as is more commonly the case, the hard surfaces of life—to constrain agency ... the arrangements are structural because they are embedded in the political and economic organization of our social world [such that] ... for many ... choices both large and small are limited by racism [casteism], sexism ... (Farmer, 2004, p. 6)

I have demonstrated throughout my thesis that political, social and economic structures in villages are such that they enormously curtail the Dalits' agency to escape poverty. They cannot fully participate in the food economy because they cannot keep teashops or dairies and this is because non-Dalits will not eat any food touched or prepared by them. They cannot farm commercially because they are generally landless. And when even landlessness is overcome as Tikaram Dhalkoti did through his lucky and successful migration to India, he could not "upgrade" from Dalitness. His economic wealth did not allow him to attain the higher status of a *Saujee* (rich man) or become a "touchable." Instead, even the house and the lands he bought from Bahuns have been converted from the Acharya (Bahun) *bastee* to a Dalit *bastee* (Chapters 4, 5 and 6).

Most Dalits are illiterate and it may be proposed that illiteracy itself can be a structure which can be overcome to escape Dalitness. But attaining literacy does not allow a Dalit to be a non-Dalit. Literate Dalits like Meena Purkoti, Durga B K and Rajkumar Dhalkoti are still perceived to be Dalits. They live with Dalits as Dalits. Each day they face discrimination which they continuously resist, especially in public spaces. Even they cannot challenge the discriminatory practices occurring daily in the private spaces. So the rich, landed and educated Dalits still cannot rid their bodies of the "impurity" which the non-Dalits assume their bodies to possess. So, although Bahuns and Tamangs superficially consider the Dalits to be equal citizens in public and commercial spaces, deep in their minds they do not consider them as moral equals.

I therefore argue that it is the notion of purity/impurity that prevents the Dalits from symmetrical water and food exchanges, inter-marriages, and residential inter-mingling. Consequently, it is not economic poverty (and landlessness) or illiteracy but the deeply held notion of purity/impurity in the minds of many rural residents combined with impregnable Bahun privileges that

act as the main structural impediments for the Dalits to fully realise their agencies, escape poverty and live lives with *ijjat* (respect).

In the Indian states of Kerala and West Bengal where the marginalized (landless, small peasants, women) have achieved greater participation in *bikase* processes is because the state's redistribution policies created political spaces within which the political clout of the landed elite was heavily reduced and poor groups could participate within and beyond the formal state institutions (Harriss, 1999; Hickey & Mohan, 2005; Webster & Engberg-Pedersen, 2002). In Nepal, such radical political spaces have never been created, not even by the radical Maoist Revolution and their governments who have lost the impetus in turning their caste-less ideology to reality, perhaps because they were forced to compromise in joining the mainstream politics and then were further weakened in their defeat in the second Constituent Assembly elections. The many social changes in the name of equality that they dreamed of and struggled for during the ten-year revolution have not fully materialized (Ogura, 2012; Toffin, 2013b). Their demands for proscribing alcohol consumption, practices of untouchability, child marriage, teaching Sanskrit and celebrating Hindu festivals such as Dasain were so radical and at times so violently imposed that as soon as they ended their war to join the mainstream parliamentary democracy, many of these demands regressed (Ogura, 2012). Even their radical vision of having only two *jat* (castes) in Nepal (men and women) lost ground. When forced into a tactical renunciation of revolutionary methods as demanded by the international revolutionary movement they were quickly and thoroughly "domesticated by the (existing) political culture ... which is far from the Marxist ideology of opposing classes" so much so that their momentum for drastic changes towards attaining all sorts of equality conclusively halted (Toffin, 2013b, p. 40). Some have argued that many women were "empowered", whether by accident or by intention, during

the Maoist Revolution (Leve, 2007; Pettigrew, 2012; Pettigrew & Shneiderman, 2004), but the “domesticated” Maoists after joining the liberal democracy have ditched “any plans for state-building” to “play extremely short-term politics” pursuing personal powers and have shelved any long-term programmes for lessening social equalities (Ogura, 2012). Therefore, the country continues to be run by conservative “high caste” men in political leadership and civil bureaucracy with elements of reform of social and gender inclusion (Lawoti, 2010b, 2012; Toffin, 2013b). So unlike in Kerala and West Bengal, the landed elite in Nepal have consistently remained politically powerful as the translators and brokers of *bikas* (Lewis & Mosse, 2006) in ways that further cement their original privileged statuses.

### **Caste, Social Change and *Bikas***

The narrative thus far is not to suggest that rural societies remain static in a “capsule” unaffected by time. However, some changes have occurred. Shifts from caste-hierarchy to equal citizenry are occurring. But the change is slow and minimal. To accelerate the change towards equal citizenry the Nepalese state managers accommodated the Maoists demands for social change and shifted Nepal’s macro-structure from Hindu monarchy to secular republic. They even declared the nation as “untouchability and caste-based discrimination free” nation in 2006, criminalized the acts of caste-based discrimination in private and public spaces through enactment of the Caste-based Discrimination and Untouchability Act in 2011 and aired social messages on television against caste-based discrimination. All this demonstrated the political commitment at *undoing* what *Muluki Ain* (National Code) did in 1854 by which the then Nepalese state managers imposed and enforced caste-hierarchy to change the behaviours of even the non-Hindu ethnic groups who enforced to behave like castes according



to the ranks given to them (Chapter Two) (Allen, 1997; Michaels, 1997; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 1997).

At the village-level, the distinction between Kumai Bahun and Purbia Bahun has completely vanished but their distinction from the Tamang and Dalits as a Bahun group persists. The vocabulary of social identity has changed from one that focused on the caste-based purity/impurity dichotomy and hierarchy to one that represents a political citizenship of difference. Former cultural identities of “*achhyut*” (untouchable) “*sano jat*” (small caste), “*pani na chalne jat*” (water unacceptable caste) have changed into the political identity of Dalits. However, to replace the primordial religious connotation with a political one whose disadvantages may be corrected through political means has proved difficult. The shameful and polluting “*matwali*” (alcohol-drinker) have become Janajati asserting their unique and proud cultural bearings. Even the Bahun-Chhetri or Chhetri-Bahun are no more *thulo jat* (big caste), *matheello jat* (high caste) or *thagadhaari* (wearer of holy cords). They are simply Bahun or Chhetri. In the latest political lexicon the Bahu-Chhetri have been renamed as Khas Arya. Although this renaming was a move to allow the economically poor among Bahun-Chhetri to participate in the state’s affirmative programmes, it is also a shift from hierarchized identity (ranked above *Matwaali* and *pani na chalne jat*) to one that is only vertically different in terms of culture (What/who is below of Khas Arya? None/no one). Such naming and renaming of social identities in the present contexts demonstrated that the Nepalese society is moving more and more from caste-based hierarchial structure to becoming more egalitarian encompassing horizontal differences of cultural identities.

The naming and renaming of social identities and the politics involved in accessing economic opportunities through programmes of affirmative actions may harden ethnic differences (Shneiderman, 2013) but they do not affirm caste

hierarchy. These are palpable shifts towards attaining social equality as David Gellner puts it:

Within the lifetime of today's senior citizens Nepal has moved from a genuinely hierarchical society, where all difference implied rank and where genuine difference was tolerated and encompassed, to an avowedly egalitarian society that guarantees human rights and equality in its constitution. Rank and status still exist, of course, but they can no longer be openly asserted. Status differences must, rather in the manner that Louis Dumont argued, be denied, hidden, disavowed, and reintroduced as a form of radical genetic or national difference. It is inevitably painful to change the hierarchical, empire-based models of the past and replace them with universal equality (Gellner, 2016, pp. 31-32).

This pain is measured in the thousands of lives lost during the Maoist Revolution.

The most marginalized have also shown some social and economic mobility too. A few Dalits have escaped Dalitness to find jobs and earn better livelihoods in the cities. A couple of Dalit women have assumed leadership roles leading *bikase* activities. Since everyday politics are fully interwoven with acts of dominance and resistance (Masaki, 2006, 2010) overt forms of discrimination especially in public places have been increasingly challenged and resisted and consequently have declined (Chapter 4).

Nonetheless, all these are superficial compromises and cosmetic compliances to the national political rhetoric of equality. The discourse of inclusion has infiltrated villages but the practical benefits are still limited. Just as the feminist literature argues that women hit the "glass ceiling" (Bruckmüller, Ryan, Rink, & Haslam, 2014) which acts as subtle but real barrier to their attempts to conquer the organizational hierarchy, so the Dalits and even Tamangs have not reached the social position that allows them to manage, guide, and lead rural villages and their *bikase* activities. Their nominal presence in the executive

committees of the many *bikase* institutions is for appearance only. Most times they don't attend meetings because they are labouring for much-needed money. When they do attend these meetings, they either remain silent or their voices do not carry weight. Therefore, the village is still led by Bahun men in all spheres. They represent most of the central political parties and become the parties' power-brokers and translators in the village such that any all-party mechanisms at district and village levels are overwhelmingly composed of them. They dominate numerous *bikase* government offices and non-government local bodies such as school management committees, co-ops and NGOs in number and in voice. They also control the rural economy as property holders of shops, dairies, vegetable collection centres and many other enterprises on top of being local money-lenders. Therefore, the Bahun men's higher ritual and caste status, although increasingly challenged, "backed by wealth and power" (Gupta, 2005, p. 409), continuously provides them a position of superiority on an unequal social playing field.

Reflecting on one of Alexi de Tocqueville's major works on the French Revolution, Toffin writes about change in Nepal:

... contemporary Nepal is not made up of just one society but of several different diverging societies far removed from each other, positioned on opposite trajectories ... a major alteration in the political system does not automatically imply a change in society. Overthrowing a political regime is not enough to change the social structure. The past is always at work in the present. By analysing social and historical facts in these terms ... the reader learns how to go beyond the simple facts and the surface in a way to understand hidden structures (Toffin, 2013b, p. 45).

Another observer of Nepal Mary Cameron thinks that the Nepalese people have a deeply embedded sense of caste hierarchy in "their sense of self, identity, and religious views ..." (Cameron, 2005, p. 284) and pessimistically predicts that she

does not see any change in this area for several generations to come. But Nepal does not remain isolated as in the past where Nepalese could not think and see beyond what was given or told to them, a condition that the political elite capitalised on. It now participates in a much more globalized world where alternate modernities are seen to be possible. However, my research gives little sign of these caste and ethnic identities vanishing soon:

The ideal of a just society as eliminating group differences is both unrealistic and undesirable. Instead justice in a group-differentiated society demands social equality of groups, and mutual recognition and affirmation of group differences (Young, 1990, p. 191).

As each social group, women, Dalit, Janajati, Madheshi and even Khas-Arya desire equality in the post 2006 political context, the caste and ethnic identities conform less and less to old Hindu caste hierarchies and more and more to vertical differences of equality (Gellner, 2001, 2016; Gupta, 2004; Lawoti, 2012; Toffin, 2013a; Vatuk, 1996).

I conclude my thesis with the argument that the notion of purity and pollution still occupies the minds of most rural residents such that it becomes the key structural barrier to Dalit fully benefiting. Almost all of my elderly interlocutors thought and acted within the spaces provided by the idea of caste system. Some of my youthful (in their early 30s) and middle-aged interlocutors were ambivalent towards caste system blaming structures such as *chalan* (tradition) and social pressure emanating from families to perform caste practices on one hand and rejecting it on the basis of democratic citizenship on the other. All of them were heavily influenced by the modernization aspect of *bikas*, as the state promoted it, and therefore found *bikas* only in development of physical infrastructure and material (economic) growth. But some of my younger interlocutors understood *bikas* also in social terms. For them *bikas* is not just

economic growth but progress towards equalizing social relations, free of discrimination. This is where hope for equal social relations even in the practices of *bikas* can be located. So, if *bikas* is to be understood *not* as an evolutionary game of race where the so called least and less developed countries eventually become “developed” but is understood as a signifier such as “freedom”, “justice” and “solidarity” as Tatsuro Fujikura suggests (Fujikura, 2013, p. 275), then *bikas* practices have to be non-discriminatory and inclusive. They should cease to function in the spaces provided by the concept of caste system since the caste system greatly limits the equalizing of social relations, the very first step towards attaining deeper forms of equality. If *bikas* is not to be a “redistribution of foreign monies into (elite) local hands”, then the caste-based hierarchical social order must be opposed (Bista, 1991, p. 157).

Only by removing such a structural barrier can the Dalits participate more equally in *bikase* activities and benefit equally. Therefore, the *bikas* practices themselves have to engage with the politics of equal citizenry, the very first step of which is to treat each other regardless of caste, ethnicity or gender with *ijjat* (respect). For this to happen the discursive nature of *bikas* which is overwhelmingly economic at the present has to be transformed to be sufficiently social and political such that caste exists only as a social marker of horizontal difference but not as vertical difference of hierarchy (Gupta, 2004; Vatuk, 1996). Only this can create equal citizenry on a level playing field. Although the thousands of years-old system of caste was clearly not created by the Shah and Rana rulers, they definitely took hundreds of years to instil discriminatory caste-consciousness as a hegemonic (Gramsci, 1992) principle into the minds of every social group in Nepal. This cannot be “undone” in one generation. But as I suggested the process of “undoing” at least at the centre, Kathmandu, has already begun. While many still are cognitively “locked” in the idea of caste

system and behave in discriminatory fashion, even in non-remote villages like Patle Gau the “undoing” has started to be quite palpable.

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